
OPINION ON SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR MOTHERS IN PRISON: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: People including mothers who are incarcerated in prison require full support from others for them to lead their lives of purpose and productivity inside and outside of prison. **Objective:** Aim of this study was to explore how the mothers in prison perceived the support they received while being incarcerated. **Methods:** The authors interviewed in-depth face-to-face with ten mothers in custody and analysed through interpretive phenomenological analysis of their accounts of the support system while being in the prison. **Results** Mothers in prison described various patterns of support they received from prison authorities, spouse and families. The availability of regular visitation, scheduled programs (such as sheltered workshop, counselling, religious session and vocational class) and infant-mother care program provided by prison authority perceived by the mothers as very beneficial but limited. On the other hand, support from spouse and family varied from being very supportive to being neglected. Good support system reduces their stress; continue the relationship between the mothers, children and family; increase their vocational skills, and promote well behaviour during the imprisonment. **Conclusion:** Mothers in prison require full support from prison authorities, spouse and family. More work is required to enhance support system for mothers in prison for them to transform to be a better person for self, family and society.

Keywords: support system, mother, women, prison, perceived support

INTRODUCTION

Although women constitute only a small proportion of the general prison population, their numbers are increasing in tandem with the rise in the overall prison population (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime; UNODC, 2014). In Malaysia, statistics from Malaysian Prison Department (2018) indicated that in 2017, of a total 147 497 inmates who were incarcerated in the prisons, 17 002 (11.5%) of them were women who had been either remanded, prosecuted, convicted or sentenced in prison. However, from this large number, only 30 of them in that year were finally found guilty and imprisoned for their wrongdoing. Most often, women are incarcerated for short duration for minor and non-violent offences (UNODC, 2014). Often, women are victims themselves, trapped within the violent environment and become the abettor or accessory offender of others' criminal act, or forced to be drug mules. Living in a patriarchal society, women are ensnared within poverty or lack of resources, social disparity, gender inequality, discriminatory legislation and practices. Most women in prison do not pose a serious violent risk to the public (UNODC, 2014).

Deterrence by imprisonment is one of the methods that have been long believed could transform an individual to be a better person (Becker, 1968; Rupp, 2008). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of legal sanctions on misconduct must come together with social sanctions (evaluation from friends or family) and internal sanctions (feelings of guilt) (Mann, Garcia-Rada, Hornuf, & Tafurt, 2016); to achieve this, involvement and support from surrounding others are vital. Supports from prison authorities and family for women in prison are important for many reasons. It helps the women to adjust well to the prison environment, reduce the expected psychological stress, promote good behaviour maintain the mother-child interaction while in prison (Hotelling, 2008; Jiang & Winfree Jr, 2006; Vainik, 2008).

Researchers have shown that women who were incarcerated in prison and able to maintain family ties had decreased likelihood to be rearrested (Petersilia, 2003). Successful return to family life decreased numbers of children growing up in cycles of poverty and lessened the burden on supporting welfare programs (Arditti & Few, 2006). Women receiving good support also had better adjustment and acceptance upon re-entry to family and community (Hotelling, 2008; Jiang & Winfree Jr, 2006; McCarty &

Brunton-Smith, 2017). However, researches have shown that positive participation of others and comprehensive supports to prisoners during and after incarceration are lacking; as the consequences, the aim for the betterment failed (Houck & Loper, 2002; Vainik, 2008). Many of them developed various physical and psychological complications during incarceration and upon released experience destitution, family destruction and recidivism (Houck & Loper, 2002). These difficulties suggest need for community-based approach which aim to strengthen mother's support systems (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Despite the growing body of literature elsewhere that explore the support system for women in prison, little attention has been paid to researching this topic among mothers in prison in this country. Up to date, from our knowledge, there has been no published study to discuss this matter. Hence, this study aimed to explore how the mothers in Malaysian prison perceived the support they received while being incarcerated.

