



Prisoners' and Prison Staff's Perceptions of the Role and Experiences of Vocational Training in Rehabilitation in Tanzania

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Abstract: Despite the growing policy emphasis on correctional rehabilitation in Tanzania, former prisoners continue to face pervasive post-release challenges, including unemployment, social exclusion, and inadequate vocational skills. To address these concerns, this study investigated prisoners' and prison staff's perceptions of the role and operational experiences of vocational training programs in facilitating skills development and social reintegration within selected Tanzanian prisons. Employing a concurrent explanatory mixed-methods design, quantitative data were gathered from 100 current inmates via structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 8 post-release prisoners and 8 key informants (vocational trainers and correctional officers), complemented by focus group discussions. Descriptive statistics were utilized for quantitative analysis, whereas qualitative narratives were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis. The findings reveal that current vocational offerings, spanning trades such as tailoring, carpentry, welding, and agriculture are aligned with national certification frameworks and yield substantial psychological transformation, enhanced self-reliance, improved discipline, and heightened self-confidence among inmates. However, program effectiveness remains constrained by resource scarcity, limited trade diversity, and partial alignment with prisoners' interests. Furthermore, while post-release individuals actively leverage acquired skills, their successful community re-entry is severely hindered by social stigma, a lack of startup capital, and inadequate post-release support frameworks. The study concludes that while vocational training is vital for correctional rehabilitation, its long-term impact requires systemic reform. Consequently, the study recommends modernizing training infrastructure, expanding trade curricula, strengthening multi-sectoral partnerships, and institutionalizing comprehensive post-release transition mechanisms.

Keywords: Vocational training, Prison rehabilitation, Social reintegration, Tanzanian prisons

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1. Introduction

Contemporary penological philosophy has shifted decisively from retributive punishment toward offender rehabilitation and sustainable social reintegration (UNODC, 2015). Central to this reformative paradigm is correctional vocational training, which operates on the

premise that imparting market-relevant technical skills economically empowers incarcerated individuals, mitigates recidivism, and contributes to broader national development (Becker, 1993; Tripodi et al., 2010). Globally with documented cases across diverse jurisdictions such as Hong Kong, South Sudan, Malawi, and Zambia prison-based training in trades like carpentry, tailoring, welding, agriculture, and automotive mechanics has proven

effective in enhancing post-release employability and fostering prosocial re-entry.

In Tanzania, correctional administration is governed by the Prisons Act of 1967, which mandates the Tanzania Prisons Service (TPS) to balance secure custody with behavioral reform. To operationalize this dual mandate and support national initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty and unemployment key structural drivers of criminal behavior (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2021) TPS has partnered with institutional bodies including the Vocational Educational and Training Authority (VETA) and the Institute of Adult Education (IAE). Through these collaborations, prisoners receive instruction in certified trades, equipping them with formal credentials intended to facilitate post-release self-reliance and civic contribution. Beyond individual skill acquisition, this approach aligns with global human rights and development frameworks, notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals targeting decent work (SDG 8) and peaceful, inclusive institutions (SDG 16) (United Nations, 2015).

However, significant operational and empirical challenges obscure the full impact of these programs. Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that while prison training builds self-confidence, dignity, and practical capabilities (Davis et al., 2013; Mbatha et al., 2020; Boateng et al., 2025), implementation is severely hindered by infrastructural deficits, obsolete equipment, restricted program access, and a lack of post-release support mechanisms (ILO, 2019; Kitta & Mgaya, 2020). In the Tanzanian context, despite a robust legal and policy intent, there remains a critical dearth of rigorous, contemporary empirical research evaluating how effectively these vocational initiatives translate into sustained post-release employment and reduced reoffending rates (Mbang'o, 1997; Msoroka et al., 2020). Addressing this empirical gap is essential to refining correctional policy and bridging the divide between rehabilitation theory and post-custodial reality.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Internationally, correctional institutions are increasingly conceptualized as sites for rehabilitation, with vocational training serving as a pivotal mechanism for enhancing inmate employability and curbing recidivism (Davis et al., 2013). Nations such as Norway, the United States, and Japan have successfully institutionalized technical, agricultural, and technological programs, demonstrating tangible socio-economic benefits for both former offenders and society at large (Petersilia, 2019; Mbatha et al., 2020). In a similar vein, the Tanzania Prisons Service has implemented vocational offerings including tailoring, carpentry, agriculture, and mechanics yet the empirical

efficacy of these initiatives in fostering successful post-release rehabilitation remains ambiguous.

