

Tomorrow Never Comes, But It [Education] Gives You Hope: Narratives of South African Women Completing Tertiary Education Online While Incarcerated

Dr. Bianca Rochelle Parry

Abstract: Higher education in the correctional environment is endorsed globally as the most effective tool for rehabilitation. Studies from the Global North have researched correctional education and its accessibility, but few of those have focused specifically on incarcerated women's access to tertiary education online. Even fewer consider this topic within the context of the Global South. This study aimed to address that gap by providing a holistic perspective of South African women's experiences of e-learning and distance higher education while incarcerated. As a qualitative research study utilising feminist narrative inquiry, the lived experiences of seven women incarcerated in the largest correctional facility in South Africa are uncovered through narrative analysis. The findings describe women's pathways towards obtaining an education online, the challenges they encountered, and the role support played in their completing a tertiary degree through distance education. Ultimately, the findings reveal that online higher education moves beyond student rehabilitation, to enhance the overall well-being of these students and enable them to cultivate empathic relationships with their peers, which in turn fosters further education opportunities for incarcerated women in South Africa.

Keywords: higher education, incarceration, women, digital education, Global South



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<https://doi.org/10.55667/ijede.2024.v38.i2.1309>

Demain n'arrive jamais, mais cela (l'éducation) donne de l'espoir: expériences narrées par des femmes d'Afrique du Sud ayant fait des études supérieures en ligne pendant leur incarcération

Résumé : L'enseignement supérieur en milieu carcéral est mondialement reconnu comme l'outil le plus efficace pour la réadaptation. Des études réalisées dans les pays du Nord ont porté sur l'enseignement correctionnel et son accessibilité, mais peu d'entre elles se sont intéressées en particulier à l'accès des femmes incarcérées à l'enseignement supérieur en ligne. Elles sont encore moins nombreuses à se pencher sur ce sujet dans le contexte des pays du Sud. Cette étude vise à combler cette lacune en offrant une perspective holistique des expériences des femmes sud-africaines en matière d'apprentissage en ligne et d'enseignement supérieur à distance pendant leur incarcération. Dans le cadre d'une étude qualitative utilisant une enquête narrative féministe, les expériences vécues par sept femmes incarcérées dans le plus grand établissement pénitentiaire d'Afrique du Sud sont dévoilées par le biais d'une analyse narrative. Les résultats décrivent le cheminement des femmes vers l'obtention d'une éducation en ligne, les défis qu'elles ont rencontrés et le rôle que le soutien a joué dans l'obtention d'un diplôme d'études supérieures par l'intermédiaire de l'éducation à distance. En somme, les résultats révèlent que l'enseignement supérieur en ligne va au-delà de la réadaptation des étudiants, pour améliorer leur bien-être général et leur permettre de cultiver des relations empathiques avec leurs pairs, ce qui, à son tour, favorise les possibilités de formation continue pour les femmes incarcérées en Afrique du Sud.

Mots-clés : enseignement supérieur, incarcération, femmes, éducation numérique, pays du Sud

Introduction

As of 2021, the World Prison Brief (2022) reported that the total global prison population exceeded 10 million people. The United States had the largest prison population, followed by China, Russia, Brazil, and India. South Africa also has a significant prison population, with the South African Department of Correctional Services reporting that 157,056 people are housed in correctional facilities across the country (Department of Correctional Services, 2023). Many organisations and researchers across the globe have conducted studies on correctional education programmes (Davis, 2019; Farley & Willems, 2017; Nowotny et al., 2016; Payne & Bryant, 2018; Reese, 2019; Sokoloff & Schenck-Fontaine, 2017; Tietjen et al., 2018; Vandala & Bendall, 2019). These studies often evaluate the effects of carceral education programmes and their impact on students in relation to employability and recidivism (reoffending) post-release.

