

Economic Empowerment and Social Reintegration of Women Prisoners in Côte d'Ivoire: An Integrated Approach to Rehabilitation

Roseline Safie N'da

UFR Criminology, Felix Houphouët Boigny University, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

Email: ndasafieroseline@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Safie N'da, R. (2026). Economic Empowerment and Social Reintegration of Women Prisoners in Côte d'Ivoire: An Integrated Approach to Rehabilitation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 539-555.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.148031>

Received: July 14, 2026

Accepted: August 17, 2026

Published: August 20, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how vocational training, psychosocial support, community engagement, and institutional partnerships contribute to the social reintegration of women incarcerated at the Abidjan Penitentiary Complex. The study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with programme beneficiaries and key project stakeholders, which were analysed using a thematic approach. The findings indicate that reintegration is perceived as a multidimensional process in which economic empowerment, strengthened social ties, and coordinated post-release support function as complementary components.

Keywords

Social Reintegration, Women Prisoners, Economic Empowerment, Community Support, Partnership Governance, Côte d'Ivoire

1. Introduction

The social reintegration of incarcerated persons is now one of the major issues of contemporary penal policies. While imprisonment has a sanction function, it also aims at rehabilitation in order to prepare for the return to society of convicted persons and to prevent recidivism. This approach is recognized by international human rights standards, including the Mandela Rules, the Bangkok Rules, and the recommendations of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2013), which identify rehabilitation as one of the key objectives of the enforcement of sentences. Van Kempen's (2014) work also underlines that rehabilitation is a major lever for preventing recidivism and protecting society in the long term.

Prison is therefore not only a place of deprivation of liberty, but also a space where the individual and social capacities necessary for sustainable reintegration must be developed.

This development marks a break with exclusively repressive approaches to detention. Foucault (1975) shows that the modern prison is part of a disciplinary system aimed at producing individuals who conform to social norms. However, prison can also reinforce exclusion mechanisms when it does not encourage support or effective preparation for release. This idea is taken up by Coyle (2009), for whom human dignity must remain the basis of any prison policy, since the deprivation of liberty cannot justify the deprivation of other fundamental rights. In the same vein, Wacquant (2013) highlights that current penal policies frequently participate in the institutional management of the most marginalized populations.

Studies on African prisons also highlight the limits of prison systems inherited from the colonial era. Bernault (1999) reminds us that the African prison world is still marked by historical logics of social control, which have long made punishment a priority, to the detriment of rehabilitation. More recently, Morelle and Le Marcis (2022) highlight that African prisons are complex social spaces where power relations, economic vulnerabilities and community dynamics intersect, calling for a renewal of approaches to reintegration.

Women have a special place in prison populations. They often remain invisible in prison policies, even though they are numerically in the minority and accumulate multiple forms of vulnerability linked to gender, poverty, violence suffered and family responsibilities. Konaté (1999, 2005) shows that African prison policies have long been designed from a male model, which leaves little room for the specific needs of women prisoners. For its part, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2009) points out that female prisoners have specific needs in terms of physical health, mental health, reproductive health and psychosocial support, which are still insufficiently taken into account in most prison systems, and that gender-based violence is a major determinant of the social and health inequalities that women continue to face.

This situation is part of broader social relations of domination and exclusion. According to the theories of empowerment developed by Kabeer (1999), empowerment is based on women's ability to access resources, to decide and to transform their living conditions. This approach is in line with the theory of capacities proposed by Sen (1999) and developed by Nussbaum (2000), according to which human development presupposes the effective possibility for each individual to freely choose his or her future. From this point of view, reintegration is not limited to finding a job, but consists of rebuilding social, economic and relational capacities that allow full participation in collective life.

African feminisms offer a complementary reading of this issue. As Salami (2021) writes, African feminism is not monolithic, but plural, and is declined in a multiplicity of approaches that intersect gender relations, colonial legacies, economic inequalities and structural violence. This intersectional approach allows us to bet-

ter understand the trajectories of women prisoners, often marked by precariousness, discrimination and violence suffered before their incarceration. [Martinez \(2018\)](#) shows, in the same sense, that the identity reconstruction of African women is done through processes of resilience and reappropriation of their power to act, which gives reintegration a social, economic and symbolic dimension.

