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# Realisation of the principle of normalisation in the adoption of ICTs in a women's prison: A Finnish qualitative study

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## Abstract

Digitalisation offers prisons versatile opportunities to promote the rehabilitation of incarcerated people during their imprisonment, on their return to society, and in communicating with relatives and service providers such as social welfare and health care services, housing services, and employment services. This study focuses on the Hämeenlinna prison, which is Finland's first closed women's prison using personal in-cell laptops for each incarcerated person. We ask (1) how is the principle of normalisation realised in the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a women's prison and (2) how do cultural factors hinder the adoption of ICTs in prison. Research material was collected through ethnographic fieldwork and research interviews (22 prison employees and 15 incarcerated women). According to the results, the use of ICTs diversified and enhanced internal communication in the prison and offered a new tool for interacting in prison. The prison offered a limited opportunity for video-mediated motherhood, and efforts were made to respond to women's multi-problematic service needs in prison, and through utilising various digital services. However, the study shows that the realisation of the principle of normalisation in the adoption of ICT in a women's prison poses many challenges. Furthermore, security-oriented thinking and passive resistance appeared as key cultural factors that slow down the adoption of ICTs and new practices. As a conclusion, it can be stated that the adoption of ICTs and the construction of a new prison culture that utilises technology is a long-term process that requires a change in practices, culture and policies that emphasise security.

## Keywords

Digitalisation of prisons, ICTs, principle of normalisation, motherhood in prison, re-entry, prison culture

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## Introduction

The adoption of prisons and probation into the new digital age is an issue that has been the subject of much debate in criminology, and in society more broadly. Digitalisation involves many parallel processes, such as the expansion of electronic monitoring and other means of digital control, and the development of various administrative information systems. In addition, the introduction of in-cell laptops, tablets and self-service kiosks can enable incarcerated people's access to internal and external digital services, distance learning, chat, and video calls.

Digital technologies and the provision of secure and restricted access to the internet for incarcerated people have been seen as important in their rehabilitation and successful re-entry process (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018), promoting their social skills, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society (McDougall et al., 2017; McKay, 2022; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Reisdorf et al., 2022; Toreld et al., 2018). Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) Digital Rehabilitation model emphasises the importance of preventing digital divides and inequalities, as well as the fact that the digital realm could also contribute to a successful re-entry. According to the model, digital technology can be used to promote incarcerated people's matters in economic (financial transactions, job skills, employment, education, income), social (communication with family, social networking), personal (hobbies, leisure activities), cultural (gender, ethnicity, spoken language), and health (access to services, e.g., mental health and substance abuse services) fields. Resources in these fields are of central importance to incarcerated people's rehabilitation and re-entry. The opportunity for distance learning in prison has been seen as important from the perspectives of digital inclusion and lifelong learning (Monteiro et al., 2015; Pike & Adams, 2012; Seo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, digital technology in prison also improves social relations between incarcerated people and prison employees (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Palmer et al., 2020) and reduces prison disciplinary offences (McDougall et al., 2017). According to Robberechts and Beyens (2020), as incarcerated people increasingly manage their affairs in such a way, this also supports their determination and autonomy. However, focusing solely on the use of technology and communicating from the cell with prison employees can also isolate incarcerated people, and hence, reduce social interaction (see Robberechts & Beyens, 2020).

The adoption of ICTs in the prison context is always a complex process and involves many challenges related to, for example, ethical issues (Knight et al., 2023; Knight & Van De Steene, 2017), digital privacy (Robberechts, 2020), and trust (Monteiro et al., 2015). The development of new practices in prison is slowed down by various teething problems and an excessive emphasis on "traditional" prison culture among prison employees (see Jewkes & Moran, 2014; Morris & Haider, 2022). In addition to technological challenges, barriers to technological development include a microculture that avoids security risks for prison staff and also resists change (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). According to Kaun and Stiernstedt (2022), the development of prison technology involves many social groups and involves contradictory socio-technical conceptions that range from imaginaries of the technological backwardness of prisons to discourses on radical innovation which emphasise the transition to the use of advanced technology. Accordingly, Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) have argued that the digitalisation of prisons is slow, and there is a profound and unprecedented level of disconnection between prison and society, leading to the deep, long-term social exclusion of individuals who have received custodial sentences.

