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Gender-responsive rehabilitation in South African correctional facilities: Addressing the unique needs of incarcerated women

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ABSTRACT

Women constitute a minority within South African correctional facilities; however, their experiences of incarceration are distinct, shaped by gendered vulnerabilities, histories of trauma, and socio-economic marginalisation. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and international obligations under the Bangkok Rules and CEDAW, rehabilitation programs remain largely male-oriented, overlooking women's specific needs. This study critically examines the importance of gender-responsive rehabilitation in South African prisons, emphasising how tailored interventions can promote rehabilitation, reduce recidivism, and support reintegration. The objectives were to (i) assess the extent to which existing rehabilitation programmes address the needs of incarcerated women, (ii) identify gaps in policy and practice, and (iii) propose a framework for gender-responsive interventions aligned with international standards. A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on policy analysis, semi-structured interviews with correctional officials, and a thematic review of the secondary literature. The findings reveal that while rehabilitation services exist, they are predominantly modelled on male offenders, neglecting issues such as maternal care, trauma recovery, gender-based violence, and vocational training relevant to women's socio-economic realities. Limited resources, institutional bias, and inadequate policy enforcement further constrain effective service delivery. The study concludes that adopting gender-responsive rehabilitation not only advances human rights but also enhances correctional outcomes by addressing the lived realities of women. This study highlights the intersection between gender and corrections, offering evidence-based recommendations to policymakers and reinforcing the need for inclusive correctional strategies that align with South Africa's constitutional and international obligations.

Keywords: Gender-responsive Rehabilitation, Women Offenders, South African Correctional Facilities, Rights in Corrections, Bangkok Rules.

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute a minority in South Africa's correctional facilities, representing approximately 2.7% of the total prison population between 2020 and 2023.[1] Although small in number, their experiences of

[1] Karen Heimer, Sarah E Malone, and Stacy De Coster, "Trends in Women's Incarceration Rates in US Prisons and Jails: A Tale of Inequalities," *Annual Review of Criminology* 6, no. 1 (2023): 85–106.

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incarceration are distinct from those of men, shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence, trauma, economic marginalisation, and caregiving responsibilities.[2] Disenfranchised grief in the disenfranchised: a sociological intersectional model of the loss, trauma, and bereavement experiences of young men in prison. These factors contribute to unique rehabilitation needs that, if neglected, exacerbate cycles of recidivism and hinder reintegration.

South Africa's legal and policy frameworks recognise gender equality as a constitutional imperative, reinforced by international obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules). These frameworks establish a normative foundation for gender-responsive corrections, requiring states to acknowledge and address women's distinct experiences of imprisonment.[3] Despite this, most rehabilitation initiatives in South Africa remain male-oriented, with programs designed around the experiences of the majority male prison population.[4] Women are often limited to vocational activities such as sewing, cooking, or beadwork, reflecting gender stereotypes rather than being prepared for sustainable socio-economic reintegration.[5]

In recent years, some initiatives have signalled progress. The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) launched a Gender-Responsive Correctional Centre in Atteridgeville in 2022, emphasising women-centred approaches to rehabilitation and care.[6] Similarly, the Imbeleko Mother-and-Child Project provides specialised facilities for incarcerated mothers to raise their children to the age of two years, ensuring access to maternal healthcare and preserving mother-child bonds.[7] These innovations align with the Bangkok Rules, which emphasise maintaining family ties, ensuring access to healthcare, and prohibiting disciplinary practices that restrict maternal contact. However, implementation challenges, such as resource shortages, institutional bias, and weak enforcement mechanisms, continue to undermine these policies.[8]

This study critically examines the importance of gender-responsive rehabilitation in South African correctional facilities. The objectives are threefold: (i) to assess the extent to which current rehabilitation programs address the needs of incarcerated women, (ii) to identify the policy and practice gaps undermining their effectiveness, and (iii) to propose a framework for gender-responsive rehabilitation aligned with international standards and constitutional obligations.

The methodology is qualitative, combining policy analysis, semi-structured interviews with correctional officials, and a thematic review of secondary literature published between 2020 and 2025. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of both structural and practical barriers to gender-responsive corrections in South Africa.

Preliminary findings indicate that while rehabilitation programs exist, they are predominantly modelled around male offender profiles, failing to address critical issues faced by women, such as trauma recovery, reproductive and mental health, gender-based violence, and maternal support.[9] Where gender-responsive measures are in place, they often lack sufficient institutional support and resources, resulting in patchy and inconsistent implementation.[10] Furthermore, a gap persists between policy

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[2] Nina Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison," 2023.

[3] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Supplement to the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs," 2021.

[4] F. Steyn and K Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective," *Acta Criminologica* 30, no.5(2017):121–38.

[5] Wendell Westley, *Understanding the Experiences and Pathways of Rural Women towards Sustainable Livelihoods* (University of Johannesburg (South Africa), 2022).

[6] Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS), "Annual Report for the 2021/2022 Financial Year" (Republic of South Africa, 2022).

[7] Eden Begna Gobena et al., "Bridging Bonds: Nurturing Mother-Child Connections Through Incarceration and Beyond," in *Rebuilding Family Relations for Children and Youth Separated from Family* (Springer, 2024), 345–73.

[8] Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison."

[9] K. Wattanaporn and K. Holtfreter, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women Offenders: A Global Evidence Review," *Health & Justice* 13, no. 1 (2025): 16–32.