Regrettably, studies concerning higher education in correctional contexts do not necessarily consider students' access to digital forms of tertiary education, which is of concern as contemporary models of higher learning are characterised by online delivery of coursework, especially since the advent of coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) (Decuypere et al., 2021; Emejulu & McGregor, 2019). In 2021, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning cited digital literacy as one of the most neglected and challenging educational issues facing educators, governments, and policymakers today. While researchers from the United States and Britain, as well as European and Nordic countries, are becoming increasingly

active on the newly emerging subject of accessibility and digital correctional education in corrections (Champion & Edgar, 2013; Farley et al., 2016; Hjalmarsson et al., 2015; Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2020; Korzh, 2021), the same cannot be said for countries in the Global South (Modé & Hirano, 2014; Raghavan et al., 2019). Even generalised studies concerning education in correctional facilities throughout the African continent are limited (Chigunwe, 2014; Moore, 2016), with few specifically considering inequitable digital access to online higher learning (Mdakane et al., 2021). Yet, in the wake of the transition from apartheid to democracy, correctional facilities in South Africa have spearheaded carceral academic and vocational education in sub-Saharan Africa by offering a variety of programmes, including those on a tertiary level through distance education (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). Unfortunately, very little research regarding student experiences of these programmes exists, demonstrating the scarcity of research publications pertaining to carceral online higher education in South Africa (Johnson, 2021; Quan-Baffour & Zawada, 2012; Vandala & Bendall, 2019).

While this dearth of knowledge on the topic of carceral online higher education in Africa is of concern, it is alarming to note that research concerning women who are incarcerated students in the Global South and are pursuing tertiary education online is absent altogether (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021). To that end, this study endeavoured to address the research gap by holistically understanding the lived experiences of seven South African

women completing their tertiary studies online while incarcerated. The aim of this exploratory research was to gather preliminary information to highlight the need for further investigation of this under-researched topic in order to improve access to and implementation of e-learning programmes in South African correctional centres.

Literature Review

Women have always represented a small fraction of the correctional population. In South Africa, the Department of Correctional Services states in their Annual Report for the 2022/2023 financial year that there are 2,691 sentenced and 1,958 unsentenced female offenders in correctional facilities across the country, which together make up less than 3% of the entire South African incarcerated population. Women's pathways to incarceration, both in South Africa and internationally, are most often preceded by higher levels of physical and sexual abuse as children and adults, lower levels of employment and education, higher levels of homelessness and financial insecurity, limited support systems, as well as higher levels of substance abuse and mental health issues when compared to their male counterparts (Agboola et al., 2022; Artz et al., 2012; Parry, 2022; Yenjela, 2015; Yingling, 2016). Despite steady growth in the number of women who are incarcerated (Fair & Walmsley, 2022), research indicates they are greatly underserved by carceral education programmes. Traditional notions of femininity and domesticity inform the majority of the programmes offered, rather than providing "female offenders access to

education opportunities that will expand their economic prospects for themselves and their families” (Ginsburg, 2019, p. 8). This follows a general trend where the correctional education and vocational programmes offered are not gender-responsive and are more suited to skills development in traditionally women dominated, low-paying sectors, such as retail or domestic services. These programmes are informed by outdated, gendered notions of femininity, rather than by providing women access to innovative, digital skills education opportunities that will expand their economic prospects (Cormac, 2021; Korzh, 2021; Ryder, 2020).

Global North research on the benefits of distance online higher education for incarcerated women is scarce and in the Global South it is all but absent. Yet, this issue requires critical consideration of online education in carceral settings, as well as its role as a form of desistance to help prevent women from reoffending after they are reintegrated into the community post-release (Conway, 2023; Korzh, 2021; Ostini & Farley, 2022). There is a danger, however, in only rationalising higher education in corrections as an agent of reduced recidivism or increased employment opportunities after release. This does not sufficiently capture the capacity of distance higher education in correctional settings, particularly in the lives of women, as an affirmative influence in their personal and social contexts. As made clear by Costelloe (2014), online distance tertiary education has the capacity to develop processes that foster networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society. Indeed,

these social networks are noted as valuable for developing relationships of worth amongst peers in correctional centres, thereby reducing instances of violence and improving their quality-of-life outcomes (Lafferty et al., 2015). Critical studies of carceral higher education state that when focussed on the goal of rehabilitation, we should not lose sight of education as a basic human right and means for empowerment, in favour of education as a tool for governments and carceral institutions to reduce costs (Castro & Gould, 2018; Evans, 2018; McCorkel & DeFina, 2019).