The subject of this study is the Hämeenlinna Prison for Women, which is the first prison in Finland that uses advanced ICTs such as in-cell laptops and advanced high-security technology in the prison's daily functions, communication and management. The central background idea of the Hämeenlinna prison can be considered to be the Nordic humane criminal policy, the related strategy aimed at preparing incarcerated individuals for a life without crime, and the principle of normalisation (Puolakka, 2021; The Prison and Probation Service of Finland, 2019). Pratt (2008) has analysed Nordic criminal policy using the concept of Scandinavian exceptionalism, with which he refers to the low imprisonment rate and the humane prison conditions. According to him, the roots of this exceptionalism in Finland, Norway and Sweden relate to various social factors, such as the culture of equality and the development of Scandinavian welfare states which are built around institutionalised solidarity and security. The theory of Scandinavian exceptionalism has also aroused critical debate. For example, according to Reiter et al. (2018), it does not reflect the micro-level realities of incarceration, although Crewe, Ievins, et al. (2023, p. 440) argue that "there is little doubt that the typical experience of imprisonment is more humane and less damaging in Norway than in England & Wales".

This study aims to describe how the principle of normalisation is realised in the adoption of ICTs in a women's prison in Finland, and how cultural factors hinder the adoption of ICTs in prison. The complexity of implementing ICTs in the prison environment advocates choosing an ethnographic approach.

### *The principle of normalisation in women's prisons*

The principle of normality or normalisation is the central starting point of prison and probation services, especially in the Nordic countries (e.g., De Vos, 2021; Engbo, 2017; Labutta, 2017; Smith, 2013). A criminal policy based on the principle of normalisation has been considered to reduce crime and recidivism rates (Labutta, 2017), although there has also been a critical discussion of this Scandinavian ideal (e.g., Reiter et al., 2018). On a general level, the concept of *normalisation* refers to shaping life in prison to resemble life outside prison, but its exact meaning varies (van de Rijt et al., 2023).

The digitisation of prisons and the access of incarcerated people to the internet are also justified by the principle of normalisation with different emphases. Smith (2013) highlights that when seen from a human rights perspective, a complete ban on internet access for incarcerated people cannot be justified, and restrictions must be argued for in a way that respects general legal principles. The issue has also been approached from the point of view of rehabilitation and integration into digital society (e.g., Toreld et al., 2018), and highlights that a lack of access to digital services can be an obstacle to re-entry and rehabilitation (Knight et al., 2023; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Reisdorf et al., 2022).

When investigating the realisation of the principle of normalisation in the adoption of ICT technology in prisons, two conceptual distinctions can be considered to be especially important. A defensive normalisation means that a prison sentence should cause no other interference to a person's rights and living conditions than the loss of freedom of movement, its inevitable consequences, and the consequences of security interventions, while proactive normalisation emphasises that prison authorities should actively create circumstances in prison that resemble free society (Engbo, 2017). Collective normalisation means that services provided in prison should be as far as possible equivalent to those provided outside as regards

the nature and quality of these services, while individual normalisation means that incarcerated people should be enabled to maintain their other social roles, such as the role of parent (Snacken, 2002).

From the perspective of individual normalisation, the importance of motherhood is central to the introduction of ICT in women's prisons. Mothers who enter prison are often already disadvantaged, judged, excluded, and most often in pain, and prison magnifies the challenges to mothering and mothering identity. They feel guilt and shame whilst in prison and feel that they fall far short of the mothering ideals generally accepted by society (Baldwin, 2017). On the other hand, Smith (2013) points out that it is also about the rights of the children of incarcerated people, in which case it would be in their interest to be in contact with their parents by video call during imprisonment, in order to preserve family relationships (see also Minson, 2021).

When talking about incarcerated women, collective normalisation means, in particular, access to necessary social welfare and health care services and other services that support the return to the society. Incarcerated women are a strongly marginalised group of people who have a lot of trauma experiences (e.g., Crewe, Schliehe, & Przybylska, 2023). Many of them have also been diagnosed with numerous mental health problems, which are caused by childhood or relationship-related crises, abuse of power, victimisation, and trauma experiences (Jewkes et al., 2019). Often, these problems have not been previously treated, so entering prison and the prison space can re-trigger, worsen or contribute to these trauma symptoms. This highlights the need for providing targeted (trauma-informed) mental health services during incarceration (Jewkes et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, only through adequate digital or face-to-face services can the incarcerated woman be supported to return to the community and lead a crime-free life.

Digital skills can also be considered important in terms of the realization of collective normalisation in women's prisons. According to Toreld et al. (2018), people with a history of crime are expected to be good active citizens, to avoid relapsing into crime, and to live within the boundaries of normality. Being an active citizen in the digital society also requires the use of digital skills. Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) point out that a lack of access to ICTs and the internet during incarceration deprives former incarcerated people of necessary digital skills to navigate the various fields of everyday life that are deeply embedded in digital technologies. In discussions about the digital divide among marginalised groups, the importance of gender has also been identified (Seo et al., 2020), and thus the issue of sufficient digital skills is particularly central for incarcerated women.

