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“I am helpless, I Can Cry in Secret” – Women Sentenced to Long-Term Imprisonment on the Afflictions of Prison Life

Abstract: The author discusses the afflictions felt by women sentenced to long-term imprisonment and the difficult situations they experience. The first part of the article is a theoretical foundation. It discusses the difficult situations and afflictions experienced by prisoners of both sexes. However, the experienced elements of the described set of afflictions, as well as their degree, are individual for each prisoner, and their activation depends not only on the prisoner's personality, their situation prior to imprisonment but also on the sex of the prisoner. Therefore, the discussed issue required a separate presentation of the matters associated with the afflictions of imprisonment felt by women. The second part is an analysis of the author's own research conducted in Correctional Facility No. 1 in Grudziądz. The article ends with conclusions regarding the afflictions of imprisonment felt by women sentenced to long-term imprisonment and indications regarding penitentiary work with the studied women.

Key words: Imprisoned women, long-term imprisonment, affliction.

Introduction

Being placed in a correctional facility is the strictest of the penalties provided for by the Polish penal code. According to the legislator, the main purpose of the penalty of imprisonment is supposed to be the social rehabilitation of a criminal preventing their return to crime, and it should be the last resort.

The criminal penalty is defined nowadays as “a deliberate affliction utilized by a state authority against a human due to their behavior, recognized by this authority as socially reprehensible and deserving of such affliction” (Cieślak 1985, p. 12), or as a personal affliction suffered by the perpetrator, and which is at the same time a reparation for the crime committed, it condemns the offense, ordered by the court on behalf of the state (Sarzała 2006, p. 148). However, the doctrine does not have a definition for the term “affliction”.

According to Mieczysław Rudnik, one can distinguish “psychological, economic and physical afflictions” (Rudnik 1964, p. 295). On the other hand, Stanisław Pławski, points out that “affliction may be related to the physical, psychological sphere and social rights of the individual” (Pławski 1968, p. 27). In order to determine what is the affliction suffered by the incarcerated individual, according to Iwona Muszyńska, it should be determined “what are the prisoners deprived of during imprisonment and what are the consequences for the psychological composition of the prisoners” (Muszyńska 1976, p. 361). Thus, it is not possible to point out a single affliction suffered by an individual placed in prison because there is more than one, there is a whole group of them, equal to the group of blocked needs of a given person. Whereas the elements of this group of afflictions activate individually for each prisoner. Depending on the personality of the incarcerated person and their situation before conviction, some will be suffered more, and some will be suffered less (Bramska 1997, pp. 18–19).

The afflictions experienced by incarcerated women in light of the literature on the subject

The essence of the penalty of imprisonment is to isolate the criminal from the society. This possibility is created by the closed nature of the corrective facility and the resulting system of coercion and control. The environments of free and imprisoned people are thus characterized by completely different conditions of life, which results in imprisonment not being a natural but rather a difficult situation for the individual (Przybyliński 2005, p. 115).

The creator of the classification of difficult situations is Tadeusz Tomaszewski (Tomaszewski 1963). In the author’s opinion, difficult situations are ones “where there is a divergence between the needs or tasks of a human being and the ability to meet these needs or perform these tasks” (Tomaszewski 1984, p. 125). Tomaszewski also distinguishes the following five categories of difficult situations: deprivations, frustrations (hardships), overloads, hazards, conflicts (Tomaszewski 1984, p. 125). Mieczysław Ciosek, on the other hand, rightly observes that all these situations are inherent in the penalty of imprisonment and that penitentiary isolation should be treated as a “complex difficult situation”.