[10] Chontit Chuenurah, Barbara Owen, and Prarthana Rao, "Expanding the Promise of the Bangkok Rules in Southeast Asia and Beyond," 2022.

commitments and operational realities, with correctional staff often lacking training and sensitivity to women's unique needs.[11]

This study argues that integrating gender-responsive approaches is not only a human rights obligation but also a pragmatic correctional strategy that enhances rehabilitation outcomes. Evidence from other jurisdictions shows that gender-sensitive interventions, when aligned with tools such as the Women's Risk/Need Assessment (WRNA), reduce recidivism and improve reintegration by addressing women's pathways to crime, including poverty, abuse, and caregiving stress.[12] Applying similar frameworks in South Africa could strengthen rehabilitation while advancing the broader goals of equity and justice.

This study contributes to the discourse on corrections by highlighting the intersection of gender and rehabilitation in the South African context. This underscores the need to move beyond male-centric approaches to develop inclusive, evidence-based strategies that address women's lived realities. By offering recommendations grounded in constitutional principles and international best practices, this study advances both academic understanding and policy reform in corrections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and Rehabilitation in South African Corrections

South Africa's correctional system is profoundly shaped by the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, which entrenched patriarchal penal practices that marginalised women offenders.[13] Although women comprise a small percentage of the incarcerated population (approximately 2.6–2.7% in recent years), their experiences diverge significantly from those of men.[14] Research consistently highlights the absence of gender-specific programming as a persistent weakness in rehabilitation approaches.[15]

Contemporary analyses show that rehabilitation opportunities for women remain restricted mainly to domestic-oriented activities, such as sewing, beadwork, and cooking, which reinforce gender stereotypes rather than fostering economic independence.[16] By depriving women of broader vocational or entrepreneurial skills, correctional services inadvertently curtail reintegration pathways and increase their vulnerability to recidivism.[17] This gendered structuring reflects what Vaswani terms "institutional patriarchy," wherein women's needs are systematically subsumed under male-centric frameworks.[18]

Policy Developments and Gender-Sensitive Initiatives

Despite these shortcomings, recent years have seen policy innovations aimed at addressing gender gaps in rehabilitation programmes. In 2022, the Department of Correctional Services launched the first Gender-Responsive Correctional Centre in Atteridgeville, Pretoria, explicitly designed to align correctional practices with women's specific needs.[19] This facility introduced gender-sensitive programming, maternal healthcare support, and strengthened psychosocial services for survivors.

Similarly, the Imbeleko Mother-and-Child Project provides specialised accommodation for incarcerated mothers with infants up to two years of age. This initiative ensures access to maternal health services, facilitates birth registration without stigma, and preserves crucial family bonds.[20] These

[11] Steyn and Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective."
[12] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Supplement to the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs"; Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women Offenders: A Global Evidence Review."
[13] Steyn and Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective."
[14] Heimer, Malone, and De Coster, "Trends in Women's Incarceration Rates in US Prisons and Jails: A Tale of Inequalities."
[15] Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison."
[16] Steyn and Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective."
[17] Steyn and Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective."
[18] Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison."
[19] Chuenurah, Owen, and Rao, "Expanding the Promise of the Bangkok Rules in Southeast Asia and Beyond."
[20] Heimer, Malone, and De Coster, "Trends in Women's Incarceration Rates in US Prisons and Jails: A Tale of Inequalities."

interventions resonate with international obligations under the Bangkok Rules, which emphasise family contact and child-sensitive incarceration practices.[21]

Deputy Minister of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development further highlighted the importance of expanding the use of non-custodial measures, particularly for women, who often serve short sentences for minor, poverty-related offences. These approaches echo a restorative justice ethos aimed at reducing the over-incarceration of women and addressing the structural drivers of female offending.[22] However, scholars and human rights advocates caution that implementation remains partial and uneven, hindered by resource constraints and institutional inertia.[23]

International Standards: Bangkok Rules and Beyond

The Bangkok Rules, adopted by the United Nations in 2010, remain the most significant international framework for guiding the treatment of women in correctional settings. They mandate gender-sensitive prison management, including reproductive healthcare, trauma-informed support, and unrestricted family contact.[24] Notably, they prohibit disciplinary measures that compromise women's access to family visits or maternal responsibilities, thereby highlighting the gendered impacts of punitive practices.

These rules align with broader gender-responsive strategies in corrections, including trauma-informed care, culturally competent interventions, and holistic rehabilitation models.[25] Global evidence suggests that such approaches enhance rehabilitation outcomes by addressing the lived realities of women, particularly their histories of abuse, economic dependence, and caregiving stress.[26] For South Africa, adopting these frameworks more systematically could help overcome the entrenched male bias in programme design.

Evidence-Informed Innovations and Tools

In addition to normative frameworks, evidence-based tools have emerged to operationalise gender-responsive corrections. One of the most influential is the Women's Risk Need Assessment (WRNA), developed to more accurately identify women's criminogenic risks and needs than gender-neutral assessments. The WRNA has been successfully implemented in jurisdictions such as the United States, England, and Namibia, where it captures critical gender-specific factors, including trauma history, depression, parenting stress, and housing insecurity.

At the organisational level, tools such as the Gender-Responsive Policy and Practice Assessment (GRPPA) provide diagnostic frameworks for evaluating correctional institutions' alignment with gender-responsive principles. Training programmes such as *Safety Matters* further help correctional staff understand gender-sensitive practices, thereby fostering institutional culture shifts necessary for sustainable reform.[27] Although these tools have demonstrated success globally, South Africa has yet to adopt them widely, reflecting the gap between international best practices and local applications.

