



Formal Education for Incarcerated Women in Spain: a Neglected Right in a Context of Structural Inequality

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Abstract

This article analyses the experiences and perceptions of women deprived of liberty and prison staff regarding formal education in Spanish prisons, with particular attention to the educational and gender inequalities that shape access, participation and educational progression. Based on a qualitative design, the study draws on 126 semi-structured interviews conducted with 46 incarcerated women and 80 prison staff from different prisons across Spain. The findings show that formal education occupies an ambivalent position in women's imprisonment. Many women perceive it as a space for recognition, self-esteem, personal development and the construction of future expectations. However, effective access remains limited by previous trajectories of social exclusion, formal educational provision concentrated mainly at basic levels, limited opportunities in post-compulsory education, accredited vocational training and university studies, as well as digital, organisational and spatial barriers. These limitations are reinforced by an androcentric prison logic and by the insufficient incorporation of a gender perspective into educational planning. The article provides evidence of the need to expand and diversify formal educational provision, improve access to technological resources and strengthen gender-sensitive prison policies that place educational continuity and socio-educational support at the centre of efforts to guarantee the effective right to education in prison.

Keywords Formal education · Women deprived of liberty · Prison education · Gender perspective · Educational inequality

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Introduction

Formal Education in Prison: Between Rights and Social Reintegration

Education is a fundamental right and a key dimension of personal development, social participation and citizenship. In contexts of deprivation of liberty, this right acquires particular relevance because of the role historically assigned to education within contemporary prison systems as a tool for rehabilitation and social reintegration. International organisations, including the Council of Europe and UNESCO, have stressed that people deprived of liberty should have access to educational opportunities equivalent to those available in the community, understanding education not only as an instrument for employability, but also as a mechanism for social inclusion, lifelong human development and the reduction of inequalities.

International literature has shown that participation in educational programmes during imprisonment is associated with lower reoffending rates, improved employment opportunities after release and benefits for personal and social wellbeing (Ellison et al., 2017; Stickle & Schuster, 2023). However, prison education models differ considerably across countries and reflect different conceptions of imprisonment. While some approaches prioritise discipline, control and the reduction of reoffending, others emphasise citizenship, human rights and personal transformation (Foucault 1975; Garland 2001; Behan 2021a). Prison education is therefore located within a persistent tension between institutional control and social inclusion, as actual educational opportunities remain shaped by structural constraints, institutional inequalities and priorities centred on security and custody (Czerniawski, 2020; Costelloe & Warner, 2014).

Comparative literature has shown that these differences are not gender neutral. Across European prison systems, educational resources continue to be organised largely according to an androcentric model, in which women's minority status affects the availability, diversity and quality of educational provision, particularly at advanced or technical levels, as reflected in the Council of Europe's SPACE I reports (2020, 2023, 2024). Studies in the United Kingdom show women's more limited access to qualified vocational training and their concentration in low-skilled programmes (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2020; Ministry of Justice, 2018). Research in France and Italy has documented more restricted and less diversified educational provision in women's prisons (Wetton & Sprackett, 2007), while studies in Germany and Nordic countries indicate that the small size of the female prison population limits specialised educational and training programmes (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019; Penal Reform International [PRI] & Thailand Institute of Justice [TIJ], 2018). Recent research in Portugal and Ukraine also shows that incarcerated women's educational and reintegration trajectories remain shaped by accumulated social inequalities, structural vulnerability and institutional limitations (Gomes & Rocker, 2024; Korzh, 2024).

These patterns highlight the need for gender-responsive prison policies capable of recognising women's specific trajectories and the inequalities shaping their prison and educational experiences (Bloom et al., 2003; Covington & Bloom, 2007). International research on women's imprisonment has similarly shown that women deprived of liberty have educational and reintegration needs that are often not fully addressed by prison systems historically designed from a male standpoint (Chamberlen & Bandyopadhyay, 2024; Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice, 2019).

In Spain, Article 25.2 of the 1978 Constitution establishes that custodial sentences shall be oriented towards re-education and social reintegration (Constitución Española, 1978). This principle was subsequently developed by the General Penitentiary Organic Law (LOGP, 1979), which established re-education and social reintegration as the primary aims of Spanish penitentiary institutions and represented a significant shift towards a rights-based, rehabilitative model (LOGP, 1979; Vicente Martínez, 2019). Within this framework, education occupies a central place as both a fundamental right and an essential component of prison treatment. Nevertheless, previous studies have shown that the gap between normative discourse and the actual experiences of people deprived of liberty remains significant, particularly for incarcerated women (Almeda, 2002; Igareda, 2009; Cerezo, 2017).

Formal education in Spanish prisons is organised in coordination with the regional education authorities and includes literacy, basic education, secondary education, vocational training and university education. Higher education is provided through the National University of Distance Education (UNED), which enables the continuity of university studies in prison under the General Penitentiary Organic Law (Organic Law 1/1979) and the Prison Regulations (Royal Decree 190/1996). Despite this legal and organisational framework, women's educational opportunities remain more limited than those available to men, especially in vocational training, technical programmes and higher education (Castillo Algarra & Ruiz Garcia, 2007; Añaños Bedriñana et al., 2019; Gil et al., 2022).