The first category of difficult situations is deprivations. These are the situations in which there is a total lack of the possibility to meet the needs that are essential for normal functioning and development (Ciosek, Piotrowski 2016, p. 435). Under the conditions of penitentiary isolation, the prisoner experiences biological, sensory and information deprivation, and deprivation of needs. The biological deprivation results from the lack of freedom of movement. Sensory and information deprivation is associated with the limitation of auditory and visual stimuli. The monotony of everyday life and the architecture of the penitentiary facility dictated by security needs make the prison world gray and boring. In contrast, emotional deprivation is the result of discontinuing or hindering the contact of the prisoner with their loved ones. It results in the lack of satisfaction of many psychological and physical needs of the individual, which in turn causes sexual deviations, loneliness and the lack of a sense of security (Machel 2003, pp. 56–58). The second category is situations of hardship, where obstacles or shortcomings hamper the achievement of the established goal. Achieving it is only possible when a person changes their mode of conduct (Ciosek, Piotrowski 2016, p. 434). Overloads are situations in which the fulfillment of a task or tasks exceeds the physical or mental capacity of the individual (Ciosek 2001, p. 275). Overloads and hardships are difficult situations, faced by the inmate since the very first moments of their placement in a penitentiary facility. New tasks resulting from the role of a prisoner cause numerous overloads. They are often tragic for people without certain psychophysical predispositions. Furthermore, the inmate encounters a number of obstacles and barriers on their road to meet specific objectives and basic needs. These hardships have a negative effect on the prisoner's body and the atmosphere of the penitentiary facility (Przybyliński 2005, pp. 122–123). The fourth category pertains to hazardous situations. These situations occur when there is a high probability of loss of an important physical value (Ciosek, Piotrowski 2016, p. 435). The prisoner is not only threatened by other inmates or officers, but they also fear for the good of their family. The last of the discussed categories of difficult situations are conflicts. In a penitentiary facility, it is easy to come into conflict with another inmate, an officer or oneself. (Chojacka 2013, p. 59). The sources of conflicts in a penitentiary facility include:

- a different perception of the goals and tasks of the penalty of imprisonment by the legislator and the incarcerated person;
- the depriving nature of incarceration;
- the prison subculture;
- the social stigma that results in the hostility of an individual towards penitentiary institutions;
- the conflict of roles of the inmates and officers (Jędrzejak 1996, pp. 340–344).

The isolation period is without a doubt a long-term difficult situation for the prisoner. For imprisoned people, it is a severe affliction, which results in many negative consequences for mental health. When discussing the problems of isolation

afflictions, authors most often refer to the list of afflictions developed by Gresham M. Sykes (Sykes 1958). Penitentiary isolation results in the following afflictions:

- deprivation of liberty; the freedom of the prisoner is limited doubly (both by the wall of the penitentiary facility but also by the passes system and the bars within the facility); the possibility to act and interact with family and friends becomes greatly hampered and limited, and the prisoner becomes morally rejected by society,
- deprivation of material and service-related amenities; the living conditions of the penitentiary institution are subjectively perceived as inadequate by the prisoner;
- deprivation of the possibility of heterosexual contact; long-term stay in a single-sex community can lead to different forms of homosexuality, as well as developing an inadequate self-image, which is due to the lack of evaluation of oneself by the opposite sex;
- deprivation of autonomy; regulatory restrictions result in the prisoner feeling like a passive object under the influence of others;
- deprivation of a sense of security; for many prisoners, living among the prison community is a source of a constant sense of personal danger.

However, the activation of individual elements of the group of afflictions is dependent not only on the prisoner's personality, their situation before being sent to prison but also their sex. The research conducted by Mieczysław Rudnik (Rudnik 1964, p. 295), Maria D. Pełka-Sługocka (Pełka-Sługocka 1969) and Iwona Muszyńska (Muszyńska 1976, p. 361) suggest that the affliction of imprisonment is experienced by women differently than by men. The studies of Mieczysław Rudnik (Rudnik 1997, p. 19) show that incarcerated women experience the affliction of imprisonment permanently; however, it depends on the mental state of the prisoner and on the external stimuli; the degree to which this phenomenon is experienced fluctuates. Every distress causes an intensification of suffering, and although its reduction is equivalent to lessening afflictions, it never completely eliminates it. So it has a sinusoidal course, rather than a constant one. In addition, the affliction of imprisonment is experienced similarly by young, adult, first-time inmates and penitentiary recidivists. On the other hand, Pełka-Sługocka (1969) points out that a particular intensification of afflictions occurs in the last month of the penalty, which is caused by the growing yearning for home and family.

The affliction experienced by incarcerated women the most severely is limited contact with their family, especially with children. In situations of imprisonment, their longing and love for children are stronger in women than in men. It is the penitentiary institution where most women realize how much motherhood means to them. There is constant anxiety concerning the well-being of the family, and fear of the husband or partner leaving. Deprivation of the need for love results in loneliness and a lack of sense of security in incarcerated women (Marczak, Mirosław 2009, pp. 120–121).

