Beyond Bars, Within Norms: Gender Roles and Reintegration of Female Ex-Offenders in Singapore

Rebecca Yap
rebecca.yap.2024@socsc.smu.edu.sg

Female ex-offenders (EOs) in Singapore are subject to unique societal norms, institutional practices and familial roles during their rehabilitation processes. This paper examines from a sociological perspective how gender norms influence the rehabilitation experiences of female EOs, focussing on the rehabilitative processes in the prison institution, experiences with stigma and labelling in society and caretaking duties in the family. While gender-responsive programmes within prison aim to address women's needs, they may instead reinforce gender norms through emphasising relational and stereotypical female-dominant vocational training. Outside of prison, female EOs may also face complex stigmas as both criminals and women who have fallen short of society's moral expectations of women. Compounding this, caregiving responsibilities may also impact reintegration, acting as a source of stability for some but a burden for others. Applying relevant sociological concepts and engaging with dominant narratives about female EO rehabilitation experiences, the paper explores how female EO rehabilitation is still influenced by gender roles and arises as a product of the dynamic interactions between decisions made by female EOs and institutional practices.

Introduction

The rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders (EOs) back into society is a process of resocialisation in which offenders relearn the societal norms of society after serving a sentence in prison. The rehabilitation process is largely controlled by the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and consists of Incare, such as training and counselling done within the prison, and Aftercare, such as Community-Based Programmes (CBP) with family or other organisations (SPS, n.d.). During the rehabilitation process, many EOs encounter difficulties such as unemployment and stigma. However, these experiences may differ based on gender.

Although forming a minority of offenders, female offenders, making up 8.5% of the total convicted penal inmates with the SPS as of end-December 2023 (SPS, 2024), experience unique prison care experiences and post-incarceration experiences as compared to their male counterparts which can complicate their rehabilitation experiences (Ng, Tang & Ang, 2019). Female EOs encounter gender-specific rehabilitation within prison institutions and grapple with gender expectations as caregivers post-incarceration. The unique struggles of female EOs expected to socialise back into and are subject to gender norms and roles along with rehabilitating as an EO make it of interest to examine the mechanisms that reinforce gender norms and roles for female EOs and how they affect the rehabilitation journeys of female EOs.

In this paper, I will explore gender and rehabilitation, asking the following question—How are female EOs in Singapore subjected to gender roles during rehabilitation and how do these influences shape their reintegration experiences? Guided by this question, I will be examining rehabilitative processes in the prison

institution, experiences with stigma and labelling in society and caretaking duties in the family through the lenses of relevant sociological concepts.

Gender Role and Norm Resocialisation in Prison Institutions

Feminist research on female offenders and EOs argue that female EOs often have different needs from male EOs in the rehabilitation process (Kok, Lin & Wong, 2020). In prison institutions, this has given rise to recommendations of gender-responsive rehabilitative care of female inmates that deal with gender-specific needs of female inmates (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2010). In accordance with this research, the SPS has also implemented gender-responsive rehabilitation in 2017 (SPS, 2018). In particular, the SPS engages in psychological rehabilitation built on relational theory which focuses on the development of the self as a relational being (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). Furthermore, in media, relational aspects of the rehabilitation process are repeatedly highlighted such as depictions of group therapy in a Channel News Asia (CNA) video and comments from rehabilitation specialists such as "Women tend to have more emotional needs, they are better able to support each other and require more community and group support." (Paulo, Lim & Goh, 2018; Cheow, 2018). Beyond social relationships, gender-based vocational training is also in place to empower women to participate in the workforce. While the full breadth of vocational training options is not revealed to the public, media representations of female inmate vocational training showcase skills such as baking or in female-dominant work roles such as call centres (Paulo et. al., 2018; Tang & Tham, 2024).