International human rights standards further support the need for a differentiated gender analysis. The Bangkok Rules constitute the first international framework to explicitly incorporate a gender perspective into the prison field, recognising that women deprived of liberty have specific needs requiring differentiated responses to ensure substantive equality and effective access to rights (United Nations, 2011). Although they do not extensively develop the right to education, they recognise, in line with the Nelson Mandela Rules, the importance of education and training in rehabilitation, autonomy and social inclusion (United Nations, 2015). From an intersectional perspective, gender cannot be analysed in isolation, but rather in relation to other axes of inequality, such as social class, ethnic background, educational trajectory, migration, motherhood and social exclusion, which differentially shape experiences of criminalisation, incarceration, and access to rights (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Carlen, 2002).

In Spain, according to the General Report of the General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions (SGIP, 2023), the prison population comprises 47,083 individuals, of whom 3,407 are women, representing 7.3% of the inmates. This places Spain among the Western European countries with the highest proportion of women deprived of liberty, compared with a European average of approximately 4.5–5% according to the Council of Europe's SPACE I reports (2023).

Women's imprisonment in Spain is shaped by the organisation of the prison system itself. Most women serve their sentences in women's residential units within predominantly male prisons, creating constraints in terms of space, resources and access to educational and training programmes. This configuration reflects a prison organisation historically designed around the male population, generating inequalities in socio-educational opportunities and difficulties in adapting prison programmes to women's needs and trajectories (Almeda, 2002; Carlen, 2002; Cerezo, 2017; UNODC, 2014; Quiroga-Carrillo et al., 2024). More than 85% of incarcerated women live in heterogeneous prison contexts that bring together pre-trial and sentenced women, younger and older women, first-time and repeat

offenders, and people with issues related to addictions, mental health, language barriers or cultural diversity. This heterogeneity calls for more flexible and individualised educational strategies.

Regarding formal education, 1,236 female inmates are enrolled in prison educational programmes, representing 36.2% of the female prison population. According to the SGIP (2023), enrolments are concentrated mainly in basic education (617) and lower-secondary education (260), while participation is considerably lower in literacy provision for foreign women (8), Spanish language courses for foreign women (39), post-compulsory upper-secondary education, or *Bachillerato* (62), and vocational training (16). A further 59 women are enrolled in university-level studies, including university access courses (26) and undergraduate degrees (33), with no recorded participation in postgraduate studies. These data show that women's educational participation remains concentrated mainly at basic and compulsory levels, while their presence in post-compulsory programmes, vocational training and higher education remains very limited, despite evidence of increasing prior educational levels and diversifying expectations among incarcerated women (Añaños-Bedriñana, 2013; Añaños Bedriñana et al., 2019; Gil et al., 2022).

These structural inequalities are compounded by unequal access to digital resources. People deprived of liberty continue to experience substantial limitations in access to digital tools and virtual learning environments, hindering education adapted to contemporary demands (Costelloe & Warner, 2014; UNESCO, 2020). Although Royal Decree 268/2022 (Real Decreto 268/2022, 2022) has enabled the gradual introduction of internet access points and virtual educational tools, significant inequalities persist, especially among people with prior trajectories of educational and social exclusion (Martín-Solbes et al., 2021; Pulido, 2023). This is particularly relevant for women deprived of liberty, whose educational trajectories are often marked by cumulative structural inequalities and fewer previous training opportunities (Bloom et al., 2003; Martín-Solbes et al., 2021).

Despite growing research on prison education, knowledge of incarcerated women's experiences of formal education in Spain remains limited, particularly regarding how structural and gender inequalities shape access, participation and educational continuity (Almeda, 2002; Añaños-Bedriñana, 2013; Ballesteros-Pena et al. 2023; Behan 2021a; Carlen and Worrall 2004; Costelloe and Warner 2014; Gil et al., 2022).

The objective of this article is to examine how formal education is configured, accessed and experienced by women deprived of liberty in the Spanish prison system, paying particular attention to the structural and gender inequalities that shape their educational trajectories. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics, scope and limitations of formal education for women deprived of liberty in the Spanish prison system?
- How do women deprived of liberty and prison staff experience and perceive the opportunities and barriers associated with access to formal education in prison?
- What axes of inequality emerge in the prison educational context, and how do they interact with sex/gender in shaping women's access to, participation in, and continuity within education?
- To what extent does the existing formal educational provision correspond to the needs, expectations and life projects of female inmates?

Methodology

This study forms part of a broader research project conducted in Spanish prisons with the aim of analysing the degree of compliance with the United Nations Bangkok Rules (2011). These rules, comprising 70 specific guidelines, seek to address the inequalities and forms of discrimination affecting women deprived of liberty, taking into account both the historically androcentric structure of prison systems and the particular vulnerabilities experienced by many incarcerated women. Although the Bangkok Rules do not focus specifically on education, they indirectly recognise its relevance as a dimension linked to rehabilitation, social inclusion and reintegration. Within this framework, the broader project incorporated questions related to formal education and the educational trajectories of women deprived of liberty. While the overall research combined qualitative and quantitative strategies, this article presents the qualitative data based on 126 semi-structured interviews conducted with 46 women deprived of liberty and 80 prison staff members from different prisons across Spain.