Because of the sensitive nature of trauma and motherhood experiences, the possibility for anonymous interaction is also emphasised in women's prisons. According to Seo et al. (2022), part of women transitioning from incarceration is a strong sense that their identity and security online are vulnerable and that they are being watched. However, the issue of privacy has proven to be a significant challenge when prisons have been digitised, especially in the case of multi-occupancy prison cells (Robberechts, 2020; see also Knight, 2015; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020).

We understand normalisation in a broad sense, where the availability of digital social welfare and health care services, the realisation of motherhood, and the possibility of anonymous interaction are an integral part of it. Accordingly, we analyse the cultural challenges of the development of digital prisons from the perspectives of both defensive and proactive normalisation.

## Method

### *Aim and questions*

The aim of this study is to analyse the adoption of ICT in the Hämeenlinna prison, and the changes in practices and culture that relate to digitalisation from the perspective of normalisation. The research asks: (1) how is the principle of normalisation realised in the adoption of ICTs in a women's prison? and (2) how do cultural factors hinder the adoption of ICTs in prison?

### *Ethnographic approach*

Our study follows an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a widely used method in cultural research and the social sciences that studies human behaviour, social interaction, thinking, and the social and cultural regularities that define them. The approach has also been utilised in prison research (e.g., Crewe, 2018; Drake et al., 2015; Jewkes, 2014; Liebling et al., 2021; Robinson, 2020; Ugelvik, 2014), and in research on the digital exclusion of incarcerated people (e.g., Jewkes, 2002; Pike & Adams, 2012; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). Ethnographers typically triangulate interview and observation methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, and this is especially useful in situations where what people say about their behaviour may contrast with their actual actions (Reeves et al., 2008). Through fieldwork, the researcher achieves an internal perspective on the research subject, but the length of the fieldwork period can vary from a few occasions to several months, depending on the study design. In addition to the researcher's reflectivity, issues related to the researcher's position (Ugelvik, 2014), gender (Jewkes, 2014) and ethics are emphasised when conducting prison ethnography (Robinson, 2020).

### *Hämeenlinna prison as a context of study*

Hämeenlinna prison was opened in 2020, and prison employees and incarcerated people were involved in the design of the prison according to the established service design methodology (see also Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). In Hämeenlinna prison (100 cells, eight prison wards), incarcerated women have been placed in single-person cells in 12-person wards, and each cell has a laptop which also facilitates private digital interaction. Hämeenlinna prison contains many of the features typical of new, modern prisons (see Puolakka, 2021). First, technology allows for ever tighter control within the prison. The extensive use of video cameras and the control of electronic communications between incarcerated people and outsiders is expected to contribute to institutional security. Furthermore, the in-cell laptops used by incarcerated people allow them to study in a closed learning environment (e.g., Moodle), make canteen orders, use a limited amount of permitted white-list sites to search for work or housing and to access some entertainment services such as films, audio-books, music and games. In-cell laptops also enable communication with family, children, and other close friends. In Hämeenlinna prison, especially when on re-entry, incarcerated women can request permission for free video calls with authorities to deal with issues related to livelihood, finances, housing, education, or job searches, which are monitored by prison employees.

## Research process and material

In our research, we used an ethnographic approach, although due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the fieldwork was quite limited. The fieldwork was carried out in three phases: three months after the introduction of in-cell laptops in May–June 2021 (seven observation days, 11 employee and 11 incarcerated women interviews), in January–February 2022 (three observation days, six employee and four incarcerated women interviews), and in April–May 2023 (five remote employee interviews). We conducted a total of 37 interviews, of which 22 were employee interviews and 15 were interviews with incarcerated women. The participants were 12 employees and 12 incarcerated women. Of the interviews, 13 were conducted as a follow-up. We aimed to select the same interviewees for each round so that we could get a more detailed view from different practitioners on the progress of the adoption of in-cell laptops.

After being granted permission to undertake the research, we approached the prison management to agree on conducting the research and recruiting volunteer interviewees. The prison management forwarded the researchers' invitation to the interviews via e-mail to the entire prison staff, and volunteer employees contacted the researchers directly. The interviewees represented employees from prison management, supervision, rehabilitation, social work and education, and development areas. Volunteer incarcerated women were also sought for an interview through a senior instructor of social work. Incarcerated women's ages varied between 25 and 54 years (mean 35.7 years) and their number of convictions varied between one and seven (six first-timers). The interviews focused on the following themes: experiences with the adoption of in-cell laptops in the digital prison, the perceived effects of digitalisation on practices and social interactions, and the potential of digitalisation to facilitate release from prison and support desistance from crime.