Because the outcomes of prison-based vocational training vary considerably across structural contexts, there is a critical need to evaluate how Tanzanian correctional facilities deliver skill-building programs, the systemic hurdles encountered, and the precise mechanisms meant to facilitate successful community re-entry (Mbang'o, 1997; Msoroka et al., 2020). Indeed, scholarly consensus underscores that former prisoners frequently grapple with persistent unemployment, social marginalization, and high rates of reoffending, thereby calling into question the transformative capacity of current correctional curricula (Visser & Travis, 2011; Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Kitta & Mgaya, 2020). Former inmates consistently struggle to secure formal employment or launch viable income-generating ventures upon release (Kitta & Mgaya, 2020), underscoring the pressing necessity to investigate how Tanzanian prisons support vocational development and identify the operational bottlenecks limiting their success.

This urgency is compounded by a stark empirical deficit within Tanzania regarding the real-world utility, pedagogical quality, and long-term relevance of prison-based trade skills. Like many correctional systems across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Tanzanian penal system is overburdened by severe overcrowding, acute resource constraints, and elevated recidivism rates (Human Rights Organization, 2021; Law Reform Commission of Tanzania, 2022). Consequently, while the Tanzania Prisons Service formally emphasizes rehabilitation as a core strategic mandate, the practical impact of its vocational schemes in equipping inmates with market-aligned, sustainable skills remains unverified. Without robust empirical evidence to illuminate these dynamics, correctional administrators and policymakers lack the baseline insights necessary to make informed, evidence-based program refinements.

Questions remain about how do prisoners and prison staff perceive the role and experiences of vocational training programs in skills development and reintegration? This implies that this study addresses an important gap on perceived effectiveness of these skill-building programs, and it attempts to find out whether they really are a vehicle of vocational empowerment or are mere institutional habit.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature regarding prison-based vocational training across global, regional, and national contexts. The review examines the operational mechanics of vocational programs, stakeholder

perceptions, inmate experiences, and post-release reintegration outcomes.

2.1 Vocational Training in Prisons

Globally, vocational training is recognized as a cornerstone of penal rehabilitation, serving a dual function: imparting technical expertise and cultivating self-esteem while reducing constructive idleness (Farabee et al., 2007). Comprehensive correctional frameworks particularly in jurisdictions such as Norway, Germany, Sweden, the United States, Canada, and Australia integrate vocational instruction with formal education, professional mentorship, and structured post-release support (Davis et al., 2013; UNODC, 2018; Johnsen et al., 2020). By equipping inmates with industry-recognized certifications, technical proficiencies, and positive work ethics, these programs significantly enhance post-custodial employability, bolster economic productivity, and lower recidivism, providing vital benchmarks for developing penal systems (Cullen & Jonson, 2017; Harding et al., 2019).

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, correctional facilities increasingly embrace vocational empowerment as a core rehabilitative strategy, despite operating under severe structural constraints such as systemic underfunding, chronic overcrowding, and inadequate infrastructure (Agomoh, 2021). Countries including South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have established training schemes in carpentry, tailoring, welding, agriculture, and micro-entrepreneurship. Empirical evidence indicates these initiatives build self-reliance, technical competence, and personal agency among inmates (Odirile & Makhubele, 2015; Agaba, 2019). Nevertheless, the broader impact of these programs remains constrained by outdated equipment, resource scarcity, weak labor-market integration, and lingering societal stigma (Mushi, 2020).

In Tanzania, the legal mandate for prisoner reform through education and labor is enshrined in the Prison Act of 1967 (Government of Tanzania, 1967). Facilities such as Ukonga, Butimba, and delivered in partnership with the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) and the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NACTVET) (Tanzania Prisons Service, 2021). While these certified programs enhance inmates' practical capabilities and self-worth, operational efficacy is continually undermined by shortages of raw training materials, obsolete tooling, a lack of certified instructors, low inmate literacy, and weak post-release transition frameworks (Muganyizi, 2022). Addressing these systemic gaps requires coordinated policy interventions, expanded inter-agency partnerships, and sustained infrastructure investment.

2.2 Perceptions of Prisoners and Prison Staff on Vocational Programs

Inmates generally view vocational training as an invaluable conduit for acquiring marketable skills, restoring self-regard, and building post-release employability (Petersilia, 2019; Mbatha, 2020). However, inmate enthusiasm and participation rates fluctuate based on personal background and pre-incarceration exposure. Individuals with limited prior formal education or low literacy often experience vocational training as a transformative turning point that instills a renewed sense of purpose (Chikadzi, 2020; Muasya, 2021). Conversely, inmates possessing prior trade experience may perceive basic training modules as repetitive or obsolete, leading to disengagement when curricula fail to offer advanced instruction or clear links to post-release employment (Kang'ethe & Muthomi, 2021).

