

The Right to Read Behind Bars: Access to Information Resources and Libraries in the Prisons in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper was to answer the question of what is the level of the readers' activity in the prisons in Sri Lanka and what are the perceived material needs of the prison libraries to meet the reading right of the prisoners. The design of the study was a descriptive survey while the population comprised of all convicted male prisoners in the Magazine Prison in Sri Lanka and the welfare as well as library workers of this prison are the population. The sample size was 50 including 40 prisoners and 10 library and welfare workers of out of a population. Structure questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) schedule were the instruments used to generate data for the study. Descriptive method of analysis was used in answering the research questions. The data was analyzed using mean and standard deviation while the data from the FGD was qualitatively analyzed. Findings also showed that the varieties of library resources and services as well as human resources provided are grossly inadequate considering the population of the prisoners. Findings showed that a number of strategies could be used to enhance the provision of library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners' information needs. They include liaising with public libraries, NGOs, religion bodies, legal practitioners, liaising with professional bodies like the library associations, granting the prisoners more access to information and developing new and using existing guidelines to prison library services.

Key Words: Reading right, Prison libraries, Sri Lanka, Information needs, Prisoners

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I. INTRODUCTION

Libraries as major custodians of information, which have been professionally processed and stored for retrieval should play positive roles in every segment of society. Anafulu (1998) posits that the library is the engine room and power house where information is collected, stored, processed and retrieved for use. According to Okunoye (2007) who cited Gregorian (1998) an investment in libraries, is an act of faith in the continuity of life. He went further to represent the library in the following words;

Libraries contain the heritage of humanity: the record of its triumph and failure, its intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements, and its collective memory. They are source of knowledge, scholarship and wisdom. They are an institution withal, where the left and the right God and the devil are together classified and retained in order to teach us what to emulate and what not to repeat. Libraries are in short the mirror held up to the face of human kind, the diary of human race. Libraries are not only repositories of past human endeavor, they are instrument of civilization. They provide tools for learning, a laboratory of human aspiration, a window to the future. They are a source of self-renewal, intellectual growth, and hope. In this land and everywhere on earth, they are a medium of progress, autonomy, empowerment, independence and self-determination. They have always provided and will always provide place and space for imaginative recreation, for imagination rebirth.

The values and missions of the modern practice of criminal justice, in which emphasis has gradually shifted from punishment towards education and rehabilitation, go hand in hand with a view of libraries as important players within the intellectual freedom and social justice agenda. Within this enlightened correctional paradigm, prison libraries serve as a window and a link to the outside world and represent a safe and humane environment that provides support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programs (Lehmann and Locke, 2005, 4 p).

Prisoner in custody is specifically subjected to restraint of movement and can, therefore, not have total assurance of enjoyment of the freedom of personal liberty under the law (Araromi, 2015). A prisoner who is observing the sentence of court by being in custody does not totally lose his rights as a human being and must, therefore, enjoy some basic rights despite being confined to a prison. Accessibility to library resource as a tool to aid the reformation of prison inmates then becomes an important part of the entire prison environment in its support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programmes.

Prison libraries play a positive role in the lives of the prisoners through the provision of resources which assist and enhance them in the skills acquired as well as help to address psychological problems and attitude behavior. Society has shifted their focus from punishment of prisoners to education, rehabilitation and the use of their time while serving in prison (Lehman and Locke, 2005). Prison library becomes an important environment in its support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programs.

The reading contributes to socialization, spiritual development, self-education and emotional intelligence, bears essential benefits for the intellectual, psychological and informational equilibrium of man. The thesis that reading is the best antidote to violence and aggression is widespread. Attempts to prove also the link between reading and health are done, which would mean that keeping the welfare and the health of the prisoners is most effective by encouraging reading.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Information is power, and learning is a continuum. Ogunesan (2005) noted that access to information and participation in a democratic society are mutually interdependent. Ghenn (1990) observed that information can be construed to be the “blood and oxygen” of a democratic society. Indeed, access to and proficiency in the manipulation of information defines, in part, the citizen of the modern democratic state. Turn (1985) and Kantor (1982) stated that the concept of a free and democratic society mandates access to certain types of information which the citizens need for their socio-political and socio-economic decisions. Therefore, the need to constantly update and improve upon previously acquired knowledge for human capacity development and empowerment cannot be overemphasized.