Design and Selection of Participants

At the time of the research, there were 60 prisons in Spain with women deprived of liberty. Only three were exclusively women's prisons; in the remaining prisons, women were housed in specific residential units within predominantly male institutions. The 16 prisons included in the study were selected according to two main criteria: (a) having a significant number of female inmates, defined as more than 40 women deprived of liberty in the prison; and (b) ensuring broad territorial representation of the Spanish prison context, covering the north, south, east, west and centre of the country. Although general guidelines are issued by the State Prison Administration, each prison implements rules, procedures and interventions differently.

The qualitative sample comprised women deprived of liberty, prison staff and members of prison management teams. For staff, the inclusion criteria were having at least two years of prison work experience and having worked directly with women deprived of liberty. Diversity among professional profiles was also sought, including social workers, educators, psychologists, doctors and nurses.

The women interviewed were selected by the treatment deputy directorates of the prisons, following criteria established by the research team. These included having spent at least one year in prison; ethnic and sociocultural diversity; being classified under first- or second-degree prison regimes; being mothers; and participating, or not, in work activities or productive prison assignments. These criteria were intended to capture a plurality of trajectories and experiences within the female prison population.

Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted by researchers with prior experience in qualitative research with women in situations of vulnerability. Since participants were not selected directly by the research team, the interviewers devoted the first minutes of each encounter to creating a climate of trust and empathy to facilitate communication and reduce barriers arising from the prison context. The interviews were scheduled in advance with each participating prison and were carried out during the main fieldwork visits. In each prison, five or six interviews

were conducted with key institutional actors and women deprived of liberty. These usually included the prison governor or deputy governor, a social worker, an educator, a psychologist, and two or three women deprived of liberty.

During the interviews, many women shared experiences related to violence, abuse and vulnerability before and during imprisonment. These narratives evidenced the relationship of trust established during fieldwork and required an active ethical stance from the research team, with situations involving possible rights violations being channelled through the appropriate mechanisms.

All interviews were conducted in private spaces provided by the prison administration, without prison staff or third parties present, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Participants were informed in advance about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidential treatment of the information provided. Permission to record the interviews was requested in all cases. Where participants did not feel comfortable being recorded, the interviewers took notes that were as exhaustive and verbatim as possible. Interviews lasted approximately one hour for both incarcerated women and professionals.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and subjected to descriptive, categorical and interpretative thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). To preserve anonymity, all elements that could allow direct or indirect identification were removed. Prisons are therefore identified only by geographical area: north, centre, south, east, west or insular area. This classification is methodological and descriptive rather than administrative and is used to contextualise the sample territorially without compromising confidentiality. In this study, the insular area includes prisons located in island territories, such as the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands. Each geographical area also includes at least two prisons, strengthening anonymity.

The analytical process combined deductive and inductive approaches. A preliminary system of categories was first developed based on the Bangkok Rules, the interview guide and the general objectives of the study. Initial categories included health, motherhood, education, activities, the prison regime, sanctions and institutional relations. These were subsequently refined through subcategories that enabled more precise coding.

The analysis followed a process of constant comparison and continuous review of thematic saturation. After a full reading of the transcripts, emerging themes were identified, with particular attention to educational inequalities and the training experiences of women deprived of liberty. This process led to five central analytical dimensions for this article: formal education, higher education, informal education, educational professionals and prison functioning. Relationships between categories, type of interview and interviewee characteristics were then explored to identify common patterns and details.

Emerging categories and subcategories were reviewed and triangulated independently by different members of the research team to strengthen the credibility and consistency of the analysis. Coding and data organisation were carried out using NVivo 15.

Credibility, Reflexivity and Limitations of the Fieldwork

To enhance credibility, the initial categories, emerging codes and final themes were reviewed by different members of the research team. A logic of constant comparison was also maintained across interviews with women deprived of liberty, professionals and management teams, allowing perspectives to be triangulated and preventing the findings from relying on a single discursive source.

The research team adopted a reflexive stance throughout the process, considering how the prison context, the position of external researchers and the conditions of access to the field could influence both data production and interpretation. Particular attention was paid to power asymmetries in the prison environment and to the need to ensure trust, privacy and respect during the interviews.

Nevertheless, although the interviewers were experienced in conducting interviews and minimising social desirability bias, some limitations may have arisen from the prison conditions in which the fieldwork took place. In addition, by selecting prisons with a specific minimum number of imprisoned women, other characteristics and discourses associated with prisons housing smaller numbers of women may have been overlooked.

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the main research questions, addressing formal educational provision, the meanings associated with education in prison, and the structural and gender inequalities shaping women's educational participation.

Educational Provision in Women's Imprisonment: Scope, Limitations and Professional Assessment

The interviews with prison staff show that formal education in Spanish prisons operates within a complex institutional framework, characterised by decentralised management, unequal distribution of resources and significant structural constraints. Educational provision is jointly coordinated by the prison administration and regional education authorities through cooperation agreements, allowing prison schools to follow the official curricula of each autonomous community.

As one member of the prison management team explained:

Our adult education centre is made up of civil servant teachers from (City). The programmes are from (City), and we are an adult education centre from (City). So, if a female inmate comes here from an adult education centre, she continues her programme here, and if she is released from here, we refer her to the nearest adult education centre. The programmes, the syllabuses, everything comes from this autonomous community. (E01, management professional, centre)

Although this coordination facilitates educational continuity, the interviews reveal significant inequalities between prisons depending on available resources, staffing levels and insti-

tutional priorities. Shortages of prison officers, educational staff and infrastructure were identified as directly limiting the scope and quality of educational provision.