Correctional personnel broadly conceptualize vocational programs as strategic tools for promoting institutional discipline, managing inmate behavior, and fostering long-term rehabilitation (Nalinya & Okech, 2020). In institutional cultures where rehabilitative goals take precedence, officers actively support and facilitate inmate participation (Sloan & Wright, 2021). However, in overstretched or severely under-resourced facilities, staff are often forced to prioritize basic security containment over educational programming, thereby restricting training hours and access (Omede & Omede, 2018). Furthermore, staff perceptions are tempered by skepticism regarding whether societal stigma and employer discrimination will prevent former inmates from successfully entering the formal workforce (Aday & Farley, 2022).

Analyzing the dynamic interplay between inmate motivations and staff perceptions enables policymakers to design context-responsive correctional curricula. By investigating these dual perspectives within Tanzanian prisons via structured questionnaires and qualitative interviews, this study yields actionable insights for optimizing resource allocation, expanding specialized staff development, fostering community partnerships, and establishing formal post-release support networks (Bales & Piquero, 2019).

2.3 Prisoners' Lived Experiences and Motivations in Vocational Training

Inmates' decision to enroll in vocational training is driven by a desire for practical skill acquisition, formal certification, personal growth, and restored dignity (Davis et al., 2013; Mbatha et al., 2020). Beyond technical instruction, participation yields substantial psychosocial benefits: it mitigates custodial idleness, reduces

depression, and fosters pro-social behaviors such as teamwork, accountability, and emotional regulation (Blomberg et al., 2000; Ndivhuwo & Ndivho, 2025). These collaborative learning environments allow incarcerated individuals to reconstruct their personal identities, transition away from criminal mindsets, and plan constructively for post-custodial life.

Inmate engagement is heavily contingent upon perceived program relevance and tangible post-release utility (Petersilia, 2019). When inmates recognize that trade qualifications align with labor-market demand and carry formal recognition from external accreditation bodies, their motivation and retention rates increase significantly. Conversely, when facilities suffer from dilapidated workshops, insufficient raw materials, and overcrowded learning spaces, inmate disengagement rises (Boateng et al., 2025). Sustainable skill mastery ultimately depends on institutional environments that combine well-equipped workshops and qualified instructors with clear pathways to post-release employment (Ndivhuwo & Ndivho, 2025).

2.4 Post-Prisoners' Experiences and Community Reintegration

Following release, former inmates frequently acknowledge that prison-acquired technical skills, work ethics, and trade certifications provide a essential foundation for self-employment or formal job placement (Schultz, 1971). Having recognized credentials enhances confidence and provides economic self-reliance, serving as a critical protective factor against reoffending.

Despite the intrinsic value of trade skills, ex-offenders encounter severe external barriers during community re-entry. Pervasive social stigma, a lack of startup capital or tools, absent credit access, and minimal institutional follow-up often obstruct smooth economic transition. Consequently, while vocational training is an indispensable catalyst for behavioral reform and self-sufficiency, its ultimate success requires ongoing community support, multi-sectoral partnerships, and structured post-release transition frameworks.

Generally, the recognized theoretical and practical value of prison-based vocational training in promoting rehabilitation, a critical empirical and operational gap persists within the Tanzanian correctional context. While global literature highlights the success of integrated trade models, existing programs in Tanzanian prisons are heavily constrained by systemic bottlenecks including acute resource deficits, outdated machinery, narrow trade selections, and minimal alignment with modern labor

market dynamics which limit program depth and fail to cater to diverse inmate skill levels.

Crucially, a major post-custodial failure exists: despite acquiring basic trade competencies, ex-offenders face severe re-entry hurdles, such as persistent social stigma, a complete lack of startup capital or equipment, and absent post-release support systems that render economic self-reliance difficult to sustain. Furthermore, there is a distinct empirical knowledge gap regarding how the combined perceptions and lived experiences of current inmates, prison personnel, and post-release individuals directly impact program effectiveness and long-term reintegration outcomes. Without context-specific research evaluating these operational bottlenecks, stakeholder perspectives, and post-custodial realities, policymakers and correctional administrators lack the empirical evidence required to reform prison vocational training into a truly effective, market-aligned engine for rehabilitation and recidivism reduction.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in established theories of Rehabilitation Theory of Punishment and human development, which together provide the conceptual and logical foundation for the proposed intervention. Specifically, the framework integrates the Rehabilitation Theory of Punishment and Human Capital Theory. While Rehabilitation Theory establishes the normative rationale for *why* correctional facilities must focus on reforming incarcerated individuals, Human Capital Theory articulates *how* vocational instruction operationalizes this transformation through targeted skills acquisition. Integrated into a unified framework, these complementary perspectives support the core thesis: that structured vocational programming in Tanzanian prisons drives behavioral modification, enhances post-release employability, and facilitates sustainable social reintegration.