While these relationship-focused measures help to foster social and emotional support systems for the women and while vocational training can support women in job-searching, these processes may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes, making prison institutions an important agent in subjecting female EOs to gender norms.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the meaning given to community-focused rehabilitation through social interaction within the prison is that of societal integration in which participation in community is interpreted as a prerequisite for societal acceptance. Nurturing group activities are reflections of gendered stereotypes of women being more relational and nurturing than men but in the context of rehabilitation, these symbols adopt the meaning of social acceptance. Likewise, symbols of traditionally domestic activities like baking or female-dominated industry work are redefined as opportunities to reclaim agency in employment. These reinterpretations of gender stereotypes as symbols of empowerment follow gendered scripts of women where domesticity in jobs have been seen as the norm (Chua, Matthews & Low, 2016).

Signalling theory, which in the sociological sense refers to a process of communication, usually through material means, to signal unknown attributes that would be beneficial to both signaller and observer (Bird & Smith, 2005), can also be applied to analyse the consequences of viewing these symbols as social acceptance. The internalisation of meanings by female EOs may further result in the performance or the increased relation to these symbols post-incarceration as a form of social signalling to society of their trustworthiness or willingness to reintegrate (Przepiorka & Berger, 2017). For instance, local research on female EOs found that community remains an important part of their rehabilitation journey, emphasising

relationships as being central to their reintegration (Liow, Lee, Stephen, Panesilvam, Tan & Salisbury, 2024).

After analysing the structural influences on gender roles by the prison and the reinterpretation and adoption of these roles by female EOs, it is shown that the prison is a key influencer of gender roles on female EOs which results in their rehabilitation experiences being stereotypically centred around community and female-dominant work. However, this does not discount the agency of the female EOs in adopting these roles as the dynamic interaction between the macro-level institution of the prison as a reinforcer for gender roles and the micro-level actions of female EOs as reinterpreters and replicators are important in the resocialisation of gender roles in female EOs. The real-world implications of this may result in female EOs having narrow rehabilitative pathways that are limited to stereotypically female vocations and female-coded rehabilitation methods where female EOs are rehabilitated mainly with reference to their social capital (Liow et. al., 2024).

Female Morality Stereotypes in Labels and Stigma

Stigma is a challenge faced by both male and female EOs alike with factors such as type of crime and society's perception of EOs' capacity to change (Tan, Chu & Tan, 2016). However, within labels of being an EO, female EOs may be subject to more nuanced forms of labels and stigma due to their social identities being influenced both by being a woman as well as an EO. In stigma theory, Goffman (1963) presents stigmas as "attributes that are deeply discrediting" and can hinder the well-being of a person with said stigma. EOs in general may suffer from "spoiled identity" in which prior deviant acts of law-breaking already label EOs as deviants in the eyes of society (Goffman, 1963). In addition to "spoiled identity", Western

feminist research argues that female offenders may also suffer from "double stigma" in society where female offenders not only suffer from the label of deviance as an EO but also labels in relation to their failure to adhere to gender stereotypes of female morality such as "bad woman" (Binik & Verde, 2022).

While few studies have been conducted on the double-stigmatisation of female EOs in Singapore, representations of concerns of female offenders regarding their identities as moral women and EOs have reflected a fear of societal judgement. For instance, in a CNA interview, Ms Syamlia, a female EO, recounted that "In [her] community, women are supposed to behave, be a good wife, be a good mother [and] look after the children, and [do not do] bad things" in reference to her hesitation to seek help as a drug addict (Tang, 2024). Her struggle to reconcile social identities as an offender and an objectively "good" woman could also possibly be reflective of the wider gendered stereotypes of women as more moral beings since representations of Southeast Asian women tend to see women holding more moral capital than men (Choi, 2018). Moral capital in this case represents a theoretical social resource of excellent character that can be drawn on to build legitimacy in relationships (Valverde, 1994).