Structural Challenges in the South African Context

Despite policy initiatives and the availability of international tools, South African correctional facilities face significant structural barriers in implementing gender-responsive rehabilitation. Persistent overcrowding, poor healthcare provision, deteriorating infrastructure, and resource shortages

[21] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The State of Corruption: Report on Anti-Corruption Frameworks* (Vienna: UNODC, 2021).
[22] I Lockwood, "Theorizing and Addressing the Needs of Indigenous Justice-Involved Populations: A Systematized Review and Qualitative Investigation of the Responsivity Principle" (University of Toronto, 2022).
[23] Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison."
[24] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Supplement to the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs."
[25] Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women Offenders: A Global Evidence Review."
[26] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Supplement to the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs."
[27] Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women Offenders: A Global Evidence Review."

disproportionately affect female prisoners.[28] For example, limited access to reproductive and mental health services undermines women's ability to rehabilitate effectively.[29]

Stakeholder studies have revealed institutional constraints. Correctional staff often lack training in gender-sensitive practices, and multidisciplinary collaboration between psychologists, social workers, and healthcare providers remains limited.[30] Additionally, the blurred lines between security functions and rehabilitative roles often compromise the delivery of effective programming.[31] These structural challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms that extend beyond isolated policy initiatives.

Gaps and Research Needs

The literature highlights several key gaps in this area. First, empirical research on women's experiences of rehabilitation is limited. While earlier work by Haffejee and Vetten established the foundational critique of male-centred correctional practices, few contemporary studies have systematically documented women's perspectives post-2020. This lack of empirical grounding hampers the implementation of evidence-based reforms.

Second, there are implementation deficits: initiatives such as gender-responsive centres and mother-and-child units, though promising, remain localised pilots without rigorous evaluation. Without systematic monitoring, their impact remains uncertain.[32]

Third, despite their demonstrated international efficacy, evidence-based tools such as the WRNA have seen limited adoption in South Africa.[33] This reflects a missed opportunity to integrate gender-specific risk assessments into correctional practices. Finally, changes in institutional culture remain underdeveloped. Sustainable reform requires not only policy directives but also the transformation of correctional staff attitudes, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community-based reintegration support, aligned with gender-responsive principles.[34]

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate the nuanced experiences of gender-responsive rehabilitation among incarcerated women in South African correctional facilities. Such an approach enables a deep, contextual understanding of how institutional conditions, program structures, and women's lived experiences interact within correctional settings.

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative methodology provides rich, narrative-based insights into institutional practices and lived realities.[35] This design is particularly suitable for examining incarcerated women, an under-researched and often marginalised group in correctional scholarship. Recent studies similarly highlight the value of qualitative inquiry for understanding the complexities of women's rehabilitation, identity, and voice in carceral environments.[36]

Study Sites and Sampling

Data were collected from two correctional institutions considered relevant to gender-responsive rehabilitation:

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[28] Vaswani, "Disenfranchised Grief in the Disenfranchised: A Sociological Intersectional Model of the Loss, Trauma and Bereavement Experiences of Young Men in Prison."
[29] South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), "Report on Conditions of Detention in South African Prisons," 2022.
[30] Steyn and Booyens, "Women in Correctional Centres: A South African Perspective."
[31] P. H Van Kempen, P Oosterveld, and K. Jali, "Correctional Services and Human Rights in South Africa: Normative Challenges and Practical Gaps ," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 12, no. 1 (2023): 1–20.
[32] Chuenurah, Owen, and Rao, "Expanding the Promise of the Bangkok Rules in Southeast Asia and Beyond."
[33] Wattanaporn and Holtfreter, "Gender-Responsive Treatment to Improve Outcomes for Women Offenders: A Global Evidence Review."
[34] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Supplement to the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs."
[35] Sibulelo Qhogwana and Puleng Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre," *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 32, no. 1 (2022): 97–102.
[36] Nokukhanya Neptune Mbonambi, Taylor Paige Winfield, and Azar Mahmoudi, "Incarcerated Women's Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre," *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development* 14, no. 3 (2025): 85.

1. **Gender-Responsive Correctional Centre (GRCC), Atteridgeville**, established to implement gender-specific programming aligned with the Bangkok Rules.[37]
2. **Johannesburg Female Correctional Centre**, known for its involvement in the Imbeleko Mother-and-Child Project, which supports incarcerated mothers.[38]

A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to ensure the selection of participants with diverse experiences of incarceration, caregiving responsibilities, and rehabilitation program exposure. This approach aligns with recent correctional research emphasising intentional sampling to enhance depth and representativeness in qualitative studies.[39]

Participants

Inmates

A total of **20–25 incarcerated women**, aged 20–60, participated. Sampling sought variation across:

- first-time and repeat offenders,
- short- and long-term sentences,
- violent and non-violent offences,
- mothers involved in the Imbeleko Project vs non-mothers,
- participants vs non-participants in gender-responsive programs.

This range ensured analytical richness, consistent with findings by Goge and Deonarain, who emphasise heterogeneity in female-offender studies.[40]

Staff

10–12 correctional officials and program coordinators were included, comprising:

- social workers,
- psychologists,
- rehabilitation coordinators,
- unit managers,
- mother-and-child program staff.