2.5.1 Rehabilitation Theory of Punishment

Rooted in early positivist criminology—tracing back to Cesare Lombroso (1876) and subsequent 19th- and 20th-century reformist scholars, the Rehabilitation Theory posits that the primary objective of incarceration should extend beyond mere retributive punishment to encompass offender reform, addressing the underlying drivers of criminal behavior, and preparing individuals for community re-entry (Cullen & Jonson, 2017). The theory assumes that delinquent behavior is largely a product of complex socio-economic and psychological factors rather than innate criminality. Consequently, offenders retain the

capacity for reform when provided with structured education, therapeutic interventions, and vocational development (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Grounded in the premise that confinement alone is insufficient to curb reoffending, the model advocates for transforming penal institutions into constructive environments for personal growth and social rehabilitation (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Vocational training represents a direct operationalization of Rehabilitation Theory. Imparting practical, market-relevant trades, such as carpentry, tailoring, welding, and agriculture equips incarcerated individuals with the technical competencies needed to achieve economic self-reliance upon release (Davis et al., 2013). Beyond hard technical skills, these programs instill work ethics, discipline, and structured routines, fostering positive behavioral adjustments and emotional maturity (Latessa & Lovins, 2019). Within this study, Rehabilitation Theory guides the investigation into how vocational interventions influence personal growth, employability, and post-custodial outcomes. Crucially, the theory frames the study's variable conceptualization, Independent Variable: The prison vocational training framework (curriculum design, trade selection, and delivery), Intervening Variables: Operational barriers and structural constraints (resource deficits, outdated equipment, and societal stigma), and Dependent Variables: Rehabilitative outcomes (reduced recidivism, successful social reintegration, enhanced self-esteem, and post-release employment) (Cullen et al., 2021).

2.5.2 Human Capital Theory

This study is theoretically grounded in Human Capital Theory, pioneered by Schultz (1961) and further refined by Becker (1964). The framework posits that targeted investments in education, training, and skill development enhance individual productivity, thereby driving broader societal advancement. From this perspective, a person's knowledge, expertise, and practical capabilities function as assets that can be systematically developed to improve economic and developmental outcomes.

Applied to correctional environments, Human Capital Theory highlights the importance of equipping inmates with practical capabilities to boost their post-release employability, earning potential, and long-term socio-economic reintegration (Schultz, 1971). Through its vocational training initiatives, the Tanzania Prisons Service (TPS) actively invests in the human capital of incarcerated individuals. Acquiring marketable skills mitigates financial insecurity and diminishes the economic drivers that frequently lead to reoffending upon release. Fundamentally, the theory assumes that human capabilities are adaptable and that structured training serves as a key

catalyst for personal empowerment and economic participation.

Complementing this economic perspective, the study integrates Rehabilitation Theory, which maintains that penal institutions should prioritize offender reform rather than mere retribution (Cullen & Jonson, 2017). This framework argues that punitive measures alone are insufficient to deter crime; instead, sustainable reductions in recidivism require structured opportunities for offenders to address the underlying drivers of criminal behavior through skill acquisition and personal development (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Within Tanzanian prisons, vocational programs operationalize these rehabilitative goals by fostering self-confidence, personal discipline, and social responsibility among participants.

Synthesizing both frameworks provides a robust conceptual foundation for examining correctional vocational programs. While Human Capital Theory explains the pathways toward job readiness, financial independence, and economic stability, Rehabilitation Theory accounts for internal behavioral shifts, personal transformation, and crime desistance. In the Tanzanian context, these theories collectively demonstrate how incarceration can be transformed into an opportunity for individual empowerment and social progress, while serving to structure the study's key variables against post-release outcomes.

Despite providing a strong justification for prison-based skill development, this theoretical integration has notable limitations. Specifically, it tends to prioritize economic outcomes while underestimating social and psychological dimensions. Additionally, it operates on the assumption of favorable labor market absorption, frequently overlooking systemic post-release barriers such as societal stigma and employment discrimination against former offenders.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of vocational empowerment within Tanzanian correctional facilities. The study utilized an explanatory design, systematically connecting quantitative findings with qualitative depth.

In the quantitative phase, structured questionnaires were administered to a sample of incarcerated individuals to establish broad empirical trends. This phase gathered

measurable data regarding vocational skills acquisition, pre- and post-training self-efficacy levels, and overall perceptions of empowerment.