Several professionals described how staff shortages affected women's access to educational spaces and opportunities:

The problem is staffing, human resources. What we don't have are prison officers; there are lots of units, closed. Of course, this place has capacity... well, three times what we currently have occupied, but no more units can be opened. (E106, psychology professional, north)

Along the same lines, a member of the management team stated:

The problem is that there are not enough staff. Here we are short of prison officers, because many are older and move into what is called second activity, where they go into offices and stop providing service inside. So that is the problem in this prison. Otherwise, there would be space for another women's unit. (E55, management professional, north)

These limitations were presented not as isolated organisational difficulties, but as structural conditions shaping women's educational opportunities. Access to education often depends less on female inmates' educational needs than on institutional capacity and prison management priorities.

The interviews also revealed ambiguities regarding responsibility for educational assessment and follow-up. Although the prison educator is formally responsible for identifying educational needs, several professionals described limited involvement in educational planning and intervention processes. This varies according to how each prison assigns roles and coordinates prison staff with external practitioners.

I don't have any role there [in the school]. The teachers are the ones who receive the applications, make the selection, carry out the assessments and teach the classes from Monday to Friday. (EP21, education professional, north)

Other professionals pointed to tensions between compulsory schooling and the limited educational capacity of some prisons:

The educator is more in charge of this. I remember he mentioned it one day — well, we all discussed it — because one of the things that is compulsory in prison is that if you don't have any studies, you have to go to school. And there was a waiting list for the school because there wasn't enough space. (E86, social work professional, east)

Taken together, these findings suggest that prison education for women operates under structurally constrained conditions in many prisons, mainly male institutions with women's units, where educational continuity and access to training are shaped by institutional restrictions, staff shortages and territorial inequalities in educational provision.

Motivations, Meanings and Educational Experiences of Women Deprived of Liberty

Some women deprived of liberty, particularly those with more limited educational backgrounds, associated education with personal transformation, improved self-esteem and the construction of new identities within prison. For many participants, prison was the first context in which they had sustained access to educational opportunities.

Educational participation was described as a source of personal achievement and recognition:

I'm learning lots of things that I never did outside. I'm learning to read and write, to do "crafts", things I had never done in my life. (E100, female inmate, south)

The women's narratives also revealed the symbolic value of becoming "students" and not being defined solely by imprisonment, allowing them to experience recognition, routine and meaning during their time in prison.

We go out to the schools. The relationship with the men is respectful; they don't flirt with us, they know they have to show us respect (...). When we leave the school, we all meet in the yard and they don't let them stay with us; they separate them straight away to take them away, but there is a good atmosphere. (EPV18, female inmate, north)

Education was linked to future reintegration opportunities and to a more positive way of coping with time in prison:

There are people who can't even read or write. There are classes to learn, to get qualifications, even university. The classes are mixed, although languages are taught in the unit. (E84, female inmate, centre)

I got a 10 in the (language) exam. The teacher told me that it was really impressive, because I started the course two months late and I passed everything except social studies. (EPV01, female inmate, north)

Participants also explained how educational activities helped to structure time in prison and provided continuity during imprisonment:

I studied up to the third year of secondary school. I would like to continue my studies in prison, but when the baby is a little older, because I am breastfeeding him. So, I want him to be six months old before I can leave him. (E73, female inmate, centre)

Here we have the school, which is this, where we are. The teacher who comes here is for primary education, because sometimes the people who come here cannot even read or write (...). As I have completed secondary education and I don't want to do "Bachillerato" studies because I already tried outside and I don't like it, the teacher gave us the option of doing English, but not officially. (E93, female inmate, east)

These testimonies suggest that women's educational motivations go beyond obtaining academic qualifications. Participants described education as a mechanism for personal development, emotional wellbeing, social recognition and preparation for life after release, with educational achievements reinforcing their self-esteem.

At the same time, their experiences show that educational participation often requires considerable personal effort and persistence in contexts marked by limited institutional support, organisational restrictions, lack of resources and insufficient educational guidance.

In (year), I managed to do the Philosophy and English subject and, after attending the final term, I managed to get the teacher to come (...). I need to have someone there to explain it to me so that it is easier for me, and then I was able to pass. In the second term, I managed to call her at my own expense and that way I was able to pass the subject. For English, I didn't manage to get her to come, but I passed. (E12, female inmate, centre)

Despite these positive meanings, women also described multiple obstacles limiting their educational participation and continuity.

Structural Barriers to Educational Participation

Participants' accounts show how structural and sex/gender inequalities shape access to and continuity in education in prison.

Institutional Barriers

Although formal education is legally guaranteed within the Spanish prison system, participants identified structural barriers affecting access, continuity and educational progression. One key obstacle was the limited availability of programmes beyond basic levels. Several professionals explained that secondary education, "*Bachillerato*" studies and vocational training were not always available in all prisons because of the small number of women enrolled and limited institutional resources.

