

Forging New Beginnings and Understanding Lived Experiences: Exploring Challenges and Factors Facilitating Reintegration among Women Parolees in Baguio City

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Abstract

The rising number of female convicts worldwide has raised significant concerns, with the Philippines among the countries with the highest rates. This phenomenological qualitative study explored the emotions, factors for success, and challenges faced by female ex-offenders after incarceration. Eight respondents participated, and the researchers employed a full exploratory approach using one-on-one in-depth interviews for data collection. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, yielding eight common themes. Respondents experienced emotional complexity upon reintegration and reported discrimination, economic barriers, and adjustment difficulties as challenges. Factors aiding reintegration included support systems, personal empowerment, effective probation programs, and faith. The study fills a gap in the literature by offering insights into the experiences and needs of female ex-offenders, suggesting that positive social change can occur when their specific needs are understood and supported.

Keywords: Female ex-offenders; reintegration; emotional complexity; discrimination; economic barriers; support systems; personal empowerment; probation programs; social change

1. Introduction

The number of women entering prisons and jails has grown significantly over the past several years. An estimated 741,000 women and girls are held in prisons around the world, an increase of 17% since 2010. Women constitute a small minority in national prison populations, averaging only 2 to 9%, and made up just 6.9% of the global prison population in 2017. However, their numbers are growing every year at a faster rate than men. In the Philippines, a report from UN Women shows that the country has the seventh highest rate of incarcerated women in the world as of 2021, with 16,439 women in prison, approximately 10% of the national prison population.

As a consequence of the rise in female offenders, the Human Rights Watch reported in 2020 that the Philippines has the most congested penal system in the world. The Bureau of Corrections recorded a total congestion rate of 301% as of January 2021, indicating that seven Bureau of Corrections facilities are holding four times more inmates than their capacity can accommodate (Human Rights Watch, 2020). A number of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) qualify for probation and parole. In the Philippines, there are 16 Parole and Probation Administration (PPA) Regional offices and 222 Provincial/City PPA offices, with the aim of rehabilitating and reintegrating persons on community-based corrections for peace and social justice. The present study focused on the PPA office in Baguio City, which falls under the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Eight women clientele of PPA Baguio served as the respondents.

Female prisoners face gender-specific challenges after their release from prison. According to Frances Magnaan, Assistant Regional Director of PPA Baguio, the agency does not have specific integration programs for women, and there is a limited capacity of staff to address the gender-specific treatment needs of women offenders. The lack of gender-responsive programming is not only a concern for the PPA but a problem across prison systems worldwide. This research endeavors to fill a critical gap in existing literature by focusing on the unique challenges faced by female ex-offenders in the process of reintegrating into society after parole. By examining the multifaceted factors influencing their reintegration experiences, this study aims to provide invaluable insights and inform policy-making and program development aimed at facilitating successful reintegration and reducing recidivism rates among this vulnerable population.

2. Review of Related Literature

Female Ex-Offenders

Female ex-offenders possess distinct needs compared to their male counterparts, especially concerning their psychological and emotional well-being. The application of female offenders' experiences to reentry programs is often misunderstood, leading to inadequacies within correctional systems (Holmstrom et al., 2017). Despite efforts made by correctional systems, significant shortcomings remain in meeting the specific needs of female ex-offenders (Brown, 2018). Correctional systems persist in utilizing risk assessment tools originally developed for men to evaluate female offenders, despite research demonstrating the differing needs of male and female offenders (Brown, 2018). Female ex-offenders confront numerous challenges not typically encountered by male ex-offenders, including mental health issues, addiction, and lack of education, which they experience at notably higher rates (Wesely & Dewey, 2018). Additionally, female ex-offenders grapple with heightened feelings of shame resulting from their criminal behaviors, further increasing their risk of recidivism (Valera et al., 2017).

Probation and Parole

Probation and parole serve as essential service programs, offering ex-offenders social support and guidelines for successful reintegration into society (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). Probation and parole officers are crucial sources of support in reducing recidivism and substance abuse relapse (Holmstrom et al., 2017). Parole and probation programs play a pivotal role in facilitating the social reintegration and skill development of ex-offenders. As part of their requirements, ex-offenders on probation must adhere to various conditions, including paying fines, securing suitable housing, and participating in substance abuse treatment, education, and job preparation programs (Morash, Kashy, Smith, & Cobbina, 2019).

Reentry Programs

Agencies and nonprofit organizations offer reentry programs aimed at enhancing the reintegration outcomes of ex-offenders (Mizel & Abrams, 2019). The growing population of female ex-offenders can be attributed, in part, to the absence of reentry programs tailored to facilitate their rehabilitation (Berry, 2019). James (2015) observed that ex-offenders encounter hurdles such as limited education, work experience, high rates of mental illness and emotional trauma, as well as substance abuse. Research indicates that various transitional programs can be advantageous for individuals with a history of incarceration; however, there is a paucity of documented research assessing the efficacy of these programs.