In line with such critical considerations, feminist research primarily documents the lived experiences of marginalised groups and minorities. Similarly, it elucidates the importance of unearthing subjugated forms of knowledge, to “create spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these engrained inequalities” (Jenkins et al., 2019, p. 414). Narrative feminist research, particularly in the area of corrections, highlights how this context imposes restrictive gender norms that further subordinate women (Pemberton, 2021). Although limited examples are found within the carceral context (Cabecinhas & Abadia, 2013; Lockwood, 2017), narrative feminist research is beneficial in addressing concerns related to specific inequalities of the multiply marginalised. Narrative feminist research reveals the lived experiences of those previously excluded, while examining the interrelated

practices through which broader inequalities are permitted. This is useful in an exploratory study where the topic has not previously been studied in-depth.

Therefore, this research study endeavoured to holistically address carceral digital higher education through the stories told by these women and to prioritise the themes they communicated during interviews. Narrative feminist research enabled this study to create a holistic understanding of the previously undocumented lived experiences of South African women students completing tertiary education online, while incarcerated. Their narratives, aided by the platform created through feminist theory, raise awareness of the unique experiences and struggles the women encountered in their academic journey. In addition, their narratives bring attention to the need for further research and social reform to redress the relegation of this population and their online educational needs.

Research Design and Methods

This exploratory research study endeavoured to address the gaps in the literature mentioned earlier. The study does this by using a qualitative method that emphasised the narratives of women who are pursuing tertiary education online, while incarcerated in the largest correctional facility in South Africa. The author's familiarity with this facility and the women housed there began in 2017, through previous research and current postgraduate student supervision, as well as community engagement efforts. These already formed relationships

benefited the study and bolstered the author's credibility with the students. This process of intensive immersion is paramount in feminist research practises when understanding narratives of marginalised communities (Lockwood, 2017, Parry, 2020a, Pemberton, 2021). Through purposive sampling, it was determined that the facility had 14 women recorded as students enrolled at a distance tertiary educational institution. Seven of those women agreed to be part of this study. The small sample size was suitable for such an exploratory qualitative study, because feminist research is concerned with a localised, in-depth understanding of participant issues, rather than broad, global-based understandings (Parry, 2020a).

Each in-depth narrative interview lasted between 40 to 70 minutes and was conducted on a voluntary basis with signed consent forms and pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The women interviewed were of various ages, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as various lengths of incarceration periods. All the participants were South African citizens, between 32 and 58 years of age. Four of the participants identify as Black women, two as Indian women, and one as a White woman. Six of the women explained that they preferred not to disclose the offense for which they were sentenced, stating that it was not pertinent to their current tertiary education efforts. During the audio-recorded unstructured interviews, emphasis was placed on capturing participants' voices in order to situate their lived experiences within their social circumstances. Narrative analysis was used to engage with participant data to

interpret their human experience and motivations. As such, narrative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed pertinent words, sentences, and paragraphs that aligned with the resulting themes. These were then coded for further critical reflection. By analysing their stories or core narratives within their lived context, this inductive narrative method of coding uncovered underlying themes that were contextualised within the broader context of online carceral education and rehabilitation.

Ethical considerations were paramount when conducting research with such a vulnerable and relegated community. By obtaining approval prior to conducting the research from three ethical review boards, two from the University of Pretoria and one from the Research Ethics Committee of the South African Department of Correctional Services, the author endeavoured to address all possible concerns about the ethical requirements of the study. Credibility was obtained through in-depth member checking with the women, with whom the transcripts and findings were shared and confirmed as accurate. In addition, the author utilised personal reflexivity in the field notes. Reflexivity is both a practice and a methodology in narrative feminist research. As such, it involves careful consideration of positionality, both that of the research and the participant, and the inherent power dynamics therein. As stated by Rossiter et al., "correctional research requires careful adaptations to collect meaningful data from inmates and recognise their vulnerability" (2020, p. 56). Therefore, throughout the research process, the author was cognisant of the dynamics of

participant agency and researcher power, as well as its impact on the collaborative experience, and on researcher participation and participant representation in the research findings (Parry, 2020a).

