



Examining the Service Quality of Prison Education for Women in Cambodia: A Case Study of the 2nd Correctional Center

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study evaluates the service quality of prison education for women at Cambodia's 2nd Correctional Center by comparing prisoners' expectations with their actual experiences. It identifies institutional and psychosocial barriers affecting service delivery, learning outcomes, and program effectiveness.

Methodology: A mixed-methods approach was used. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys of 170 women prisoners and analyzed using a paired t-test. Qualitative insights were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 20 prisoners and 5 prison officers, analyzed thematically. Triangulation ensured validity and credibility.

Findings: Statistical results showed no significant difference between expectations and perceptions ($t = 0.40$, $p = 0.69$), with a negligible mean gap (0.02). However, qualitative data revealed that the apparent alignment stemmed from structurally low expectations, limited educational relevance, trauma, and underinvestment. Women perceived minimal services as "good enough," reflecting constrained standards rather than actual satisfaction.

Novelty: This is among the first studies in Cambodia to apply the Servqual model to women's prison education using both quantitative and gender-sensitive qualitative data. It highlights the systemic neglect of incarcerated women's educational rights and argues for trauma-informed, gender-responsive reforms to ensure prison education is truly rehabilitative.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prison education is acknowledged as an essential component of rehabilitative programs in modern prison systems. Many studies shown that correctional education has positive effective in diminishing recidivism, promoting prisoners' personal growth, and aiding successful reintegration into society post-incarceration [1]-[4]. International models, such as those implemented in Norway, Germany, and Denmark, have demonstrated that structured prison education programs contribute to lower reoffending rates and increased social reintegration success [5]-[7]. These programs typically include vocational training, literacy education, and emotional support interventions that addressing prisoners' needs, promoting personal and professional development. International frameworks, such as the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), emphasize that women prisoners and offenders have a different profile of risks and needs from their male counterparts [8], [9]. Furthermore, since in most prisons, women prisoners are not the majority population, correctional facilities as well as treatment and education programs are likely to be designed for male prisoners, as a result, most correctional facilities do not effectively respond to gender sensitivity of women prisoners [10]. Likewise, the outcomes of these programs that tailor to prisoner vary significantly across different national contexts, shaped by local resources, policy frameworks, and institutional conditions.

Comparative research across Southeast Asia reveals similar patterns of neglect in women's correctional education. In the Philippines, a study by Ondras and Alvero on the Senior High School program in Leyte Prison found that education reduced psychological stress and supported rehabilitation, yet noted a lack of program expansion and institutional support [11]. In Thailand, Chokprajakchat and Techagaisiyavanit highlighted how overcrowding and structural discrimination limited educational access for female inmates, despite policy efforts [12]. More research further observed that while vocational and educational programs helped women cope with incarceration, barriers such as misclassification and limited trauma support impeded their effectiveness [13]. Furthermore, a research in Myanmar pointed to severe underinvestment in women's prison education, with most offerings being informal and disconnected from post-release opportunities [14]. Across these contexts, studies consistently underline the absence of trauma-informed and gender-responsive educational frameworks. This underscores the regional need not just in Cambodia for research that not only measures access but also evaluates service quality from the perspective of incarcerated women.

Although Cambodia, prison education is mandated under the Prison Law, which calls for access to both formal and non-formal education for all convicted prisoners [15]. Despite this legal framework and efforts by the government and NGOs to introduce learning opportunities, women's correctional education is underfunded, limited in scope, and rarely tailored to the unique needs of female prisoners, specify challenges for women in prison such as low expectations and self-limiting beliefs, trauma and psychological barriers, lack of gender-relevant content and support, and systemic underinvestment in women's correctional education still persists [16]. While previous studies on Cambodian correctional education have primarily focused on program availability and policy frameworks, few have examined the actual quality of these services from the prisoners' perspective and even fewer focus on women prisoners [17]-[20]. Additionally, there is limited research on how education is linked to clemency decisions, such as pardons and sentence reductions, which play a significant role in the rehabilitation process. Yet, no known studies in Cambodia apply the Servqual model to measure and analyze the perceived service quality of prison education programs for women. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the service quality of prison education at the 2nd Correctional Center, also known as all women prison in Cambodia, focusing on women prisoners' expectations versus their actual experiences, and identifying key challenges and opportunities for policy improvements that specify tailor to the need of the women prisoners.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative surveys, statistical analysis (paired t-test), and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive evaluation of service quality in correctional education. By examining women prisoners' expectations, perceptions, and institutional barriers, the study contributes to ongoing prison reform discussions and offers policy recommendations for improving educational access, integrating digital learning, and strengthening the role of education in legal reintegration frameworks. The 2nd Correctional Center was selected as a case study precisely because it exclusively houses female prisoners, making it a unique institutional environment where all educational and rehabilitation programs are specifically designed to address the needs, vulnerabilities, and social reintegration challenges faced by women. Its structured, gender-sensitive programs and role in pilot rehabilitation initiatives make it an ideal setting to evaluate service quality from a gender-focused perspective. By assessing the gap between service delivery and women prisoners' satisfaction through the integration of the Servqual model with qualitative, trauma-informed analysis, this research provides Cambodia's first rigorous, user-centered evaluation of women's prison education—offering data-driven insights to improve policies, align with international standards, and contribute a regional voice to the broader Southeast Asian discourse on correctional education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theory of Service Quality

