



## **Intellectual freedom, social justice and prison libraries in Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

The article contributes to the professional discussion of prison library in the context of intellectual freedom and social justice paradigm. It presents results from a survey of the prison libraries in Sri Lanka based on Magazine Prison in Welikada. The survey was conducted in 2018 through an interview. The results show that many prisons in Sri Lanka provide some kind of minimal library services to their inmates. However, prison libraries in Sri Lanka are not professionally managed or are they regularly funded. Further, their collections are developed mainly through gifts and there is almost no evidence of any systematic programming which would lead to constructive and creative use of prisoners' free time.

**Keywords:** intellectual freedom; social justice; prison library; sri lanka; information rights; prisoners; inmates

### **Introduction**

The universal rights of all persons, including prisoners, to freedom of access to information have been repeatedly asserted in a number of high level documents (American Library Association, 2010 and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 1999, 2002). For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1953) state that everyone has the universal right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the freedom to seek and receive information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. The United Nations (2009) also promotes every human's basic right to information which includes those who are incarcerated.

The Charter for the reader establishes reading as a universal right and pays special attention to prisons, hospitals, retirement homes and other places where books and reading are not common (International Book Committee / International Publishers Associations, 1994). Furthermore, in one of the earliest documents of this kind, the United Nations' (1955) Standard Minimal Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, it has been recognized that every prison should have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, that it should be adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books and that prisoners should be encouraged to make full use of it (Zrinka Simunic, Sanjica Faletar Tanackovic and Boris Badurina, 2016) <sup>[28]</sup>.

Traditions of fairness, equity, civic engagement, diversity and humanism have long characterized the library and information science profession, and literature focusing on the explicit rendering of the social justice agenda in diverse library environments is emerging (Bush, 2009; Moffatt, 2005; Morrone and Friedman, 2009; Pateman and Vincent, 2012; Vincent, 2012). In the library and information science context, social justice has been defined as giving people access to the information, services and facilities to which they have rights and making sure that they are fully aware of, and know how to take up, their entitlement to these services (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2007). Since libraries are committed to providing equitable access

and opportunities to all members of their communities in particular, the underprivileged and underpowered they are inherently involved with, and must be aware of, issues related to social justice (Clark, 2011, 383 p). By responding to the issues of inequality and social exclusion, libraries can promote and advance social justice and social responsibility in their communities in various ways: by providing equitable service to various underprivileged and disenfranchised populations (based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age and other variables associated with institutionalized social exclusion); by promoting awareness of social justice issues and providing access to authoritative and reliable materials that address social justice issues from diverse viewpoints; and by developing responsive collections, offering community-based services and designing outreach programs that meet the requirements of underrepresented communities and those with unique needs (such as in-home delivery services, foreign language services, etc.).

When we look at prison inmates we see people in a situation that is environmentally unusual and simultaneously, very common in its occurrence, particularly in the world. It is an enclosed world, high in stress, low in opportunities for decision-making, and socially isolating. We think of prisoners as different from ourselves. Campbell (2005) writes that prisoners want to know how to survive and how they might get out. To survive, they want to know who is trustworthy, what will make the prison society accept them and what rights to human treatment they have. To get out they want to know the law and what they can do with their lives when free.

Specially, prisoners disproportionately suffer higher incidence of mental illness, substance abuse and addiction, learning disabilities, illiteracy or below grade-level educational achievement and abuse or post-traumatic stress syndrome. Unless fully addressed, each of these conditions impedes the returning prisoner's ability to compete for work today or for the jobs of the future (Malcolm C. Young, 2014).

The role of prison libraries as cultural agents has been beautifully expressed in a Norwegian parliamentary report

(Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2007/2008):

“Culture must form part of the daily activities in prison in the same way it does in society as a whole. It gives individuals the chance to experience new and positive aspects of life and of them. Through culture, self-understanding and self-reflection change. Culture is a relational and interactive process that entails creating meaning, communicating with each other, and organizing social life. Cultural activities can generate aspects of general humaneness and general education that increase the ability to cope with life” (Ljodal and Ra, 2011, 482 p).

Libraries as major custodian of information, which have been professionally processed and stored retrieval should play positive roles in every segment of society. Anafulu (1998) <sup>[5]</sup> posits that the library is the engine room and power house where information is collected, stored, processed and retrieved for use. A library as a body of collected information brought together for the purpose of knowledge dissemination and utilization should be a central clinic for all (Ibegwam, 2003). Prison as a reformatory institution and inmates being members of the larger community should of right be exposed to information and knowledge for educational and training purposes, person development as well as study kits and do-it yourself tools.

Prison libraries, like other types of libraries, are institutions that promote learning and access to information. In the 1977 Supreme Court ruling of *Bounds v. Smith*, it was determined that inmates have a constitutional right to access law libraries and / or assistance from law professionals. This access, however, is still limited in that its purpose is to assist prisoners in “attack their sentences, directly or collaterally, and to challenge the conditions of their confinement” (Hackerson, 2015, 36 p). Although prison administration is required to allocate funding for these resources, it does not include other more general library offerings like books for entertainment or leisure reading and access to news sources or databases.