Findings

The following sections use excerpts from transcripts to describe the women's individual pathways towards obtaining an education. The excerpts reveal the women's challenges when accessing digital education and the role of support in their completing tertiary distance education degrees, including opportunities for fostering peer support.

Pathways to Tertiary Education for Women Incarcerated in South Africa

In considering the women's pathways to enrolling in a higher education programme while incarcerated, we found three of the women explained that they had no opportunities to establish an interest or pursue further education before their incarceration. Yusra, Faith, and Marie each described how education became a possibility for them only after their incarceration. Yusra (48 years old), who had completed her high school diploma and two degrees in higher learning (Business Management and Communications Studies) since her incarceration, said:

I left school at an early age because my dad got retrenched. I was the only daughter, coming from an [traditional] family . . . I was married at [the] age of 17 . . . Okay, it was a very abusive marriage. After 14 years

when my husband didn't want me and the kids . . . I had no support. So, I couldn't get a job. I wasn't educated and I had no support; I had [two small children],so I turned to prostitution . . . [and] when I turned to prostitution, I—that's how I landed myself in this [place].

Faith (52 years old), who had completed a higher degree in Education Studies, spoke of her passion for education, saying, "I was motivated even when I was outside, but unfortunately, outside I did not have sufficient [resources]. Fortunate enough, when I came to prison, I realised that this is the only time where I can continue with my studies." Marie (50 years old) had also started her studies after she was incarcerated, and provided context as to what had inspired her academic journey and how the first two degrees she obtained (Information Technology and Law), differed from her current studies in HIV/AIDS training:

The reason why I studied law is I will tell you now, is . . . is my parents passed away when I was six years old, so we got adopted by my mother's sister and her husband, me and my sister. So, the guy abused me since . . . since a young age, and then on a stage we were taken away, we were put in children's homes, and . . . then you go into foster care again, so we had a terrible childhood. Okay? So, our childhood did not contribute, but nobody said anything about it. I mean, I made my decision. The reason why I wanted to do the law is I want to put every person that does things like that to a child behind bars. But I was immature and . . . and, so it was not really my passion. It was . . . it was a revenge. Do you understand? It's not a passion. Now what I'm doing is . . . is a passion. It's something that I like.

For the remaining four women, their pathway to education had started before they were incarcerated. Zeenat (58 years old), who was completing a degree in Environmental Law, stated that her family members had studied further and so education was already encouraged in her family from a young age. She revealed, "I come from an educated family. . . Everybody is educated." Lesedi (43 years old), who was completing her Doctorate in Psychology, elaborated on her education prior to her incarceration as follows:

When I come to [correctional facility], I had a BTech in Labour Relations. So, the . . . the school section open in 2012 . . . there were other ladies who were learning, [and] I [would] tell them, "No, I have qualification, I don't have to study." I thought, it's enough . . . [But] there used to be this [educator] who tell me, "Are you a professor? If you are not a professor, you still have to study."

Similarly, Mindi (46 years old), who was studying Information Technology, stated that, "I guess, like education, for me, was like always part of the plan because when I was arrested, I was studying with [institution name]." Lerato (32 years old) explained her pathway to studying Law in a bit more detail:

Before I came here, I was actually studying in [country name]. I was with the [higher education institution name]. I was doing business studies there . . . I encouraged myself, because uhm . . . nobody actually pushed me . . . it was my choice, it was my decision. I went there on my own. I paid my own fees. I did everything on my own. So, it's been a priority for me. It is something that I've always wanted, because at my family, . . . people, they . . . didn't do tertiary education.

Challenges Accessing Digital Education

All of the women outlined the numerous challenges they faced in completing a degree in higher learning behind bars. This was only possible online through distance education. As Lerato explained, “everything being online, we’re no . . . longer getting books, we’re no longer getting printed material.” The lack of access to computers or laptops, as well as restricted access to the internet, were the biggest challenges highlighted.