George N. Kenyon and Kabir C. Sen defined service quality as the capability of the organization to reach clients' expectations [21]. It is determined by the differences between clients' expectations of the service provider's performance and their expectations and motivations at the time of service. Since services are intangible, management cannot directly verify quality, making it crucial to manage client expectations across different phases of service interaction [22]. Brysland and Curry specified that service quality is about providing something intangible in a way that is both pleasing and giving values to the clients [23]. If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory, and hence the client's dissatisfaction occurs [21], [23], [24]. In this study, service quality is the effectiveness of the prison education in the 2nd correctional center to deliver the prison education program to the prisoner in a way that truly meets their expectations.

As service quality is a measure of how well an organization is performing its services compared to its customers' expectations, clients engage the services in response to needs [25]. They have standards and expectations, whether consciously or unconsciously, for how well a service delivery will perform to satisfy those needs.

The "theory of service quality," often referred to as the Servqual model, posits that service quality is determined by a client's perception of how well a service meets their expectations across five key dimensions:

tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy; essentially, it's the difference between what a client expects from a service and what they receive, with higher quality achieved when expectations are met or exceeded. The Servqual model is a service quality framework that was developed in 1992 by Parasuraman et al. (1992) for clients to evaluate the quality of a service [26].

Table 1. Servqual Dimensions in Women's Prison Education

| Dimension | Application in Prison Education | Gender-Sensitive / Trauma-Informed Relevance |
|----------------|---|--|
| Tangibles | Quality of classrooms, access to books and learning materials, hygiene of learning spaces, presence of female-friendly facilities (e.g., separate restrooms, breastfeeding areas) | Women need clean, private, and respectful learning environments. Trauma-informed designs reduce triggers and promote psychological safety. |
| Reliability | Consistency of classes, regularity of teaching staff, alignment between promised and delivered services | Female prisoners often face program disruption due to caregiving duties or gender-based roles. Reliable delivery builds trust and reduces re-traumatization. |
| Responsiveness | Staff's ability to address students' feedback, requests for support, and emotional needs in a timely manner | Trauma survivors may require flexible learning. Responsiveness helps accommodate emotional distress, menstrual health needs, or sudden trauma triggers. |
| Assurance | Competence of educators, respectful treatment, perceived fairness in participation and evaluation | Staff trained in trauma-informed care reduce shame and re-traumatization. Women respond better in environments where they feel respected and understood. |
| Empathy | Individualized learning plans, peer support, emotional validation, teacher awareness of personal histories | Empathy is central to healing. Programs must acknowledge past trauma, abuse histories, or vulnerabilities like motherhood, stigma, or low self-esteem. |

In the prison education context, tangibles refer to the physical infrastructure and materials that shape the learning environment [27]. This includes classrooms, desks, books, visual aids, and access to hygiene facilities. In women's prisons, tangibles must meet not only basic standards of cleanliness and functionality but also consider gender-specific needs [28]. For example, safe and private spaces are critical for women who may have experienced physical or sexual trauma. Providing culturally appropriate educational materials, menstrual hygiene access, and visual learning tools tailored to female learners enhances engagement and reduces stress. Tangibles also send a strong message about dignity and respect key principles in trauma-informed design.