Reading can bring many benefits to the prison community including mental escapism, education, rehabilitation, widening of horizons and help with transition back into the community on release (Fuller, Deborah). Libraries bring mental stimulation from the outside in the form of literature, culture, current events and knowledge, which provide opportunities and gateways for a richer life (Ljodal and Ra, 2011, 473p). As centers of information and culture, agents of social change and institutions of learning, prison libraries can help inmates adjust to the realities of their lives within a correctional institution and provide skills and information that help incarcerated persons prepare for reintegration into the community as law abiding citizens (Clark and MacCreagh, 2006, 2 p) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Therefore 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 human environment that provides support for educational, recreational and rehabilitative programs (Lehmann and Locke, 2005, 4 p) <sup>[19]</sup>.

## Objective

The main objective of this research is examining the strategies that could be used to enhance the provision of quality library and information resources and services to meet the prisoners’ information needs.

## Problem

Prison Library service is a neglected area in Sri Lanka which needs more attention, resources and planned development. Though there are thousands of inmates from all society in prisons in Sri Lanka, providing them with quality library and information service remains a distant dream due to various legislations. This unfortunate situation has caused inmates constant challenges on how to survive and be integrated into society as better citizens.

## Method

The study employed qualitative research design to provide in-depth and detailed examination of the topic. The descriptive survey method was used in collecting data from respondents in the Welikada prison in Sri Lanka. 10 prisoners and 5 Library Officers were randomly selected and interviewed as the sample.

## Results

The prison system consists of 04 closed prisons, 18 remand prisons, 02 correction centers for youthful offenders, 01 training center for youthful offenders, 09 work camps, 02 open prison camps, 23 prison lockups and 01 prison school are under the control of Superintendents of Prisons. The study was carried out in the Welikada prison (also known as the Magazine Prison) and it is the maximum security prison and is the largest prison in Sri Lanka. According to prison statistics report in 2018, the Welikada prison has a very high population of prisoners. According to the data from the prison statistics report in 2018, at present, there was a total of about 121,869 prisoners in all prison institutions in Sri Lanka. Among them, there were 99,036 unconvicted prisoners and 22,833 convicted prisoners.

The majority (80%) of the prisoner were Sinhala of the total prison population in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka and also occupy all the divisions in the Colombo district. Other ethnicity groups were represented small proportions of the prison population. A major question the study sought to find answer to was the educational background of literate prisoners. This was to be able to find out how their educational levels influence their information needs and use. This is supported by Womboh (1991) revealed that most of the prisoners (about 93.8%) were not educated beyond school education. Only about 6.2% of them acquired higher education than that. The prisoners’ educational level is a major factor to be considered in providing library and information services to them.

Many literacy training programmes were conducted by the rehabilitation section of the prison. Among those, Dhamma School (Sucharithodaya Daham Pasala) was the main literacy training school in the prison. 207 total numbers of prisoners were studying at the Sucharithodaya Dhamma School at the Welikada prison. Among them 16 were getting ready to the final examination of the Dhamma School and 20 were getting ready to the Dharmacharya Examination. In

addition English classes, Tamil classes, classes of writing and reading were conducted for who were unable to read or write.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

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. 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.

It was indicated from the answers from interviewed sample that the problems of meeting of the prisoners' information needs to a high extent with uncomfortable nature of the prison, prison policies and laws that restrict certain reading materials, poor funding of the library, inadequate accommodation for the library, staffing problems, little time allowed for use of information resources and services and poor connections with public libraries and other library professional bodies.

They indicated that purchasing of reading materials by the prison authorities will help enhance such provisions to a very high extent. Other ways are allowing more access to library materials and developing new and using existing guidelines to prison library service accommodation. They mentioned that connecting with public libraries, NGOs and others like religious bodies and legal practitioners, allowing more information flow from other sources like religious groups and mapping out time for the prisoners to use the library and other information resources will help enhance such provisions to a high extent. On the part of the prisoners, their own responses agreed with those of the Rehabilitation and Library officers. They went further to emphasize the need for the government to be sensitized on the information needs of the prisoners so they might provide the needed materials for them. Almost all the groups in the prison remarked that the government should direct more attention to making the prison conditions better than their present pitiable states.

Renovating the prisons to reduce overcrowding and improving on the status of the precolonial cells will help in making the prison environment a little more conducive for accessing and utilizing information resources when provided. Also they suggested the need for the authorities to work towards the prisoners' reformation by avoiding censorship, possibly allowing the prisoners to access internet and make use of newspapers, magazines and the like.

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

- A mechanism should be put in place for the provision of effective library information services for Sri Lankan prisoners. This should be based on a comprehensive information need analysis of prisoners required in the peculiar environment.
- Additional prison libraries to boost information services for prisoners need to be established in other prison locations across the country.
- The extended services of the national library, 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.
- There is need urgent policy measure to addressing the perennial problem in Sri Lankan prisons for the effective provision of information services.
- A simulated internet service should be set up in prison libraries for prisoners to get acquainted with the vast

current materials which act as tool for information generation.

- 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.
- A readership promotion must be embarked upon to whip the interest of prisoners in reading.

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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