In Côte d'Ivoire, for several years now, the modernization of the prison system has gone hand in hand with a growing desire to strengthen rehabilitation and social reintegration mechanisms. This dynamic has led to the implementation of a project to improve the living conditions and reintegration of women prisoners at the Abidjan Penitentiary Unit, as part of the national reforms aimed at improving detention conditions and revitalizing the prison system. This project combines improvement of living conditions, vocational training, economic empowerment and support towards socio-professional integration, with a view to preparing for social reintegration, restoring human dignity and reducing factors likely to increase the risk of recidivism. According to the approaches to restorative justice developed by [Zehr \(2002\)](#), the reconstruction of social ties appears to be an essential lever for achieving sustainable reintegration.

In this study, four concepts structure the analysis. Economic empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire the resources, skills and agency necessary to sustainably improve their living conditions and exercise greater control over their choices ([Kabeer, 1999](#); [Sen, 1999](#)). Community support refers to all the support provided by families, communities, civil society organizations, religious communities and institutions to promote the reintegration of women before, during and after their release. Social reintegration is understood as the process of rebuilding social ties, access to economic activity, exercising rights and participating in community life after incarceration. Finally, partnership governance corresponds to the coordination of interventions between public institutions, civil society organizations, technical and financial partners as well as other actors involved in the preparation, support and monitoring of reintegration.

This progress is there, but there is still little scientific work on the effects of economic empowerment mechanisms on the reintegration of women prisoners in Côte d'Ivoire. The available work focuses mainly on prison conditions or institutional reforms, without an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms by which training and support programmes contribute to reconstructing the social trajectories of beneficiaries. The work of [Maruna \(2025\)](#) on desistance shows, however, that the sustainable exit from delinquency is largely based on the reconstruction of identity and the social recognition of people who have previously been criminalized. The essential scientific interest of the present study lies in this inadequacy.

This research is part of this perspective by proposing an integrated reading of the reintegration of women prisoners in the Ivorian context. Her scientific contribution is the analysis of the interactions between economic empowerment, psychosocial support, community mobilization and partnership governance, as complementary factors of social reintegration. Based on the pilot project implemented

at the Abidjan Prison Unit, it shows that reintegration does not depend solely on the acquisition of professional skills, but also on the active participation of beneficiaries in defining their needs, restoring their dignity and coordination between public institutions and civil society organizations, religious communities and technical and financial partners. This research thus contributes to a better understanding of gender-sensitive prison policies and offers a new empirical perspective on the mechanisms likely to support social reintegration and contribute to the prevention of recidivism in African contexts.

The research aims to answer the following question: how do economic empowerment and community support mechanisms participate in the social reintegration of women prisoners in the context of Ivorian prison reforms?

The general objective is to analyse the mechanisms by which a reintegration project based on vocational training, psychosocial support and community mobilisation is perceived as contributing to the empowerment and preparation for the social reintegration of women prisoners at the Abidjan Penitentiary Unit. More specifically, it is a question of examining the perceptions of institutional actors, identifying the contributions of economic empowerment in the trajectories of reintegration and reintegration. To analyse the conditions perceived as favourable to the social reintegration of women prisoners.

The hypothesis put forward is that the reintegration of women prisoners is based on a multidimensional approach that combines economic empowerment, psychosocial support, restoration of dignity, community support and partnership governance, going far beyond simple preparation for employment.

2. Methodology

2.1. Type of Study

This research is part of a qualitative approach focused on understanding the perceptions, experiences and representations of the actors involved in the process of reintegration of women prisoners. This approach seems particularly suited to the analysis of the social, institutional and community dynamics surrounding rehabilitation systems in prisons. It allows us to grasp the complexity of the interactions between the beneficiaries, the public institutions and the partners involved in the implementation of the project.

The study is based on a comprehensive approach inspired by qualitative sociology and content analysis to understand the mechanisms by which economic empowerment and psychosocial support actions contribute to the social reintegration of women prisoners.