Access to information is a fundamental and legitimate right enunciated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights charter (UNDHR, 1948) and this principle has remained of great importance to libraries in their quest to provide equitable access to information for all. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1994) jointly developed the Public Library Manifesto that obliges libraries to provide information to all without discrimination and also to people with mental and physical disabilities as well as the ill and the imprisoned.

Prisoners have the same fundamental right to reading and access to information which should not be denied. Prisoners, just like free people in the society, have been observed to have various information needs that can be provided for through library and information services. Lehman (2005) stated that an incarcerated person has not relinquished the right to learn and to access information, and the prison library should offer materials and services comparable to community libraries in the free world. He emphasized that restrictions on the access to library materials and information should be imposed only when such access is known to present a danger to prison security. Similarly, every institution should have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners should be encouraged to make full use of it.

The international legislation for reading, books and libraries in the places of imprisonment has not been studied in complex and completeness. After an extensive desk research we have found that all relevant international documents concerning any aspect of the life of the prisoners in the world are adamant that everyone has the right to read and be informed, and the state should give him that freedom. Many and different organizations have compiled and formulated charters and lists of the human rights applied to reading and literacy. Others are related to the right to read at all – the constant presence of the right to universal access to information, speaks for this (Barker, Escarpit, 1973)

In order for meaningful learning to take place in the prisons, the inmates must be provided with functional libraries, well stocked with relevant and current reading materials. Oluwadare (2016) opined that the more accessible information sources are, the more likely they are to be used. In this regard, the prison library presents a window to the outside world and can provide much useful information for those preparing for release.

The prison library is often referred to as a “normal zone” for prisoners, and the services and resources offered are very important for their rehabilitation, education, and socialization. For many prisoners, the library functions as a window to the world in an otherwise monotonous existence behind the walls. The library and the librarian bring mental stimulation from the outside into the prisons in the form of literature, culture, current events, and knowledge, which provide opportunities and gateways to a richer life. However, for the library to function as the “normal” room in the prison, fundamental economic and organizational structures must be in place. National policy, economy support, and service structure are important factors that affect how, and to what extent, prisoners receive satisfactory library services.

The expression “books open worlds” is especially applicable to the prison environment, where the world is a strictly limited space, an actual microcosm of society (Thompson, 1997). It is a place associated with the dark side of society. Most people prefer to look the other way when real stories from prison appear in the news; they would rather keep their own illusion of prison life, which is mostly based on movies and crime fiction.

Prison libraries have great potential to provide support to prisoners who take part in educational programs while incarcerated. As recognised by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in their Libraries Change Lives Award to Saughton Prison Library, and described in a City of Edinburgh news article (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010), for a prison library to be truly valuable to prisoners, beyond helping them spend considerable amounts of free time constructively, it must also contribute to supporting their lives when they leave prison and play a role in reducing their chances of re-offending. Prison libraries can do this in a number of ways. The most powerful tool to help prisoners stay out of prison is education, particularly education that increases employability. A study by the U.K.'s Ministry of Justice found that lack of employment and stable accommodation were consistent factors in the re-offending of prisoners following release from prison (Brunton- Smith & Hopkins, 2014).

Prisoners' restricted circumstances, libraries can play a greater role in the lives of prisoners than of almost any other group. Providing for the needs of these prisoners will help in achieving the objectives thus Improving the literacy of prisoners, rehabilitating, re-socializing, and re-integrating and preparing the prisoners into becoming better citizens who can readapt into the society after prison.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to answer the question of what is the level of the readers activity in the prisons in Sri Lanka and what are the perceived material needs of the prison libraries to meet the reading right of the prisoners. Additionally, following sub objectives were formulated.