## Analysis

In this study, the researcher working in the field reflected on her thoughts on tape immediately after the end of each day of fieldwork. The focus of reflection was on the observations of the prison's external settings (facilities, processes, functions, etc.), social interaction, digitalisation, as well as the researcher's own feelings, preliminary interpretations and hypotheses. After this, the findings and experiences were discussed among the researchers (authors). At the beginning of a systematic analysis, the interview materials were organised by question. The material was analysed separately according to the phases and target groups. An interpretative analysis was then performed by looking at the material as a whole. The final interpretations emerged after the analysis of the interviews and fieldwork observations through the joint reflections of the researchers.

In the interpretive analysis phase, we utilised Schein's (2004) model of organisational culture, where *artifacts* (e.g., the physical space of the prison, technology, and the interaction culture in the prison) are seen as a visible part of the culture. In addition, the organisational culture includes *beliefs and values* (e.g., in relation to the principle of normalisation) and *underlying beliefs* (unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings). Our attention was first focused on visible prison culture such as the prison facilities, the use of in-cell laptops, and the relationship between digital and face-to-face interaction. Next, we focused on analysing the realisation of individual social roles such as the motherhood of incarcerated women (individual normalisation), and their access to different digital services outside

of the prison during imprisonment (collective normalisation). Finally, we analysed cultural barriers to the use of ICTs, applying Engbo's (2017) distinctions of defensive and proactive normality.

### *Ethical reflections*

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019) and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). An ethical review of the performance and publication of the research was obtained from the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the Helsinki Region Universities of Applied Sciences. Research approvals were granted by the Prison and Probation Service of Finland. Participation in the study was voluntary and each interviewee signed an informed consent form.

Incarcerated women are clearly a socially marginalised group of people. Thus, the study of incarcerated women requires special sensitivity from the point of the researcher (Jewkes, 2014). In this study, the incarcerated people were interviewed by a female researcher, and they were treated with respect and equality. However, one challenge to establishing a confidential relationship was that prison practices and the glass walls of the prison facilities did not allow for a completely anonymous discussion (see e.g., Robberechts & Beyens, 2020; Robinson, 2020), and although other people did not hear the conversations, the prison employees knew who was being interviewed during the study.

The question of the role of the participant observer in the prison community also contains potential tensions. Ugelvik (2014) has reflected on his own experiences as a prison researcher and his position within the cultural web of the prison and described perpetual negotiations about his position in the prison, and his proper place in the ever-present struggle between incarcerated people and prison employees. According to him, the researcher has to balance very different positions, such as those of "suspicious stranger", "responsible professional", "unwanted intruder", and "trusted confidant". During the ethnographic fieldwork, we encountered all of the roles described by Ugelvik, and in particular, achieving the role of "trusted confidant" made it easier to conduct interviews. In discussions related to the daily life of the prison, employees showed their feelings more openly, with expressions that ranged from frustration to a sense of urgency, or a shared joy in the encounters. The incarcerated women also shared their opinions freely and in considerable detail in the interview, and appreciated being included in the study. The interviewees reported realistically on the progress of the adoption of ICTs and in-cell laptops, and how these have contributed to, or changed, the prison culture and practices in the new digital prison. They also described issues of work-related tensions and passive resistance, which occurred especially among the prison officers.

## **Findings**

### *ICTs shape and diversify prison practices and ways of communication*

At the beginning of the fieldwork, our attention was drawn to the prison's facilities which are architecturally modern, completely bar-free, and contain glass as a building material. The prison is surrounded by a green forest area and the setting differs significantly from many closed prisons representing older architecture. The prison has an electric lock system and



extensive camera surveillance. The security level of the wards varies, with some being closed and some more open rehabilitation wards. The single-person prison cells are well equipped and seem homely. The prison wards' common areas have a kitchen, a dining and living room area, a telephone booth, and a laundry room. The wards also have their own outdoor courtyards and a common outdoor courtyard which was utilised for gardening work activity and guided exercise. However, outside the wards, incarcerated women could only move around when accompanied by a prison employee.

During the fieldwork periods, digitization was visible in the everyday life of the prison in many ways, and for example, in-cell laptops were used for communication within the prison (chat messages, electronic forms, video calls). Based on the interviews, the employees felt that they were more accessible to incarcerated women than before, and that incarcerated women felt the use of electronic forms made it easier to contact employees. The adoption of ICTs was perceived as streamlining the prison processes. A clear example of this is the transition from paper forms ("grumble notes") to electronic forms that allow incarcerated women to contact prison employees. The use of the electronic contact form also ensured that the form was not "lost on the journey" (Aino, 38 years):

We can put the contact form in the mailbox. Of course, the fact that you can send it via a laptop, it's always easier, your form will get there. When you give it to a prison officer (PO) who doesn't necessarily pass it forward, it's better in that sense (...) That's the way to really pass it forward. Then you know it won't get lost on the way (...) If we didn't have in-cell laptops, we would be completely at their (the POs') mercy. You can see the names and titles (from the in-cell laptop) of the people to whom you can write directly. (Aino, 38 years)

As the above excerpt points out, the transition from paper contact forms to electronic forms helped the realisation of the autonomy of incarcerated women, and this was important from the point of view of reducing the tensions related to prison officers' dominant position in the prison. However, the increased number of forms being sent burdened the employees, and caused the forms to pile up.