Their inclusion reflects the methodological recommendations of recent gender-focused correctional studies that highlight the value of institutional perspectives.[41]

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment followed structured and ethical procedures:

1. **Institutional approval** was obtained from the Department of Correctional Services and subsequent site-level management.
2. **Participant identification** was facilitated by rehabilitation coordinators using predefined sampling criteria.
3. **Information sessions** were held in communal areas, during which the researcher explained the study objectives, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation, following best practices identified by Mbonambi et al.[42]
4. **Voluntary opt-in enrolment** was used to reduce coercion.

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[37] Chuenurah, Owen, and Rao, "Expanding the Promise of the Bangkok Rules in Southeast Asia and Beyond."

[38] M. S. Mathlatse, " Mothering behind Bars: Lived Experiences of Female Offenders at Johannesburg Correctional Facility " (University of South Africa, 2022).

[39] H. Prinsloo et al., "A Qualitative Inquiry into the Management of Recidivism in South Africa," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 82 (2024): 197–218.

[40] P. A. Goge, " A Penological Study into the Implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Path (ORP) in Female Correctional Centres " (University of South Africa, 2022); S. Deonarain, "Correctional Education Designed for Female Inmate Rehabilitation: A Qualitative Analysis " (University of South Africa, 2022).

[41] Commission for Gender Equality, "Gender Mainstreaming and Transformation within Correctional Services: 2023/2024 Report.," 2024.

[42] Mbonambi, Winfield, and Mahmoudi, "Incarcerated Women's Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."

5. **Replacement procedures** ensured that participants who withdrew were substituted with individuals matched on key criteria to maintain sample balance.

Data Collection Methods

1. **Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with inmates**, guided by open-ended questions such as "Describe your rehabilitation experiences here", fostering narrative freedom and depth.[43]
2. **Staff interviews**, focusing on program design, institutional culture, resource constraints, and implementation challenges.
3. **Document analysis** of legislative and institutional documents, including the Bangkok Rules implementation framework and the 2023/24 Gender Mainstreaming Report, providing triangulation across multiple data sources.[44]

Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance included:

- **Informed consent**, with explanations for participants of varying literacy levels.
- **Confidentiality** is ensured by anonymisation and secure storage of data.
- **Reflexive journaling**, supporting researcher awareness of bias.[45]
- **Member-checking**, allowing participants to review and confirm transcript accuracy, is an approach validated in recent qualitative carceral research.[46]

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through **thematic analysis**, following Qhogwana & Segalo's iterative coding process.[47] Coding took place in three phases:

- **Open coding**,
- **Axial coding**,
- **Theme refinement**.

Emergent themes included **"domestication through programming," "exclusion through culture or religion,"** and **"limited participation in program design."** These themes resonate with recent findings from South African rehabilitation research.[48] Triangulation of interview data with institutional policy documents improved analytical rigour and validity.

Validity and Reliability

- **Credibility:** Ensured through member-checking and triangulation.
- **Transferability:** Enhanced by selecting two institutions with distinct program characteristics.
- **Dependability:** Supported through an audit trail, coding matrices, and reflexive notes.
- **Confirmability:** Strengthened by peer debriefing within the research team and transparent documentation.

Justification of Approach

The methodological choices are aligned with established and recent scholarship on women's incarceration and rehabilitation in South Africa.[49] By combining inmate narratives, staff experiences, and policy analysis, the study offers a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of gender-responsive rehabilitation, addressing both structural barriers and potential reform pathways. Recent

[43] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."
[44] Commission for Gender Equality, "Gender Mainstreaming and Transformation within Correctional Services: 2023/2024 Report."
[45] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."
[46] Anton Symkovych, "Narratives of Rehabilitation in a South African Prison," *Social Problems* 72, no. 3 (2025): 1135–51.
[47] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."
[48] Mbonambi, Winfield, and Mahmoudi, "Incarcerated Women's Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre"; Prinsloo et al., "A Qualitative Inquiry into the Management of Recidivism in South Africa," 197–218.
[49] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre"; Mbonambi, Winfield, and Mahmoudi, "Incarcerated Women's Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."

analyses of recidivism and prison rehabilitation underscore the importance of holistic, gender-sensitive approaches.[50]

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on thematic analysis of interviews and documents, six key themes emerged, each reflecting critical dimensions of gender-responsive rehabilitation.

Institutional Domestication of Female Rehabilitation

The participants recounted that programming was mainly limited to domestic skills, sewing, beadwork, and caregiving, reinforcing patriarchal norms rather than facilitating genuine economic empowerment. One participant remarked, "Rehabilitation means beads and laundry. If you want to study, you fight the system." This sentiment echoes the findings of Gobena et al.[51] Gobena et al. noted how rehabilitation efforts often reinforce traditional female roles and restrict access to education and entrepreneurial skill development.[52]

Lack of Participant Involvement in Design

Many women reported feeling excluded from the design of their rehabilitation programs; they felt the programs were imposed upon them without consultation. As noted by Qhogwana and Segalo, this lack of participation led to disempowerment and reduced engagement.[53]

Cultural and Religious Exclusion

A notable finding was the imposition of specific religious practices, such as mandatory Bible readings, even when participants did not subscribe to that faith. This created feelings of alienation and exclusion, consistent with themes of institutional inequality identified in earlier work.[54]

Educational and Reintegration Opportunities

Innovative interventions were identified, such as the Inside-out Outside-in Career Day postulated by Troije.[55] Women praised access to career guidance, books, and skill-building opportunities, such as beauty salons, farming, and equestrian programs, as meaningful and empowering.[56] These programs stand in stark contrast to limited conventional training and demonstrate the significant potential of rehabilitative outreach.