2.2. Field of Study

The study was conducted at the Abidjan Penitentiary Pole (PPA), Côte d'Ivoire's main penitentiary facility, where a large number of male and female inmates are incarcerated. This research is part of the project to improve the living conditions and reintegration of women prisoners, implemented in the context of reforms to

modernize the Ivorian prison system.

One of the objectives of this project is to strengthen the economic empowerment of women deprived of their liberty through vocational training, income-generating activities, psychosocial support and preparation for socio-professional integration after release. It is part of the national dynamic to strengthen the judicial and penitentiary system supported by technical and financial partners.

The reintegration project was designed according to a progressive process articulated in three complementary phases. Beneficiaries were selected on the basis of predefined criteria: being a female prisoner, volunteering, having a remaining sentence of no more than six months, having skills or knowledge related to the intended profession, having demonstrated good behaviour during detention and not being the subject of any other ongoing criminal proceedings. The first phase, carried out in a prison environment (*intra-muros*), provides for six months of training in sewing and pastry, combining theoretical and practical teaching, supplemented by financial education modules. The second phase, implemented after liberation (*extra-muros*), lasted eighteen months. The thirty beneficiaries continue their training at the Institute of Training and Women's Education (IFEF) in Yopougon as well as with master craftsmen. During this period, they are housed and fully supported by the project in order to promote their learning and their gradual integration. The third phase, lasting three months, is devoted to the installation of the beneficiaries in pre-equipped workshops and to support intended to facilitate their economic autonomy and socio-professional integration. At the time of the interviews, the intramural phase was being implemented.

2.3. Surveyed Population

The study sample is composed of actors directly involved in the project for the reintegration of women prisoners at the Abidjan Penitentiary Unit. A purposive sampling made it possible to select the participants most likely to inform the mechanisms of social reintegration and economic empowerment. Included are actors who have participated in the design, implementation, monitoring or benefited from the project, who have relevant experience or knowledge of these devices and who have given their free and informed consent. Individuals who did not meet these criteria or who refused to participate were excluded from the study.

The participants were recruited with the support of the administration of the Abidjan Penitentiary Unit and the project managers, who facilitated the identification and contact with the different categories of actors. Women prisoners were approached within the project, while other participants were contacted in their respective structures or institutions, and then invited to take part in the study.

A one-on-one interview was conducted with each of the 55 participants in the five categories presented below.

Category of participants	Workforce (n)
Female inmates beneficiaries	30
Institutional actors	10
Representatives of civil society and religious communities	8
Trainers and social workers	5
Technical and financial partners	2
Total	55

This diversity of sample made it possible to compare the perceptions of the beneficiaries and the various institutional, community and technical actors in order to gain a global understanding of the issues, mechanisms and challenges of the social reintegration of women prisoners.

2.4. Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were conducted between May and July 2025. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in French, the working language of the participants. Empirical data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews conducted with the various actors involved in the project.

The interview guide was structured around several axes:

- Representations of social reintegration;
- The specific needs of women prisoners;
- Economic empowerment schemes;
- Psychosocial support mechanisms;
- Institutional partnerships;
- Difficulties encountered in preparing for release and in community reintegration.

The concepts of economic empowerment, community support, social reintegration and partnership governance, defined in the conceptual framework of the study, served as a common thread in the development of the interview guide. They guided the formulation of questions relating to the resources mobilized, the forms of support, the reintegration pathways and the modalities of coordination between the actors.

With the agreement of the participants, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full. No translation was necessary, as the exchanges were carried out in French.

This collection technique allowed participants to freely express their experiences, perceptions and analyses while ensuring a certain homogeneity in the information collected.

2.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data were the subject of a thematic analysis inspired by content anal-

ysis. After the transcription of the interviews, an in-depth reading of the corpus made it possible to identify the units of meaning. The coding of the transcriptions was carried out by the author according to an approach combining an initial analysis grid based on the concepts of economic empowerment, community support, social reintegration and partnership governance, defined in the conceptual framework of the study. and open coding to bring out new elements from the collected speeches. The units of meaning were then grouped into codes, then organized into analytical categories before being consolidated into themes of analysis. Particular attention was paid to the convergences and divergences between the points of view of the different categories of participants in order to reflect the diversity of experiences and to strengthen the credibility of the interpretation.