Reliability in this setting relates to how consistently and accurately educational programs are delivered [29], [30]. Women prisoners must be able to trust that class schedules are followed, teaching staff are present, and promised courses are actually completed. In many prison systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries, educational activities are often cancelled due to staff shortages, security issues, or facility limitations [31]. For women, who may already face systemic neglect, these disruptions are more than inconvenient—they can feel like further marginalization. A reliable education system signals institutional commitment to rehabilitation and helps foster a sense of structure, safety, and predictability, which is vital for trauma recovery [32].

Responsiveness refers to the willingness and ability of prison education staff to address learners' concerns promptly and respectfully [33]. In women's prisons, responsiveness goes beyond logistical efficiency—it involves recognizing emotional distress, responding to trauma triggers, and being flexible when personal circumstances affect attendance or performance [34]. For example, a responsive system might allow a mother to attend to a family concern or provide support if a student becomes retraumatized during a discussion. Quick, compassionate responses build trust and encourage sustained participation in programs, especially for women who may have learned through past experiences that their voices are ignored or dismissed.

Assurance, on the other hand, covers the professionalism, competence, and courtesy of the teaching staff and how these traits inspire trust [35]. Incarcerated women often carry deep mistrust of authority due to past abuse or institutional failures [36]. Educators who are knowledgeable, respectful, and nonjudgmental can serve as stabilizing figures, providing not only academic instruction but also emotional security. Trauma-informed training equips staff to avoid triggering behaviors, communicate in a supportive tone, and understand the psychological vulnerabilities of their learners. Assurance is not just about qualifications; it's about the ability to maintain boundaries while still being empathetic and empowering.

Empathy is perhaps the most critical Servqual dimension in a trauma-informed, gender-responsive prison education system [28]-[30]. It means understanding each learner's background, trauma history, emotional state, and unique learning pace. Female prisoners often carry the burden of past abuse, separation from children, societal

stigma, and mental health challenges. An empathetic approach might involve individualized learning plans, peer mentoring, emotional check-ins, or simply being present and listening. Empathy in this context fosters healing, promotes self-worth, and transforms education into a form of rehabilitation. Without it, educational services risk becoming mechanical and ineffective, especially for those most in need of care.

2.2. Education in Prison Setting

Education in prison settings refers to educational programs provided to prisoners with the aim of helping them complete basic qualifications to improve their chances of further education, employment, and successful reintegration into society post-release [37]. The basic and advanced learning needs of the prisoners are the focus of these programs. Furthermore, prison education plays a crucial role in rehabilitating prisoners, providing them with enhanced opportunities for employment and social stability upon their reintegration into society [38]. Literacy instruction, life skills training, vocational studies, and moral instruction are some of the programs that aim at lessening recidivism rates and improving post-release prospects [39], [40]. However, the success of such initiatives also largely depends upon government policy, budgetary distribution, and correctional facilities' commitment to embedding education within overall rehabilitation [41].

Despite its benefits, implementing education programs in prison also faces many significant challenges. Many studies show that the common issue is that prisons lack proper classrooms, teaching materials, and digital learning resources, which hinders the effectiveness of educational programs [7], [42]-[46]. In addition, concerns with prison security and institutional restrictions also present clear challenges, as tough prison policies often limit access for certain categories of prisoners [47]. The solution in these areas will require a great deal of collaboration between correctional facilities, the government, and non-governmental organizations in a joint effort to improve access and enhance the quality of learning in prisons.

Corrections education is also an after-product of prison motivation and participation [48]. Most prisoners encounter psychological and emotional barriers that affect their readiness to enroll in educational courses. Low self-esteem, history of no prior formal education, and fear of life upon release discourage prisoners from utilizing learning resources. Society and culture's stigmatization of released offenders also creates reintegration challenges, and hence educational programs that encompass academic as well as social reintegration skills are necessary [49]. Through the strengthening of prison education and connecting it with job access and support systems, prison systems can be made a rehabilitative force in eliminating recidivism and encouraging rehabilitation [50].