- Identify the types of information resources available to prison inmates in the Magazine prison in Sri Lanka
- To find out the retrieval devices that facilitate inmates access to information resources.
- To determine how regular the information resources are utilized by inmates in the Magazine prison in Sri Lanka

IV. PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of a prison is to rehabilitate the people and send them back to society for which the importance of quality library services is invaluable. A comprehensive picture of the reading in prison establishments in the world is absent and also there is no empirical study on the reading in the places of imprisonment in Sri Lanka. The research interest of the library keepers and of the experts from the public libraries and academic libraries to the problems of the reading in the prison libraries is absent. Prison library service is a neglected area in Sri Lanka which needs more attention, resources and planned development. Though there are thousands of inmates in prisons in Sri Lanka from all strata of society, providing them with quality library and information services is still a distant dream. Therefore the research problem of the study is to investigate the question of what is the level of the readers activity in the prisons in Sri Lanka and what are the perceived material needs of the prison libraries to meet the reading right of the prisoners.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research designs to provide in-depth and detailed examination of the topic and descriptive survey method was adopted. 40 prisoner and 10 library and welfare workers were selected as the sample of the study. A research questionnaire and Discussion Paper was used to collect data from the sample. Out of completed questionnaire resulting in a response rate of 100%, were used in data analysis. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

VI. RESULTS

The results were presented both quantitatively and qualitatively. The finding show that majority of the respondents (80%) were Sinhala, while 8.8%, 6.3% and 5% were Tamil, Muslim and Christian respectively. The result that most respondents were Sinhala is likely because the Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in the Sri Lanka and also occupy all the divisions in the Colombo district. Other ethnicity groups were represented small proportions of the tested sample

The age distribution of respondents showed that the majority (41.3%) of convicted prisoners were aged between 40-50 years. Most (60.1%) of the respondents were within the productive age bracket of 30-50 years and 40% were above 50 years. The majority of educated prisoners were between the ages of 40-50, including 2 graduates, 16 of advance levels and 12 of ordinary levels.

Many literacy training programmes were conducted by the rehabilitation section of the prison. Among those, Dhamma School (SucharithodayaDahamPasala) was the main literacy training school in the prison. 207 total numbers of prisoners were studying at the SucharithodayaDhamma School. Among them 16 were getting ready to the final examination of the Dhamma School and 20 were getting ready to the DharmacharyaExamination. In addition English classes, Tamil classes, classes of writing and reading were conducted for who were unable to read or write. Among the sampled prisoners, 32.5% were not interested for

those training programmes. Some prisoners were getting full advantage from those literacy training programmes.

Types of information resources available to prison inmates:

There were no reading tables, chairs or reading space in the Welikada prison. However, none of the prison libraries have adequate accommodation in terms of standard library building, reading space, tables, chairs, shelves and circulation desks. In the prison, the library is usually squeezed inside a small apartment in the welfare section/building as can be seen from the table.

The prison also has library collections in different areas and of different type fiction, non-fiction. However it is also evident that they are lacking in their library collections. It could be seen that Welikada prison library has 3335 book titles only. The prison does not even have materials on certain subject areas at all. The few available ones are outdated books donated by individuals or public libraries a long time ago. Prison authorities did not acquire newspapers and magazines due to security reasons.

	Resources	Quantity
1	Accommodation – reading tables/chairs	NA
2	Qualified library staff/workers	NA
3	Reading Materials	
	I. Fictions – story books/novels	1650
	II. Science fictions	50
	III. Other fictions	400
4	Non – fiction books like books on subjects like	
	I. Religion or religious books	1100
	II. Languages	0
	III. History	20
	IV. Science and Technology	10
	V. Reference books like encyclopedias and dictionaries	5
	VI. Social sciences like books on business	30
	VII. Biography and related books	70
VIII. Textbooks written in subjects e.g. Mathematics, Agriculture etc.	0	
5	Magazines and Newspapers	
	I. Science magazines	0
	II. General weekly/daily magazine and newspapers	0
	III. Local magazines	0
	IV. Foreign publications	0
	V. Business magazines or newspapers	0
6	VI. Recreational magazines or newspapers like sports	0
	Materials on law and legal matters	0
7	Audio recordings	0
8	Video recordings	0

Information Resources available in the Prison

The library is manned by welfare officers who know little or nothing of librarianship. The warders who work in the welfare departments as well as overseeing the affairs of the library have no previous library working experience or library qualification.