METHODS

The authors carried out a qualitative research involving mothers who were incarcerated in the Female Division, Kajang Prison, Malaysia in July 2018. Participants were selected among women incarcerated for the non-violent crime, aged between 20 and 65, a mother either biological, stepmother or foster mother and could speak *Bahasa Malaysia* or English. The initial screening was done by prison staff to ensure only non-violent case were selected. Potential participants were given participant information sheets and consent form. Those who were willing to voluntarily participate were invited to a room deemed safe and suitable from the perspective of prison authorities. In order to put women at ease, in the beginning, each mother was asked to talk about her routine activities in the prison. Then, demographic data were documented.

The session continued with gentle prompts encouraged them to describe regarding their motherhood experiences such as "*Could you please share with us your stories and lived experiences about being a mother after coming here?*" and "*What is your opinion about the support system you have received after coming here?*" Most of the time open-ended questions were used. The participants were encouraged to give elaboration if their accounts were brief and not well understood by the researchers. For example, "*Just now you were saying that...could you please elaborate more?*" Because all the authors were not allowed to bring and to use any audiotape, while interviewing the participant, detailed notes and verbatim accounts were taken by other researchers and then written notes were verified with each woman immediately after the interview.

Analysis began by making sure all identifying details were disguised in or deleted from transcripts and pseudonyms were used. In our endeavour to understand the ways in which women made sense of their experience, the authors applied interpretative phenomenological analysis to the notes and transcripts; further interpretation was guided by narrative theory (Razali, Fisher, & Kirkman, 2018). All authors discussed every aspect of the analysis and resolved any differences.

The research was approved by the Prison Department, Malaysia (PRIDE.BDK. Rd.500.8/9/1 Jld.11 (23) and the Medical and Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia 600-IRMI (5/1/6) REC/237/18, All participants gave informed consent.

RESULTS

The authors interviewed ten mothers in prison and all of them described that support from prison authorities, their family and relatives were very important. The four groups of people who matter the most to keep the mothers strong were their spouse, parents, siblings and children. The levels of support received were described by the women as varies from very supportive to totally neglecting them without any contact. The ultimate support for them was the forgiveness, acceptance of their repentance and assistance from the God.

Theme 1: Religious coping and support

The authors interviewed mothers in prison from various religious background; Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Hindus. All of them described the importance of connecting with the ultimate superpower. For Muslim mothers, they were grateful that prison authority provides a regular schedule for religious preaching and counselling. For example, Madam A said that "*I learn a lot about religion here. We have the class that taught about religion almost every day. I planned to wear headscarf once I release.*" Another mother Madam B said,

"I told my child that I went to learn about religion. I felt grateful because here I have time to learn more about religion to become better. I started to teach myself to not miss any pray time. I felt calmer when I remember God."

(Madam B)

Mothers who were non-Muslims attended regular counselling and continued their religious practices as usual. Religious coping was utilized by most of the mothers to deal with their emotional changes and difficulties being in custody particularly when they believed other supports are lacking. Turning to God provides them the sense of calmness, reduces their stress and encourages transformation to be a better person.

Theme 2: Supportive prison environment

Generally, the majority of the mothers in prison described a range of level of supports they received from the prison; from good to limited support from prison authorities. Most of the mothers were grateful to the prison authorities for giving them opportunities to gain new vocational skills such as sewing, baking, grooming and knowledge about business. These opportunities were achieved through programs for rehabilitation. A few of them said that they may not get similar experiences outside. Exclusive for mothers who gave birth while incarceration, they were very happy with the opportunity that they can be with their baby in the cell together with them. They were also thankful for the program which allows family visitation and telephone calls. Mothers in prison claimed that these opportunities were able to continue and maintain their relationship with children and family. On the other hand, a few mothers ventilated their disappointment that there were limited resources such as clothing for newborn babies and nutritious food for the postpartum mothers.

Theme 3: Mothering through husband

Mothers in prison described that their spouses were the source of strength. The husband was important to continue the parenting especially in looking after the emotional needs of their children. Wife of a responsible husband felt assured about their children's emotion and well-being. For example, Mother C who had two sons who were teenagers at home staying with their father said, "Now my husband takes over my duty over our children. My husband and children never missed to visit me. He trusts me and often told me to always be patient". Another mother, Madam D added, "My husband always gives me the full support. My daughter told he often lose appetite when he remembered about me. He also had lost some weight." However, those mothers who had a poor marital relationship shared a contrary opinion. For example, Mother E, a divorcee said that "I don't care about my (ex) husband at all. The only thing that I care is my children."