Following the preliminary analysis of the survey data, the qualitative phase was conducted to examine the underlying mechanisms, lived experiences, and contextual explanations behind the statistical patterns. Through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a subset of survey respondents, vocational trainers, and prison administrative staff, this phase explored the "how" and "why" of the quantitative outcomes.

By synthesizing both paradigms, the study bridges broad, measurable metrics with rich narrative insights, offering a holistic and contextually grounded evaluation of vocational empowerment in prison settings.

3.2 Research Design

A concurrent explanatory mixed-methods design was used. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected during the same phase (concurrently), analyzed separately, and then integrated to explain, confirm, or enrich the overall findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). After separate analyses, the findings are compared and integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative findings help explain or provide context for the quantitative results, while the quantitative findings indicate the magnitude, patterns, or relationships among variables.

Unlike a purely quantitative or qualitative study, this design combines the strengths of both approaches while saving time by collecting data simultaneously. The main aim is to use qualitative data to explain, elaborate on, or add context to quantitative findings. This implies the results from both parts were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of how vocational training contributes to inmate empowerment

3.3 Study Area

The research was conducted across selected correctional facilities in Tanzania characterized by active, well-established vocational training programs. In Tanzanian prison facilities represent diverse geographical contexts and offer a comprehensive spectrum of trade disciplines, such as carpentry, tailoring, welding, masonry, electrical installation, vehicle mechanics, metalwork, cleaning and decoration, and agricultural enterprise.

The selection of these specific correctional sites was guided by several methodological and operational criteria. Primarily, these facilities maintain structured vocational units, dedicated instructional staff, and systematic record-keeping systems, providing direct access to key informants and institutional data. Furthermore, their pronounced institutional emphasis on rehabilitation and high concentration of enrolled inmates ensured the collection of rich, reliable, and contextualized data regarding skill acquisition, program implementation, and prisoner empowerment.

3.4 Target population

The target population for this study comprises three key stakeholder groups: incarcerated trainee-prisoners, correctional instructional staff, and post-release ex-prisoners.

First, the population includes current prisoners who are actively enrolled in or have completed a prison-based vocational training program within the last two years. This two-year temporal boundary minimizes recall bias, ensures alignment with contemporary curricula, and maintains participant accessibility while controlling for external confounding variables. Second, the study targets prison officers and vocational instructors directly involved in program administration and trade delivery. Their inclusion provides essential institutional perspectives on operational challenges, curriculum implementation, and pedagogical efficacy, serving to cross-validate self-reported inmate data.

Third, the population incorporates post-release former prisoners who have been reintegrated into the community for a minimum of six months. This six-month post-custodial threshold is strategically chosen to assess the durable, long-term outcomes of vocational empowerment on employability, economic stability, and social re-entry (Petersilia, 2019). Ultimately, the true efficacy of correctional training lies in post-release application; this duration provides a sufficient timeframe to evaluate former inmates' real-world efforts to secure employment, establish self-sustaining livelihoods, and avoid recidivism.

3.4.1 Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling strategy was used. Correctional facilities were selected based on the criterion of having established vocational training programs in terms of vocational colleges. Purposive selection was used to select three prisons and 50 prisoners for each prison. From the quantitative sample, a subset of 50 prisoners in each prison was selected to capture a wide range of variations in trade

skills, sentence lengths, and ages. Additionally, 08 vocational trainers and prison welfare officers were chosen for in-depth interviews. 02 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 6 participants each were also conducted with prisoners.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

3.5.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with vocational trainers and prison officers, as well as post-prisoners, to gather in-depth qualitative insights. Interview guides addressed topics such as motivations for joining vocational programs, challenges faced during participation, perceived changes in confidence, hope, and employability, as well as the adequacy of resources and institutional support. The semi-structured format provides flexibility, allowing respondents to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that all key themes are explored systematically (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, contrasts, and unique perspectives related to vocational empowerment.

3.5.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions were conducted with selected groups of prisoners to explore collective views on the empowerment process, interactions in training workshops, and institutional support mechanisms. FGDs allow participants to discuss experiences collaboratively, highlighting social dynamics, shared challenges, and group-level insights that may not emerge in individual interviews. A discussion guide directed the conversations while allowing flexibility for participants to voice opinions and build on each other's experiences. Data from FGDs were then transcribed and analyzed thematically, complementing individual interview data to provide a richer understanding of the social and interpersonal dimensions of prison-based vocational training (Morgan, 1996).