This approach has made it possible to identify several central themes:

- the perception of prison as a space for rehabilitation;
- economic empowerment as a lever for reintegration;
- the role of psychosocial and spiritual support;
- the reconstruction of the identity of women prisoners;
- community and institutional mobilization;
- the challenges of socio-professional reintegration.

The empirical results were then compared with the main theoretical frameworks relating to social reintegration, prison studies, African feminisms, empowerment theories and human rights-based approaches, in order to propose a cross-interpretation of the data.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to qualitative studies of vulnerable populations.

Prior to each interview, participants were briefed on the objectives of the research and their free and informed consent was obtained. We only participated on a purely voluntary basis, no constraints were applied.

In order to preserve the confidentiality of the information collected, the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed during the transcription and analysis of the data. The comments collected were used solely for scientific purposes and the information allowing the identification of the respondents was deleted or made anonymous.

Care has also been taken to respect the dignity of women prisoners and not to stigmatize individual situations, in accordance with international principles of human rights and social science research.

3. Results

The analysis of the interviews reveals a great convergence of the discourses of the various institutional, community and religious actors on the need to refocus Ivorian prison policy on social reintegration. The data collected indicate that reintegration is now seen as a multidimensional process including preparation for exit,

economic empowerment, psychosocial support and community mobilization. The analysis reveals five main findings.

3.1. Reintegration as a New Orientation of Prison Policy

The interviews show that the concept of prison has changed a lot within the prison administration. The officials interviewed now consider that incarceration cannot be reduced to a simple deprivation of liberty, but must be a stage of social reconstruction allowing the prisoner to regain his place in the community.

As one prison official pointed out:

“Prison is not intended to punish an individual. Its objective is to resocialize him, to allow him to redeem himself and to fully reintegrate into society. He must not remain an individual on the periphery of this society, but must once again become a full-fledged citizen”. (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Institutional Manager).

This evolution is also perceptible in the testimonies of the women beneficiaries. One of them states:

“Before joining this training, I only thought I would serve my sentence. Today, I see prison as an opportunity to learn a trade and prepare for my return to society”. (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F06).

The speeches collected also show that this orientation is part of a national dynamic of developing a national reintegration policy involving public institutions, technical partners and civil society organizations.

An institutional actor reminds us:

“We are going to call on all our partners to develop together a national policy for reintegration and improvement of detention conditions”. (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Head of the Prison Administration).

In addition, several speakers insist on the fact that the lack of preparation for release is one of the main causes of reintegration failures. According to one of them:

“A release from prison without preparation, without structured intervention, is a programmed failure. Prison then becomes a destructive parenthesis rather than a time of reconstruction”. (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Deputy Director of Reintegration).

3.2. Vocational Training as a Lever for Empowerment

All interviews highlight the central role of economic empowerment in the reintegration trajectories of women prisoners.

The pilot project aims to train thirty women in the sewing and pastry trades according to a progressive path including training in detention, continuation of apprenticeship outside the city walls and support for professional installation.

According to the project managers, the system is designed to be participatory:

“The types of training have not been imposed. It was after a preliminary investigation within the detention that the ladies themselves oriented their choice to-

wards pastry and sewing". (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Project Manager).

Another speaker adds:

"These two professions emerged according to the needs expressed by the women themselves. We have also provided financial education so that they can manage their future activities". (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Program Manager).

One beneficiary also expresses the importance of these trainings: "Thanks to sewing, I feel able to work when I leave. I want to be able to earn an honest living and provide for my family." (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F12).

Beyond technical skills, the trainings are therefore designed as a way to strengthen the economic autonomy and management capacities of the beneficiaries after their release.

3.3. The Role of NGOs and Religious Communities in Reintegration

The data collected underline the importance of the role played by civil society organizations and religious communities in supporting incarcerated people.