Theme 4: Family and children as sources of strength

Apart from the spouse, children and other family members perceived by the mothers in prison as sources of strength. However, not all gave full support to these women. In some of the cases that we interviewed, the close relative that mostly took care of their children were their biological parents and siblings. For example, Mother F commented that "Now my children are with my mom's. I don't really worry about my child welfare because I know my mother is managing it well". For women with an adult son or daughter, the moral support received from the children can also help them to build back their confidence. For example, Madam G who had children in their middle twenties said,

"My daughter told me 'You are still who you are. You are still a leader. Don't worry about it because we are all waiting for you' This kind of moral support that my daughter gave, touched me. I can't stop crying when I put off the phone."

(Madam G)

DISCUSSION

The unique findings of this research are the foundation to the development of further knowledge in the understanding of support system for mothers in prison. It also could provide suggestions to inform prison authorities for further enhancement of current available correctional and rehabilitative programs. As described by the mothers in this study, religious coping plays an important role as the main support for them to endure living in the custody and transform themselves to be better persons. Recognizing the importance of religiosity for inmates, Malaysian Prison Department through its Religious and Welfare Unit has also introduced faith-based intervention in prison. The program not only limited to the teaching of moral values (*akhlak*), but also other topics in Islam such as interpretation of Quran (*tafsir*), profession of faith (*tawhid*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the history of Islam and the prophet (*sirah*) (Siti Marfuah, Razali, & Susanto, 2015). The role of faith to assist people to reform and live a life free from wrongdoing has long known. It has been suggested elsewhere that faith-based interventions support the process of desistance, increase social support and quality of life of the inmates (Johnson & Jang, 2017; Stansfield, 2017; Talik & Skowroński, 2018).

Participants also described the usefulness of other various programs scheduled for them in the prison. Apart from improving religious knowledge of the inmates, other units or sections such as Character Development Unit, Treatment Unit as well as Vocational and Industrial Section help transform the inmates to be a more productive person in and out of the prison (Malaysian Prison Department, 2012). Good values are taught to inmates throughout their lives in prison through regular sessions with a counsellor or motivator. Inmates' health is being managed appropriately at a prison clinic or hospital nearby. In addition, prison also provides various vocational skills (such as machinery work, bakery, tailoring, and beauty expertise) to the inmates aim to prepare them with skilful job opportunities upon re-entry to the community. A review of 12 studies on vocational training in prison indicated that this program is beneficial to reduce recidivism and increase their employability after being released from the prison (Alós, Esteban, Jódar, & Miguélez, 2015; Mohammed & Mohamed, 2015; Newton et al., 2018).

Support from spouse, family and children as described by mothers is very crucial for inmates. Studies have shown that support from family could help them manage the stress being incarcerated and maintain inmates' mental health (Wallace et al., 2016). In addition, according to a review of ten studies on the effect of prison visits to inmates, apart from good effect to mental health, regular visits by the family would also reduce in rule-breaking behaviour, reduced recidivism and increased their survival in the community upon released (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). For prison inmates who involve in drug addiction, the study by Andersen (2018) suggested that support from family through regular visits to prison would increase the chance for them to be sober from

drugs. Furthermore, support from family and their children is vital to maintaining the mother-children relationship and also reduced the stress of the children who lived outside without their mothers (Poehlmann, 2005; Vainik, 2008).

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that mothers in prison require full support from prison authorities, spouse, family and their children. The ultimate support for them is the support from God, hence faith-based program is very beneficial. More work is required to enhance support system for mothers in prison for them to transform to be a better person for self, family and society. This study has to be interpreted with care because all the participants were prisoners; known to be vulnerable to coercion directly or indirectly from authorities. The participants were selected conveniently and had gone through screening by the prison authority prior to the research interviews. In particular, the participants did not include those imprisoned for severe criminal actions that their experiences may be affected by the sentences and the prison setting. Furthermore, all mothers had at least a year stay in prison that may hinder them to recall in details initial experiences being incarcerated and that they may have adjusted well with the prison's environment.

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