The combination of structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and FGDs ensured data triangulation, enhancing both the credibility and depth of the findings. While quantitative data from questionnaires provides measurable evidence of skills acquisition, perceptions, and outcomes, qualitative data from interviews and FGDs offer contextual understanding, personal experiences, and institutional insights. Together, these methods created a robust data collection framework capable of addressing the study's objectives regarding

vocational empowerment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of Tanzanian prisoners.

3.6 Research Trustworthiness

To enhance validity, the study employed multiple strategies. Content validity is ensured by designing questionnaires, interview guides, and FGD protocols based on extensive literature on prison vocational training, rehabilitation, and skill development (Mbatha et al., 2020; Boateng et al., 2025). Experts in correctional education and vocational training were consulted to review the instruments, ensuring that all relevant dimensions of the vocational framework, challenges, and outcomes are captured.

Construct validity was addressed by clearly operationalizing variables: the vocational framework as the independent variable, challenges as intervening variables, and outcomes such as recidivism reduction, employability, and inmate well-being as dependent variables (Msoroka, Findsen, & Barnes, 2020). Triangulation across multiple data sources, interviews with post-release prisoners, interviews with prison staff, a questionnaire, and FGDs with current prisoners, and a documentary review of prison records and training reports, enhances validity by cross-verifying information.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research methodology encompass the moral principles and administrative protocols required to preserve scholarly integrity while safeguarding the rights, dignity, and welfare of human participants—a duty that carries heightened significance when engaging vulnerable populations such as incarcerated individuals. To ensure institutional compliance and ethical oversight, official research clearance was formally secured from St John's University of Tanzania (SJUT) and the Tanzania Prisons Service (TPS) Headquarters prior to field deployment. Grounded in the foundational ethical principles of respect for persons and distributive justice, the study design prioritized participant autonomy while ensuring a fair distribution of research risks and benefits, specifically guarding against the exploitation of institutionalized or socio-economically marginalized groups.

Operationalizing these ethical commitments involved rigorous participant protection procedures centered on informed consent, confidentiality, and harm minimization. Participants were comprehensively briefed regarding the study's objectives, methodology, potential risks, and anticipated benefits, after which voluntary written informed consent was obtained with explicit assurances

that non-participation or withdrawal would carry no negative institutional consequences. To guarantee strict anonymity and data privacy, all personal identifying details were removed from research records and replaced with standardized alphanumeric codes or pseudonyms. Furthermore, in adherence to the principle of non-maleficence ("do no harm"), data collection instruments and interviewing protocols were sensitively structured to prevent psychological distress, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all respondents throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses findings of the study including demographic characteristics of the respondents.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Prisoners-Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of prisoners’ respondents, including age, gender, education level, length of incarceration, and vocational skills. These characteristics are important in understanding participation patterns and the effectiveness of vocational training programs. The demographic characteristics of the remaining categories of respondents were not collected because they were not directly relevant to addressing the study objectives. This assisted in minimizing unnecessary data collection and reducing respondent burden (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

4.1.1 Age Distribution of Prisoners’ Respondents

This study explored the age of prisoner respondents because age influences criminal behavior, rehabilitation needs, and reintegration outcomes, helping researchers and policymakers develop age-appropriate correctional interventions (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

Table 1: Age Distribution (n = 100)

Age Group	Frequency	Percent (%)
21–30	26	26.0
31–40	38	38.0
41–50	27	27.0
51+	9	9.0
Total	100	100

Source: Field data,2026

The majority of prisoners’ respondents (38%) were aged 31–40 years, followed by 41–50 years (27%) and 21–30 years (26%), while only 9% were aged above 50. The dominance of economically active age groups (21–50 years) suggests that vocational training programs target individuals with high potential for workforce participation after release. This finding aligns with studies indicating that younger and middle-aged prisoners are more likely to benefit from rehabilitation programs due to their longer post-release working life (Okolie et al., 2022). It also supports the argument that vocational training can significantly contribute to reducing recidivism among productive age groups (ILO, 2023). Therefore, the findings suggest that equipping prisoners with vocational skills

enhances their opportunities for self-employment, personal transformation, and social reintegration, thereby reducing the likelihood of reoffending after release.