The NGO representatives stress that their objective is to improve detention conditions through actions concerning access to the law, listening, hygiene, health and social support.

As a representative of the NGO explains:

"Reintegration consists of bringing the prisoner back to his place and dignity in society. We develop concrete projects to fight against recidivism". (Semi-structured individual interview, NGO manager).

The religious accompanists emphasize that their intervention goes far beyond the religious framework:

"We receive inmates in individual interviews, we encourage them to change their behaviour and we promote the values of respect, forgiveness, peace and citizenship". (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Spiritual Accompanist).

The women beneficiaries also confirm the importance of this support in their reintegration process. As one of them puts it:

"The advice of the spiritual accompanists and NGO teams helped us a lot. They made us understand that prison is not the end of our lives. They explained to us the community service and the training offered. They told us that if we learn well, when we leave, we will be able to practice this profession learned here and rebuild our future". (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F08).

Several testimonies illustrate the concrete impact of this support:

"A former inmate is now an operations manager in my company, and another former inmate has become a purchasing manager". (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Spiritual Accompanist).

3.4. The Expectations Expressed by Women Prisoners

The interviews reveal that women prisoners are primarily interested in acquiring skills that promote their economic autonomy after release. The testimonies of the beneficiaries show a strong convergence around the desire to acquire economic autonomy after their release. Most of them consider learning a trade to be an essential condition for their social reintegration, while expressing additional needs, particularly in literacy and business management.

One of them expresses her aspiration to have a job that will allow her to rebuild her life as follows:

“I would like to learn a job that allows me to work as soon as I graduate. I don’t want to depend on anyone anymore”. (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F15).

Preliminary surveys show that the sewing and pastry professions correspond to their professional aspirations. However, other needs were also expressed. As one participant noted:

“In addition to sewing, I would have liked to learn to read and write properly to better manage my business.” (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F22).

These expectations are in line with the observations made by a manager who conducted the survey of inmates:

“Women also mentioned hairdressing and especially literacy among the training they would like to receive.” (Semi-structured individual interview, Survey Manager).

The actors interviewed believe that taking into account the needs expressed is a determining factor in ensuring the support of the beneficiaries and the sustainability of their integration.

3.5. The Challenges of Release from Prison and Social Reintegration

Finally, the interviews highlight several obstacles likely to compromise reintegration pathways.

The first challenge concerns the social stigmatization of former prisoners. The women interviewed express the fear of being rejected by those around them and by society after their release. As one of them confided:

“What scares me the most is not getting out of prison, it’s the way others look when I go home. I’m afraid that I’ll continue to be judged despite the efforts I’ll make to change”. (Semi-structured individual interview, Female prisoner beneficiary F04).

This concern is also underlined by an institutional actor:

“We must trust those who come out of prison and not consider them as pariahs of society”. (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Institutional Participant).

The second challenge lies in the low resources devoted to reintegration. According to a prison official:

“Reintegration is the soft underbelly of all prison policies. The priorities often remain the food, health and safety of prisoners before they are prepared for release”. (Semi-structured Individual Interview, Head of the Prison Administration).

Finally, the participants stressed that successful reintegration presupposes continuity between prison time and return to society through sustained mobilization of public institutions, NGOs, religious communities, the private sector and technical and financial partners.

Thus, all the results show that the reintegration of women prisoners is now thought of as a global process of social reconstruction in which vocational training, psychosocial support, community participation and economic empowerment appear to be complementary levers likely to promote social reintegration and reduce the vulnerability factors associated with the risk of recidivism.

4. Discussion

This research shows that the reintegration of women prisoners does not depend solely on preparation for a profession, but on a global process of social reconstruction integrating economic, psychological, relational and institutional dimensions. The results, based on the testimonies of the women beneficiaries and the other actors involved, highlight the decisive role of vocational training, psychosocial support and community support in their reintegration processes. They are seen as creating favourable conditions for social reintegration when they are part of a multidimensional approach based on dignity restoration, capacity building and partnership governance. However, the qualitative and cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow us to assess their long-term effects on the stability of reintegration or on recidivism.

