



Original Research

“If We Don’t Work Together, There Is No Pudding”: Informal Foodways and Culinary Agency in a South African Female Prison

Francois Steyn, University of Free State, South Africa

Krinesha George Messif, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Received: 04/10/2025; **Accepted:** 10/10/2025; **Published:** 02/20/2026

Abstract: Poorly prepared or unpalatable food is often referred to as “prison food,” a term used to describe the tasteless meals served in correctional facilities. This article examines the intertwined dynamics of food, emotional experience, innovation, and interpersonal relationships among women who serve prison sentences, with emphasis on the significance of informal foodways within correctional facilities. Personal interviews were conducted with twenty-three women who were imprisoned in a South African correctional center, and the data collected was thematically analyzed. The results show that female inmates often perceive prison food not merely as sustenance but as a symbol of punishment and emotional distress associated with their confinement. The deprivation of the basic human right to prepare and enjoy food exacerbates feelings of powerlessness, igniting a complex emotional response that includes anxiety and frustration. The research delineates four critical aspects of food culture in prisons: the prison shop and purchasing power, food bartering, cooking methods, and the importance of collective cooking in forging relationships among inmates. Given the absence of nutritional guidance and involvement in meal preparation, the study posits that the food experience significantly influences the overall psychological well-being of inmates. Strategies that include improving food quality and promoting culinary engagement are essential.

Keywords: Food, Female Offenders, Prison/Correctional Center, South Africa

Introduction

Humans need food to survive, but the act of eating and preparing food influences the self, interpersonal relationships, and the contexts in which people consume food (Smith 2002). Prisons represent environments where food has tremendous value and power (Simanovic and Gosev 2019), and food systems define the boundaries within and outside prison walls. Correctional centers themselves have a temporal transitory quality as offenders serve varying prison sentences and at different security levels (Smoyer and Blankenship 2014). Nevertheless, a common denominator is that all prisoners depend on the food that the correctional system provides.

Poorly prepared or unpalatable food is commonly referred to as *prison food*. The food experience of inmates has been described as a harsh and punishing part of prison life (Smoyer and Lopes 2017), thus mirroring the disciplinary measures prisoners are subjected to daily (Smith 2002). For female inmates in particular, the absence and denial of the relatively

mundane yet enjoyable activity of preparing and consuming food resembles symbolic punishment (Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Female offenders ascribe their lack of appetite not so much to the quality of prison food but rather to the emotional response to imprisonment itself, including anxiety, stress, nervousness, and grief (Smith 2002). Frustrated, imprisoned women acknowledge that it is not about prison food per se but instead about the powerlessness and loss of control that accompanies food experiences in prison. Food, therefore, is symbolic of the reality that life is now restricted and previous notions of independence and individualism intersect to amplify the pains of imprisonment.

Prison foods also symbolize the lack of humane treatment due to hunger, which leads offenders to feel uncared for, ignored, frustrated, and humiliated (Smith 2002; Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Female offenders view the meals as a concrete form of punishment in terms of the type of food, how it is served, the time it is served, the duration they are allowed to participate in meals, surveillance while eating, and cooking systems. Some offenders use terms such as *dog food* to refer to the food they receive in the prison, which echoes their poor treatment (Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Furthermore, controlling the dietary habits of offenders is an effective disciplinary method because it limits self-control (Smith 2002).

Little is known about female offenders' lived experience of imprisonment in South Africa in so far as food is concerned, and studies from abroad on prison food mainly stem from male prisons in England and Canada (Smoyer and Blankenship 2014). Local research on female prisoners and food is thinly spread and, apart from a brief reference to the lack of nutrition and prison food by the Gender, Health & Justice Unit (Artz et al. 2012), the authors could not find any South African publications on female prisoners and their food. This article focuses on four aspects of informal foodways in prison: the prison shop, products, and purchasing power; food, bartering, and illegal foodways; cooking methods and prison recipes; and collective cooking and relationships in prison.

Global studies (Smoyer 2014b; Woods-Brown et al. 2024) have highlighted the inequalities that exist regarding foodways and nutritional equality in prison environments across various contexts. However, research is significantly limited in respect to a gendered perspective within the South African correctional sphere. The present study addresses this gap by exploring how formal and informal food systems play an instrumental role in shaping the lived realities of female offenders in a South African correctional center. It further contributes to the context-specific insights that reflect on global prison food scholarship, demonstrating the interconnectedness of nutrition, identity, and correctional policy within a Global South framework.

Literature Review

Policy Environment

The legislative framework for providing food to inmates in South Africa is primarily shaped by the South African Constitution, the Correctional Services Act, and various policies and

guidelines established by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS). The frameworks are designed to ensure that the nutritional needs of inmates are met while respecting their human rights and supporting their rehabilitation. The South African Constitution, particularly Section 35, guarantees the rights of detained individuals, including the right to adequate nutrition. The Correctional Services Act (Act No. 111 of 1998) mandates the DCS to ensure that inmates receive meals that meet their nutritional needs, taking into account their health status and dietary requirements (Ndanuko et al. 2021).