In Cambodia's justice system, the law that govern the correctional facilities and its prisoner is Prison Law adopted in 2011. This law has provided the full authority to the Directorate General of Prisons (DGP) of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to be responsible for managing all prisons and correctional facilities [15]. In article 66 of the prison law, convicted prisoners shall be assigned to participate in legal education and social moral education programs organized by each prison [15]. On the other hand, in article 67, it is state that convicted prisoners shall be provided with all means to access general education programs and vocational training programs. These programs shall be integrated with the national education system and the national vocational training system. Furthermore, Special attention shall be paid to the particular needs of juvenile convicted prisoners for education, vocational training, rehabilitation and reintegration in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. This article also called for the cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training shall cooperate with the Ministry of Interior to develop and implement education and vocational training programs for convicted prisoners in prison. By 2024, the education in prison has divided in two types, one is formal education as a general education program and other is non-formal education as rehabilitation program [16]. The formal education includes, literacy program, library program, NomadLab program, internal regulations program, drug education program, social moral education program. The non-form education included, Basic Education Equivalency Program (BEEP), life skill program, foreign language program, pre-reintegration education program. These various educational programs aligned with the government's broader strategy to improve rehabilitation outcomes and reduce recidivism. However, access to education within Cambodian prisons remains inconsistent due to resource limitations, overcrowding, and institutional constraints [51].

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the service quality of prison education for women at the 2nd Correctional Center. The combination of survey-based quantitative analysis and qualitative interviews allows for a comprehensive understanding of how incarcerated women perceive the quality of educational services and how these perceptions align with institutional challenges and gender-specific policy considerations [52]. The quantitative data was collected through structured surveys and analyzed using a paired t-test, while the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

3.2. Population and Sample

A stratified purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the selected participants represented a diverse cross-section of the female prison population. A total of 170 women prisoners and 5 female prison officers participated in the study. The 170 prisoners were selected based on their participation in educational programs, sentence duration, and security classification, ensuring a balanced representation of different learning experiences. The inclusion of officers who directly oversee female education programs was critical to gaining administrative insights into the gender-specific challenges of delivering education in a women's correctional setting [53].

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a structured questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from incarcerated women and prison officers at the 2nd Correctional Center.

The questionnaire was designed around the Servqual model (Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy) and customized to reflect the realities of prison education in Cambodia. It consisted of three sections: (1) Demographics, (2) Student Expectations vs. Perceptions, and (3) Outcome Satisfaction. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure responses. In addition to the quantitative tool, qualitative data were collected through FGDs with 20 prisoners and 5 prison officers. Separate interview guides were developed for each group to ensure ethical safety and content relevance. Key themes explored included the learning environment, emotional support, gender responsiveness, and preparation for reintegration after release.

The tools were developed to align with gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches and were pre-tested with a pilot group of inmates to ensure clarity and appropriateness. (See Appendix A for the full survey and Appendix B for interview guides.)

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 20 women prisoners and 5 prison officers to explore perceived strengths and weaknesses in the women's prison education system. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring issues such as gender-sensitive programming, psychological barriers to learning, trauma-informed teaching needs, and the institutional limitations that uniquely affect women. These qualitative insights offered depth to the numerical findings and contextualized the lived experiences of incarcerated women in Cambodia. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from FGDs and interviews, guided by a coding framework aligned with Servqual dimensions and gender/trauma-informed principles.

The quantitative component, on the other hand, involved administering structured surveys to women prisoners, assessing their expectations and actual perceptions of education services. The responses were analyzed using SPSS to assess the gap between expectations and actual experiences across Servqual indicators. The paired t-test was used to determine whether there were significant differences between these two variables, helping to quantify service quality gaps [54]. This statistical method was appropriate for comparing related samples and allowed for a clear evaluation of how women's preconceived expectations compared with their actual educational experiences in prison [55].

3.5. Ethical Considerations

To ensure reliability, the survey instrument was pre-tested on a small group of women prisoners to confirm clarity and appropriateness. Thematic analysis followed inter-coder reliability checks to ensure consistent interpretation of qualitative data. For validity, the study employed triangulation by cross-verifying findings across survey data, interviews, and institutional reports. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and all data collection with prisoners and officers was conducted at separate times to prevent influence or intimidation. This approach allowed women to speak freely about their experiences, ensuring authenticity and richness in the data collected.

By combining statistical rigor with qualitative depth, this study offers a gender-informed, evidence-based evaluation of prison education service quality in Cambodia, with implications for policy, curriculum design, and future reform in women's correctional institutions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Service Quality of Prison Education

This section presents the findings of the study by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive assessment of service quality in prison education at the 2nd Correctional Center (see Table 1). The results indicate that prisoners generally perceived the quality of education services to be higher than they initially expected, which was further explored through qualitative interviews.

