

# UNODC's support to foster prisoners' rehabilitation and social reintegration into society

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*"The purposes of a sentence of imprisonment or similar measures deprivative of a person's liberty are primarily to protect society against crime and to reduce recidivism. Those purposes can be achieved only if the period of imprisonment is used to ensure, so far as possible, the reintegration of such persons into society upon release so that they can lead a law-abiding and self-supporting life.*

*The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules),  
Rule 4.1*

Many offenders after having served their prison sentence fail to desist from crime and to successfully reintegrate into the community. They are often confronted by a range of socio-economic, health or other personal challenges that tend to become obstacles to their social reintegration which imprisonment – by itself – is incapable to address. The rehabilitation of offenders and their successful reintegration into society should therefore be among the basic objectives of all criminal justice systems. While many social reintegration interventions can take place at various stages of the criminal justice process, they can also be implemented outside of that process, when offenders are diverted to alternative programmes.

Based on an individual assessment, all such interventions should be part of an integrated programme designed to address offenders' specific issues and challenges, both during and after imprisonment.

The importance of interventions to support the social reintegration of offenders as a mean of preventing further crime and preparing prisoners to reintegrate into society is clearly recognized by international human rights conventions as well as by the United Nations standards and norms in crime prevention and criminal justice.<sup>1</sup>

Among those, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners<sup>2</sup> outline the minimum prison conditions and management practices accepted as suitable by the international community as a whole. Initially adopted back in 1957, the Rules were updated in 2015 and renamed as the Nelson Mandela Rules, thereby reinforcing their undisputed standing as the single most important universal standard related to prison management and the treatment of prisoners.<sup>3</sup>

As the guardian of the Nelson Mandela Rules, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has developed a series of guidance material not only on the Rules, but also on a variety of thematic areas pertaining to prison management at large.<sup>4</sup> Amongst these, various publications specifically focus on the rehabilitation and social reintegration of offenders, such as its updated *Introductory Handbook on the Prevention of Recidivism and the Social Reintegration of Offenders*<sup>5</sup>, which

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<sup>1</sup> Including the European Prison Rules, <https://rm.coe.int/european-prison-rules-978-92-871-5982-3/16806ab9ae>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson\\_Mandela\\_Rules-E-ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Nelson_Mandela_Rules-E-ebook.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Brochure\\_on\\_the\\_UN\\_SMRs.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Brochure_on_the_UN_SMRs.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/justice-and-prison-reform/tools.html?ref=menuaside>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/dohadecclaration/en/topics/prisons/prisoner-rehabilitation--documents.html> or [http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/18-02303\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/18-02303_ebook.pdf)

elaborates on promising practices, practical steps and examples of programmes to be adopted in particular by national prison administrations for reducing recidivism.

UNODC's *Roadmap for the Development of Prison-based Rehabilitation Programmes*<sup>6</sup> aims at assisting prison administrations in developing high-quality and sustainable rehabilitation programmes and national strategies in line with international standards. It also provides practical steps which need to be taken to develop and implement prison-based programmes. While a rehabilitation strategy in prisons should include a wide variety of activities – including medical and psychological treatment, counselling and cognitive-behavioural programmes – the Roadmap focuses on the three core areas of education, vocational training and work programmes.

Based on its expertise and the above publications, UNODC provides technical assistance to Member States with a view to increase their compliance with the Nelson Mandela Rules and to further enhance prison-based rehabilitation programmes.

Within the framework of its Global Programme for the Implementation of the Doha Declaration and its pillar on fair, humane and effective criminal justice systems<sup>7</sup>, UNODC delivers technical assistance to assist eleven Member States worldwide in breaking the cycle of re-offending.

Among other projects, UNODC is currently supporting the Plurinational State of Bolivia to develop rehabilitation programmes that meet gender specific needs of women and foster their employability upon release<sup>8</sup>.

Women offenders, who are often in charge of their families, face particular challenges when reintegrating into society. Unfortunately, in most countries, even when rehabilitation programmes exist, they are designed to address the needs of the predominantly male prison population and therefore do not meet gender specific needs of female offenders. In many cases, vocational training or work-related activities for women fall into gender stereotypes and occupational activities but do not fully prepare them for reintegration nor foster their employment opportunities upon release, a fact which has led to the development of the distinct United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules).

In Bolivia, women count for about eight per cent of the prisoner population, and two thirds are incarcerated for non-violent crimes, usually related to the micro-trafficking of drugs. With most coming from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational background, and with the additional burden of being the main or even sole earner in the family, these women can easily fall back into crime if they are unable to guarantee a steady and sufficient livelihood. To reduce their recidivism, UNODC is therefore promoting their reinsertion into society by offering women prisoners vocational training in the construction field, which will increase their self-sufficiency and take them away from traditionally female-dominated, low paying sectors such as sewing, domestic services or the food sector.

Bolivia's construction sector is growing, with a high demand for qualified female workers. The average salary of construction workers is 25 per cent superior to the national minimum salary. For women, the opportunity to enter this sector following a formal training is therefore a formidable method of empowerment, and a road to financial security and a self-sufficient life.

Additionally, the project aims at strengthening their integration within the community by encouraging them, upon their release, in joining the National Association of Women Constructors in Bolivia, which

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/topics/prisons/prisoner-rehabilitation---documents.html> or [http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/17-05452\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/17-05452_ebook.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/topics/prisoner-rehabilitation.html>

<sup>8</sup> Link to video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHAHs2gzZ\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHAHs2gzZ_Q)

helps its members promote their services, identify work opportunities and to eventually develop their own business.

Through this innovative project, UNODC will continue to encourage Member States to review, improve and enhance their rehabilitative approach to prison management, including through programmes tailored to their national context and to the specific needs of prisoners, with a view to give them a meaningful new chance to successfully reintegrate into society.

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations.*