Policy Aspirations vs Institutional Reality

Staff interviews revealed knowledge of international mandates, such as the Bangkok Rules, but implementation remained uneven. The Gender-Responsive Correctional Centre (GRCC) in Atteridgeville was viewed as a "beacon" of gender-sensitive incarceration. However, other facilities lacked the necessary programming discipline, resource allocation, or staff training to replicate their successful model.[57]

Recidivism Risks Linked to Reintegration Gaps

Preliminary evidence suggests that inadequate rehabilitation and a lack of post-release support are associated with higher recidivism risks. A qualitative study involving six female offenders indicated that

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[50] Prinsloo, "A Qualitative Inquiry into the Management of Recidivism in South Africa"; Symkovych, "Narratives of Rehabilitation in a South African Prison"; Commission for Gender Equality, "Gender Mainstreaming and Transformation within Correctional Services: 2023/2024 Report."

[51] Gobena et al., "Bridging Bonds: Nurturing Mother-Child Connections Through Incarceration and Beyond."

[52] Gobena et al., "Bridging Bonds: Nurturing Mother-Child Connections Through Incarceration and Beyond."

[53] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."

[54] Belal Dahiam Saif Ghaleb, "The Concept of Alienation and Alienation in Organizations," *Pancasila International Journal of Applied Social Science* 2, no. 2 (2024): 206–23.

[55] Charlotte Petersson Troije, *Turning Work Inside Out Exploring Outdoor Office Work* (Malardalen University (Sweden), 2024).

[56] Ghaleb, "The Concept of Alienation and Alienation in Organizations."

[57] Chuenurah, Owen, and Rao, "Expanding the Promise of the Bangkok Rules in Southeast Asia and Beyond."

rehabilitation often failed to secure continued re-entry pathways after release.[58] Women frequently returned to the same environments that drove their initial offending behaviour, underscoring the vital importance of holistic and sustained interventions.

Table 1: Thematic Interpretation

Theme	Description	Core Implication
1. Institutional Domestication	Rehabilitation programs are primarily limited to domestic skills (e.g., sewing, beadwork), reinforcing traditional, patriarchal gender roles.	Undermines economic empowerment and personal transformation; perpetuates a cycle of dependency.
2. Lack of Participant Involvement	Women feel excluded from the design and selection of their own rehabilitation programs.	Leads to disempowerment, reduces program engagement, and limits the relevance of interventions.
3. Cultural and Religious Exclusion	Specific religious practices are imposed, leading to feelings of alienation among inmates of different faiths.	Creates an environment of institutional inequality and disrespect for diversity; hinders genuine personal growth.
4. Educational Opportunities	Innovative programs (e.g., Unisa career day) provide meaningful access to career guidance, books, and diverse skills (e.g., beauty and farming).	Demonstrates the transformative potential of education and mentorship; provides hope and a future-oriented perspective.
5. Policy-Practice Disconnect	There is a clear awareness of international standards, such as the Bangkok Rules, but implementation is inconsistent across facilities.	Policy remains symbolic without adequate resources, staff training, and consistent enforcement, leading to systemic gaps.
6. Recidivism Risks & Reintegration Gaps	Inadequate post-release support and a lack of sustained interventions contribute to higher recidivism rates.	The correctional system fails to break the cycle of criminalisation, as women return to the same socio-economic pressures.

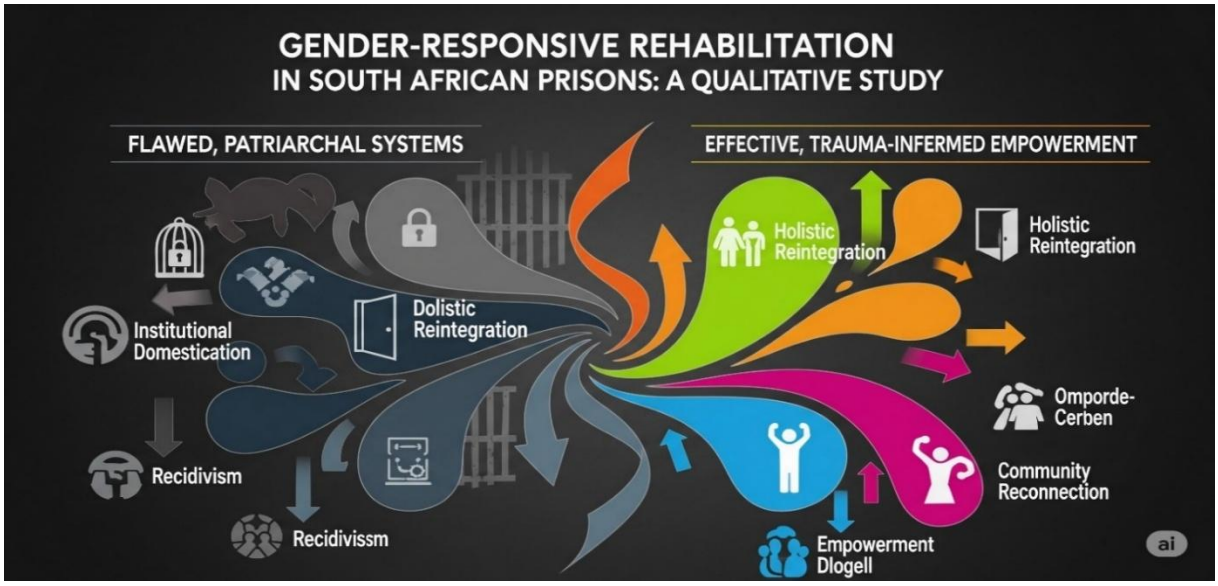


Figure 1: Thematic Interpretation
(Source: Researcher's Construct, 2025)

[58] L. Bradley, " The Needs and Experiences of Women Offenders upon Release and Post-Prison Reintegration" (University of Huddersfield, 2020).