4.1.2 Gender Distribution

Examining the gender of prisoner respondents is important because it helps identify gender-specific differences in offending patterns, rehabilitation needs, and prison experiences, thereby supporting the development of more effective and gender-responsive correctional policies and programs (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

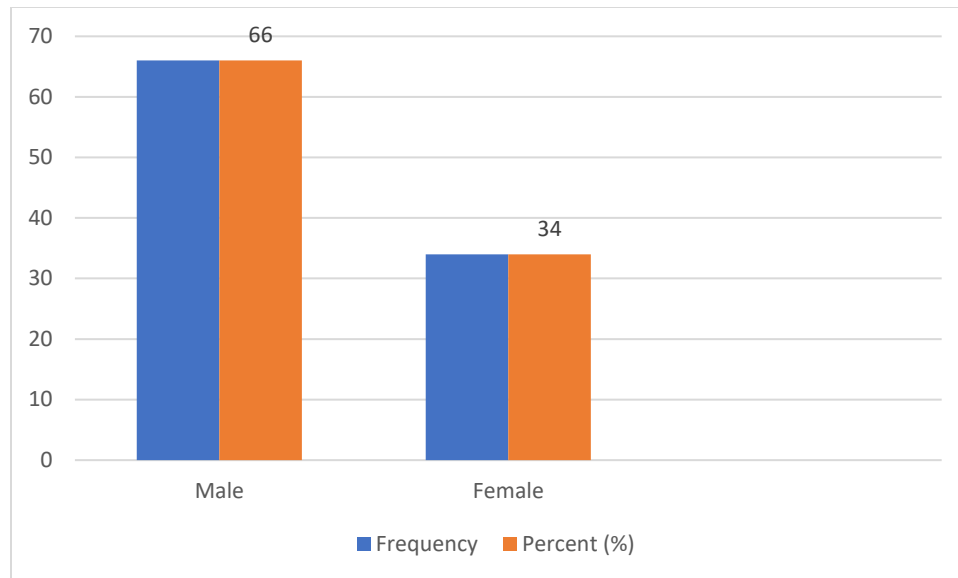


Figure 1: Gender Distribution (n = 100)

Source: Field data, 2026

Male respondents constituted the majority (66%), while females accounted for 34%. The higher proportion of male participants reflects the general prison population structure, where males constitute the majority of inmates. However, the presence of a significant proportion of female prisoners highlights the need for gender-responsive vocational training programs. Previous studies emphasize that women in prisons often require different skill sets, such as tailoring and entrepreneurship, to enhance reintegration (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, this finding suggests that failure to integrate gender considerations into vocational training may reduce the relevance and effectiveness of rehabilitation programs, particularly for female prisoners whose employment opportunities and reintegration experiences may differ from those of males. Therefore, prison vocational training programs should incorporate diverse and flexible skill areas, entrepreneurship education, and support mechanisms that respond to the specific needs of both male and female prisoners to enhance successful reintegration outcomes.

4.3 Stakeholder Perceptions on their Experiences of Vocational Training in Rehabilitation

This section presents and discusses empirical findings regarding how current inmates, post-release ex-prisoners, and correctional personnel perceive the rehabilitative role and lived operational experiences of prison-based vocational training programs. To provide a holistic understanding, from in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), interpreted through established penological and human development theories.

4.3.1 Perceptions of the Role of Vocational Training in Prisoner Rehabilitation

Both inmates and correctional officers conceptualize vocational training not merely as a routine custodial activity, but as a transformative rehabilitative engine. The findings highlight four primary dimensions through which stakeholders perceive the role of trade programs: skill acquisition, behavioral reform, psychosocial transformation, and official certification. For example, one noted that:

“The training I received gave me practical abilities that I could immediately use after release. Even though I started small, the skills helped me to earn income and support myself instead of returning to old habits.”
(Interview with Post-Release Prisoner 8, March 19, 2026)

This finding aligns directly with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993), which posits that targeted investments in technical skills enhance individual productivity and economic self-reliance. However, the 28% of respondents who expressed skepticism regarding employable skills point to underlying structural mismatches between prison trade offerings and modern labor market demands (ILO, 2023).

4.3.2 Behavioral Reform and Institutional Discipline

Beyond technical competencies, respondents reported that participation in vocational schemes directly fostered positive behavioral changes and personal discipline among inmates. Data indicates that structured daily workshop schedules mitigate custodial idleness, redirecting inmate energy toward prosocial engagement:

"When I joined the training program, my daily routine changed completely. I became more focused and disciplined because I had something meaningful to do, which kept me away from negative influences." (Interview with Post-Release Prisoner 8, March 18, 2026)

This behavioral transformation validates the Rehabilitation Theory of Punishment (Andrews & Bonta, 2017), demonstrating that structured correctional activities replace deviant behavioral patterns with institutional discipline, emotional regulation, and personal responsibility (Davis et al., 2014).