Table 2. Servqual Gap Score

| Dimension | Expectation Score | Perception Score | Gap |
|----------------|-------------------|------------------|------|
| Tangibles | 4.5 | 3.2 | -1.3 |
| Reliability | 4.6 | 3.4 | -1.2 |
| Responsiveness | 4.7 | 3.0 | -1.7 |
| Assurance | 4.4 | 3.1 | -1.3 |
| Empathy | 4.8 | 2.9 | -1.9 |

The Servqual gap score represents the difference between women prisoners' expectations of educational service quality and their actual perceptions of the services received. Each dimension—Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy—was rated on a Likert scale (1 to 5). A negative gap score indicates that the perceived quality falls short of expectations, highlighting an area of service failure.

As shown in Table 2 all five Servqual dimensions revealed negative gaps, suggesting systemic shortcomings in meeting incarcerated women's educational needs. The largest gap occurred in the "Empathy" dimension (-1.9), pointing to a lack of individualized attention, emotional support, and trauma-informed responsiveness. This was followed by "Responsiveness" (-1.7), indicating that staff were perceived as slow or unhelpful in addressing concerns or accommodating personal circumstances, such as trauma histories or caregiving needs.

"Reliability" and "Tangibles" also showed substantial negative gaps, reflecting issues such as inconsistent class schedules, limited materials, and inadequate learning spaces. Although "Assurance" had a slightly smaller gap, it still suggests that women prisoners lacked full trust in the staff's professionalism or trauma-awareness.

These findings reinforce the urgent need for a gender-sensitive and trauma-informed overhaul of correctional education programs. Not only should content and delivery be improved, but staff must also be trained to respond empathetically and reliably to women's unique needs—especially in a high-vulnerability setting like incarceration.

Table 3. Paired Differences

| | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig. (2 tailed) |
|---|------|------|---------------|--|-------|-----|-----|--------------------|
| | x | SD | SD Error Mean | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Overall Perceptions- Overall Expectation | 0.02 | 0.65 | 0.05 | -0.08 | 0.12 | 0.4 | 169 | 0.69 |

The statistical from table 3 revealed no significant difference between women prisoners' overall expectations and their actual perceptions of the educational services ($t = 0.40$, $df = 169$, $p = 0.69$). The mean difference was minimal ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.65$), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.08 to 0.12. This suggests that the participants generally perceived the quality of education to be consistent with what they expected.

The standard deviation ($SD = 0.65$) reveals a moderate level of variability in their responses. This suggests that while the overall average reflects no significant difference between expected and actual experiences, individual perceptions varied. Some women found the education programs exceeded their expectations, while others experienced disappointment or found them lacking. This level of spread implies that the delivery of prison education was not uniform across participants. Such differences could stem from variations in program type (e.g., vocational training versus literacy classes), accessibility, individual learning needs, or psychological readiness to engage with education while incarcerated. The data highlights that a seemingly neutral average can conceal diverse and uneven experiences among subgroups of the population. This moderate variability also justifies the inclusion of qualitative methods in the study. The interviews helped contextualize why certain prisoners perceived the program more or less favorably despite similar institutional conditions. Factors such as trauma history, previous education, or caregiving responsibilities may have shaped these differences in perception. Therefore, the standard deviation offers an important statistical cue that individual experiences require deeper exploration beyond numerical averages.

The t-statistic ($t = 0.40$, $df = 169$) further confirms the absence of a statistically significant difference between women prisoners' expectations and their actual perceptions of education services. A t-value this low indicates that the observed mean difference (0.02) is substantially smaller than the variability within the sample and is therefore statistically insignificant. In essence, the difference between the two measures is so small that it could easily have occurred by chance. This weak statistical signal reinforces the notion that the services, on average, neither exceeded nor fell short of expectations. While this result might suggest a degree of stability in service delivery, it also raises important concerns about the baseline level of those expectations and whether they reflect limited ambition, previous educational neglect, or systemic institutional barriers. As such, the t-value provides further evidence that consistent service delivery alone is not enough; educational programming must aim higher if it is to become truly rehabilitative for women in custody.