In providing reading materials for the prisoners, the library lends books to the prisoners and allowed to borrow books to their cells. Prisoners indicated that they needed to be borrowing books to read at their convenience.

The prison library also gets loan assistance from neighboring libraries. For instance, the Welikada prison used to get such from the public library in Colombo. In the prison library and educational programmes always go together. In Welikada Prison, it was the school and Dhamma school programmes established and run by the prison authority that attracted the emergence and establishment of the library.

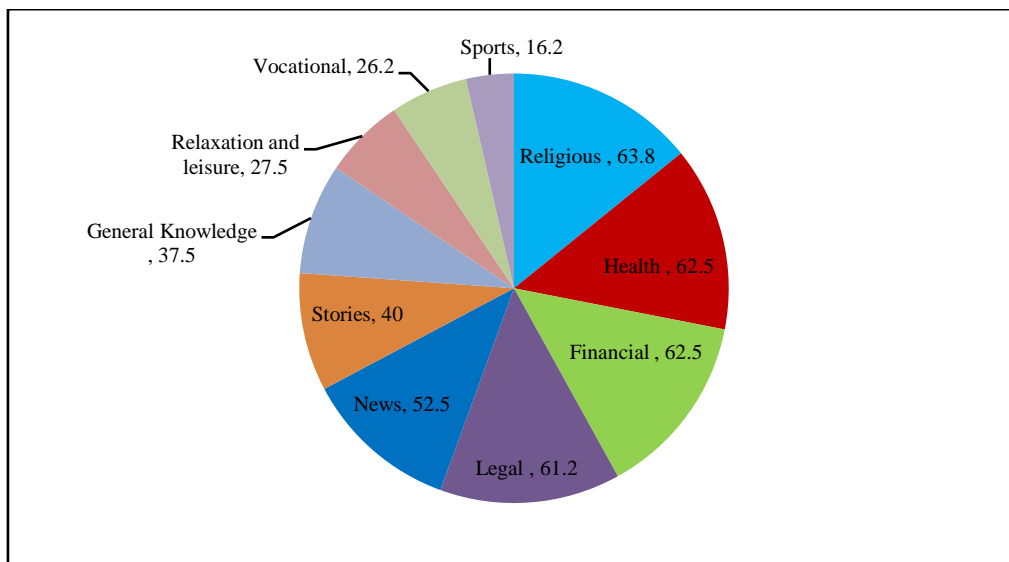
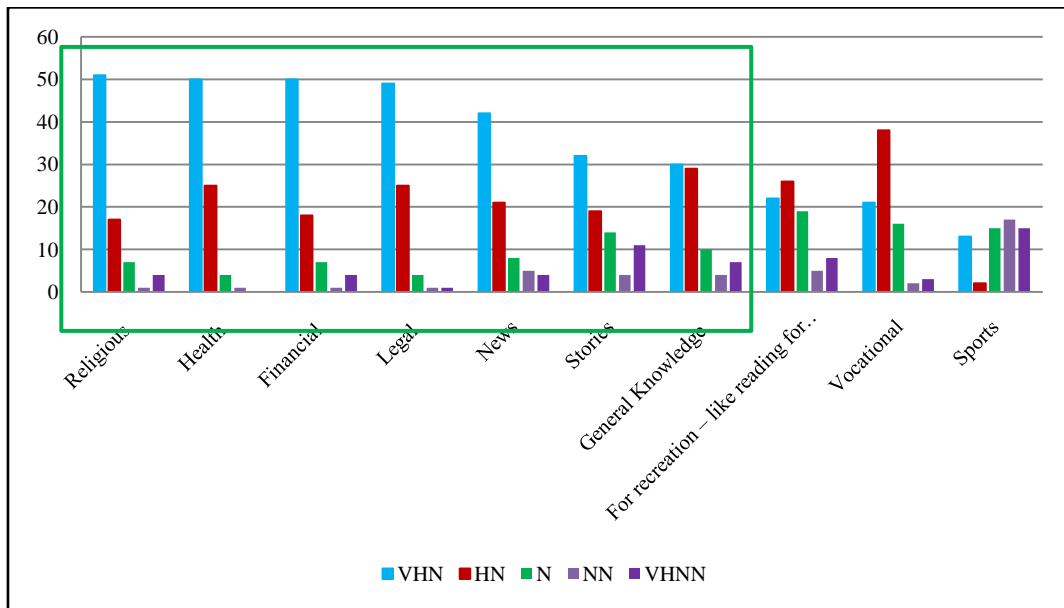
Information needs of the prisoners:

The responses of the different prisoners showed that the prisoners needed information on all the areas that were mentioned.

		Legal	Religious	Health	Vocational	Recreation	Financial	General Knowledge	Sports	Stories	News
N	Valid	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mean	4.5	4.375	4.55	3.9	3.6125	4.3625	3.8875	2.9875	3.7125	4.15
	Mode	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	5

The result shows that all the listed information needs are highly needed by the prisoners as they all obtained mean scores of above criterion mean ($x \geq 3$) representing “Very Highly needed”. More specifically, areas such as health, legal, religious, financial and news are highly needed with means above the 4.00 weighted averages. Even other areas such as vocational training, recreational, stories and general knowledge information with lower means scores compared to the weighted average are also very highly needed with high mean scores. Prisoners were not interested to sport related information and results were indicated lowest mean rating of 2.98.

Indicate using a 5-point scale of very highly needed, highly needed, needed, not needed, very highly not needed, areas where the prisoners need information. According the indicated modes of the results, most of the prisoners’ answer were “Very Highly Need” option for religious (63.8%), health (62.5%), financial (62.5%), legal (61.2%), news (52.5%), stories (40%) and general knowledge (37.5%). It shows, prisoners had very high needed of information in these seven categories and it is shown respectively in following figures.



The prisoners needed spiritual information to change for the better both spiritually and emotionally. For instance, they need reading resources on religious matters like the holy books and also stories about and the biographies of great people that lived exemplary lives like the saints. Such materials will help to enlighten them more on how to redirect their lives in areas where they have been lacking and change for the better emotionally and spiritually.

Likewise, the prisoners agreed that they had very high need for information for health purposes. They explained they needed health information to be able to keep up with hygienic measures like maintaining neatness, body cleanliness, care in using sharp objects and other tools to prevent wounds. These would help them avoid contracting diseases common with the prison environment diarrhea, dysentery and even malnutrition. They especially need this information because inadequate health facilities standard hospital facility, drugs and general healthcare are provided for them.

Furthermore, the study indicated that the prisoners have high need for financial information to enable them source money for use in the prison as well as after release. Such information as how and where to raise money, what they could engage in while in prison that can fetch them money are needed. Some of the prisoners engage in jobs outside the prison to generate money, according to the specifications of the prison authorities. Some others took the need to be need for money to be used even as they are still in prison.

All the questioners expressed having a very high need for legal information. Further enquiries showed that such information would enable them to know their fundamental human rights, even as prisoners. Legal information could enhance due process in the trial of those awaiting trial and hasten processes of their trial or release, as the case may be.

In Welikada prison, many of the prisoners indicated having high need for and special interest in recreational reading like novels about adventure and fantasies which can help them overcome their boredom in the prison. The prisoners said that having adequate and varieties of recreational reading materials will definitely help them to learn on their own, improve their communication ability and cope with loneliness and boredom. This was the case in all of the prisons.