4.3.3. Psychosocial Transformation: Self-Confidence and Sense of Purpose

Evidence highlighted how acquiring a skill restored inmate dignity and provided a constructive orientation toward the future:

"The training changed how I see myself. I no longer feel defined by my past mistakes, but rather by the skills I have developed and the opportunities I can pursue." (Interview with Post-Release Prisoner 6, March 17, 2026)

Another respondent added:

"Being part of the training gave me something to look forward to every day. It made me feel that my time in prison was not wasted, but was preparing me for a better future." (Interview with Post-Release Prisoner 5, March 15, 2026)

These psychological gains are consistent with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) and Desistance Theory (Maruna, 2001), which emphasize that cognitive reframing, restored self-worth, and future-oriented hope are essential prerequisites for desisting from crime and achieving long-term community reintegration.

4.3.4 Perceived Role of Formal Certification

Respondents anticipated receiving official certification upon program completion under the framework of the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA). Both current and post-release participants perceived formal credentials as an essential mechanism for establishing legitimacy in the competitive post-custodial job market as captured below:

"After leaving prison, I tried to find employment using the skills I had learned, and most employers asked for certificates or formal proof of training. Certification adds credibility and opens more opportunities, including access to employment and financial support for starting a business." (Interview with Post-Release Prisoner 4, March 17, 2026)

Document review evidence corroborates these views, noting that initiatives such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) framework certified 201 inmates in 2025 (*Sauti ya Magereza*, 2025). As highlighted by the ILO (2023), standardized credentials bridges the gap between institutional rehabilitation and formal labor market acceptance.

While stakeholders hold highly favorable perceptions of the *role* of vocational training, their *lived experiences* within correctional workshops reveal significant operational barriers that constrain program effectiveness. Inmates described how institutional space constraints, rather than personal interest or market demand, dictate program assignment:

"I was placed in a tailoring program simply because there was space available, not because it matched what I want to do in the future. I had a strong interest in mechanical work, but those opportunities were either unavailable or already full." (FGD with Current Prisoners, Prison A, March 16, 2026)

This operational constraint contradicts Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which posits that intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes depend heavily on personal autonomy. As Okolie et al. (2022) observe across Sub-Saharan Africa, over-reliance on low-cost, labor-intensive trades limits former inmates' ability to compete in modern, technology-driven economies.

4.3.5 Prison Staff's Institutional Perceptions and Administrative Realities

Interviews with prison officers and vocational instructors revealed a complex dual perception: staff strongly endorse the rehabilitative philosophy of trade training, yet feel hindered by operational limitations.

"Vocational training plays a central role in preparing prisoners for reintegration, but we are limited by resources, staffing, and infrastructure, which affects the quality of training." (Interview with Prison Staff A, March 15, 2026)

Another respondent commented:

"We see positive changes in prisoners who participate in training, but without adequate support and policy backing, it is difficult to sustain and expand these programs." (Interview with Prison Staff B, March 18, 2026)

Staff perspectives highlight an institutional paradox where high commitment to offender reform is constrained by chronic underfunding, inadequate workshop machinery, and a shortage of certified technical trainers. Addressing this institutional gap requires targeted policy support, modernized infrastructure, and stronger multi-sectoral partnerships to transform prison vocational training from a basic custodial routine into a sustainable engine for social reintegration.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Vocational training within Tanzanian correctional facilities serves a vital rehabilitative function by instilling personal discipline, restoring psychological self-worth, and equipping inmates with practical skills essential for an identity transformation. Although these programs operate within recognized frameworks aligned with national certification, their operational efficacy is curtailed by significant internal limitations. Curricula remain dominated by traditional trades, omitting modern, market-driven competencies such as information and communication technology (ICT) and business management. Moreover, while individual inmate participation is largely driven by a desire for economic self-reliance, broader enrollment is restricted by resource shortages, limited facility capacity, and foundational educational gaps.

Despite the internal readiness fostered by these programs, post-release success is severely compromised by external structural barriers that ex-offenders encounter upon re-entering society. Former inmates routinely face pervasive social stigma, a complete lack of start-up capital, and fragile personal safety nets, which collectively restrict their ability to translate acquired skills into sustainable livelihoods. This vulnerability is further compounded by the absence of formal, institutionalized post-release transitional mechanisms, preventing the long-term sustainability of the positive behavioral and psychological gains achieved during incarceration.

To rectify these operational and systemic gaps, practical and policy reforms must be implemented concurrently. Prison administrations should modernize workshop infrastructure, broaden trade options to match contemporary labor market demands, and integrate remedial literacy and numeracy instruction to ensure equitable learning access. Concurrently, policymakers must streamline accreditation through national bodies—such as the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) and the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NACTVET) while establishing national reintegration policies that incorporate employer sensitization, microfinance access, and community mentorship. Reinstating modest financial compensation for prison labor would also provide departing inmates with vital transitional capital to support their initial reintegration.

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