

# REHABILITATION OF WOMEN IN PRISON

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## I. ABOUT PRI AND OUR WORK ON WOMEN'S IMPRISONMENT

Penal Reform International (PRI) is a non-governmental organization working globally to promote criminal justice systems that uphold human rights for all and do no harm. We work to make criminal justice systems non-discriminatory and protect the rights of disadvantaged people. We run practical human rights programmes and support reforms that make criminal justice fair and effective.

Women's imprisonment is a priority for PRI – not least because we know that implementation of the UN Bangkok Rules on women has remained piecemeal in many respects. One grave indicator of this is that the number of women in prison worldwide continues to rise; our latest analysis shows an increase of 17 per cent globally since the Bangkok Rules were adopted a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> PRI has undertaken a significant amount of work to support rehabilitation of women who find themselves in conflict with the law including in Georgia, a small country in the South Caucasus. Our approach when we work with women in criminal justice systems is based on the simple premise of putting into practice the UN Bangkok Rules as summarized below.

## II. DATA AND RESEARCH FOR A GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO REHABILITATION OF WOMEN

What is the first step in delivering a programme on rehabilitation of women? It is knowledge. Before embarking on any sort of intervention or programme of work we ask ourselves: What is the situation on reoffending for women and here I point to Bangkok Rule 67 which calls for "...comprehensive, result-oriented research on the offences committed by women, the reasons that trigger women's confrontation with the criminal justice system, the impact of secondary criminalization and imprisonment on women, the characteristics of women offenders, as well as programmes designed to reduce reoffending by women..."

What are the typical barriers women in criminal justice systems face in a certain country or region? PRI's research has shown common barriers to rehabilitation are often different for men, or if not different, impact women in a unique way.

It is therefore important for rehabilitation to be gender-sensitive because if they are to be effective, they need to address the multiple, overlapping needs of the person, the root causes of criminal behaviour, and these include those that are specific to women.

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.penalreform.org/blog/addressing-the-105000-increase-in-the-global-female/>>.

### III. COMMON BARRIERS FOR WOMEN'S REHABILITATION

Based on PRI's extensive research, and supported by other evidence, the different gender-specific issues commonly include:

- *Violence*: there is ample evidence that high numbers of women in prison have experienced violence. And in some cases, this violence is linked to their offence. It is key to address consequences of such violence.
- *Stigma and rejection* of women who have been involved in crime or in prison is often felt disproportionately, mainly because they are deemed to have broken social norms as “mothers, carers”. Impacts of such stigma include child custody issues or relationships where, for example, women may accept bad relationships as they are rejected from their families.
- *Rate of mental health* conditions are generally higher among women in prison compared to their male counterparts. This is now exacerbated by the impacts of coronavirus measures in prisons.
- Another common barrier for women's rehabilitation is related to *their status as sole carers of children or dependents* – the anxiety, worry and consequences of separation while in prison are well-evidenced.
- Finally, *poverty and low social status* of all people in prison is certainly true in the case of women. Although with women we know that poverty is frequently connected to the offence, and in many cases the ability to get out of poverty is more difficult because of the issues I have just mentioned.

### IV. MEETING THE NEEDS OF WOMEN IN PRISON IN GEORGIA (IN RELATION TO REHABILITATION)

In Georgia, where we implemented a specific programme on the topic, a PRI survey and a subsequent study by UN Women documented the top three requirements that women identified as needing support with to build law-abiding lives after prison.

These were: health and counselling, employment, and help with childcare and family reunification. Our project was designed to provide these support needs and others identified. As a minority group (women make up about 3.7 per cent of the national prison population total of just over 10,000 people in Georgia), they needed a specific approach.

We teamed up with partner organizations to deliver rehabilitation and support services to female prisoners and their children over a two-year period. The identified support needs were met through interventions from work and training opportunities, business start-up grants to psychological counselling, financial support for health care and a dedicated nursery and childminder at the mother and baby unit in prison so women could participate in programmes (see table):

Identified need (PRI / UN Women)	Service delivered
Insufficient rehabilitation, vocational and employment opportunities	Vocational training, small business management skills
Experiences of violence	Opening of a shelter
Legal issues	Legal aid
Difficulties to find employment	Small grants and training
Practical issues	Mother and baby unit in prison, shelter post-release
Health-care issues (including mental health)	Psychological counselling

### **A. Shelter**

The shelter was important as women leaving prison often face so much stigma and discrimination and this, coupled with the absence of a social network, criminal record and caring usually for young children, means they are in a vulnerable position. This vulnerability and economic reality may lead them to reoffend again. The shelter provided a safe place and helped those released from prison, especially after a longer sentence. It prevented them returning to violent relationships. Also wrap around services were provided at the shelter (for example, access to legal aid and health care).

### **B. Legal Aid, Counselling and Psycho-Social Assistance**

Legal aid and psychological counselling proved pivotal in the rehabilitation process for some women, allowing them to overcome long-term problems such as obtaining custody of children, issues accessing identification documents or overcoming a lack of confidence due to the stigma from been in prison.

The project also supported 97 children of imprisoned mothers by providing them psycho-social assistance. Psychologists provided therapy to children experiencing behavioural disorders, and social workers facilitated rebuilding relationships between children and their mothers through joint sessions. Transportation for regular visits was

facilitated. They assisted children and their families in applying for relevant state programmes to increase their access to education and health care.