Another affliction that manifests itself more clearly in women than in men is the lack of full satisfaction of personal hygiene needs. This creates an affliction especially for incarcerated women because a significant part of their attention is focused on the external appearance, which is very important to them. In days past, female convicts were forced to wear prison uniforms, the washing and ironing of which was frowned upon by the officers. This was accompanied by a ban on the use of cosmetics. This led to a bad atmosphere and unfavorable pedagogical conditions. Currently, women have the right to own clothes, use cosmetics and dress their hair however they see fit. The possibility to take care of one's self-appearance, even to a lesser degree, improves the well-being of female inmates (Marczak, Mirosław 2009, p. 122).

Another affliction is the inability to coexist in a community. However, its degree depends on the atmosphere and population of the penitentiary. While the vast majority of men are able to adapt to the conditions of a penitentiary facility to a certain extent, very few women are able to do so. The concentration of people of the same sex with different views and habits in a small, confined space not only causes numerous conflicts but also creates selfish and egocentric attitudes among the incarcerated. In addition, the sense of separateness, autonomy and anonymity is blurred. The narrowing of personal space has a negative impact especially on sentenced women (Kolarczyk et al. 1984, p. 196).

The afflictions concerning female penitentiary facilities described in this part should also include the matter of women sentenced to prison for murdering their partner. These women are usually the victims of domestic violence, who have become criminals in an act of self-defense, out of desperation or under emotional strain. Many of them remained in a long-term relationship with a man who harmed the whole family by using violence. On the one hand, homicide liberated them from their tormentors, on the other hand, the punishment they suffer is in no way a lesser hardship than the harm they previously experienced. Imprisonment separates them from their children. They experience defeat once again, as mothers – previously they were unable to protect their children from violence, and now they are unable to take care of them. For these women, the penalty of imprisonment is nothing other than further evil and suffering they are put through (Machel 2007, p. 216). However, the perception of the affliction by the imprisoned women in this regard is not directly related to the conditions of penitentiary isolation but rather to the behavioral disorders or dysfunctions that are brought by the female prisoners from the outside.

Research procedure

The aim of the research was to identify the afflictions suffered by women sentenced to long-term imprisonment. The research procedures involved a qualitative

strategy using an interpretative paradigm (see i.a. Rubach 2008, pp. 309–310). The main research problem was included in the form of the question: What afflictions resulting from imprisonment do women sentenced to long-term imprisonment experience?

Detailed problems arising from the main problem were also formulated:

1. What is the nature of the afflictions associated with being sentenced to long-term imprisonment?
2. What difficult situations do the women sentenced to long-term imprisonment experience?
3. To what extent do the afflictions resulting from the penalty of imprisonment influence the effectiveness of the process of social rehabilitation of female prisoners?

The research used the case study method, while the technique of choice was the interview, supplemented by the analysis of documents – personal background records part B. The research was conducted in the form of open, individual and non-categorized interviews (Pilch 1995, pp. 82–86). The studied women were informed about the objectives, object and nature of the study. The analysis of the research material performed by the author in this publication is a presentation of a snippet of the completed research.

The research was conducted in 2015 in the Correctional Facility No. 1 in Grudziądz, which is governed by the District Inspectorate of Prison Service in Bydgoszcz. It is a closed penitentiary facility with a semi-open penitentiary facility department and a remand prison for juvenile women who are serving a custodial sentence for the first time, and for recidivists. The Correctional Facility No. 1 in Grudziądz is also a semi-open correctional facility for men serving sentences for the first time, and for adolescents. The facility can hold a total of 1039 inmates, 26 of them in the Mother and Child Home and 13 in the Gynecological and Maternity Ward.

The research was conducted with each convict separately in a common room or residential cell without the use of a voice recorder, without the presence of an officer. It allowed to collect research material relating to the afflictions of the penalty of imprisonment experienced by women sentenced to long-term imprisonment.

The research subjects are women sentenced to long-term imprisonment. The necessary factor to qualify for the research was a sentence of 3 years imprisonment or longer, serving the sentence for the first time, in the system of programmed influence. Presented below is a short characteristic of the studied women:

- Marta – higher education – lawyer, sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment under art. 148 § 1 of the penal code, under art. 60 § 6 of the penal code. Serves her sentence in the Mother and Child Home. She has a husband and three minor children. She has been in the penitentiary facility since 2014, no passes.