From the above indicated results, most of the prisoners do make use of the library and information resources and services all the time that such resources and services are provided. Majority of the prisoners indicated this and always said that engaging themselves with using information resources gives a feeling of the outside world in addition to helping them meet up their various information needs. Such prisoners make use of information resources, as they said, when in certain mood or state of mind. The prisoners sorrowed on tight schedule and lack of enough reading and information materials as well as any library or reading programmes. Not only are adequate information resources and services not provided, but also that there is little or no time allowed for using or enjoying such resources and services / programmes. Such tight schedules, they said, were being caused by prison routines like working in both outside and inside the prison compound.

Prison policies, staffing problems, little time allowed for use of information resources and services and poor connections with public libraries and other library professional bodies all hinder the provision of library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners' information needs. Tight schedule in the prison, uncomfortable nature of the prison and inadequate accommodation for the library were cited as common factors that hinder the meeting of their information needs.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

As a developing country, the Sri Lankan prison library system still exists in a backward level. Although many prisons have small libraries, they are informal and elementary. There were two libraries in the Welikada prison. Worn with use, the book in the prisoner's hands is being read for the eighth time. Once a shabby corner with few books on a small shelf, the Welikada Prison Library renovated last July 2017, now has cupboards, tables and chairs with more than 5000 books of different genres. However, there is a long way to go to create the Model Library planned by the Special Committee on Prison Library Services.

The Welikada prison library has not separate buildings allocated to them; rather they have used a small room under the welfare department. Although these two prison libraries have bookshelves, they are not enough and all the shelves were small in size and old fashioned. Findings from the Focus Group Discussion showed that the prison library has some information resources, but their collection is limited to one side. Maintained only in religious books and novels, the library has no academic information. Both libraries do not have access to information on health and legal information needs of prisoners. There were no periodicals in the prison library. Internet facility or technological instruments like computers were not available there.

The prison does not even have materials on certain subject areas at all. The few available ones are outdated books donated by individuals or public libraries a long time ago. The Public Library, Colombo is giving 500 titles of books at a time to the Welikada prison library for specific periods. When after finished that time period those books should be returned and can be getting new titles from the public library. Among those

books, most of the titles were novels or religious. It is evident that these libraries do not have adequate information resources to provide for the prisoners' information needs.

Materials on violence, pornography, wars and so on or general materials that can contain any of such cases in the outside world, like some newspapers, are believed by the prison authority to be capable of threatening security and causing violence inside the prison if the prisoners are given full access to them. Even when donors bring such materials, they kept away from the prisoners.

The prison library does not have qualified library staff in the library. The library is manned by a rehabilitation officer who knows little or nothing in librarianship. In addition, several experienced prisoners were also managing the library. The warders, who work in the welfare departments as well as overseeing the affairs of the library, have no previous library working experience or library qualification.

Adequate library staff both in number and qualification, ensure efficient service delivery for the prisoners to meet up with their information needs. The American Library Association Library Standards for Correctional Institution (2008) clearly noted that the library staff should be made up of a library director, technicians and clerks.

Library of the Welikada prison has a small society with 100 of registered prisoners as the library users. Findings showed that most of them made use of the library and information resources and services all the time they were provided. These are the majority who are drawn to reading and information materials for different purposes.

Most of the prisoners who were used the prison library are with different academic skills. They were maintaining several magazines monthly. "SucharithaPrathibha", "KatulthimathaSupipiKusum" and "Madissale" were the magazines that they had maintained and poetry, short stories, articles, puzzles, and reviews were the content of those magazines. As examples,

As well as some of the other prisoners were also special skilled at writing books. "Poppy" (2014), a novel written about war, "VijanathiPajanathi" (2016), about the degenerate goodness of the slum life and the book 'Kucha' which tells how the world is changing and how to stand up for equality when it fails, the book "Asiyanusaye" on crime control were also some of excellent books that written by a prisoner named KiribathgodaVajira.

The types of information most needed by prisoners include health information, religious information, educational support, information on legal, vocational information, information for recreation, study and life-long learning, and skills acquisition among others. On health, religious, recreational as well as legal information needs, the prisoners rated them to be very highly needed while the rehabilitation officers rated them just high.

