

PRISON REFORM: AN URGENCY FOR PUBLIC SECURITY

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We believe that the recent announcement of the construction of a high security prison should be accompanied by a major prison reform aimed at reducing overcrowding, resolving the proportionality of sentences, for example in the case of the drug law, and improving reintegration and desistance from crime programmes.

Reviewing comparative experience, some countries have controlled the prison crisis by promoting a rational use of prison and reviewing disproportionate laws that criminalise poverty. The same effort should be made in Chile. This, in a context where almost half of the women who enter the prison system do so for drug offences, with an increase of around 8% in this reason for entry compared to 2010 (Gendarmería de Chile, 2010).

These women are often serving long sentences, are first-time offenders and have a low risk of re-offending. Many of them could well serve alternative sentences outside prison.

Beyond a high security prison, it is important to define the role of reintegration in the political and legislative agenda, especially with regard to women who are deprived of their liberty. Most of these women suffer from profound social exclusion. Seventy per cent of them have been victims of violence or abuse in their lifetime. A large proportion of them have never worked and have very low levels of schooling. Ninety per cent are mothers and the majority are heads of household. Therefore, their imprisonment also affects their children, who are left in the care of other women in the state and, in a small percentage, in the care of their partners. Maternal absence often results in risky behaviour, poor school performance, psychological and psychiatric problems.

Reintegration is a major challenge for women leaving prison, for whom there are no roles or opportunities available, and who are trapped in the structural impossibility of shaping a future.

Fundación Mujer, Levántate! develops various programmes that aim to contribute to the desistance from crime and the social inclusion of women who are or have been deprived of their liberty. To this end, it is dedicated to psychosocial and integral empowerment, welcoming women and inviting them to stand up and begin a path of redefining their own history. In this way, the women have access for the first time to a real opportunity to integrate into society.

The acquisition of pro-social roles, their insertion into the world of work, empowerment and a healthy exercise of motherhood are key to this process.

Stopping crime is not only about stopping offending, it is about developing a new sense of identity that is recognised by the social environment, breaking through the barriers of stigmatisation.

To carry out this task, the commitment of the state, the support of the political world and the understanding of society are needed. Reintegration is an effective strategy to combat crime. A clear example is the recidivism rate of women who have been in the programmes of the Mujer, Levántate! foundation, which is 5%, compared to 42% nationally. Unfortunately, only a small number of women are able to access these programmes, which is why it is key to highlight reintegration at the public policy level.

Reintegration is a right, not charity. As long as this is not clear, it will be difficult for Chile to move towards a real, concrete and effective security policy.