- Klaudia – vocational education – small catering chef, sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment under art. 148 § 1 of the penal code. Serves her sentence in the Mother and Child Home. Single mother – one minor child. She has been in the penitentiary facility since 2010, no passes.
- Anna – vocational education – small catering chef. Sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment under art. 148 § 1 of the penal code. Widow, mother of two minor daughters. Her custodial rights are suspended and her children are living with a foster family – the parents of the prisoner. She has been in the penitentiary facility since 2009, no passes.
- Weronika – vocational education – small catering chef. Sentenced to 12 years and 6 months of imprisonment under art. 148 § 1 of the penal code. Divorced, has an adult, self-supporting son. She has been in the penitentiary facility since 2006, she is granted permission to temporarily leave the prison.

Analysis of own research

Affliction is an indispensable element of the penalty of imprisonment. The duress of functioning in this "completely different, parallel world" causes many difficulties for every individual. So, what are the afflictions of imprisonment for a woman who still has to spend many years in a penitentiary facility?

The research confirmed that, despite their long-term stay in prison, the convicted women constantly experience afflictions resulting from their prison sentences. The biggest hardship is the limited contact with their families and the outside world. Deprivation of emotional needs leads to a feeling of loneliness and powerlessness in the studied women. The studied women made the following observations regarding the afflictions associated with limited contact with their families:

"What I miss the most while I'm in prison is my family and freedom. But mostly my family. [...] I miss being able to just be near them at any time. [...] Apart from that, I've got no particular needs. You can get used to things. [...] Apart from my family, I have no one, and everybody who's here needs the support of their families. [...] In difficult situations I usually phone home, I have problems with coping on my own. [...] When something bad happens to your loved ones, you feel helpless" (Klaudia).

"When something bad happens to my loved ones, I cry. [...] I try to find legitimate excuses for myself. I cry, but in the end, I'm able to get a grip of myself. What can't be cured, must be endured" (Weronika).

"What I miss the most while I'm in the Penitentiary Facility is contact with my family during visits" (Anna).

Under the conditions of penitentiary isolation, the need for maternal love is particularly subjected to deprivation. The impossibility of active participation in the life of minor children results in fear and anxiety regarding their well-being in the respondents. The studied women experience a sense of guilt and shame, resulting from the knowledge that they have failed as mothers.

“When I get out of here, I want to spend more time with my family, to catch up. [...] I’d like to have a normal life because my life was awful. Have a happy, loving family and children smarter than their mom” (Klaudia).

“Children change so fast... I got a photo from my daughter’s first communion the other day you know, she’s changed so much... I couldn’t attend her first communion. They would only let me go with a convoy. How was I supposed to attend a communion ceremony with a convoy? I decided not to go at all, not to cause a stir. [...] My parents and my daughters bear a grudge against me, no wonder, I did take their father away. [...] What I’d like the most is to return to my children. Find a job and live with my children. [...] Be more present in my daughters’ lives. Maybe it’s strange, but that’d be an achievement for me” (Anna).

“I have very good relations with my children. And still, my younger daughter is jealous that my son is here with me, not her. My older daughter seems to understand it somehow. We try to bring them up together with my husband. I’m worried about my daughters, about their emotional deficiencies. Children should have their mother around” (Marta).

The studied women also feel deprived of autonomy. This affliction results from the prison personnel exerting power and control over them. No possibility of determining the course of their actions, obstacles in the pursuit of their established goals result in difficulties in normal functioning. The women indicate a feeling of incapacitation:

“I find it most difficult to fulfill the need of self-determination. Here, others decide even about such things as when I get to go for a walk with my child. [...] Being dependent on the decisions of the administration is very burdensome for me. I feel incapacitated, I can’t decide for myself or my child” (Marta).

“My hobby. I love figure ice skating and acrobatics. Here I can’t fulfill my passions” (Weronika).

Of particular note is the statement of one of the respondents, describing penitentiary isolation as “a different, parallel world”. For her, incarceration is nothing other than a long-term, complex difficult situation. The conditions encountered in the facility are completely different from those that she was used to. In fact, the respondent herself pointed out that the period of her stay in prison has affected her personality. She does indicate, however, that individuals who existed

in a similar environment before imprisonment find it easier to adapt to the conditions of the facility.