Furthermore, when analysing the social interaction between incarcerated women and prison employees, we found the use of both ICT and face-to-face encounters to be important. On one hand, some of the practical matters (e.g. making a sentence plan) seemed natural to deal with through video calls. On the other hand, several employees emphasised that "face-to-face encounters come first" (employee 1), and incarcerated women experienced that these face-to-face meetings were significant for their coping in prison. Also, moving into a new digital prison did not lead to a reduction in face-to-face interaction, but rather the opposite – it seemed to improve the relationship between the incarcerated women and the prison employees. One incarcerated woman pointed out: "The work environment, the conditions with this digitization, everything is changing. It has also been more natural for prison employees to go along with the fact that the operating culture (and encounters) is changing." (Alma, 54 years)

Additionally, video calls were used for communication with family members, and authorities which were responsible for social work, income support, rehabilitation, services, or support measures after their release. The possibility of making a video call from a cell (e.g. to social worker, psychologists, pastor, study counsellor, or nurse) was considered important, because this allowed for a private conversation:

Here (in my cell), it doesn't feel like anyone else can hear. If I'm alone in my cell, I would close the window because there was someone outside in the yard. It was, however, my own conversation (with the prison psychologist). (Sara, 39 years)

The above excerpt revealed that incarcerated women often valued their own individual cells and privacy as more important than the prison's current technology. The material did not reveal any negative aspects related to the use of ICTs, such as isolation or a reduction in social interaction (see Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). Rather, ICTs seemed to diversify the forms of communication inside the prison and with the employees, and bring new opportunities to it (see Knight & Van De Steene, 2017; Morris & Haider, 2022). Hence, combining the versatile use of ICTs and face-to-face encounters promoted the construction of social relationships between incarcerated women and prison employees (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Palmer et al., 2020), as well as increasing the coping of incarcerated women in prison.

### *The pains of limited and video-mediated motherhood in prison*

During the fieldwork, many examples were found of how the gender and related social roles of incarcerated persons manifest in everyday life and prison practices. Women had the opportunity to wear their own clothes and make-up in the wards. The prison had its own hairdressing salon, where incarcerated women could have their hair dyed in the company of an instructor. Also, rehabilitative work options were offered to incarcerated women, including a sewing shop, textile maintenance, garden work, library, real estate work, and cleaning work. These work activities also offer possibilities to complete parts of vocational qualifications. In these respects, a clear striving towards normality could be seen in the practices of the prison.

In the interviews, almost all of the incarcerated women described their sadness and concern at having to be separated from their own children. At the time of the data collection, they had the opportunity to meet with their children via video call twice a week (for half an hour), and in order to support their parenting, incarcerated women were granted separate permits for video calls during the week. Many incarcerated women kept in touch with their children from the ward's phone booth and called them daily. The video meetings were perceived as valuable moments in terms of being a mother, and even as the most important part of their weekly program:

After all, employees also monitor video calls, but you can still be in your cell. (...) I can play or draw with my children (...) so that I can be involved in their daily lives somehow. [Interviewer: Did you get that tip from a prison employee?] Yeah. We were drawing with my children, and they said 'Mum, look now, I've drawn this.' (I answer) 'What did you draw? Then I showed the picture I drew (...). I try my best to keep in touch with the children all the time. (Siiri, 38 years)

The excerpt above reflects motherhood during imprisonment on a concrete level. It highlights small things like playing a dice game or drawing with children. Furthermore, the prison employees supported this communication by giving the incarcerated women advice on how to participate in their children's everyday life via video call. Although these video meetings enable regular interaction with the child, this kind of video-mediated motherhood is very far from what is considered as normal motherhood outside of prison, regardless of whether the mother lived with her child before their imprisonment or whether the child was placed in out-of-home care (see Baldwin, 2017). So seeing children for a few hours a week via video calls was seen as being only a scratch on the surface of being a parent (see Baldwin, 2017; Minson, 2021).

However, even though the meetings with children (or family and friends) took place in a private cell via an in-cell laptop, these meetings were monitored, and permission had to be requested for the meetings. From the point of view of the implementation of privacy (see Robberechts, 2020), this was problematic. Incarcerated women became aware of the boundary conditions related to supervision, and the realisation of the meeting took precedence over supervision. On the other hand, the child's rights are also an issue, which supervision can violate.