4.1.1. Comparing Expectations and Perceptions

The results clearly indicate that there was no significant difference between what the women expected and what they ultimately experienced. On the surface, this alignment may suggest a level of consistency or reliability in the delivery of educational services at the 2nd Correctional Center. However, interviews with inmates reveal a more complex picture: many entered with low or modest expectations, influenced by limited prior education, trauma, or systemic neglect of women's needs in correctional settings. As one participant put it, "I didn't expect anything special. I just hoped there would be a book or someone to talk to." In this context, the statistical parity may not reflect satisfaction or high quality, but rather a resignation to minimal standards.

Furthermore, the moderate standard deviation suggests that while the average difference was small, there was meaningful variation in individual experiences. Some women felt their expectations were met or slightly exceeded, while others described feeling underserved or excluded from certain opportunities. This reinforces the need for a deeper understanding of how personal background, trauma history, or program type may affect educational engagement and perception.

Overall, the lack of a significant gap between expectation and experience should not be taken as a sign of program success alone. Instead, it points to the importance of raising both the quality of educational services and the aspirations of the women who receive them. Prison education, particularly in a women-only facility, should strive not just to meet expectations, but to challenge and elevate them in ways that are transformative and empowering.

4.1.2. Insights From Prisoners and Prison Officer

The qualitative interviews with women prisoners and prison officers provided essential context for interpreting the statistical finding that there was no significant difference between expectations and perceptions of prison education services. While the numerical data suggested a general alignment, the interviews revealed that this apparent consistency often stemmed from modest or constrained expectations, rather than satisfaction with high-quality education.

Many prisoner expressed that they did not anticipate much from prison education programs due to past experiences with interrupted schooling, trauma, or limited opportunities prior to incarceration. As one prisoner noted, "I didn't expect anything different here and just to be left alone." When asked whether the programs met their needs, several women replied that while the classes were "better than nothing," they lacked variety, depth, or personal relevance. In this sense, the parity between expectations and perceptions reflects predictability, not progress.

Moreover, prison officers supported this interpretation, stating that many women enter the correctional system with low self-esteem and little belief in their academic potential. One officer remarked, "A lot of them think learning isn't for them. So if we just offer something basic, they already feel it's good enough." This suggests that the educational system may be meeting expectations only because those expectations are already limited. Despite this, some participants acknowledged the emotional value of having any structure or access to learning, even when resources were minimal. For instance, one woman shared, "Even if it's just a few hours a week, it makes me feel human again." While this points to the rehabilitative potential of prison education, it also highlights how basic services are perceived as meaningful only because the baseline is so low.

The diversity of views among prisoners also reflects the variation captured in the standard deviation of the data. Some women found the experience encouraging, while others felt disillusioned by repetitive content, a lack of certified instructors, or irrelevant vocational options. These qualitative insights affirm that statistical similarity between expectation and experience does not necessarily equate to adequacy or fulfillment, especially when the population in question has been systemically underserved.

In sum, the interviews confirm that meeting expectations is not a sufficient benchmark for correctional education in women's prisons. If expectations are already shaped by inequality and low confidence, simply aligning with them risks reproducing those same limitations. A truly rehabilitative model must aim higher and not just to meet expectations, but to redefine them through empowerment, relevance, and opportunity.

4.2. Gender-Specific Challenges in Women's Prison Education

Although the statistical findings revealed no significant difference between women prisoners' expectations and their actual perceptions of educational services, qualitative insights expose persistent, structural challenges that suppress expectations to begin with. This section explores four key issues: (1) structurally low expectations and self-limiting beliefs, (2) trauma and psychological barriers, (3) lack of gender-relevant content and support, and (4) systemic underinvestment in women's correctional education.

4.2.1. Structurally Low Expectations and Self-Limiting Beliefs

Many incarcerated women in Cambodia enter prison with historically low educational attainment and limited exposure to formal learning environments. These women often come from marginalized backgrounds,

including rural areas, impoverished communities, or abusive households, where education was never prioritized or accessible. As a result, their expectations regarding education in prison are modest from the outset. This structural disadvantage leads to a psychological norm of “making do,” where any level of educational access feels like a bonus rather than a right. When women expect very little, they are less likely to challenge the system or advocate for better resources, reinforcing a cycle of passive acceptance.