"I miss my family and normality the most. Regular, plain, everyday normality. Here, it's like a different parallel world. [...] My stay in the penitentiary facility changed everything in me. I had to abandon the life I've had up to this point and try to survive in a completely different, alien environment. Some people feel good here because they lived in similar conditions before incarceration. To me, everything is different here" (Marta).

Another affliction pointed out by the studied women is the inability to live in a community. The female prisoners mention a lack of trust towards the other inmates, and as a consequence, a lack of closer relationships. The inability to live in a community results in the occurrence of conflicts, which may, in turn, result in psychological and physical violence. The female prisoners complain about the lack of discretion and jealousy expressed by the other inmates. It should be pointed out that none of the studied women indicated any difficulties in communicating with the prison staff.

"cause you can't trust anyone here. I've been here long enough to know that. You can't say anything to the girls, they might use it against you, tell other people. [...] It is more difficult to communicate with the inmates than the administration. They're jealous, envious, they gossip all the time" (Klaudia).

"They're envious, vain. Here in the canteen, there are cosmetics and other things you need to take care of yourself. They won't go to work, earn money and buy some for themselves, instead, they're envious of those that can afford it" (Weronika).

"I don't approve of violence against other inmates. OK, you can have an argument, but beating each other up is too much. [...] I try to get along with everybody, but it's not always possible" (Anna).

The women sentenced to imprisonment at the Mother and Child Home indicate an affliction resulting from the necessity of 24-hour supervision of their children. They complain about no one helping them and fearing that other prisoners might hurt their children:

"The conflicts here mainly involve children. For example, one time a certain female prisoner yanked my little daughter, here in the drawing room, so I yanked her. It resulted in a conflict and a reprimand" (Klaudia).

"I can only entrust my child to two female colleagues here. There are simply no people here who would be good with children. We could use some help, to be able to rest for a moment and not to worry about leaving the child with the wrong person" (Marta).

It may seem surprising that all the studied women have declared that they do not feel threatened by the other inmates. They admit that as a result of their long-term stay in the penitentiary facility they have adapted to life in a prison community. Only one respondent confessed that she is afraid of losing her belongings:

"I'm afraid of theft. In here you can buy or sell anything for Pampers or cigarettes. There are female convicts who receive no packages and yet they have items to sell. Where did they get them? A lot of the girls steal things, you have to keep an eye on your stuff" (Marta).

"Maybe you feel threatened when you come here. I've been here for too long to be afraid of anything" (Weronika).

Imprisonment is also associated with being rejected by society on the outside. The studied women are afraid that they might have difficulties with re-adapting to the outside world. Furthermore, they realize that their stay in the penitentiary facility had a significant impact on their personalities. In addition, the distant perspective of completion of their sentences results in their future being uncertain:

"After all these years, I've gotten used to living here. I'm a little anxious about my release, but my family supports me, so I guess I'll be fine [...]. God, I wish I was out of here. I've spent so many years here already and there are still so many to go" (Klaudia).

"I have no colleagues or friends on the outside – some of them I've alienated myself, and some have alienated themselves from me. [...] I wish the outside world would accept me because that's where I belong. [...] It can't be changed or erased. It's obvious that I need to find a place for myself in society. Once I get out, I'll have to find a job, make things work somehow. I don't know how long will my dad will live" (Weronika).

"I have no friends on the outside, everyone's turned their backs on me, including my best friend. Since I've been here, I receive unpleasant messages from her, she does everything to bring me down. [...] I don't plan far ahead. There's still quite some time to serve here..." (Anna).

The female prisoners also indicate afflictions resulting from the functioning of the prison subculture, which in penitentiary institutions for women involves resolving the tension resulting from penitentiary isolation by getting emotionally and sexually involved with another woman. The studied women declared that they do not participate in the other life. Statements of the convicted women suggest that sexual deviations of the other inmates are a source of psychological distress for them:

"At first I was devastated. I was unable to function while sharing a cell with such individuals [...]. Because it's sick. I kept my distance" (Klaudia).

"I'm neutral when it comes to homosexual relationships, but they should keep it to themselves" (Anna).

