

CLEAN START: CREATING SECOND CHANCES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN KENYA

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Teresa Garcia Castro¹

Clean Start is a social enterprise led by women who have been in prison in Kenya. This organization—unique for Africa—aims at restoring hope, dignity, and self-confidence to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and girls, while breaking the cycles of poverty, crime, and recidivism. Clean Start works with women and children impacted by the criminal justice system so that they can successfully reenter society. Clean Start's reintegration vision starts inside prisons with their Spear Program and Circles of Healing, which aim to equip women and girls with life skills, education, and vocational training for their lives after prison. In addition, Clean Start provides second chances to women and girls leaving prison through the Overcomers peer-led group and Tables of Support. These pre-and post-release programs support women as they return to their communities, provide livelihood opportunities for formerly incarcerated women and girls, and, according to Clean Start, have reduced recidivism rates.

Context and Description

Women and girls are being incarcerated at concerning rates in Kenya. According to the 2020 Economic Survey, currently there are around 22,213 women in the Kenyan prison system, including those who have been sentenced and those in pretrial detention.² Clean Start reports that most of these women have little or no education, live in conditions of poverty or extreme poverty, and are single mothers who are the breadwinners for their families. This sometimes leaves them with no option but getting involved in low-level and non-violent offenses including brewing and selling illicit alcohol, aiding civil disobedience, tax evasion, theft, hawking groceries and clothes on the street, assault, and drug-related activities.³ Liquor-related offenses are the primary cause of women's incarceration in Kenya.⁴

Women behind bars in Kenya face numerous challenges, including inadequate prison infrastructure, unsanitary conditions, lack of access to education or vocational training, and lack of support for the transition between life in prison and life post-incarceration. As a result, women face economic, social, and legal difficulties in re-entering society. These include solitude and abandonment, discrimination and stigma, lack of psychological support, lack of necessary skills and education to seek employment, and problems in finding housing. Moreover, they often face stigmatization and rejection from their families and communities. For many women, getting out of prison is harder than getting in.

To address some of these challenges, Teresa Njoroge, a formerly incarcerated woman, and Joss Carruthers founded Clean Start in 2015. Clean Start—a unique project in the African continent—is a social enterprise led



Meeting of formerly incarcerated women organised by Clean Start in Nairobi. Credit: Clean Start

by formerly incarcerated women based in Nairobi, Kenya. Their goal is to support women as they leave prison, enabling them to break cycles of poverty and imprisonment through access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship. Clean Start works with women inside the prisons through their Spear Program and Circles of Healing, and supports them in their post-incarceration reintegration through the Overcomers group and the Tables of Support.

The **Spear Program**, licensed in the United Kingdom, helps young people in conditions of vulnerability to find work or education by equipping them with the skills they need to succeed in long-term employment. Through this program, Clean Start provides six weeks of coaching in three correctional institutions: Langata Women Maximum Security Prison, Dagoretti Girls' Rehabilitation School, and Kamae Girls' Borstal Institution. The Spear Program's goal is to develop skills including confidence building, conflict resolution, time management, teamwork, and preparing for job interviews.

Clean Start's vision for women's reentry includes three other components: Circles of Healing, the Overcomers group, and Tables of Support. This transition process consists of reestablishing family ties, reuniting mothers with their children, and finding vocational training and work opportunities for the women and girls after they leave prison.

Initiated in 2020, the **Circles of Healing** provide a peer-led safe space for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women to come together and heal, get psycho-social support, and build coping pathways and resilience. The Circles of Healing bring together 15 to 20 women when they are still in prison to help them plan for their lives upon release. Once they go back to their communities, the women join Circles of Healing on

"Through Spear, I have learned to be strong and have self-belief; to be confident and avoid negativity. I have learned that different people have different perceptions; to have a power mentality and to be responsible. I have also learned the causes of conflicts and ways of managing conflicts."

17-year-old participant in the Spear Program

the outside and the accompaniment continues. Currently, Clean Start has operational Circles in the Langata Women's Prison, Nyeri Women's Prison, and Machakos Women's Prison. In addition, the reintegration into society is supported by peer mentorship groups, known as the Overcomers.

The **Overcomers** is a group of around 100 formerly incarcerated women and men from different parts of the country who provide support to one another. The meetings include

"Once out of prison life is not easy; you find life moved on and nothing is the same, even your family feels different. You are stigmatized and as a mother, you feel different as well. You do not know where to start because there is no money. I did not let this bring me down. I started a business of baking cakes and making mandazis (donuts), and selling them until I was able to open a small eatery near Catholic University of Eastern Africa, where I specialize in Swahili dishes."

Woman Overcomer

training on specific issues—taken from the Spear Program—including communication tools for conflict resolution, building resilience, maintaining motivation, how to deal with failure, anger management, and handling the disclosure of a criminal record. In addition, they have created networks of solidarity and communications via WhatsApp groups where they share job advertisements. The Overcomers have joined their voices and created a movement for, and led by, formerly incarcerated people to advocate for: 1) creating second chances for formerly incarcerated people; 2) breaking down stigmatization around incarceration and; 3) supporting formerly incarcerated people to find employment.

Tables of Support make up the final component of the transition program. This

intervention provides formerly incarcerated women with entrepreneurship training, life skills development, and business opportunities so that they can have a sustainable livelihood. Clean Start works with a range of partners in the communities including the private sector, faith-based organizations, and civil society to identify training, apprenticeship, and work opportunities for formerly incarcerated people. In addition, Clean Start provides a seed fund of US\$150 to women leaving prison.

Results and Impact

Clean Start's programs are relatively new and measuring their impact is a challenge; nonetheless, these interventions constitute a promising experience, and one that is unique in Africa as it is led by formerly incarcerated women. Over the last five years, Clean Start has supported 3,439 incarcerated women, including with spiritual and emotional care, mentorship, and life skills training.⁵ The Circles of Healing have provided safe, peer-led spaces for 108 women to enhance their self-esteem, foster reconciliation, and to get psychosocial and trauma-healing support.⁶ In addition, the Tables of Support have assisted over 500 formerly incarcerated women with education, training, and access to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.⁷ After their release from prison, women work at or try to open second-hand clothes stores, beauty salons, restaurants, and grocery stores, among others. Most of them join the Overcomers support group, which builds community, fights stigma and discrimination against formerly incarcerated people, and provides a space for them to advocate for systematic change in the criminal justice system.

According to information provided by Clean Start, to date these programs have reduced recidivism rates by up to 98% among the women. They hope to expand these programs to

all of the 36 women’s prisons in Kenya and establish the Circles of Healing outside prison in all of the country’s 47 counties.

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Endnotes

1. Senior Program Associate at the Washington Office on Latin America.
2. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Economic Survey (2020), 314, <https://africaopendata.org/dataset/kenya-economic-survey-report-2020>
3. Ibid, 330.
4. Ibid, 316.
5. Clean Start, Impact (Accessed on September, 2020), <https://cleanstartkenya.org/impact-2/>
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

This series aims to share examples of innovative approaches that incorporate a gender perspective and the principles of public health and human rights into drug policy. Such innovations will have the best possible outcomes only when they are accompanied by more fundamental drug law and policy reform. However, in the absence of broader reforms, or carried out in conjunction with such reforms, these innovations can help break the vicious cycles of poverty, social exclusion, drug use, involvement in the drug trade, and incarceration that plague so many poor communities across the Americas today. Global Innovative Approaches is a tool that accompanies the publication [Women, Drug Policies and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).