Indeed, three of the women, Marie, Mindi, and Faith, had gone to court to fight to access online infrastructure for their studies. Each of them explained their journey:

***Marie:** We took them to court . . . and the three of us, we got our court orders. In Correctional Centres . . . this [education] is correction. This is correction. Studying, doing something with your life is correcting the mistakes that you made. Prison is . . . is a . . . is a university on its own and you see everything in here. So, this is why I say education is the most important thing if you are incarcerated. It's the only thing that I say is actually correction.*

***Mindi:** Well, I've got a court order. I filed my own application when I uhm . . . when I was doing my [degree] . . . First year. And it was successful, so I have a court order and then my friend bought me a very good laptop. But the internet . . . Ja, that limitation is actually quite frustrating . . .*

***Faith:** As much as all the things are done online, you must see to it that—okay, before I can go there—studying online, immediately you register . . . But now how are you going to do that if you don't have a laptop? It was*

so difficult, and it was so stressing that we had to wear the chains and go to court. We went to court and stated our reasons before the judge, and the judge really complimented us for taking an effort to improve ourselves. And the judge gave us that order that we must keep our laptops in our rooms. Though we got that opportunity to have our laptops in our cells, the challenge is the issue of the modem. Because now, you just go there and then you download the material, then the 17 hours you are locked in, you must see to it that you do your work. You know, when you study in prison, don't throw in the towel. Be resilient.

Unfortunately, not all the women had been able to petition the court, and they still faced accessibility challenges, as described by Lerato:

There're some people here that do have their laptops in their cells, so for them it's easier. But for, like people like me that don't have them in . . . don't have the laptops. In . . . in the cell . . . it's more difficult. Like the last time I needed to print, there was no toner . . . there's no ink . . . I don't have study material. So, everything that I need to study, is in my laptop, which gets locked up at 2 [pm].

Importance of Personal and Peer Support

All seven women agreed that their carceral higher learning academic journeys could not have been started, or completed, without personal structures of support. This support was most often in the form of financial support as South African incarcerated students' studies are not state subsidised. Faith highlighted the importance of this support when she said, "It's so unfortunate that most of the ladies here, they don't have financial assistance. If they had, they will also go in to study."

All the women explained how financial support stemmed from friends, family, and even religious institutions. Yusra explained that “The reasons why I’m with [higher educational institution name] is because I actually won a bursary from my church.” For Mindi, the fiscal support for her studies came from a friend:

Like, I've been here for 18 years, I only started studying on my 10th year. I wanted to study, but uhm I looked at my financial circumstances . . . and at that time I did not have money, so I just always put it off, like, okay, I'm going to study at some point, or somebody [will help] and fortunately a friend of mine that I . . . I went to varsity with, came to see me and she decided that she was gonna sponsor my honours [degree] . . .

Primarily though, the women received funds to study further from family members. Lesedi explained, “. . . my Mum, my parents have been helping me. My Mum is very . . . like . . . supportive. As I’m saying . . . because I’m preparing for 2022, she wanna know now, how much I will need when I have to register, so she’s planning for me.” Zeenat shared a similar statement, but explained how her family had taken their support a step further and assisted her by completing the online registration process when she had no access to a computer:

I had difficulty trying to register, right? Because we don't have access to cell phones or computers, anything, so I have to liaise with my family . . . I have to ask family to do my registration for me, so they didn't know exactly what I wanted [to study] . . . I said, I want to do my Masters in Human Rights . . . or something to do with family, [with] women, because I've always been passionate about family and women . . . I've come from a broken home as well.

Zeenat was also the only woman to mention the correctional centre educators as being a form of support for her studies, saying that:

Our members [Department of Correctional Services educators] are wonderful in this section. I can't tell you how blessed we are to have good members. They're caring and they're loving, and they make us feel like humans, not like . . . like offenders, you know? So, they give us dignity and I think that's the thing that [distance university name] has done. It gives you . . . it's giving you dignity, which is so important.