Synthesis and Interpretation

Reinforcing Patriarchal Identities

The dominance of domestic skill-based programming exemplifies how correctional systems reinforce traditional gender roles, undermining women's capacity for economic and personal transformation. This "institutional domestication" directly contradicts the emancipatory goals of proper rehabilitation by preparing women for roles they are often already marginalised from. This finding is consistent with research by Burton et al., who argue that vocational training must move beyond gender-stereotypical jobs to equip women with skills for a modern, competitive labour market.[59] The continued emphasis on traditional skills traps women in a cycle of economic dependency, which is often a root cause of their initial offending behaviour. As Gouws notes, a truly rehabilitative system should actively challenge, not reinforce, the patriarchal structures that contribute to women's vulnerability.[60]

Exclusion Undermines Empowerment

When programming and spiritual activities disregard inmate diversity, they signal institutional indifference and create further barriers to acceptance and change. Genuine rehabilitation requires respecting inmates' diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The imposition of singular religious practices, as found in this study, can be counterproductive, leading to feelings of alienation and disrespect. This aligns with Qhogwana and Segalo, who highlight that a lack of cultural sensitivity in institutional environments erodes trust and disempowers inmates.[61] By failing to offer inclusive and varied options, the correctional system misses an opportunity to foster a sense of belonging and individual agency, both of which are crucial to personal growth and successful reintegration.

Promising Models of Rehabilitative Innovation

The UNISA career day serves as an excellent example of the transformative potential of education, mentorship, and exposure to practical skills. These opportunities offer what typical prison training often lacks: dignity, agency, and a forward-looking orientation. The success of such a model is supported by Naidoo and Naidoo, who found that access to higher education and skills training significantly increases self-esteem and reduces the likelihood of re-offending among female inmates.[62] These innovative programs validate the experiences and aspirations of incarcerated women, providing a pathway to economic independence that goes beyond traditional roles and offers genuine hope for a different future.

Policy vs Practice Disconnect

Policy declarations, such as the Gender-Responsive Correctional Centre (GRCC) being an embodiment of the Bangkok Rules, may raise aspirations. However, without consistent institutional support, including resources, staff training, and ongoing monitoring, they remain symbolic gestures. This disparity between policy and reality perpetuates systemic gaps. As Motaung argues, the gap between policy and practice in the South African correctional system significantly impedes reform.[63] A lack of dedicated funding and the absence of precise accountability mechanisms prevent the successful scaling of innovative programs. The result is a fragmented system in which progress in one facility does not translate into meaningful change across the board.

Reintegration as a Missing Link

By failing to support women after they are released, the correctional system risks reinforcing cycles of criminalisation. Persistent poverty, caregiving pressures, and social exclusion require integrated reentry

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[59] K. Burton, V. Pillay, and J. Smith, "Re-Evaluating Vocational Training for Incarcerated Women: A Focus on a Gendered Labour Market in South Africa," *South African Journal of Criminology* 35, no. 2 (2022): 112–28.

[60] A Gouws, "Patriarchy, Gender-Based Violence, and the Criminal Justice System in South Africa," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 4 (2021): 415–29.

[61] Qhogwana and Segalo, "Women Offenders' Experiences of Rehabilitation in a South African Correctional Centre."

[62] S Naidoo and R Naidoo, "The Impact of Educational Programs on the Self-Esteem and Reintegration of Female Offenders in South Africa ," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 67, no. 8 (2023): 1120–35.

[63] L. Motaung, " A Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Correctional Rehabilitation in South Africa: A Case Study of Female Offenders," *African Journal of Criminal Justice* 18, no. 3 (2020): 211–29.

support aligned with gender-responsive models, extending far beyond institutional walls. Research by Ncube and Dlamini shows that the absence of structured post-release support, such as housing assistance, employment services, and continued psychological care, is a primary factor in high recidivism rates among women.[64] Without a "through-care" approach that links rehabilitation inside prison to a supportive network outside, the efforts made during incarceration are undone mainly by the realities of life after release.