"If you ask me, it's not normal. It's like a bestiality of sorts. I was a part of such company for a very short while. I quickly separated myself from them. It's disgusting" (Marta).

As the conducted research shows, penitentiary isolation results in numerous afflictions for the convicted women. In a situation of imprisonment, a woman encounters many difficult situations, causing changes in her personality and negatively affecting the effectiveness of the process of social rehabilitation.

Without a doubt, the most aggravating affliction experienced by long-serving female prisoners is the limited contact with their loved ones and the lack of direct care for their children. Deprivation of the basic emotional needs leads to a feeling of loneliness and helplessness, and as a consequence – behavioral disorders. Another affliction experienced by the female convicts is being deprived of autonomy. Penitentiary isolation has affected the personalities of the respondents, and it also deprived them of self-determination, which may result in the process of depersonalization. Constant control and coercion from the staff not only generate specific difficulties but can also have a negative impact on social re-adaptation. A recisely planned lifestyle, a lack of opportunity to perform various social roles, especially in long-serving female convicts, can result in passivity and social incapability after leaving the prison.

The female convicts who have been isolated in prison for the longest time do not feel threatened by the other female convicts, they declare that their long-term stay in prison has made them accustomed to the conditions there and they have accepted them. One should point out that they have succumbed to the process of prisonization. The concept of prisonization was developed by Donald Clemmer (Clemmer 1958). This American sociologist based his concept on the observation that, over time, the prisoner assimilates the customs, stereotypes, habits and general principles of the penal institution to a lesser or greater degree.

Still, the respondents indicate the afflictions involving the inability to live in a community. The difference in characters and tastes leads to conflicts between the female prisoners. The result is a lack of sense of belonging or having a trustworthy person in the institution. The affliction resulting from the necessity of functioning in the prison community may lead to the loss of self-esteem and distinctiveness, which results in selfish and egocentric attitudes among the prisoners.

It is also important to note that staying at the Mother and Child's Home does not affect the studied women when it comes to alleviating the afflictions resulting from the penalty of imprisonment. The respondents not only indicate the same afflictions, but they also mention others. They fear not so much for their own well-being, as the well-being of their children. The respondents fear for the safety of the children staying with them at the penitentiary institution, since the

other inmates may hurt them. The female prisoners also indicate that differing upbringing methods are a source of numerous conflicts, leading to psychological and physical violence. On one hand, the women do appreciate the possibility of playing the role of a mother, but on the other, they indicate that the need to provide constant care for their children results in them feeling psychologically exhausted.

In the case of the women studied, it is particularly necessary to take advantage of the possibilities of them serving their sentences in the system of programmed influence. Serving a sentence in this system involves the preparation of an Individual Influence Program for the prisoner, i.e. the construction of a diagnosis, the definition of objectives and specific tasks, and the selection of methods of working on deficits, i.e. continuous co-operation of the convicts with the penitentiary staff. The prison staff should, above all, encourage the female prisoners to maintain and continuously reinforce family relationships. These are the only people from whom the respondents receive support. According to the personal background reports, the women come from functional families and their members have a good influence on them, which is extremely important in the process of social rehabilitation. The respondents who have minor children should be directed to such forms of influence that will primarily aim at shaping their parenting skills and reinforcing a sense of responsibility, as well as their moral development. It is also important to help the respondents in developing attainable targets and life plans. The prison staff should constantly motivate them to improve their professional qualifications and participate in activities that enable them to activate and develop their interests. Such activities should not only be of an individual but also of a group nature. Furthermore, the respondents should be encouraged to participate in community work at the ward. There is also a need for more effective pedagogical supervision over those women serving their sentence at the Mother and Child's Home that pose a threat to the children of other inmates. This will help to alleviate the afflictions resulting from isolation and have a positive effect on the effectiveness of the social rehabilitation process.

The research shows that penitentiary isolation has had a different impact on each of the women. One should remember that an individual is placed in a penitentiary facility not only to isolate them from society but also to subject them to corrective and social rehabilitation activities, and to provide appropriate and decent conditions for their functioning. In the case of prisoners serving long sentences, it is important for the penitentiary staff to limit the punitive function of the penalty of imprisonment to a minimum. This will help to alleviate the afflictions suffered by this category of prisoners, and in turn, it will favorably affect the educational conditions and bring about the maximum efficiency of the penalty of imprisonment.

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