Many of the interviewed incarcerated women also highlighted the importance of meetings with relatives, spouses, and other friends. However, many incarcerated women had complex relationships in their background, even being victims of spousal abuse, which brought their own challenges to face-to-face family meetings. For this reason, remote meetings were better considered to serve the women's needs and safeguarded them from possible spousal abuse. As reported by one interviewed employee: "A signal came from them (incarcerated women) that they didn't even want to meet (their spouses) face-to-face because there was pressure and intimidation" (Employee 11).

In the prison under study, efforts have been made to take into account the specific needs of incarcerated women in many ways. However, the issue of motherhood is particularly challenging, and while it is obvious that interaction via video connection contains many limitations, it is also necessary to assess what kind of contact with the incarcerated mother is in the best interests of the child. Thus, it can be stated that there are principled limitations to the realisation of individual normality.

### *Incarcerated women's needs for social welfare and healthcare services, and possibilities for digital citizenship*

Many incarcerated women have had traumatic experiences and have various mental health problems (e.g., Jewkes et al., 2019), which was also revealed in the interviews of this study. In the Hämeenlinna prison under study, efforts were made to respond to these challenges in different ways, such as offering rehabilitation programs and various online services. For example, incarcerated women had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with some of the social welfare and health care services' websites, or to do self-help tests independently.

Collective normalisation means that incarcerated people should have access to equal services as other citizens (Snacken, 2002), however, the incarcerated women only had access to a limited number of white-list websites from their in-call laptops that were considered safe to use. The independent use of public services was also not allowed or not possible in prison due to strong requirements for electronic identification via mobile phone (in the form of bank IDs or mobile certificates), as using a mobile phone was seen as a security risk in prison. Thus, these personal affairs were in fact handled under the supervision of prison employees. A completely independent use of online services was not even considered to be desirable, but according to some prison employees, incarcerated women need the support of an employee to handle their personal affairs.

Incarcerated women need several social welfare and health care services, and to establish contact with various service providers (e.g., authorities granting income support, social workers, employment agencies, and various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)) before their release, in order to make their return to society more successful. These service providers also offer remote income support guidance or individual rehabilitation for incarcerated people. In addition, several NGOs organise live rehabilitative group activities in prison for

incarcerated women (parenting groups, digital skills courses, peer group activities, etc.). With the help of these services and remote contacts, an effort was made to create ties for life after release, which was central to their re-entry and desistance.

[Different service providers outside the prison] use video calls. The employee does not have to come all the way here to meet them, but can meet via video call. It's nicer than a phone call though, more private. (...) The prisoner can be there in such peace somehow. It's good. And when you don't have to be involved and they aren't supervised. (Employee 6)

The excerpt also brings out that these remote meetings were not monitored, which freed up time for prison employees to do other work.

Also, in Hämeenlinna prison, employees were aware that “surviving in a digital society requires digital skills” (employee 2), in which case it would be important to promote their digital skills and the independent use of services even more in prison. In general, the incarcerated women had basic digital skills and managed to use smartphones to use services and to fill out online applications. However, the activity and digital skills in using in-cell laptops varied, for example, depending on the person's age. Incarcerated women also pointed out that surviving in a digital society requires digital skills, and it would be important to practice these skills in prison.

If your digital skills are lousy, it is possible to learn the skills needed in society in a (prison) environment. However, everything is going more and more in a digital direction – all the communication and services. Everything that is needed for you to start a new life happens very far away in that digital network. Learning how to use a computer for handling your own matters is a basic skill that you should have today. (Anni, 34 years)

As the above excerpt illustrates, the prison could be a learning environment that offers good opportunities for supporting digital citizenship (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017) and practicing digital skills or doing things independently, yet they were not utilised to a sufficient extent. But this is not a unique situation, and these findings related to the digital skills of incarcerated women are also in line with studies by Reisdorf et al. (2022) and Reisdorf and DeCook (2022).

In the Hämeenlinna prison, the in-cell laptop enabled, for example, the limited use of digital rehabilitation services and self-help programs during imprisonment. Some of the available digital services were meant to help incarcerated women with their trauma experiences and mental health problems, as well as to support their rehabilitation and return to society. However, the prison is still far from the goal of collective normality (Snacken, 2002), where equal health and social services would be similarly available in the prison as outside. Likewise, compared to the numerous opportunities offered in society outside the prison to use the internet, the number of websites in use in the prison was minimal, which is a concrete example of how far the prison is from digital society (see Toreld et al., 2018).