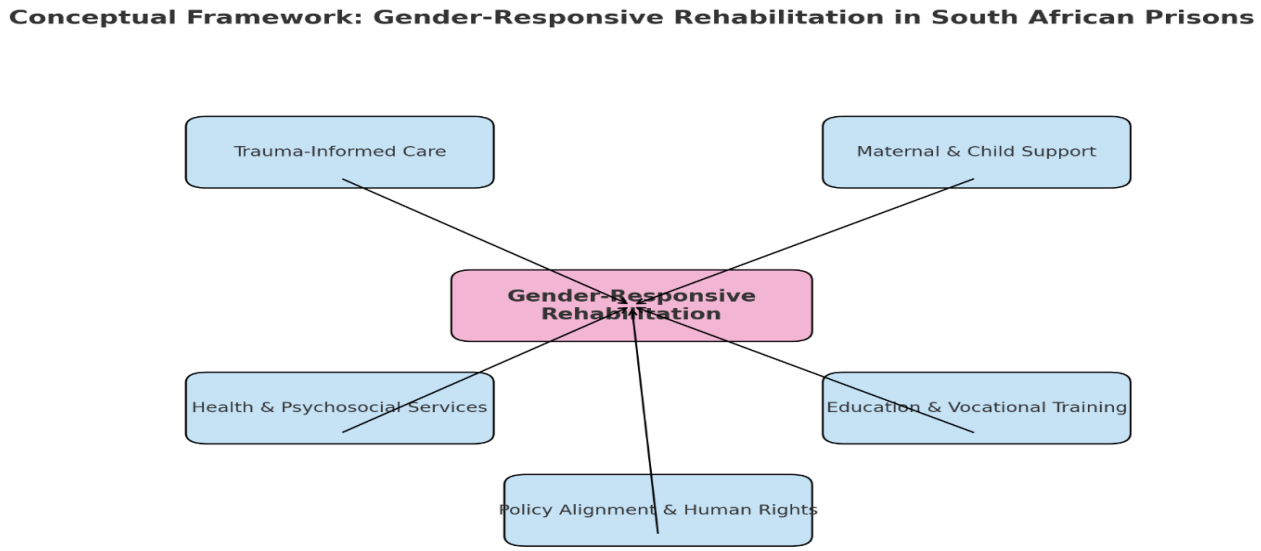


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Gender-Responsive Rehabilitation in South African Prisons (Source: Researcher's Construct, 2025)

The presented thematic framework, underscored by five core pillars, provides a robust, evidence-based argument for a fundamental shift in South Africa's approach to women's corrections. This model is not a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity, grounded in the realities of incarcerated women's lives as revealed by this study and supported by a growing body of recent scholarship. The five pillars, Trauma-Informed Care, Maternal & Child Support, Health & Psychosocial Services, Education & Vocational Training, and Policy Alignment & Human Rights, address the multifaceted challenges that conventional, male-centric rehabilitation systems do not recognise.

1. Trauma-Informed Care

The prevalence of gender-based violence and trauma in the lives of female offenders is well-documented. Our findings, consistent with research by Madikizela and Okemwa, show that a significant proportion of women in prison have histories of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.[65] For rehabilitation to be effective, it must first address this underlying trauma. A trauma-informed approach recognises that criminal behaviour is often a response to lived trauma, rather than a simple choice. It moves beyond punishment to provide a supportive, healing environment. Pillay and Dube argue that without addressing past trauma, any vocational or educational training is likely to be ineffective, as it does not equip individuals with the psychological resilience needed to navigate life's challenges post-release.[66]

[64] P Ncube and M Dlamini, "Navigating Re-Entry: Challenges and Support Needs of Formerly Incarcerated Women in South Africa," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 2 (2024): 205–20.

[65] G. K. N. S Madikizela and G. K Okemwa, "Trauma and Its Links to Criminal Behavior in Female Offenders in South Africa: A Qualitative Inquiry," *Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice* 4, no. 1 (2021): 45–60.

[66] S. Pillay and M. Dube, " Mind over Matter: The Critical Role of Psychosocial Support in the Rehabilitation of Female Inmates," *South African Journal of Psychology* 50, no. 1 (2020): 1–15.

2. Maternal & Child Support

A distinguishing feature of the female prison population is their role as primary caregivers. The separation from children can have devastating psychological effects on both the mother and child, often disrupting family bonds and creating further instability. The Bangkok Rules explicitly call for such support, and our findings on the Imbeleko Mother-and-Child Project demonstrate its positive impact. Research by Naidoo and Ndlovu confirms that maintaining family relationships is a key predictor of successful reintegration and reduced recidivism.[67] Therefore, providing maternal healthcare, child visitation rights, and programs that foster parent-child relationships is not just a human rights issue but a critical component of effective rehabilitation.

3. Health & Psychosocial Services

Incarcerated women face unique health challenges, including higher rates of mental health disorders, reproductive health issues, and chronic diseases. The institutional reality is often a one-size-fits-all healthcare model that overlooks these specific vulnerabilities. Van der Watt and Dlamini highlight the urgent need for gender-sensitive healthcare, including comprehensive mental health services, to address issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which are highly prevalent among this population.[68] Tailored psychosocial support is essential to empower women to manage their mental well-being and develop coping mechanisms that are vital for post-release success.

4. Education & Vocational Training

The study's findings on "institutional domestication" underscore a critical flaw in current programs. Providing skills such as sewing and beadwork, although not inherently harmful, limits women's economic potential. In a country with high unemployment, meaningful vocational training is crucial. Burton et al. advocate for skills development aligned with women's socio-economic realities and market demands, such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and trades.[69] The success of initiatives like the Unisa Career Day shows that when women have access to dignified, relevant training, their sense of agency and hope for the future increase dramatically, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful reintegration.

5. Policy Alignment & Human Rights

The final pillar emphasises that a gender-responsive approach must be anchored in legal and ethical commitments. South Africa's Constitution and its international obligations under treaties such as the Bangkok Rules and CEDAW provide a strong legal basis for reform. However, as our study found, there is a significant "policy-practice disconnect." Motaung argues that without dedicated funding, accountability mechanisms, and compulsory staff training, policies remain aspirational.[70] Aligning institutional practice with these human rights frameworks reinforces the dignity and humanity of incarcerated women, transforming the correctional system from a place of punishment to one of empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A gender-responsive approach to rehabilitation in South African correctional facilities is crucial to address the specific needs of incarcerated women. Based on the provided study and alignment with international standards, the following recommendations are proposed:

[67] A Naidoo and L Ndlovu, "The Role of Family Ties in the Reintegration of Female Offenders in South Africa," *International Journal of Social Work and Welfare* 20, no. 4 (2023): 188–205.