The threat of stigmatisation on both gender expectations of female morality and criminality can be viewed from Durkheim's views of moral fact and sanctions. Gender norms and roles are moral facts of society that exert influences on behaviour, and discrimination as a result of stigmatisation acts as an informal sanction to punish deviance and maintain the moral facts. As such, experiences with stigma by female EOs could act as deterrence agents to reoffending in rehabilitation experiences of female EOs. Despite alternative theories such as Labelling Theory by Becker (1963) that may suggest that labels could instead perpetuate deviant

behaviour, it is still accepted that stigma and labels do have an influence on deviant behaviour. In all, female EOs are pressured by stigmas on both their deviance against gendered morality stereotypes and the law which in turn influence their decisions to desist or deviate in rehabilitation.

Prosocial Female Identities in Caregiving Responsibilities

While the previous factor explored caregiving as an expected social norm to be achieved, the experience of caregiving itself is a gendered experience where interpretations of caregiving for dependents can affect self-perceptions. Caregiving is a role that is largely associated with females in Singapore, with 60% of caregivers being female (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2024). As such, it is no wonder that some female EOs are also subject to the role of caregiver.

Interestingly, caregiving roles can have both positive and negative impacts depending on the meanings given to the caregiving experience. Once again adopting a symbolic interactionist approach, caregiving can be interpreted as a transformative experience in which female EOs are affirmed by their prosocial identities and duties of mother and caretaker, or as a struggle in which female EOs are unable to fulfil their gender roles due to conflicts in balancing expectations as a caregiver and productive worker. In interviews from research with female EOs, female EOs who defined caregiving as a positive experience spoke of family as a motivation factor, with interviewees giving comments such as "Now for me when I have time, I am always with family." and "Already a blessing to have a family and a home, shelter for me, so why should I go and spoil it?" (Liow et. al., 2024). These accounts highlight family interactions and caregiving in relation to family as a socialising agent that affirms their prosocial identities in relation to their families, which act as prosocial

institutions (Liow et. al., 2024). However, while the expected roles of caregiving and themes of family socialise female EOs into adopting traditional gender roles, these have generally positive impacts in the rehabilitative experiences of female EOs.

These experiences align with the "looking-glass self" theory in which recognition and validation from others, in this case the family of female EOs, of an identity, in this case the prosocial identity of female EOs, reinforces that same identity (Cooly, 1902). In these experiences, gender roles are a stabilising force for rehabilitation. On the other hand, interviews with female EOs who portrayed caregiving as a struggle highlighted difficulties in living up to their expected gender roles. Interviews highlighted inabilities to reconnect with family and other problems such as difficulty finding gainful employment due to their EO status as compounding factors for their struggles (Ng et. al., 2019). In these experiences, gender roles highlight inequalities in rehabilitative care as female EOs are expected to fill additional roles as caregiver and mother and the achievement of this may be hindered by their EO status, revealing double-penalisations of female EOs in rehabilitation experiences.

Ultimately, the meaning given to caregiving, whether positive or negative, demonstrate the negotiation of female EOs' identities as both female and EO where positive meanings to caregiving are associated with adoption of female prosocial identities instead of deviant identities and where negative meanings to caregiving are associated lack of affirmation and further nuanced by problems such as unemployment which are results of their EO identities. The use of symbolic interactionism to examine these subjective and individual experiences is crucial in identifying hidden issues faced by subgroups in a population, underscoring the fact that the rehabilitation experiences of female EOs are not homogenous.

Conclusion

Through sociological analysis, the rehabilitation journeys of female EOs in Singapore are seen to be highly gendered with social norms being reinforced and resocialised in prison, society and family. This paper highlights the role of interplay between institutions and female EOs in resocialising gender norms, stigmas and labels about intersections of broken female stereotypes and criminality in pressuring female OEs to desist, as well as the polarising influence of adopting caregiving roles on reintegration as key influences and effects of gender roles on female OEs. However, some limitations are that representations are largely dominant narratives of rehabilitation from local news outlets and Non-Governmental Organisation the Yellow Ribbon Project which may not fully represent the rehabilitation experiences of all female EOs (Tay, Lopez, Ng, & Mohd Yazib, 2020). Nonetheless, the struggles and triumphs in the rehabilitation journey of female OEs are valid and strides in the understanding of female OEs have been made in the realm of academic research.

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