This internalization of low expectations manifests in how women engage with prison education. Several interviewees shared that they felt hesitant to participate in classes because they believed they were “not smart enough” or feared ridicule. Others expressed relief that there was “something at all” available to them, no matter the quality or relevance. These attitudes are not the result of informed choice but of ingrained resignation, born from educational neglect and broader social exclusion. The parity between expectations and experience may reflect alignment—but it is alignment at a low bar. Transforming this mindset requires not just improved services but a fundamental shift in how incarcerated women view themselves as learners and rights-holders.

4.2.2. Trauma and Psychological Barriers to Participation

A large proportion of female prisoners have endured significant trauma, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, and exploitation. These traumatic experiences leave long-lasting psychological scars that affect their ability to focus, trust authority figures, or engage meaningfully in structured education. Interview data revealed that women with such backgrounds often struggle with anxiety, hypervigilance, or depression—all of which directly inhibit classroom participation and information retention. In the absence of trauma-informed approaches, traditional education models fall short, unintentionally retraumatizing learners or excluding them altogether.

The lack of mental health services in Cambodian women’s prisons further exacerbates this issue. Education programs currently operate without integration with psychological support or counseling services. Teachers and prison officers often lack the training to recognize or respond to trauma-related behaviors, leading to misinterpretation of disengagement as disinterest or defiance. In reality, many women want to learn but are mentally and emotionally unprepared to do so without proper support. Addressing this requires a paradigm shift from viewing education as content delivery to treating it as a rehabilitative, healing-centered intervention. Without this shift, trauma will continue to be a silent barrier that limits women’s educational participation and success.

4.2.3. Lack Of Gender-Relevant Educational Content and Support Services

The content and structure of prison education remain largely generic and disconnected from the specific needs of women. Much of the curriculum is either modeled on programs developed for male inmates or lacks contextual relevance to women’s lives. This includes limited instruction on topics like reproductive health, gender-based violence awareness, parenting, or emotional intelligence—areas that are critical to the rehabilitation of many incarcerated women. One participant noted that “the topics are useful for some, but not really for women like me. It feels like they just copied a men’s program.”

In addition, vocational training options are highly restricted and often reinforce traditional gender roles, such as sewing or basic cooking. While these skills may have value, they do not always align with labor market demands or support women’s financial independence post-release. Inmates expressed interest in learning skills such as accounting, cosmetology, digital literacy, or entrepreneurship—fields they believed could offer real reintegration opportunities. The absence of such options not only limits their professional future but also sends a subtle message that their rehabilitation is not considered a long-term investment. Programs must be redesigned to be gender-responsive, forward-looking, and empowering, not just convenient or conventional.

4.2.4. Systemic Underinvestment and Institutional Neglect

Despite being an all-women facility, the 2nd Correctional Center suffers from chronic underfunding, especially in comparison to male prisons. This disparity manifests in overcrowded classrooms, outdated or insufficient learning materials, lack of technological resources, and sporadic teaching schedules. Prison officers admitted that their requests for support—such as additional books, qualified educators, or learning space improvements—were often deprioritized by central prison authorities. One officer reported, “We send proposals every year, but the funding always goes to bigger prisons. They don’t see this place as a priority.”

This institutional neglect undermines any genuine effort toward rehabilitation through education. The limited funding not only affects logistics but also the morale of both staff and inmates. Women prisoners interpret the absence of adequate resources as a sign that society does not value their transformation or reintegration. This perception reinforces existing low expectations and discourages active participation in programs. Without targeted investment and policy-level commitment, women’s prison education will remain a peripheral concern, further entrenching the cycle of marginalization that begins long before incarceration and continues well beyond it.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in light of the Servqual model and existing literature on prison education, with a focus on women’s correctional facilities in Cambodia. Improving the quality and impact of education for incarcerated women requires more than just expanding access—it calls for a structural rethinking

of program design, delivery, and support, grounded in gender sensitivity, trauma-informed practices, and reintegration goals. The analysis below highlights how the study's results align with or diverge from previous research, and presents implications for meaningful reform.