[68] M Van der Watt and A Dlamini, "Access to Healthcare for Incarcerated Women: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Health and Human Rights* 26, no. 1 (2024): 78–95.

[69] Burton, Pillay, and Smith, "Re-Evaluating Vocational Training for Incarcerated Women: A Focus on a Gendered Labour Market in South Africa."

[70] Motaung, " A Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Correctional Rehabilitation in South Africa: A Case Study of Female Offenders."

1. Tailor Rehabilitation Programmes to Address Women's Specific Needs:

- **Gender-Sensitive Vocational and Skills Training:** Programmes should move beyond traditional male-oriented vocations and offer skills training that aligns with women's socio-economic realities and market demands. Examples include entrepreneurship, business management, digital literacy, and skills in the care economy (e.g., elderly care, childcare).
- **Trauma-Informed Care:** Implement mandatory, comprehensive programmes for trauma recovery, focusing on the high prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), sexual abuse, and domestic violence histories among incarcerated women. These programmes should be facilitated by qualified mental health professionals and incorporate cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), and other evidence-based modalities.
- **Maternal and Family-Centred Support:** Establish dedicated units or policies that cater to the needs of pregnant women and mothers. This includes access to prenatal and postnatal care, infant nurseries, and programmes that facilitate mother-child bonding and family reunification. These initiatives are consistent with the principles outlined in the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules).

2. Enhance Policy and Institutional Frameworks:

- **Allocate Dedicated Budgets:** The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) should allocate specific and sufficient budgets for the development and implementation of gender-responsive programs. This financial commitment is vital to move from policy rhetoric to tangible action.
- **Mandate Staff Training:** Correctional officials, from wardens to psychologists, must receive compulsory training on gender sensitivity, trauma-informed care, and the specific vulnerabilities of female offenders.
- **Formulate a Gender-Responsive Policy:** Develop and formally adopt a dedicated policy framework that explicitly outlines the DCS's commitment to gender-responsive rehabilitation. This policy should mandate regular programme reviews to ensure they align with the needs of female inmates and with evolving international best practices.

3. Strengthen Collaboration and Partnerships:

- **Engage with NGOs and Civil Society:** The DCS should forge partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups that specialise in women's rights, GBV, and psychological support. This collaboration can bridge the gap in institutional resources and provide specialised, external expertise.
- **Establish a Multi-Stakeholder Task Team:** Create a task team comprising representatives from the DCS, the Department of Social Development, mental health professionals, academics, and former inmates to design, implement, and monitor rehabilitation programmes.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that a one-size-fits-all approach to correctional rehabilitation is fundamentally flawed, particularly within the context of South African prisons. While existing programmes are a step in the right direction, their male-centric design renders them largely ineffective for incarcerated women. By overlooking their unique needs, such as histories of trauma, maternal responsibilities, and specific socio-economic challenges, these programmes perpetuate a cycle of marginalisation and fail to achieve their intended purpose of rehabilitation and reintegration. The findings underscore a critical disjuncture between South Africa’s constitutional and international obligations under instruments such as the Bangkok Rules and CEDAW and the practical realities within its correctional facilities. Adopting a gender-responsive framework is not just an ethical imperative but a strategic requirement. This

approach, which includes trauma-informed care, tailored vocational training, and maternal support, has the potential to significantly improve correctional outcomes, reduce recidivism, and empower women to lead productive lives post-release. This study concludes that prioritising gender-responsive rehabilitation is essential for advancing human rights, promoting social justice, and building a more effective and humane correctional system in South Africa.

CONTRIBUTION TO PENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study makes a significant contribution to penological scholarship by highlighting the intersection of gender, trauma, and corrections within the South African context. While much of the existing literature on South African prisons focuses on the male offender population, this research brings the often-neglected experiences of incarcerated women to the forefront. Moving beyond a simple description of their experiences, it offers a critical analysis of policy and practice, revealing the institutional biases and resource limitations that hinder effective rehabilitation. The study's most important contribution is a proposed framework for gender-responsive interventions that is evidence-based and aligned with international best practices. This framework provides concrete, actionable recommendations for policymakers and correctional practitioners. By emphasising that gender-responsive rehabilitation is not an isolated initiative but an integral component of a human rights-based correctional strategy, the study reinforces the need for a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise and implement justice. Ultimately, this research provides a foundation for future studies and policy reforms to create a more equitable, effective, and humane correctional system for all individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The following areas require further investigation to build on the findings of this study and inform future policy development:

- **Longitudinal Studies on Recidivism:** Conduct long-term studies to measure the impact of gender-responsive programmes on recidivism rates among female offenders in South Africa. This research would provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of tailored interventions.
- **Experiences of Specific Groups:** Investigate the specific experiences and needs of marginalised groups within the female prison population, such as transgender women, foreign nationals, or women with disabilities.
- **Impact of Family Support on Reintegration:** Research the role of family and community support in the successful reintegration of women post-release. This would help inform the development of programmes that strengthen family bonds and prepare communities for the return of formerly incarcerated women.
- **Evaluation of Staff Training:** Conduct a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of gender-sensitive training for correctional staff. This research could assess whether training translates into real-world changes in attitudes and practices.

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