4.1. Reintegration as a Change in the Prison Paradigm

The interviews reveal that institutional actors today perceive prison as a place of preparation for the return to society and no longer only as a space of punishment. This evolution is in line with the analyses of Foucault (1975) who already pointed out the limits of a prison system focused exclusively on disciplinary control. When incarceration is not accompanied by a real rehabilitation project, it risks causing more exclusion than reintegration.

The results also converge with the work of Coyle (2009), for whom prisons must preserve human dignity and actively prepare for the return of prisoners to society. The speeches collected at the Abidjan Prison Unit perfectly reflect this desire to refocus prison policies on the prisoner.

This development is also in line with the recommendations of the Nelson Mandela Rules, the Bangkok Rules and the UNODC (2013) which consider preparation for release as an essential component of preventing recidivism and protecting the human rights of persons deprived of their liberty. This interpretation is also reinforced by Griffiths, Dandurand and Murdoch (2007), for whom reintegration

is an essential lever for preventing recidivism when it combines institutional support, community support and access to social resources. In the same vein, [Van Kempen \(2014\)](#) emphasizes that rehabilitation remains one of the pillars of modern prison policies, because of its positive impact on the sustainable reduction of recidivism and the protection of society.

4.2. Gender and Prison Vulnerability: A Feminist Reading of Reintegration

The results show that women prisoners face specific vulnerabilities, well beyond simple deprivation of liberty. Economic difficulties, family breakdown, previous violence and social discrimination are major factors that influence their reintegration trajectories.

These observations corroborate the analyses of [Konaté \(1999, 2005\)](#) who shows that African prison policies have long been designed according to a male model, ignoring the specific realities of women prisoners. They also corroborate the work of [Bernault \(1999\)](#) on the historical legacy of African prisons, marked by logics of social control oriented more towards punishment than rehabilitation.

[Chetcuti-Osorovitz \(2021\)](#) reminds us, from a contemporary perspective, that the female prison experience is strongly marked by social gender relations, family assignments and stigmatization mechanisms. This reality is illustrated by the results obtained, showing that release from prison is often accompanied by social and family rejection which weakens the prospects of reintegration.

Criminal responses remain strongly marked by social gender relations. Reintegration policies therefore need to take better account of the specific needs of women in conflict with the law.

The analytical work of [Salami \(2021\)](#) also makes it possible to make these life paths intelligible by crossing gender, poverty, colonial legacies and structural violence. In this context, the reintegration of women prisoners is as much an issue of social justice as it is of penal policy.

4.3. Economic Empowerment as a Potential Lever for Social Reintegration

One of the main lessons of this study is the central role of economic empowerment as a lever for reintegration.

The actors interviewed perceive vocational training in sewing, pastry and financial management as tools likely to strengthen the economic autonomy of beneficiaries and reduce their exposure to certain vulnerability factors associated with the risk of recidivism. This dynamic confirms the work of [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) for whom empowerment is based on access to resources, decision-making power and economic opportunities.

The results also confirm the capability theory developed by [Sen \(1999\)](#) and continued by [Nussbaum \(2000\)](#). Reintegration is not just about having an income, it is about giving women back the ability to make choices, to regain decision-making

autonomy and to build a new life project.

The testimonies collected show that the beneficiaries are less interested in one-off assistance than in a real economic independence, likely to restore their self-esteem and their social status. This observation confirms that income generation is a factor that can promote social stabilization and support reintegration processes.

However, the results show that, in the Ivorian context, economic empowerment alone is not enough to promote reintegration. Its effectiveness seems to depend heavily on the existence of psychosocial and community support, which broadens the traditional approaches focused on professional integration alone.

4.4. Social Capital, Community Support and Identity Reconstruction

The results also underline the decisive importance of social capital in reintegration trajectories.

Through the intervention of NGOs, religious leaders, volunteers and local communities, a link can be maintained between the detainee and society. This support helps to restore trust, maintain family ties and recreate one's social identity.

