

Libraries Behind Bars and Information Society: Drawbacks and Potentials

Bandaranayake, P. and De Silva, P.

pbandaranayake@gmail.com

Abstract

This research into the use of Sri Lankan prison libraries in rehabilitative process is being undertaken as part of PhD study at Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo. Information poverty is one of biggest issues faced by incarcerated people. As they do not have the same level of rights as normal citizens they have limited access to libraries and information sources. Incarceration itself creates need for certain information related to their new life in prison as they are deprived of freedom. As their information needs cannot be met easily and quickly they are always information poor. Illiteracy among prisoners make this issue more critical. Understanding these needs, their perspectives on prison libraries and role of the library in prison correctional programmes offer insight for librarians and libraries and library associations as well as prison authorities seeking to better serve incarcerated populations. The poorly managed libraries are not funded and are not staffed by library-trained personnel. Therefore, their information needs remain unmet as other prison staff focus only on custody, care and correctional programmes. In addition, no formal research has been undertaken to evaluate prison rehabilitation programmes and to understand the role of prison library or on user experience. Following an in-depth qualitative analysis of the transcripts of interviews, several aspects were identified to describe the experience of using a prison library. Not only prisoners, majority of prison staff have no understanding of how they experience their libraries, or of the role of these libraries play in rehabilitative process of the prisons and quality of prisoners' lives. In this study several implications for practice are identified that may be of interest to prison administrators and library professionals, both in Sri Lanka and overseas.

Keywords: Prison libraries, Information needs, Recidivism, Rehabilitation, Information society

Introduction

Recidivism is one of the biggest concerns of prison authorities as it is skyrocketing in most of the countries. At present Sri Lanka has a high recidivism rate (57%) in spite of having various rehabilitative efforts which are not well designed to support ex-prisoners in their reintegration into society as law abiding citizens. The incarceration rate is 94 per 100,000 citizens of the country. Even though female prison population is low as 4% of total prison population, their numbers are mushrooming within this decade (Prison Statistics, 2018). Libraries play a significant role in creating informed, independent, information literate citizens. Communities such as prisoners who are mostly illiterate, disadvantaged and marginalized will be beneficial if a proper library system is established to serve them.