Successful Reintegration

Successful reintegration refers to the absence of recidivism from reintegrated former offenders, which further perpetuates community safety (Cobbina, 2010). Research confirms that strong family and community support and comprehensive reintegration programs are vital for achieving successful reintegration of former offenders into society (Brown, 2018; Magadze, 2016; Visher, 2015). Success in reintegration may also be seen in changes within the ex-offender, such as restored family life and employment attainment (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2013).

Adjustment

Participants in the study of Chikadzi (2017) emphasized the formidable challenge of adapting to a changed environment after release from prison, highlighting the stark contrast between the structured routine within prison walls and the unfamiliarity of mainstream society. Scholars such as Davis et al. (2012) and Shinkfield and Graffam (2009) underscore the difficulty ex-offenders encounter in readjusting to society due to the attitudes and behaviors acquired during incarceration. Rebuilding relationships with family and the community emerged as a significant challenge, with many participants recounting experiences of rejection and ostracization, hindering their ability to reintegrate effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative research design was used in the study with descriptive phenomenology as the primary method of interpreting the information gathered. Through this approach, the research delved into the depths of the participants' perspectives to comprehend their experiences by providing them with opportunities to articulate their insights (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Ravitch and Carl (2016) explain that a qualitative research approach focuses on exploring the experiences of a particular group of individuals. The study used one-on-one in-depth interviews in the data collection process to truly understand the experiences of the female ex-offenders, enabling the researchers to gain a deeper understanding through the valuable experiences provided by the respondents.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a nonprobability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select cases with relevant information on the topic under study (Palinkas et al., 2011). The participants were female ex-offenders who are at least 24 years old but not older than 55 years old, who had abstained from committing any further crimes after their release from prison, and who had been on parole or probation for more than six months. Eight respondents from Baguio City were selected by the Parole and Probation Office based on these criteria, as their information and circumstances were treated as confidential.

3.3 Data Collection

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol. This format was selected to enable researchers to focus on the specific phenomenon under investigation while allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words, with opportunities for follow-up questions (Percy et al., 2015). Participants were informed about their rights to privacy and confidentiality through an informed consent process in accordance with Republic Act 10173 or the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Interviews were conducted face to face in a conducive environment, and recordings were kept solely for research purposes.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed as the method of analyzing qualitative data, particularly interview transcripts. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data, allowing researchers to integrate and categorize their data collection at an efficient and detailed level. The analysis followed a six-step process: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) organization of codes into themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the report. The finalization of themes was validated through feedback from two inter-raters, serving as triangulation with other researchers.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

To ensure complete confidentiality and privacy of the data, the researchers obtained informed consent from all participants. Participants were made aware of the study's purposes, goals, scope, and engagement level. They were given the right to refuse participation or to end the interview when they felt uncomfortable, without any negative consequences. Participants were assured that participation would not cause them bodily or emotional harm. Data gathered were stored securely with access restricted to the researchers and will be kept for five years after publication.

4. Results and Discussion

The data analysis revealed eight themes based on the different experiences shared by the participants. One major theme emerged when exploring the feelings of the participants: Emotional Complexity. Three major themes pertained to the challenges encountered during the reintegration process: Discrimination and Social Stigma, Economic Barriers, and Adjustment Difficulties. Four major themes emerged as factors that helped the respondents reintegrate into the

community: Interplay of Support Systems, Personal Empowerment, Effective Probationary Programs, and Faith in Overcoming Adversity.

Theme 1: Emotional Complexity

The majority of respondents experienced a diverse array of emotions upon their reintegration. Four respondents expressed happiness, rooted in the fact that they are now free, with Respondent 1 saying: “Masarap yung pakiramdam na nasa labas na ako.” Four respondents conveyed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, with Respondent 5 stating: “Parang syempre nakakaba na nakakaiyak... sa environment hindi mo alam kung saan ka lulugar at kung tatanggapin ka ba.” Seven respondents reported mixed emotions, and six felt relief upon nearing their definite release, with Respondent 7 exclaiming: “Hay sa wakas, ung relief na andyan na ung pinaghirapan mong lumaya.”

Ex-offenders are particularly susceptible to emotional complexity due to several interconnected factors. Engagement with the criminal justice system and the process of reintegration require ex-offenders to reconcile their past actions, adapt to new social norms, and confront stigma and discrimination (Kazemian, 2020). These transitions evoke mixed emotions such as relief and hope alongside fear of judgment and uncertainty about the future. The structural barriers ex-offenders face, including limited job opportunities, lack of stable housing, and strained family relationships, all contribute to ongoing emotional strain (Kazemian, 2020). This is consistent with findings from Shinkfield and Graffam (2009), who highlighted the relationship between emotional state and success in community reintegration for ex-prisoners.

