The Public Perceptions of Ex- prisoners' Psychological Well-being and Social Reintegration in Sri Lanka

V.K.N. Gamage

International College of Business And Technology (ICBT) associated with Cardiff Metropolitan University

kav11nishi@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka, a collectivist society deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, connects individuals based on ethnicity, religion, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Scroope, 2016). In such a social structure, public perceptions of ex-prisoners are not only shaped by individual beliefs but also by collective societal views (Vinney, 2019). The concept of universal human rights applies to all, including ex-prisoners who have served their sentences and are attempting to reintegrate into the society. However, societal attitudes, often influenced by cultural stigmas and religious beliefs offer challenges for these individuals by influencing their mental well-being and hindering their social reintegration. This qualitative study investigates how these public perceptions influence the psychological and social reintegration experiences of ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka, identifying social reintegration as a fundamental human right. The study was conducted due to the lack of existing literature on the comprehensive analysis of how public perceptions in Sri Lanka's unique cultural context directly impact the mental health, employment opportunities, and social reintegration of ex-prisoners. Additionally, there is limited exploration of reintegration challenges, the role of community, familial support systems and the broader societal factors that influence recidivism. The research examines the extent to which cultural stigmas, labels, and economic challenges impact the negative public opinions and how these affect the reintegration process. With regard to these external factors together with the public attitudes, this study highlights the challenges that ex-prisoners face, including isolation, mental health impacts, and employment difficulties, which increase the risk of recidivism (Ekanayake, 2020). Furthermore, the research explores the need for supportive interventions such as mental health services, education, and familial support to prevent these negative perceptions of the society influence the ex- prisoners and to promote positive societal change. This focus on the influence of public opinion provides a critical perspective on how community support can reduce stigma, enhance psychological well-being, and support ex-prisoners in leading productive lives by reingratiating into the society (Brydsten, Rostila, & Dunlavy, 2019). Additionally, the study demonstrates the vitality of the society in fostering a supportive environment that facilitates successful reintegration (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009) which benefits both the ex- prisoners as well as the broader community.

2. Materials and Methods

The study focused on the public opinion regarding the psychological well- being and the social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka. The research employed volunteering sampling method to conveniently gather participants. Eight participants were recruited following the convenience with the sampling method and the feasibility of conducting in-depth qualitative analysis, while managing the time constraints. Eight participants were recruited with an inclusion criterion where, they should be Sri Lankan citizens of age 18 and above, who could comprehend and communicate in English. This inclusion criteria ensure that the participants represent the general adult Sri Lankan population and can consistently communicate in English. The exclusion criteria included individuals with a criminal history or those currently incarcerated, on parole, or unable to communicate in English. This exclusion criteria prevent bias by excluding those with criminal backgrounds, ensuring objective public perceptions for an effective exploration. They were recruited through a study advert circulated on social media which allowed the interested individuals to access a link or scan a QR code. After reading an information sheet in a Qualtrics survey, participants clicked "Next" to reach the consent form.

Consenting individuals chose "agree" and provided contact details for follow-up, while those who selected "disagree" were redirected to the main page, and their responses were disregarded. The researcher then contacted consenting participants to schedule interviews. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, where the interview questions were approved by the ethics team. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams and were audio-recorded following the verbal consent of each participant and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to explore the data, involving six key stages. First, the data was familiarized thoroughly by reading the transcribed interviews. Then, initial codes were generated by labeling key ideas and emotions. Next, related codes were grouped into preliminary themes according to the patterns observed. After reviewing and finalizing the themes, they were defined and named to understand their primary meaning (Chawla, 2021). Finally, a report was produced, presenting the themes and supporting evidence from the data, offering a structured interpretation of the findings. This process presented a detailed understanding of the participants' responses.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the diverse challenges faced by ex-prisoners in the Sri Lankan context, which affect both their psychological well-being and their social reintegration. These challenges are deeply combined with the cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors that contribute to the stigma surrounding ex- prisoners by significantly hindering their social reintegration process.

Cultural and Religious Stigma

In Sri Lanka, cultural beliefs play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of criminality and the reintegration of ex-prisoners. The strong cultural emphasis on family honor presents the belief that the criminal's behavior is not only a personal failure but also a stain on the individual's family. As the study presents, "Sri Lankan culture values family honor and views criminal behavior as a stain that impacts both the individual and their relatives." This sense of collective shame contributes to the social exclusion of ex-prisoners, as crime is viewed as an irreversible moral failure. Furthermore, certain religious teachings contribute to the stigma by emphasizing moral purity and righteousness, leading to the perception of ex-prisoners as "morally spoiled." As the study suggests, "Religious teachings that emphasize purity and moral decency can worsen the marginalization," with the society often viewing ex-prisoners as unworthy of reintegration.