### **C. Economic Empowerment and Tackling Poverty**

Economic empowerment and tackling poverty were other central objectives for our project, as having no money when coming out of prison is one of the main drivers of reoffending. This is particularly the case with women where common offences are related to poverty. For instance, in Georgia, common offences committed by women attracting a prison sentence are theft or property related, and the second most common type is drug-related offences, often committed in a context of financial need. While interventions in prison cannot address the underlying gender inequalities for women in society, micro-level programmes can help women on the pathway to employment and independence.

As well as vocational training and small business management, the project also helped women to find employment and/or gave small grants so they could start their own business. This was deliberate in order to overcome the issues of high levels of unemployment and difficulties for former prisoners to find jobs. Training focused on the registration of an enterprise, legal regulations, taxes, marketing and budgeting, as well as developing a business plan.

These courses not only had a therapeutic effect, boosting self-esteem but it helps recipients regain their status as carers for their families, provided structure to their daily routines and gave them opportunities to socialize.

### **D. Coordination of Multi-Sectoral Stakeholders**

The programme involved multi-sectoral stakeholders including mental health, justice, civil society and women affected. This was key to its success as the approach ensured joined-up service provision, for example, women accessing one service could be referred on to other services as needed. There was also positive support from state institutions for this project.

## **V. CHALLENGES FACED AND SOLUTIONS TO MITIGATE OR OVERCOME**

As always with projects that seek to overcome complex problems, our work in Georgia faced some challenges that are common elsewhere. Firstly, regarding infrastructure there are limitations, for instance insufficient availability of spaces or rooms for rehabilitation programmes to take place in prison, or there is no conducive environment. We therefore took on the challenge, for instance, by refurbishing the mother and baby unit purchasing furniture and toys, etc. Similarly, with the shelter, the authorities allocated the premises, but it needed furniture. It is critical to allocate funds and energy early on in such efforts.

Secondly, for sustainability beyond the project life, some challenges were faced. Ensuring buy-in from the state was going well during the project; however, a major restructuring in the government involved significant staff changes. A political shift brought a reprioritization with women in prison no longer a key priority of government. We saw that it is important therefore to plan for all possibilities, and for donors and the international community to ensure pressure alongside civil society for sustainability.

Finally, another challenge in any project on women is in tackling gender norms. Programme design is important, and therefore in our work in Georgia we sought to contribute to gender equality by giving women in prison the sort of training and opportunities which will lead to jobs and not fall back into roles those traditionally seen as appropriate for women. We also sought to ensure that the job training and other support was in line with the reality of the labour market so that there were real job prospects.

## **VI. IMPACT OF THE PROJECT IN GEORGIA**

The project had significant success in terms of reoffending rates. 85 per cent of the beneficiaries of the project did not reoffend. Of the 121 out of 819 who did reoffend, 7 of these women were sentenced to prison and the rest were placed on probation or received another non-custodial sanction.

## **VII. GUIDANCE ON REHABILITATION OF WOMEN IN PRISON**

The lessons from this project in Georgia and many others around the globe are captured in guidance published in 2019 by PRI with the Thailand Institute of Justice, titled “Guide to the rehabilitation and social reintegration of women prisoners: Implementation of the Bangkok Rules”.<sup>2</sup>

The tool is designed for use by prison management, staff, policymakers and others involved in the criminal justice process, including legislators, judges and law enforcement officials. It aims to provide practical guidance on improving existing rehabilitation programmes and services and designing new ones, looking at different country contexts and considering location-specific challenges and opportunities. It outlines 10 key principles for gender-sensitive rehabilitation programmes.

It summarizes the importance of good prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration programmes and identifies the main barriers to successful rehabilitation, including the barriers faced by female prisoners and by specific groups of female prisoners such as girls, foreign nationals and women from ethnic minority groups. Identifying these barriers provides an insight into why additional efforts are needed to assist the rehabilitation of women offenders.

Finally, it includes some of promising practices from around the world showcasing good prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration.

## **VIII. GUIDANCE ON REHABILITATION OF WOMEN SERVING NON-CUSTODIAL SANCTIONS**

PRI’s work in Kenya with the Probation Service, and with the support of the Thailand Institute of Justice, showed that there are various issues faced by women serving probation or community service that are a barrier to their successful rehabilitation. For instance, the women struggled to save money to pay for transport to attend monthly appointments at the

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.penalreform.org/resource/guide-to-the-rehabilitation-and-social-reintegration-of/>>.

probation office and had issues getting to their placement; problems with the length and scheduling of community service work meant clashes with family obligations like fetching water or childcare, worsening the financial situation; safety issues when supervised by male officers, etc.

A key outcome of our work in Kenya showed, again, that economic empowerment of women was critical to their rehabilitation. A package of resources, including a guide, “Gender-sensitive community service and probation: Model for Reform”<sup>3</sup> documents the overall experiences and findings of the pioneering, multifaceted project that focused on the experiences of women completing non-custodial sentences in Kenya. It lays out 10 key steps to take when replicating the project in an international context, in order to introduce a gender-sensitive approach to non-custodial sentences.

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<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.penalreform.org/resource/gender-sensitive-approach-model-reform/>>.