Theme 2: Discrimination and Social Stigma

All respondents mentioned experiencing judgment and labeling based on their past offenses, regardless of the nature of their case. The females in the study shared that as soon as they came out, people in their community made them feel undervalued because of being an ex-convict. Respondent 4 expressed: “Ang na-experience ko kasi dito, pag nanggaling ka sa kulungan, iba na kaagad ang tingin sa’yo ng mga tao, napakababa na.” Several respondents perceived their gender as a contributing factor to the judgments they faced, with Respondent 1 noting: “Mas grabe yung tingin ng tao sa mga babae kesa lalaki, kahit simple lang yung kasalanan, napakajudgemental talaga.”

This theme is consistent with labeling theory, which focuses on the role of social labeling in the development of deviant behavior (Gay, 2000). Incarceration carries stigma for both men and women, but the degree of stigma is much greater for women because of gender-based stereotypes. The researchers confirmed that community members have the tendency to reject former offenders and use labels that stigmatize them (Agboola, 2014; Chikadzi, 2017). Society is not kind to ex-offenders, and ex-offenders will always carry the burden of their past, making discrimination and social stigma one of the most prominent challenges they face.

Theme 3: Economic Barriers

Six respondents expressed difficulty finding employment. Respondent 2 stated: “Hirap maghanap ng trabaho, wala tumatangap.” The lack of employment also caused mental struggles, with Respondent 6 sharing: “Mahirap makahanap ng work and nakaka down din.” Financial strain further compounded these challenges, as Respondent 3 described: “Parang starting from zero ka ulit. Parang kaming pulubi ng nung time na yun.”

These findings are supported by Mosser (2022), who identified financial concerns as a primary risk factor that must be properly addressed for ex-offenders to be successfully reintegrated. Economic barriers tend to be the primary theme for women reentering society. The dual challenges of employment and financial instability present grave obstacles for female ex-offenders, primarily due to the stigma of their past actions. Moos (2011) further found that families can also financially burden ex-offenders through the expectation that they contribute to childcare, child support payments, and assistance for loved ones.

Theme 4: Adjustment Difficulties

Participants faced challenges in adapting to their new environment upon release from prison. Respondent 2 reflected: “Siyempre iba ang buhay sa loob. Kelangan mo ulit masanay dito.” Respondent 4 added: “Nahirapan ako magadjust kasi ibang tao nanaman kasama ko.”

Davis et al. (2012) describe the profound contrast between the prison world and mainstream society, emphasizing that offenders often struggle with the abrupt transition. This difficulty in adjustment can exacerbate stress and strain, potentially contributing to recidivism. Participants also expressed concerns about the stagnation in their personal development during lengthy incarcerations, feeling they had missed out on crucial opportunities compared to their peers. Several participants disclosed that the transition from prison to mainstream society was accompanied by psychological stress, a theme aligned with Schlossberg’s (2011) transitional theory. This framework helped researchers explore participants’ perceptions of situation, self, support, and coping strategies during the adjustment process.

Theme 5: Interplay of Support Systems

All respondents emphasized the significant impact of support groups on their reintegration. Family support was identified as the primary support system, with three sub-themes: acceptance and support from the family, family as a source of motivation, and family-centered decision-making. Respondent 2 shared: “Sa pamilya kasi mabait talaga sila saakin, palagi nila ako tinatanggap at sobrang appreciate ko yun sakanila.” Respondent 3 stated: “Nakita mo ang anak mo o yung family mo araw-araw na ikaw yung tinitingan nilang, mamomotivate ka talaga.” Beyond family, respondents acknowledged churchmates and probation officers as crucial sources of support. Respondent 6 noted: “Churchmates helped me realize that there is life after prison.” Respondent 1 shared about the probation officers: “Ang laking tulong na mababait sila dito, mga officer, kasi hindi ako nahihiya.”

A pertinent theory that elucidates the relevance of this theme is Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (1985), which provides a deep understanding of the complex dynamics within family relationships. These findings are also analyzed within the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) framework, where family, church community, and probation officers each serve distinct roles at the microsystem and mesosystem levels (Yelderman et al., 2018). The majority of respondents demonstrated that no single support system was solely responsible for their reintegration; rather, a combination of different systems was instrumental in helping them through the process.

