Abstract

‘Surviving Zambian Prisons - Prisoner experiences, Coping strategies and Sex in prison’

PhD dissertation by Anne Egelund

Prisons in Africa are understudied and poorly understood. Perhaps surprisingly, amongst the research produced, there has been very little focus on prisoner perspectives. Rather, most studies focus on prison staff and other more institutional perspectives. This PhD makes an important contribution to the field of prisons research in Africa, where the dissertation explores how male inmates experience imprisonment, and how they struggle for physical, social and psychological survival.

The thesis is built on a data collection in Zambian male prisons, where 72 inmates, 15 former prisoners and 10 staff members were interviewed in the period from 2011-2013. The interviewing methodology rested in the life story/narrative tradition. Some ethnographic observations were also part of the data.

Every prisoner’s experience is unique and his own, yet common themes also occur. The well-known ‘pains of imprisonment’ from international prisons research, such as the loss of liberty, stigma, isolation from family and loved ones are in the Zambian context exacerbated by the poor conditions of imprisonment, where overcrowding, ill-health, injustice, and social abandonment pose specific challenges and affect inmates’ identities as men. The author characterises imprisonment in Zambia as chronic crisis, where enormous demands are made on prisoners for them to survive.

The experience of imprisonment may fundamentally affect the individual prisoner’s sense of identity to the point of injury or breakdown. Even if inmates do have some capacity to act to improve their situation, they have limited options to do so. The PhD draws on Honneth’s theory of recognition and on empirically grounded studies to identify five main categories in relation to how inmates respond to imprisonment. The categories are: not coping at all; morally grounded struggles for rights in groups; individual struggles for maintaining or constructing a pro-social identity; and compensatory struggles for recognition, where the struggle for recognition can be viewed as negative in the sense that these behaviours will further alienate them from conventional society, and because the struggle entails negative behaviour that nevertheless allows them some form of recognition. Finally, the fifth category concerns those who struggle for survival with no direct association with recognition. Here, inmates will simply aim to get by on a day-to-day basis, drawing on instrumentalism and emotional withdrawal to survive.

Some prisoners enter into relationships as a way to survive. Sexual activities in the closed prison environment are influenced by the prison context and conditions, and will play into power structures, hierarchies and social relationships, not to mention to individual’s coping strategies. Sexual relationships between men in Zambian prisons can generally be characterized as transactional. A reformulation and interpretation of gendered roles take place, where some so-called ‘weak’ inmates are constructed as ‘women’ to be available to dominant inmates, so-called ‘men’. The ‘men’ gain a sense of masculinity through the sexual relationship, whereas the constructed ‘women’ experience severe threats to masculine identity. The thesis proposes that the social construction of gender and sexuality is a translation or reinterpretation of general society’s gender roles in an environment without biological women.

In this way, the thesis makes a rare but important contribution to understanding prisoner perspectives in an African prison.