Lesedi also recognised the important support that correctional centre educators provided and described how the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic had intensified the need for educators who were actually housed in carceral facilities during the countrywide lockdown:

The teaching, I had to help . . . because during the COVID, they released most of the teachers. So, I had to step in to help . . . but once I started, I realised that I'm falling in love with it. Then you wanna see what you're doing to people and everything, then you bond with your learners. Then I said, I will just continue . . . and see if you can help the others.

The lack of educators had challenged and inspired Lesedi, as well as four of the other women interviewed, to mentor and teach other incarcerated women both formally and informally. This idea of social responsibility was a very important internal motivating factor for all seven women, and inspired them to take care of themselves and those around them as well. Faith stated, "They were struggling with teachers. I volunteered. I'm a pure educator. I volunteered to . . . help them with teaching." Lesedi explained how although the general

environment of the correctional centre was not conducive as a motivating space, education had inspired her compassion for others:

I think there's a lack of motivation . . . as I said that the environment is not conducive for school . . . the environment is full of anger . . . people are affected . . . Because the school year is like a challenge to the ladies. They don't . . . they . . . they struggle to complete a year. They are accepted January, but come winter . . . because the place [hub] is so cold . . . they walk out. So, if just let's say, [I] can motivate [them], because it's not fun when you are alone, doing something . . . So, it also encourages me to [study], let's do this thing together, not alone . . . So, I think motivation is very low; I think we need more motivation. I wanna see what tomorrow is bringing. So, I have to wait for this tomorrow, which never comes . . . Tomorrow never comes, but it [education] gives you hope. I think it's better to have hope, than give up . . .

For Faith, the challenges she faced could not compare to the internal motivation she felt to be an inspiration for her children:

Long-distance learning, it can be difficult at times, but it needs someone who has a passion of studying . . . who has goals right, and who is prepared to overcome the challenges. The stress level is also high, the finances are not good. But in anyway, if you are studying in prison, you have a better chance to [inspire] your kids outside because now, if I can study at my age, then they could see that mama is really serious about education, and that motivated my kids.

Discussion

The findings above highlight the women's individual pathways towards obtaining an education, the challenges they encountered with distance education, and the role that personal and peer support played in their completing a tertiary degree online while incarcerated. Despite the pathways literature that evidences how women have poor access to education prior to their incarceration (Agboola et al., 2022; Parry, 2020b; Yenjela, 2015; Yingling, 2016), four women in this study stated that their pathway to education had started before they were incarcerated. That said, they did typify other challenges evidenced in pathways research.

For example, Zeenat shared, "I've come from a broken home as well," exhibiting solidarity with other women who experience instability and trauma in their childhood prior to their incarceration. Yet, she had positive role models when it came to education, as she explained, "I come from an educated family Everybody is educated." Lerato's experience was different, in that she was not supported in her educational aspirations prior to her arrest. She stated, "I paid my own fees. I did everything on my own. So, it's been a priority for me. It is something that I've always wanted, because at my family, . . . people, they . . . didn't do tertiary education." The remaining three women described pathways that corresponded directly to the pathways literature. Each explained how they had no opportunities to establish an interest or pursuit in furthering their education before their incarceration, and education became a possibility for

them only after their incarceration. Yusra experienced educational disadvantages, economic hardship, emotional trauma, and violence with little support. It was only after her incarceration that she had completed her high school diploma and two degrees in higher learning via distance education online. Faith and Marie each shared similar accounts of violence, lack of resources, and poor support systems that impeded any academic advancements prior to incarceration. In spite of these traumas, all the women had achieved amazing academic accomplishments in online higher education, sometimes obtaining multiple degrees, improving their mental state and individual prospects. This is seen in the words of Marie, "Now what I'm doing is . . . is a passion. It's something that I like," and also the words of Lesedi, "I think it's better to have hope, than give up."