This dynamic is in line with the analyses of [Penal Reform International \(2022\)](#), which highlights that the most effective reintegration programmes are those that involve local communities, civil society organisations and public institutions in a logic of continuity between detention and life in society.

The observations also corroborate the work of [Mbaye \(2018\)](#) according to which community networks are a key factor in the resilience and social reintegration of vulnerable populations in Africa. For incarcerated women, social connections help restore a sense of belonging and mitigate the effects of stigma.

Finally, the testimonies of religious accompanists show that listening, forgiveness, family mediation and moral support play an integral part in the reconstruction of the identity of former prisoners, confirming that reintegration is as much a matter of restoring social ties as it is of economic integration.

This reconstruction of identity is also in line with current theories of discontinuance. [Maruna \(2025\)](#) shows that the sustainable abandonment of delinquent behaviour is based on the ability of people to develop a new life story that values their potential for change.

The results show that the reintegration of women prisoners is not limited to the economic dimension. From a socio-criminological point of view, the difficulties of social reintegration can also be explained by stigmatization, the weakening of social ties and the vulnerabilities accumulated before and during incarceration. In this context, access to an income-generating activity, coupled with psychosocial and community support, seems to create conditions conducive to the withdrawal processes described in the literature and could contribute to reducing the factors associated with the risk of recidivism, although this study does not make it possible to measure the effects.

This observation suggests that, in the Ivorian context, religious communities and civil society organizations exercise a role of social mediation that goes beyond material assistance. They make it possible to restore trust and rebuild the social ties essential for sustainable reintegration, a dimension that is still poorly documented in research on prison policies in West Africa.

4.5. Partnership Governance as Support for Reintegration Pathways

Finally, the study shows that successful reintegration relies heavily on the quality of partnerships between public institutions, civil society organizations, technical and financial partners, religious communities, and the private sector.

This collaborative approach is in line with the recommendations made by [UNODC \(2013\)](#), which calls for multisectoral governance involving all actors likely to support detainees before, during and after their release.

Responses to social vulnerabilities are based on inter-institutional coordination involving the State, local authorities and community organisations. This approach makes it possible to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

The results show that this partnership governance is a relevant response to the historical inadequacies of prison policies. It allows for continuity of support between the prison environment and the community while strengthening the economic, social and psychosocial opportunities offered to women after their release.

This collaborative governance is also in line with the principles of restorative justice developed by [Zehr \(2002\)](#), according to which the repair of social ties is based on the joint involvement of perpetrators, victims, institutions and the community. It also validates recent analyses on withdrawal that highlight the role of social networks, institutions and communities in consolidating reintegration pathways and in supporting reintegration pathways and consolidating the withdrawal processes described in the literature.

These results lead us to conceive of reintegration not as the exclusive responsibility of the prison administration, but as a multisectoral public policy involving institutions, communities and economic actors at the same time. This configuration seems to be an important specificity of the rehabilitation systems observed in Côte d'Ivoire.

This study confirms previous work on prison reintegration. It shows that economic empowerment alone does not guarantee lasting effects. Its effectiveness is also based on psychosocial support, partnership governance and the active participation of beneficiaries in defining their reintegration pathway. The results also indicate that the coordinated mobilization of public institutions, civil society organizations, religious communities and technical partners is an essential lever to ensure the continuity of support between prison time and return to society. In this sense, this research contributes to an enrichment of knowledge on gender-sensitive prison policies, by proposing an integrated reading of reintegration where the reconstruction of economic, social and relational capacities is inseparable from

the restoration of dignity and community inclusion. Thus, this research makes an original empirical contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms likely to support the processes of social reintegration, withdrawal and the reduction of factors associated with the risk of recidivism in the context of Ivorian prison reforms for women prisoners.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that the reintegration of women prisoners is a central issue for human development, social justice and the prevention of recidivism. The analysis of interviews conducted with institutional, community and religious actors shows that the return of women to society cannot be ensured by the execution of the sentence alone or by isolated vocational training. It is based on a comprehensive approach integrating economic empowerment, psychosocial support, community support, restoration of dignity and the coordinated mobilization of the various actors involved in the prison field.