Theme 6: Personal Empowerment

Participants discussed their resolve to help themselves complete their reentry programs successfully and avoid returning to prison. Respondent 2 shared: “Sa akin, nagbabago ako para, una, hindi dahil sa ibang tao o sa pamilya ko, kung hindi para sa sarili ko.” Self-validation emerged as a sub-theme, with Respondent 4 stating: “Patunayan ko sa sarili ko na hindi lang ako hanggang ganto. Na may dapat akong marating.” Five out of eight respondents emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive mindset, and six became future-oriented in their goal setting, with Respondent 8 stating: “Tignan na agad yung goal nyo, yung plans nyo, yung future. Maganda yung may point of view kayo sa buhay nyo.”

These findings resonate with Zortman et al. (2016), who observed that participants who enhanced their attitudes and increased self-respect were more likely to successfully complete reentry programs. Larsen (2017) recommended that programs for female offenders include skill development to manage life transitions effectively. Maruna (2001) affirmed that determination and motivation are imperative to staying out of jail, noting that it is more than just the ex-offender knowing that criminal behavior is wrong, but comes down to the ex-offender’s own stance on success and what matters most to them.

Theme 7: Effective Probationary Programs

All participants expressed appreciation for the reentry programs provided by the PPA. Respondent 4 shared: “Napakagandang program para sa mga taong gustong magbagong buhay.” Respondent 1 said: “Yung mga activities, sumasali ako kung anong sabihin nila and I feel rewarded doon.” The harmonized and integrated treatment program

adopted by the Administration immensely helped the participants in their reentry, enabling them to gradually ease back into their communities.

This theme aligns with reintegration theory, which posits that crime stems from a breakdown or absence of community cohesion (Padayachee, 2008). Research concludes that holistic rehabilitative programming positively influences ex-offenders' ability to achieve sustainable social reintegration upon release from incarceration, thereby reducing recidivism (Ravulo, 2019). The rising recidivism rates among female ex-offenders can be attributed, in part, to the absence of comprehensive reentry programs aimed at facilitating rehabilitation (Berry, 2019).

Theme 8: Faith in Overcoming Adversity

Almost all participants mentioned prayer and God when asked what helped them transition to their new life. Respondent 2 shared: "Sa prayers lang ako kumapit, wala naman iba." Respondent 7 echoed: "Tsaka dasal lang, yun lang pinaghahawakan namin lahat, dasal." Respondent 3 added: "Alam ko na hindi ako papabayaang ni God. Kaya pinagtibay ko yung paniniwala sa kanya."

Maruna (2001) highlights that many ex-offenders turn to religion as a catalyst for change. This aligns with Giordano et al. (2002), who noted that religious commitment can serve as a blueprint for sustaining successful reentry. Larsen (2017) similarly discovered that reliance on God and spiritual growth were pivotal factors for reconnecting successfully with communities. This theme aligns with the EST on the mesosystem level, where connections across microsystems—including school, church, work, and home life—influence the development of ex-offenders (Patten et al., 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The aim of this phenomenological, qualitative research study was to investigate the perceptions, experiences, and emotional responses of female ex-offenders who successfully reintegrated into society, alongside the challenges they faced during this process. The findings addressed the gap in literature by providing an understanding of female ex-offenders' perceptions of reentry programs and their reentry process. According to research, existing programs for offenders are founded on male models and fail to consider the unique reentry challenges faced by female ex-offenders (Larsen, 2017; Martilik, 2018). The needs of female ex-offenders' treatment and reentry success need to be understood so that professionals can better serve this population (Cale et al., 2019).

This study provides the PPA, community leaders, stakeholders, and family members with a better understanding of the reentry process and its challenges for female ex-offenders. Results from this study can effect positive social change by educating families about the difficulties female ex-offenders face such as finding employment, handling stigma and negative labeling, childcare, and adjustment to community as they transition from institutional life back to the community. Successful reentry can empower these individuals to support their families, secure employment, pursue education, find stable housing, and ultimately become productive members of society. This paper underscores that successful reentry is a reciprocal relationship involving both the individual ex-offender and the broader community.

5.2 Recommendations

Future research should expand the geographic scope beyond Baguio City to explore how different regional factors influence the reentry process for female ex-offenders across various PPA offices (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Additionally, future studies should investigate the challenges faced by female ex-offenders who struggle to reintegrate and do not achieve successful outcomes, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and factors influencing reentry success.

The researchers emphasize that reentry should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a singular event (Holtfreter & Wattanaporn, 2013; James, 2015). The PPA is encouraged to develop gender-specific treatment programs that address the unique needs of female ex-offenders, including childcare support, food assistance,

relationship-building training, and self-worth skill-building activities. Programs specifically for mothers to reconnect with their children may be particularly beneficial, as most incarcerated women are mothers who assume primary parenting roles after incarceration. Collaboration between the PPA and the Bureau of Penology is recommended to synergize efforts, share resources, and implement innovative strategies. Government agencies should consider implementing technical and livelihood programs tailored for this demographic, such as small-scale entrepreneurship initiatives, to foster financial independence and reduce recidivism.

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