Psychological and Social Implications of Stigma

The stigma associated with ex-prisoners has reflective psychological consequences. Social rejection often leads to feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and isolation, which significantly hinder their efforts in reintegrating to the society. The study highlights that "the weight of societal rejection has driven some ex-prisoners into despair, worsening their mental health and leading them to consider recidivism as an option of survival." This emotional impact, influenced by social alienation, creates a brutal cycle where ex-prisoners feel trapped by the negative labels forced upon them which leads to return back to their crime lifestyle as a coping mechanism. The lack of community support further worsens their sense of isolation, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives effectively. Additionally, personal struggles such as emotional turmoil, guilty consciousness and social isolation, influence the pattern of recidivism. These factors also hinder the social reintegration process as ex-prisoners often feel trapped in a cycle of negativity and exclusion.

Economic and Community Barriers

Economic hardship represents another significant challenge for the ex- prisoners to reintegrate into the society. Ex-prisoners often struggle to find stable employment due to societal prejudice, which severely limits their opportunities. As the study reveals, "Without access to gainful employment, ex-prisoners are left with limited options, often resorting to crime to meet

basic needs." The economic challenges resulted by the stigma they face revert many ex-prisoners toward criminal networks as a mode of survival. The ongoing discrimination within the communities, including avoidance by family member further complicates their reintegration process. This rejection makes it difficult for ex-prisoners to find stable work and rebuild social connection leading them to feel marginalized and disconnected from ordinary society. Moreover, criminal conformity where ex-prisoners are driven back into criminal behavior due to association with other criminals in the community is intensified by the economic pressures they face. These economic and community influences complicate the social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka.

Public Perceptions of the Justice System
The study also highlights public doubt towards the criminal justice system in Sri Lanka. Many people perceive the system as biased and corrupt, which raises discouragements in the legal system. Accordingly, "The criminal justice system is seen as biased and vulnerable to corruption, leading many to feel that justice is selectively applied." This perception of injustice expands the isolation of ex-prisoners, reinforcing the stigma they face and further hindering their reintegration process.

Recommendations for Reintegration
The study emphasizes the importance of implementing comprehensive reintegration strategies to address these challenges and promote societal acceptance of ex-prisoners. Several key recommendations include, Educational Opportunities where, programs to enhance the skills of ex-prisoners should be developed in order to provide them with better opportunities for employment and social reintegration. Community and Familial Support, which strengthens their support systems within families and communities to facilitate acceptance and reduce social rejection. Offering therapeutic measures to address the psychological impact of stigma, helping ex-prisoners cope with the feelings of isolation and guilt. Additionally, encouraging actions that promote spiritual growth and self-acceptance to aide ex-prisoners to navigate the cultural and religious barriers they face.

Furthermore, the study presents a reintegration outline in accordance with the public perceptions that includes aftercare services and public awareness campaigns. Such efforts would contribute to create a more inclusive environment for ex-prisoners by reducing recidivism and promoting their social and psychological well-being. The findings highlight the need for a more inclusive society which provides ex-prisoners with the support they need to overcome the barriers created by stigma in order to reintegrate successfully into the community. Accordingly, these strategies along with policies aimed at enhancing public awareness and societal development can be considered essential for improving their reintegration process. The study results suggests that by reducing the stigma surrounding ex-prisoners and promoting their acceptance in society, Sri Lanka can help facilitate a successful reintegration process for the ex-prisoners by reducing recidivism and contributing to the overall development of society.

4. Conclusion

The study underlines the significant impact of the cultural and religious stigma, and the stereotypical attitudes that hinder the process of a successful social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka. Despite the varied perceptions of the public on the struggles experienced by ex-prisoners and the stigma on ex-prisoners, the findings demonstrate how these perceptions affect and shape the mental and emotional well-being of ex-prisoners. The strengths of this study include its exploration of these public perceptions, which provides a clear illustration of the factors that influence the social reintegration of ex-prisoners and the interventions needed in order to promote a successful reintegration process. The study highlights the necessity of legal reforms, community support, and interventions on mental health and social reintegration for a successful ex-prisoner reintegration process. With consideration of the issues and the interventions, and by addressing them, the society can become more inclusive and

understanding, supporting the reintegration and social contribution on ex-prisoners. The study captures the public perceptions and collectivist attitudes that shape ex-prisoners, institutional influences, personal struggles, and the importance of developing a more supportive society for them. This would promote mental health and well-being together with a successful social reintegration of ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka. The limitations of the study, such as the limited number of participants, and limited time, suggest the need for future research. A larger sample size and extended time for the study could benefit the exploration further by enabling a more thorough investigation of the experiences and challenges faced by ex-prisoners. Further, exploring the effectiveness of reintegration interventions, as well as the challenges faced, through the lens of ex-prisoners would offer deep insights regarding their psychological well-being and the social reintegration process. Overall, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the public perceptions on ex-prisoners in Sri Lanka underlining the critical need for societal support ensuring the psychological well-being and a successful reintegration into the society with the implementations of new strategies and interventions to promote a more inclusive society.

5. Acknowledgment

6. Keywords

Ex-prisoner, Psychological Well-being, Public Perceptions, Social Re-integration

7. References

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