Last year I told the management that I wanted to continue studying (...) and I told them that I needed face-to-face education. And they told me that I was the only one here at that level, that they couldn't bring it in just for me. (E12, female inmate, centre)

Vocational training is what the state body offers us. We do it with funding from the European Social Fund, and there we do gardening, waste management, which is for all sexes (...). We wanted to have that experience because we wanted to show that women could do it, but the courses have to have 15 female students, because they can't have more or fewer. If there are fewer and they don't complete 75% of the hours, you have to return the grant. (E01, management professional, centre)

These accounts show that women's access to intermediate and advanced educational levels remains shaped by prison organisation and limited institutional investment in women's education and training.

It is not that women do not have access to education; they do have access to education, they can also take the university entrance exam, they can enrol through the UNED. What they do not have is the convergence, in one unit, of that study environment. (E22, management professional, south)

Participants also identified timetable rigidity as an important barrier. Educational activities were generally held in the morning, while prison work, which provides small earnings or institutional benefits, often took priority.

And have you been to school? Because, well, you could finish the second year of secondary education. FEMALE INMATE: I know, but I preferred to work because my job, for example, when I was in the laundry, I left at nine and at 4:30 or 5:30 I didn't come back to the unit, and school is in the morning. (E57, female inmate, north)

Obstacles also emerged in relation to university education. Although higher education was formally accessible through the UNED, women described economic, organisational and academic difficulties affecting continuity.

Some female inmates enrolled in university studies explained:

The UNED is free for the first year. If you get a good mark, they give you a grant; if not, you have to pay. (E63, female inmate)

I had two "Bachillerato" subjects left and I passed them last year. From baccalaureate, they won't let me take the "EVAU", because I can't leave for the exam and it isn't held here. So I'm going to take the access exam in June and then, in September, I hope to enrol in Psychology through the UNED. (E56, female inmate, north)

These situations varied by prison, with better possibilities in the north and centre than in the south. Another woman described difficulties in accessing educational materials and online content due to prison restrictions, limited technological resources and, above all, lack of internet access.

I've just started. What I'm already seeing is that there are many explanations that are not on paper, because they are giving me photocopied material from what they are sent through the website there, but there is information in videos and I can't watch that. And then they give me the assignment I have to do — I even have it here — and they tell me that the information is in the syllabus plus the videos. (E12, female inmate, centre)

In "Bachillerato" studies they give you the syllabus and the activities, and I have to study alone in my cell. I don't have anyone to advise me or anything, and I can't check the internet. (E91, female inmate, east)

These findings suggest that educational participation continues to depend largely on women's capacity to overcome institutional and material barriers, as well as on each prison's organisation and professional commitment.

Gender Barriers and Intersectionality

The interviews also revealed obstacles specifically linked to gender inequalities within the prison environment.

Professionals repeatedly described how some women's educational participation was shaped by intimate relationships and gendered dynamics of control. In some cases, Roma women and some Muslim women avoided attending school because their partners disapproved of mixed educational spaces.

One professional explained:

Most of them do not go to school because their husbands do not let them. (E58, management professional, south)

The management team of one prison described similar situations:

They all go to school, all those who want to. Because many times we have the obstacle that their husbands or partners do not let them go to school. Well, I have sometimes had to mediate with male inmates you have known all your life. And in mixed settings we also have female inmates who do not want to go because there are men and their husband does not let them. (E28, management professional, insular area)

These accounts show how gender inequalities, intersecting with ethnic-racial inequalities, continue to operate within prison through forms of control that affect women's mobility, participation and educational opportunities.

The architectural organisation of Spanish prisons also generates significant disadvantages for women. Since most prisons are designed primarily for the male population, women are usually concentrated in small residential units with limited access to educational spaces and study rooms.

One participant described the difficulties involved in finding adequate study conditions:

A library with two medium-sized tables and two chairs, and the prison officers or management say that she has to go and study in the small library that each unit has, but it is occupied by people taking drugs, and she cannot be there. She does not report this because she cannot be a snitch, and management says that they have that little room there when it is not true, because she cannot use it. (E27, female inmate, south)

The same participant explained that there were study spaces reserved exclusively for men, while women lacked equivalent facilities. She herself identified this situation as discriminatory.

The study area is only for studying, but only for men. So she complains precisely about that lack, or that discrimination. (E27, female inmate, south)

These experiences reveal how prison infrastructures reproduce gender inequalities by limiting women's access to adequate study environments and reducing their possibilities for

educational continuity. In men's prisons, most units have a small library, an arrangement that existed for women only where their numbers were larger.

The organisation of prison spaces also had a particular impact on access to university studies. One woman enrolled at university explained that she had to leave her cell during certain time periods, while at the same time lacking access to suitable study spaces such as the library.

The interviewee studies through the UNED; she has just enrolled in Law, in the Faculty of Law. She explains how she would have liked to study Sociology, and says she will do so one day, but for now she has enrolled in Law. She has asked to be given a desk lamp so that she can study, and this has been allowed, but she says she needs somewhere to study. She says that she is made to leave her room from 8:30 to 13:30 and then again has to be outside her room from 16:30 to 19:30, and during those times they do not let her go to the library. (E27, female inmate, south)

The participant described trying to continue her studies under conditions marked by constant interruptions, restricted mobility and limited institutional support. These experiences show that educational participation depends not only on academic motivation, but also on access to material conditions conducive to study.