The pilot project carried out at the Abidjan Prison Unit is a good illustration of the relevance of this integrated approach. By involving beneficiaries in defining their needs, offering training adapted to their aspirations and offering support towards socio-professional integration, it helps to strengthen the capacities of women prisoners to rebuild their life path. The results show that the actors interviewed perceive economic empowerment as an important lever for rehabilitation when it is articulated with social, psychological and community support. However, they do not make it possible to assess the effects of the project on post-release trajectories, sustainable access to employment or recidivism.

This experience, beyond its immediate impact on the beneficiaries, provides useful lessons for the reform of Ivorian prison policies. She advocates for a gender-responsive reintegration policy, based on human rights, equal opportunities and social inclusion, in line with the Nelson Mandela Rules, the Bangkok Rules and international criminal justice recommendations. It also shows that strategies for preventing recidivism depend not only on the quality of prison systems, but also on the capacity of public institutions, civil society organizations, religious communities, the private sector and local authorities to provide long-term support to people after their release.

This study opens up several avenues for research and action. From a scientific point of view, it would be relevant to carry out longitudinal studies to measure the real impact of training programmes on the professional, family and social trajectories of former prisoners several years after their release from prison. Similarly, comparisons between prisons or between different African countries would provide a better understanding of the institutional factors facilitating the success of gender-responsive reintegration policies.

In operational terms, the findings suggest strengthening post-prison monitoring systems, improving access to finance for income-generating activities, promoting functional literacy, offering psychological support, and partnering with

companies that can provide employment opportunities for ex-prisoners. They also highlight the need to involve families and communities more in reintegration processes in order to combat stigma and promote the rebuilding of social ties.

Finally, this research reminds us that the prison can only fully accomplish its mission of justice when it becomes a real space of preparation for return to society. By investing in the capacities, skills and dignity of incarcerated women, prison policies can create conditions conducive to their social reintegration. While the actors interviewed consider that these measures are likely to contribute to reducing the factors associated with the risk of recidivism, this hypothesis deserves to be verified by longitudinal studies integrating post-release follow-up and objective indicators of reintegration. Reintegration is therefore a sustainable social investment, for the benefit of social cohesion, development and peace.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Bernault, F. (1999). *Confinement, Prison and Punishment in Africa: From the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Karthala.
- Chetcuti-Osorovitz, N. (2021). *The Gender of Prison: Women's Prison Experiences*. La Découverte.
- Coyle, A. (2009). *A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management: Handbook for Prison Staff* (2nd ed.). International Centre for Prison Studies.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Surveillance and Punishment: Birth of Prison*. Gallimard.
- Griffiths, C. T., Dandurand, Y., & Murdoch, D. (2007). *The Social Reintegration of Offenders and Crime Prevention*. Public Safety Canada.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30, 435-464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>
- Konaté, D. (1999). *Women and the Prison System in Africa*. Jamana.
- Konaté, D. (2005). *Gender and Prison Policies in West Africa*. CODESRIA.
- Martinez, K. (2018). *Women's Resilience and Social Transformation in Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maruna, S. (2025). Redeeming Desistance: From Individual Journeys to a Social Movement. *Criminology*, 63, 5-25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12393>
- Mbaye, A. (2018). *Community Solidarity and Social Reintegration in Africa*. L'Harmattan Senegal.
- Morelle, M., & Le Marcis, F. (2022). *Carceral Africa: Investigations into African Penitentiary Worlds*. Karthala.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511841286>
- Penal Reform International (2022). *Global Prison Trends 2022*. Penal Reform International.
- Salami, M. (2021). *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*. Zed Books.

- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2013). *Handbook on Strategies to Reduce Overcrowding in Prisons*. United Nations.
- Van Kempen, P. H. P. H. M. C. (2014). *Rehabilitation in European Penal Policy*. Wolf Legal Publishers.
- Wacquant, L. (2013). *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Duke University Press.
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2009). *Women's Health in Prison: Correcting Gender Inequity in Prison Health*. WHO Regional Office for Europe.
- Zehr, H. (2002). *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Good Books.