Some groups of prisoners indicated that the prison had little or nothing to offer them as regards their educational needs. These were prisoners who have acquired higher education. Some of them were had a bachelor degree with an MSc or a PhD. Some of them were had Diplomas or Postgraduate Diplomas. However, on the specific need for getting more education while in prison, the prisoners rated it very high, as for self-learning. It is implied from the findings that recreation, study and life-long learning, educational support, skill acquisitions are important areas of information requirements that must be provided in the Welikada prison library for the prisoners.

Prisoners, just like free people in the society, have been observed to have various information needs that can be provided for through library and information services. Providing for the needs of these prisoners will help in achieving the objectives thus Improving the literacy of prisoners, rehabilitating, re-socializing, and re-integrating and preparing the prisoners into becoming better citizens who can readapt into the society after prison.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Prison library service is a neglected area in Sri Lanka which needs more attention, resources and planned development. Though there are thousands of inmates in prisons in Sri Lanka from all strata of society, providing them with quality library and information services is still a distant dream. The main purpose of these institutions is to rehabilitate the people and send them back to society for which the importance of quality library services is invaluable.

Therefore, in the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are being made.

Additional prison libraries to boost information services for prisoners need to be established in other prison locations across the country. This would help to support prisoners with their quick reference information, recreation, and legal aid information and enhance their rehabilitation as well as make them better informed citizens. The extended services of the state and public libraries should be integrated in prison libraries through periodic lending services. This would help the shortage of books in most prison libraries to cater for materials that cannot be readily provided for by prison authorities.

Prison library infrastructure and equipment has not kept pace with development in Sri Lanka. Lack of accommodation, library building facilities and space are problems in this regard. There is need, therefore, for

urgent policy measure to addressing the perennial problem in Sri Lankan prisons for the effective provision of information services.

The prison library is currently stocked with materials that are largely religious materials. Prison libraries should accommodate a wide variety of materials to cover all subject interests cutting across the different educational levels and qualifications of prisoners. This may include print and non-print materials, newsletters, directory, encyclopedias, handbooks, subject books and other such information resources already listed in this study. Books on the law should even be on the prison library as awareness of the law serves to discourage current offenders from more breaking of the law, an act referred to as recidivism. This could also be the starting point for the establishment of a prison law library to offer basic legal education to prisoners on their basic rights. For optimum use of the information resources of the library, prisoners must be attended in the selection and acquisition of materials to satisfy their needs.

The prison authorities should map out time for the prisoners to consult library and information resources and services as part of the prison's daily schedule of activities. Guidelines to prison library services in Sri Lanka should be developed by the Prison Service in collaboration with Library Association and stakeholders. The study also revealed that the prison library is not managed by a professional librarian, but by prisoners and untrained rehabilitation officers who normally have other qualification. A minimum qualification of a Diploma in Library Studies is required of the library officers. The character of the librarian must be one interested in working with prisoners and a person with a strong character to be able to provide adequate information for the transformation of the lives of prisoners.

Based on evaluations of prisoners' ideas, the reader society must be expanded, books on technical and astrology are required, short-term prisoners should be made aware of the library; the library needs a system of rules and regulations, a reference section is needed, Magazines such as Manahara, Muthuhara and books in the academic literature and translations of the Universal Literature as well as in all categories of state awards are required can be taken as other recommendations. In addition, most of prisoners said that reading books suitable for rehabilitation should be taught.

In addition, in order to make these literacy education programs successful, there are few factors to keep in consideration. Such factors include: Positive relationships between teachers and prisoners-students, motivation in the form of various incentives to increase program enrollment and completion, and the age and race of the inmates who participate. Knowledge on this topic and project can positively affect the education field, prison systems, society as a whole, and it can help shape those individuals into lifelong learners

In this regard education in prison is a path to personal employment, enhanced citizenship and better health achieved through the provision of information resources and services. The relevance of information to the prisoners in prison has been justified in various studies. It is believed that information need of prisoners is indeed critical for the daily survival of prisoners, even more so than it is for the free citizens living in the outside world.

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