Taken together, these findings suggest that women's educational participation is deeply shaped by prison environments historically designed for the male population and poorly adapted to women's educational needs.

The interviews also showed how educational inequalities intersected with other axes, such as ethnicity, migrant origin, previous trajectories of school dropout and socioeconomic vulnerability.

Several participants described particularly high levels of educational exclusion among Roma women and women with interrupted schooling trajectories.

One female inmate stated:

So I think that from here they should encourage studying a little, even if it is just the basics. There are many [referring to Roma women] who cannot read, who cannot write. They know every word there is and every trick they can pull, but then they cannot read or write (...). They do not want to go to school because they prefer to be downstairs playing Parcheesi. (E56, female inmate, north)

One participant explained how previous experiences of educational exclusion shaped her confidence about continuing to study:

I studied in French, never in Spanish, and maybe it would be difficult for me. I would like to, but I don't know. The UNED is free for the first year; if you get a good mark, they give you a grant; if not, you have to pay. I have seen a girl who is 21 and is at the UNED. I don't know why she can and I can't. (E63, female inmate, south)

These findings suggest that educational exclusion in prison cannot be understood solely through gender. Inequalities are configured through the interaction of multiple social and

structural disadvantages that shape women's educational opportunities before, during and after imprisonment.

These accounts suggest that women enter prison with deeply unequal educational backgrounds prior to imprisonment. Educational exclusion in prison therefore reflects broader social inequalities related to poverty, ethnicity, migration and previous educational marginalisation.

Educational Trajectories and Accumulated Inequalities in Prison

This section addresses both the prior educational experiences of women deprived of liberty and the inequalities accumulated in prison, examining how these shape their relationship with formal education during imprisonment.

From the professionals' perspective, these patterns are linked to accumulated inequalities, situations of vulnerability and difficulties in reintegration:

Yes, but bear in mind that when you talk about reintegration, a female offender enters prison who maybe doesn't even have the habit of driving. Miracles are not performed here. A person whose father raped her, whose brothers raped her, who has been taking drugs since the age of nine, with no education — you cannot turn that person into someone "normalised", in inverted commas, because even if we managed it, she would go back to the same neighbourhood and environment. (E10, prison officer, centre)

The excerpt shows how current educational difficulties are linked to prior experiences marked by violence, social exclusion and educational dropout.

In this context, the findings show that literacy and primary education were generally available in most prisons and were valued positively by both women and professionals, especially in cases marked by previous processes of educational exclusion. However, access to subsequent educational levels appeared more limited and unequal.

Yes, I would like to attend class, because it is more interesting. Also, because there is a lot of envy among the female inmates, there are many problems. But I would like a teacher of a higher level to come in here and offer a useful course, to raise the educational level. But of course, they tell me that most of them cannot even read or write. (E12, female inmate, centre)

Literacy and primary education were generally available in most prisons and were valued positively by both women and staff. Literacy programmes appeared especially relevant for women who had experienced severe processes of educational exclusion before entering prison.

Some professionals highlighted both the progress achieved through these programmes and the challenges they still face:

We had a very large illiteracy group last year at the beginning of the academic year, and now they can read and write. (E07, management professional, centre)

In this prison, what can mainly be offered to her is education. That is, if she does not have any, then she should enrol in school. That is the basic thing. But the problem is that many people do not want to attend school. (E25, social work professional, south)

However, continuity beyond compulsory education was considerably more limited. Post-compulsory secondary education studies (*Bachillerato* in Spanish) were often unavailable because of the small number of women enrolled in each prison, generating structural inequalities in relation to the male population.

As one member of a prison management team stated:

The thing is that I have to fight for “Bachillerato” studies. Because right now we do not have them here, and I think they are more necessary, because we have that age group there. (E58, management professional, south)

Vocational training also presented significant limitations. Participants described programmes that were poorly aligned with real labour market demands and, in some cases, lacked official accreditation or were inaccessible to women. When such provision was available in some of the prisons with larger female populations, it tended to reproduce traditionally feminised forms of training, such as beauty, hairdressing, and textiles. In some cases, courses such as hairdressing were not available to male prisoners.

A girl took the mental health course to work in nursing, but she does not work there. She works in the office with another woman. Both are support inmates¹ (...). They have not been given the opportunity to work somewhere else, where men can. (E73, female inmate, centre)

All the jobs and courses are for men. We do not have vocational training courses for women. (E72, female inmate, centre)

Professionals also pointed to regulatory and structural difficulties, including administrative requirements for enrolment in vocational training and the lack of adequate infrastructure:

Well, they have to have some documentation or something, because otherwise they cannot do certain courses, vocational training courses in (Centre), because they cannot register. They can sign up, but they are not registered — well, it is a mess — as jobseekers, because they cannot work. (EPV06, education professional, north)

For vocational training we would need infrastructure. Imagine vocational training in electronics: we would need to allocate a space to create an electronics workshop where they could do the practical component. (E58, management professional, south)

¹ The term “support inmates” is used in Spanish prison practice to refer to incarcerated women who perform informal or semi-formal support roles for other inmates or in prison activities. Although it is not a specific legal category under the LOGP, the Prison Regulations provide a general basis for inmates’ participation in activities and support tasks.