### *Security-oriented culture and passive resistance hinder the adoption of ICTs in prison*

Through fieldwork observations and interviews, a somewhat contradictory picture of the digital prison and adoption of ICTs emerges. On one hand, the use of ICTs has increased considerably

and has become a way of communicating between incarcerated women and employees and largely outwards as well. On the other hand (and consistent with previous research: e.g., Jewkes & Moran, 2014; Morris & Haider, 2022), the adoption of new practices in prison involved various teething problems. The COVID-19 pandemic made these challenges more difficult to some degree, but it also forced the adoption of new digital practices. In the initial phase of the adoption process, technical problems and delays occurred with the devices and video calls. Challenges were also related to, for example, the familiarisation of personnel with new technology, the definition of new types of tasks for personnel, new facilities, and business relations with the ICT service provider. In the last phase of fieldwork, the teething problems had decreased and the ICTs worked properly. However, some employees were still slow or somewhat reluctant to adopt the technology, even though technical support was available.

Based on our analysis, security-oriented thinking appeared to be one of the key cultural factors that slowed the adoption of ICTs in the prison. The main experienced threat was related to the fear that communication with persons outside the prison could enable criminal activity either inside or outside the prison. To prevent this, efforts were made to limit or monitor all electronic interactions. For example: mobile phones were prohibited, the imprisoned person had access only to internet pages that were defined as safe, video calls with relatives required permission and were monitored, participation in digital peer groups (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous, parenting groups) was not possible, and studying was not possible in learning environments (e.g., Moodle) that enabled students to interact with each other. Money transfers also were controlled to prevent extortion, drug dealing and various criminal activities. These restrictions were based on legislation and administrative instructions but also reflected the policies and practices of the prison. Security measures restricting the freedom of an incarcerated person based on a realistic threat assessment are also justified in terms of defensive normalisation (Engbo, 2017).

These practices also raised some questions. First of all, the policy regarding video calls was not in line with the policy regarding phone calls. When using the phone in the prison ward, incarcerated women were able to freely call numbers they had previously announced (and verified) without special permission and supervision. Second, a strictly formal interpretation of “security threats” can have harmful consequences. For example, it can prevent studying, limit contact with close people, or make it difficult to access services that facilitate the return to society (e.g., the independent use of health and social welfare services that require identification is not possible). All in all, consistent with previous studies (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016), an overemphasised security logic appears to be a key cultural barrier to the adoption of ICT in prison.

The cultural barriers to the adoption of ICT can also be examined from the perspective of proactive normalisation (Engbo, 2017), by asking which factors prevent prison actors from actively promoting digitalisation. When viewed from this perspective, a culture of “slowing down” emerged in the study. This “let’s see” (Elina, 26 years) attitude manifested itself to incarcerated women as slow progress, and facilitated omissions such as not reading messages. The prison management also recognised this way of thinking, and aptly described the development as “a slow-moving ocean ship whose course does not change, no matter how hard you turn” (employee 11).

Based on our findings, it appears that the development of prisons in line with the requirements of the digital age requires a change in the prison culture and also in attitudes towards security issues. The culture of passive resistance and an excessive emphasis on traditional

prison culture among prison employees (see Jewkes & Moran, 2014; Morris & Haider, 2022) appeared in the study as a relevant factor for the adoption of ICTs. Taking into account factors related to prison culture is therefore key to the adoption of new prison technology, and consequently, a readiness to develop practices and a culture of trust is needed.

## Discussion

### *Main findings*

The study highlights many successes but also reveals the challenges of developing a digital prison. First, the study shows that the digitalisation of the prison does not automatically mean a decrease in face-to-face interaction, but on the contrary, in the studied prison, the adoption of ICT seemed to diversify communication. Secondly, the implementation of the principle of normalisation has its own challenges in the women's prison. Although efforts are made to respond to women's multiple service needs and family relationships are supported in prison, normal motherhood during imprisonment is in many ways impossible, and access to necessary digital social welfare and health care services is limited due to various restrictions based on prison security. Thirdly, the security-oriented culture and passive resistance of the supervision employees appeared as factors that are slowing down the adoption of ICTs and the development of new practices.

### *Reflection on results*

Our results show that the adoption of ICTs can streamline and diversify internal communication in the prison. The ICTs offer incarcerated women the opportunity to contact prison employees at a low threshold, and the use of electronic forms and instant chat messages increases their accessibility. This contributes to a more flexible management of the daily affairs of the prison and facilitates access to information and the necessary support. Our study brought out how the combination of ICTs' versatile use and face-to-face encounters can also enhance the construction of social relations between incarcerated women and prison employees (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Palmer et al., 2020). Furthermore, digital communication from one's own cell enables privacy to be realised at least to some extent (see e.g., Robberechts, 2020). Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; McDougall et al., 2017; Morris & Haider, 2022; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018), the results offered an indication that combining the rehabilitative functions of the prison and the possibility of digital interaction can support the release and reintegration of incarcerated women.