Completing a distance higher education degree while incarcerated was not a battle easily won, however. All the women described the many challenges they had to face in accessing their education online. Unequal access to adequate online higher educational opportunities is not unusual in corrections because these students often experience limited access to digital resources and the internet (Farley & Willems, 2017). Indeed, this is a challenge that many distance tertiary students outside correctional facilities also experience due to poor internet access, the high costs of digital infrastructure, and a lack of digital skills (Alzola Romero, 2012; Mpungose, 2020; Olawale et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). However, incarcerated students also face the challenge of risk

averse correctional systems who can restrict or outright prohibit the use of the internet, computers, and other technologies for learning (Farley et al., 2016). As a result of Section 29 (1) of South Africa's Constitution (1996), education is recognised as a basic human right and all incarcerated individuals must be allowed access to education, which is why three of the women (Marie, Mindi, and Faith), had gone to court and won their case to access online infrastructure for their higher education studies. Those who could not go to court, still grappled with issues that included poor digital infrastructure and the lack of educators available to assist in carceral classrooms. These challenges essentially create inequality, altering digital access to education into a privilege rather than a right.

Although it is important to inculcate understandings of the pathways to online distance higher education programmes and the complex challenges faced by incarcerated women enrolled in these programmes, this is not the end of the story. As previously explicated, the aim of this study was to provide a holistic perspective of South African women's narratives of experience. This not only revealed challenges the women faced when completing distance tertiary education behind bars, such as lack of access to the internet and other technologies, but it also developed feminist understandings of the social issues which may be at play. Thus, the power of digital higher education progressed beyond increasing the women's employability and desistance post-release, towards developing their self-empowerment. This was evidenced in the stories

the women shared, such as when Zeenat said, “. . . I think that’s the thing that [distance university name] has done. It gives you . . . it’s giving you dignity, which is so important.”

It also enabled peer support, which, as an intersectional form of support that involves peer cooperation and collaboration, enhances the overall well-being of individuals and communities in corrections (Baumgartner & Sandoval, 2018; Brown & Bloom, 2018; Hawes, 2017). This was apparent in the narratives where participants had used their higher education degrees to motivate and assist their peers in their distance education journeys, such as Lesedi who said, “[I] can motivate [them], because it’s not fun when you are alone, doing something . . . So, it also encourages me to [study], let’s do this thing together . . .” It is necessary then that future research uncovers the lived experiences of students pursuing an education online while incarcerated, not only to discover to what extent distance higher education could benefit offender rehabilitation and reintegration. But also, as evidenced by these women’s narratives, to understand how distance education has the potential to cultivate empathic relationships with their peers, which fosters further education opportunities for more women incarcerated in South Africa.

Conclusion

It is imperative to consider the meaning of truly accessible and inclusive online higher education through research in South African correctional facilities.

Correctional facilities the world over face overcrowding, limited resources in healthcare and education, and the difficult conditions that correctional officers and educators have to work under. Despite these many challenges, it is still of vital importance that research raises awareness and understanding of the barriers faced by incarcerated students enrolled in online higher education programmes. If the digital divide is allowed to deepen between those who are incarcerated and their communities, it will continue to widen as rapidly as technologies are evolving and it will cause resettlement for offenders to be impossible as an isolated and relegated population.

The low number of women enrolled for distance higher degrees in the correctional centre I visited is of major concern. This limitation in sample size only further serves to highlight the need for research that facilitates the development of a gender-responsive, student-centred pedagogical approach that is accessible and relevant to these women. Both in South Africa and abroad, there is a need for gender-responsive policy change whereby carceral education programmes provide online higher education opportunities for women that consider their specific pathways to and motivations for completing a higher degree. Research focussed on online distance higher education in corrections has the potential to expand understandings of these women's pathways towards education attainment. It also has the potential to identify opportunities offered and the challenges faced in this endeavour, along with the possible implications for personal and peer development.

Lastly, the author endorses research recommendations where researchers and policymakers (Johnson, 2021; Mdakane et al., 2021) motivate for online higher education programmes to be extended from inside correctional facilities to outside in local communities. This would further encourage relationships between mothers and their children, friends, and family, preparing these women for full participation and active contribution to society.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences [grant number WGP21/1031].

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author

Dr. Bianca Rochelle Parry is Programme Director for Research at the Centre for Mediation in Africa at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. As a rated researcher with the National Research Foundation, she has published widely on marginalised community experiences, with a specific concentration on women and gender issues.



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