The data obtained from the interviews suggest that educational provision for women often prioritises programmes that are easier to organise institutionally, rather than those more closely linked to women's professional interests or employment opportunities after release from prison.

Vocational training courses: women were only offered hairdressing, and I used to say, please, enough already (...), but if most of them already have the hairdressing course, why are they not offered another type of training? So I think other things need to be offered, because women's labour market is not limited to hairdressing. (E59, social work professional, south)

University education represented the most selective and least accessible level. Although women could theoretically access university studies through the UNED, participation remained very limited because of economic costs, scarce academic support and restrictions arising from the prison regime itself.

They do not let me take the official university access exam because I cannot leave to take the exam and it is not held here. (E56, female inmate, north)

There have also been other prisoners who passed through here and said that, to study for university, there are other prisons where they give you a code and you can access those specific internet pages that help you study, and you cannot access others. (E12, female inmate, centre)

The findings indicate that educational opportunities progressively narrow as the educational level increases. Although different levels of education formally exist in prison, women's effective access continues to be shaped by structural inequalities, institutional practices marked by different axes of inequality, including gender, economic limitations and insufficient educational support systems.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study contributes to the analysis of formal education in the prison system in relation to the minority status of women deprived of liberty, showing that education occupies an ambivalent position. First, women deprived of liberty experience education as a pathway to recognition, personal transformation and the construction of future projects, yet their educational trajectories continue to unfold under conditions that are deeply unequal in comparison with those of imprisoned men. Second, participants' accounts demonstrate that opportunities for access, retention and academic progression are shaped by institutional limitations, gendered prison dynamics and multiple forms of social vulnerability.

Despite the normative recognition of education as a right oriented towards social reintegration, women deprived of liberty in Spain continue to face significant inequalities in access to, continuity in, and use of formal education in prison. These inequalities cannot be understood solely within the prison context but must be situated within broader trajectories of accumulated social disadvantage affecting many women before their entry into prison.

From a life-course perspective, Hildenbrand (2024) argues that women's prison experiences should be analysed by considering the long-term impact of factors such as poverty, educational exclusion, labour precarity, care responsibilities and gender-based violence. The findings of the present study are consistent with this perspective, as many participants described fragmented educational trajectories marked by multiple forms of structural vulnerability prior to imprisonment.

Far from being a specifically Spanish issue, these difficulties have been widely documented in international research conducted in European and Anglo-Saxon prison contexts. Studies carried out in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, the United States and Ukraine similarly show that incarcerated women often have prior educational trajectories marked by social exclusion, early school leaving, poverty, and experiences of violence and social vulnerability (Behan 2021b; Costelloe and Warner 2014; Moreira et al. 2017).

In the case of Spain, the findings show that educational provision remains concentrated mainly at the levels of literacy and primary education, while opportunities to access post-compulsory secondary education, vocational training and university education remain insufficient. This situation is consistent with previous research conducted in the Spanish prison context, which has pointed to the concentration of educational provision at basic levels and to greater difficulties in accessing advanced educational pathways for women deprived of liberty (Añaños-Bedriñana, 2013; Del Pozo, 2017; Gil Cantero et al., 2022). Consequently, although access to basic education is relatively widespread, women who wish to continue more advanced educational trajectories face significant organisational and institutional barriers. These barriers, moreover, are not distributed evenly, but vary according to the prison in which women serve their sentences. The prison in which women serve their sentences therefore introduces an additional source of inequality by shaping effective access to adequate and diversified educational provision.

The findings also show that many of these educational limitations derive directly from women's minority status within prison systems. European studies have shown that the small number of incarcerated women is often used institutionally to justify a more limited educational provision, fewer resources and fewer training opportunities in comparison with the male population (Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Cerezo, 2017). The testimonies collected in this research reflect precisely this situation, especially in relation to secondary education, accredited vocational training and access to university studies.

In relation to vocational training, the findings suggest the persistence of gender inequalities in the configuration of training pathways accessible to women deprived of liberty. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in Spain and other international contexts, which has shown how certain prison dynamics tend to reproduce traditional gender roles and stereotypes in the educational and training opportunities offered to incarcerated women (Añaños-Bedriñana, 2013; Castillo Algarra & Ruiz García, 2007; Del Pozo, 2017; Penal Reform International & Thailand Institute of Justice, 2019).

Beyond the acquisition of formal qualifications, the findings show that many women deprived of liberty perceive education as a space for personal reconstruction, emotional stability and future projection during imprisonment. Similar findings have been documented in other national contexts. In a recent study conducted in Ukraine, Korzh (2024) observed that incarcerated women associate participation in learning processes not only with employment expectations, but also with the reconstruction of identity, self-esteem and the possibility of imagining alternative life trajectories.

Along similar lines, the findings of the present study suggest that prison education can constitute a mechanism through which women are able to distance themselves, at least temporarily, from the punitive logic of prison and reconnect with personal aspirations frequently interrupted by previous experiences of exclusion and social vulnerability.

Another particularly relevant aspect identified in this study is the persistence of significant digital and technological barriers. Limited access to the internet, virtual platforms and audiovisual resources especially hinders participation in advanced secondary and university education. This issue has also been documented in other European contexts, particularly in Portugal and the United Kingdom, where different studies have shown that technological limitations and restricted access to digital resources continue to represent major barriers to educational participation in prison (Moreira et al., 2017; Ryder, 2020). In increasingly digitalised societies, these restrictions not only hinder the effective exercise of the right to education, but also limit future possibilities for social inclusion and labour market participation after release.