In-cell laptops can also provide new opportunities to communicate with relatives during incarceration (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). According to Baldwin (2017), the lives of many incarcerated women are broken and challenged, and many have experienced physical emotional and sexual abuse. These previous experiences, as well as that of being in prison, have contributed to their experiences of failure as a mother and negatively influenced the construction of a mothering identity. In addition, they also see prison as traumatic, challenging, and damaging, and being separated from their own children is felt as extremely painful. Thus, supporting motherhood and maintaining mothers' social relationships with their children are essential in reducing their pain, and also in terms of building a new kind of mothering identity. Prison

employees can support this through the activities offered by the prison (e.g., peer parenting groups). However, video-mediated motherhood can only scratch the surface of what motherhood is in normal life (see Minson, 2021).

According to Reisdorf and Rikard's (2018) model of Digital Rehabilitation, in the digital realm, it is possible to support the rehabilitation and re-entry of incarcerated people by taking into account their economic, personal, social, cultural and health-related needs. For incarcerated women especially, the social and health fields are emphasised due to the emphasis on motherhood and family relationships and traumatic experiences. In the women's prison under study, all of the fields included in the model were taken into account, and incarcerated women had limited opportunities to communicate with their families, or access employment services, leisure services, housing services, or social welfare and healthcare services among other things. Overall, the use of digital services and active digital citizenship during imprisonment requires not only access to digital services but also sufficient digital skills (Reisdorf et al., 2022; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Van De Steene & Knight, 2017). When developing services specifically for incarcerated women, a trauma-informed approach must also be taken into account (Jewkes et al., 2019).

The Hämeenlinna prison is a Nordic humane prison where the introduction of ICTs has been implemented following the principle of normalisation. However, there are also indications in the material of traditional prison culture, in which the restriction of incarcerated people's rights on the basis of various potential security threats is emphasised. Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016) have argued that often the introduction and application of new technologies are thwarted by security personnel who are highly resistant to finding solutions to potential security breaches, and the mere word "security" can close down all conversations about digital technologies in prisons. Consistent with this, our research also made visible the cultural resistance related to new technological solutions, and the thinking in which new technology is approached specifically from the perspective of security threats. The background of this seems to lie in a prevailing culture of mistrust in the prison, where new opportunities for incarcerated people are treated with suspicion from the start. On the other hand, prison culture is not uniform, and the interviewees talked about technology in different ways. The results are consistent with the views of Kaun and Stiernstedt (2022), who suggest that the development of prison tech would seem to involve contradictory socio-technical conceptions. The study revealed both pro-technology and critical views towards the digital prison. Overall, the study recommends moving towards a culture of trust (see e.g., Monteiro et al., 2015), where the access of incarcerated persons to the internet is not seen only as a security threat, but also as an opportunity that supports rehabilitation and a return to the digital society outside (see e.g., Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022).

The principle of normalisation is one of the starting points for Nordic correctional services and the digitalisation of prisons (Engbo, 2017; Toreld et al., 2018), however, the principle is only partially realised in the women's prison. The key challenges are related to the implementation of normal motherhood in prison, equal access to social welfare and health care services, an overemphasis on security measures and a culture of slowing down which prevents the development of prison conditions in line with society outside the prison. Thus, the challenges concern collective and individual normalisation (Snacken, 2002) as well as defensive and proactive normalisation (Engbo, 2017). The implementation of the principle of normalisation depends in part on the culture and practices of the prison, but ultimately the issue is political and raises the questions of whether incarcerated women have the right to the same services as other citizens, and whether they are part of the digital society.

## Limitations

The digitalisation of prisons is a long-term process, and a deeper analysis of prison culture would have required more extensive fieldwork. The ethnographic fieldwork was also limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, and for other practical reasons such as the delay in the introduction of the digital prison and the timing of the study. On the other hand, in some way, the pandemic also acted as a factor that promoted the adoption of the technology.

## Conclusion

ICTs in prisons can support the rehabilitation and social integration of incarcerated people, and facilitate many internal prison processes. One of the key characteristics of Hämeenlinna prison seems to be the combination of a humane encounter on one hand, and the adoption of ICTs on the other. However, the research reveals that the adoption of ICTs requires the prison to overcome existing cultural barriers, which requires a reform of the security culture, and a new kind of development-oriented attitude from prison employees. On a general level, the research shows that although normalisation is an important ideal of the Nordic criminal justice system, it faces many challenges when the prison is updated to meet the demands of the digital age.


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