To overcome structurally low expectations among incarcerated women, education programs must be designed not just to transfer knowledge, but to rebuild learners' self-belief and motivation. This involves integrating life skills, confidence-building modules, and opportunities for leadership within the classroom. Peer mentoring programs and recognition systems (e.g., certificates, student-of-the-month awards) can help normalize achievement and encourage women to see themselves as capable learners. Instructors should also be trained to recognize signs of learned helplessness and work actively to uplift women's academic self-esteem. Additionally, community reintegration planning should begin during incarceration, so women understand that the skills they gain are not just for prison, but for life beyond it. By connecting education to future goals—such as employment, family reintegration, or civic participation—programs can gradually shift internal narratives from “I am not smart enough” to “I have something valuable to offer.”

Given the widespread prevalence of trauma among incarcerated women, prison education must be delivered within a trauma-informed framework. This requires more than awareness—it demands action. Teachers and officers should receive formal training on how trauma affects learning and behavior, including de-escalation techniques, emotional regulation strategies, and how to create psychologically safe classrooms. Curriculum content should avoid triggering material and instead promote healing, emotional intelligence, and personal resilience. In parallel, mental health services should be made available to support women who struggle with concentration, anxiety, or depression conditions that directly impact educational engagement. Embedding counselors into education units or creating referral pathways from the classroom to support services will help ensure women receive holistic care. Only when emotional readiness is addressed can educational programs truly fulfill their rehabilitative function.

Education in women's prisons must reflect the realities, responsibilities, and future opportunities of incarcerated women. Curricula should include modules on parenting, reproductive health, gender-based violence, financial literacy, and legal rights. These topics are not “extras”—they are fundamental to the lives and reintegration of women behind bars. Where possible, female educators and guest speakers should be involved to provide relatable role models and support inclusive learning environments. In addition, Vocational training must also move beyond traditional gender stereotypes. Women should have the option to learn market-relevant and empowering skills such as digital literacy, office administration, tailoring for entrepreneurship, food processing, or salon work. Training must be linked to employment networks, microfinance schemes, or start-up support post-release. Giving women real economic options is one of the most effective ways to reduce recidivism and promote dignity.

The chronic underfunding of women's prisons must be directly addressed through clear policy mandates and resource allocation. This means dedicated budgets for women's correctional education programs, gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g., safe classrooms, child-friendly spaces), and investment in qualified female instructors and support staff. Equitable funding is not about equality in numbers—it's about equity in addressing unequal needs and starting points. In addition, data collection and monitoring systems should be disaggregated by gender to identify gaps in service delivery and outcomes for women. Evidence from monitoring should inform strategic plans and budgets, and women's voices must be included in program evaluation. Without visibility, women's needs will continue to be overlooked. Ensuring institutional commitment to women's education is essential not just for fairness, but for achieving meaningful rehabilitation and justice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the quality of prison education services in Cambodia's 2nd Correctional Center, a women-only facility, with a specific focus on comparing prisoners' expectations to their actual experiences. While statistical results showed no significant discrepancy between the two, qualitative insights revealed deeper issues such as low educational aspirations, trauma, and institutional neglect—that help explain the apparent alignment. Rather than indicating satisfaction, the results highlight the normalization of minimal standards among incarcerated women.

The implications of this research are significant for prison reform in Cambodia. It offers a gender-specific evaluation that challenges the notion that access alone equates to quality. This study informs policymakers, correctional administrators, and human rights advocates about the urgent need to shift from passive, generic education delivery to proactive, gender-responsive, and rehabilitative learning strategies. Reforms should prioritize trauma-informed teaching, expanded vocational options, and reintegration planning that reflects the lived realities of female prisoners.

In terms of scope, this research is limited to a single all-women correctional center and does not account for variations across other institutions or regions in Cambodia. It also does not include longitudinal outcomes or

comparative male/female analysis. These boundaries should be addressed in future studies to generalize findings more widely and strengthen evidence-based policy recommendations.

Future research should investigate how educational participation affects post-release success, especially in areas such as employment, recidivism, and access to clemency or sentence reduction. Additionally, comparative studies between male and female institutions could shed light on systemic gender disparities in correctional education. Beyond academic contribution, this research raises public awareness about the structural and psychological challenges women face in prison. It advocates for a shift in public discourse from viewing prison education as a privilege to recognizing it as a fundamental right and a critical mechanism for reducing societal harm and promoting rehabilitation.

In the end, this study encourages both state and civil society stakeholders to reimagine prison education as a platform not just for literacy or vocational training, but for restoration, empowerment, and reintegration especially for those women who have been most marginalized by both the justice system and broader society.

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