The findings also reveal tensions between the normative recognition of the right to education and the organisational dynamics of the prison institution. Although Spanish legislation establishes that the prison administration must promote access to education, in practice educational participation continues to depend largely on organisational factors, resource availability and internal operational criteria. This contradiction between rehabilitative discourse and institutional reality has been widely described in the international literature on prisons, which warns of the difficulties involved in reconciling the security logic of prison with educational and social reintegration goals (Czerniawski, 2020; Gil Cantero, 2010).

In this context, the findings also highlight the need to clarify the role of the professional figures involved in prison education. In the Spanish prison system, the so-called “prison educator” forms part of the treatment teams and carries out functions of socio-educational support and assistance in reintegration processes. However, some professionals interviewed pointed out that access to these posts may occur through internal promotion from prison officer roles, without necessarily requiring specialised pedagogical training. This situation may hinder the development of complex and sustained educational interventions within the prison context, especially in relation to the specific needs of women deprived of liberty (Martín-Solbes et al., 2021).

From the perspective of lifelong learning, people deprived of liberty remain entitled to ongoing educational processes, including within the prison context (Delors et al., 1996; Bélanger, 2016). Within this framework, the findings reinforce the relevance of Social Education professionals and socio-educational figures involved in prisons, especially in the educational and personal support of women deprived of liberty. As Añños-Bedriñana (2013) and Del Pozo (2017) argue, the development of specialised socio-educational interventions can support processes of autonomy, participation and social reintegration, particularly in contexts marked by previous trajectories of exclusion and vulnerability.

The findings also show the importance that women attach to education in relation to their expectations for the future after release, although significant structural limitations persist. Similar dynamics have been documented in Portugal by Gomes and Rocker (2024), who show that the reintegration trajectories of formerly incarcerated women are frequently shaped by social inequalities accumulated before and during imprisonment, limited institutional support and processes of social stigmatisation.

In the Spanish context, this reading resonates with Ballesteros-Pena (2017), who argues that it is not yet possible to speak of a fully consolidated feminist criminology, but rather of a body of studies that, especially since the 1990s, has begun to address the criminal justice system from a gender perspective. Within this framework, the present study contributes to broadening this field of analysis by positioning formal education in prison as a space shaped by gender inequalities, prior educational experiences and institutional conditions that affect women deprived of liberty in particular ways.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the need to incorporate a stronger and more comprehensive gender perspective into prison education. Although normative and discursive advances have been made in recent years, the experiences of women deprived of liberty show that gender inequalities continue to shape the educational organisation of Spanish prisons. In this respect, the findings are consistent with international research advocating the development of gender- and trauma-responsive educational models capable of responding to the specific trajectories of exclusion and vulnerability that characterise a large proportion of the incarcerated female population (Bloom et al., 2003; Ryder, 2020).

Finally, the findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study focuses exclusively on the Spanish prison context while excluding Catalonia, which has a separate prison administration, thereby limiting the broader generalisability of the findings. Second, although the research includes interviews with women and professionals from different prisons, prisons with small numbers of imprisoned women were not selected, and educational conditions in these settings may differ. In addition, the interviews were conducted within the prison context, an institutional environment shaped by dynamics of control and power relations that may have influenced participants' accounts and narratives. A further limitation is that the educational dimension analysed in this study is exploratory, given that education was not the exclusive aim of the broader research project; this prevents a deeper and more developed analysis of many existing educational dimensions, which should be addressed in future work. Finally, the gender and intersectionality dimension requires further depth, incorporating LGBTQI+ groups and other categories such as social class, prior educational levels and religious beliefs, which emerged only tangentially.

In this regard, future research could examine in greater depth the dynamics between gender, ethnicity, nationality, educational level and access to formal education in prison, as well as develop longitudinal and comparative studies that make it possible to analyse the educational trajectories and reintegration processes of women deprived of liberty across different prison contexts.

Overall, this study shows that formal education for women deprived of liberty in the Spanish prison system remains marked by limited and unequal provision, concentrated mainly at basic educational levels, with greater restrictions on access to post-compulsory, vocational and university pathways. Drawing on the perceptions and experiences of female inmates and prison staff, the findings show that available formal education does not fully respond to women's fragmented educational trajectories or specific socio-educational needs. Access, participation and educational progression are shaped not only by individual motivation, but also by prison administration, resource availability, the prison in which women serve their sentences, prior educational experiences and gender inequalities within the prison experience.

The study therefore highlights the need to understand prison education from a gender and lifelong learning perspective, recognising its potential to support autonomy, personal

reconstruction, empowerment and social inclusion. For this potential to be realised, formal educational provision must be expanded and diversified, access to technological resources improved, institutional conditions strengthened to support women's educational continuity and professionals involved in educational guidance and support provided with the training and sensitivity needed to identify specific barriers and reinforce the inclusive character of prison education.

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Data Availability The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical considerations related to the sensitive nature of the qualitative interview data.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This research project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Comillas University de Madrid on 11th May 2022, n°2022/40.

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