According to the Correctional Services Act of 1998, "Each prisoner must be provided with a diet consisting of a minimum protein and energy content of 2,000 kilo calories per day for adult females" (Republic of South Africa 2004, 50). Additionally, the diet of female offenders should comprise foods rich in calcium, protein, vegetables and fruits, cereals, and food items rich in fats and oils (The South African Government 2005). The preparation of food in prison is also required to comply with the provisions of the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972 (Act No. 54 of 1972) and the principles of good hygiene (The South African Government 2005). The nutritional standards set forth by the DCS are further influenced by broader national health policies aimed at addressing food security and nutrition in South Africa. The National Development Plan and the National Health Insurance policy advocate for improved nutrition as a means to enhance public health outcomes, which indirectly impacts the food provided to inmates (Charlton et al. 2016). These policies recognize the importance of nutrition in preventing diseases and promoting overall health, thus reinforcing the need for adequate food provision in correctional settings (Moshoeshe et al. 2022).

The role of nutrition in correctional facilities is not only about meeting basic needs but also about supporting rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Research indicates that proper nutrition can significantly impact inmates' physical and mental health, thereby influencing their behavior and rehabilitation outcomes (Charlton et al. 2008). DCS recognizes this connection and has implemented programs that promote healthy eating habits among inmates, which are essential for their overall well-being and successful reintegration post-release (Bertram et al. 2012).

Formal and Informal Foodways

Exploring foodways within correctional facilities reveals a complex interplay between formal and informal meal systems that significantly impact inmates' social dynamics and identity formation. The formal meal system typically encompasses a common dining area within the correctional center, where inmates receive pre-planned meals provided by the institution (LaMonaca et al. 2018). Prisons generally have kitchens where meals are prepared, often with inmates participating in cooking and meal preparation and distribution. Understandably, timeous food ordering and supply are inherent to the formal food system in correctional centers to cater to the thousands of inmates housed in correctional care. In contrast, informal

foodways emerge through mechanisms such as the commissary, where inmates with financial means can purchase mostly non-perishable products, thereby creating a parallel food economy that reflects their social status and relationships within the prison (Smoyer 2014b). In addition, informal food practices, such as using makeshift tools and trading food, further shape inmates' interactions and coping mechanisms while highlighting the tension between institutional rules and personal agency in the prison environment.

The commissary is known as the prison shop where offenders can purchase snacks or other items, making it one way for offenders to feel in control of what they consume, or provide themselves with an opportunity to exercise a freedom of choice (Zgoba et al. 2020). While food in a correctional setting influences identity, power, and relationships, the commissary exposes the strength of networks between offenders and others, both inside and outside of prison (Smoyer 2014a). Receiving funds externally represents a sense of power and control within prison as it allows offenders a greater opportunity to trade food for services with other offenders. The items that are available to offenders from commissaries in centers in England and Canada include candy, sauces, cakes, chips, crackers, pre-cooked rice and pasta, condiments (e.g., peanut butter, jelly, mayonnaise), and processed meats, cheese, and fish products (Smoyer and Blankenship 2014). Commissaries generally have limited trading times, and the inability to shop freely and the constrained variety of items are noted as symbolic punishment because it amounts to a loss of freedom for female offenders (Smoyer and Lopes 2017).

In some countries, offenders can earn money by doing work in the correctional center to purchase items from the commissary while others rely on funds from their loved ones outside of the correctional environment (Smoyer and Blankenship 2014). However, the remuneration offenders earn is extremely low in comparison to the costs of the items available in the commissary, making it almost impossible for offenders to purchase goods without financial assistance from family and friends (Zgoba et al. 2020). The reliance on informal foodways can create disparities in health outcomes as those with more resources are better positioned to access higher-quality food options (Johnson et al. 2018).

The act of smuggling food items from the prison kitchen or dining area constitutes another layer of informal foodways. Such practices often arise from the inadequacies of the formal meal system, where the quality and quantity of food provided may not meet inmates' needs or preferences (Montford 2022). This hidden food culture serves as a form of resistance against the institutional constraints imposed on inmates, allowing them to reclaim some agency over their food consumption and social interactions (Ugelvik 2011). Formal and informal foodways within correctional facilities are integral to understanding the social dynamics and identity construction of inmates. The interplay between these food systems reveals how food practices are not merely about nutrition but are deeply embedded in the social fabric of prison life (Smoyer 2015).

Food Innovation and Relationships

Inmates often use food as a means of expressing cultural and personal identities, particularly in self-cook systems where they can prepare meals that reflect their backgrounds (Smoyer 2014b). This autonomy in food preparation not only enhances their sense of agency but also allows for the preservation of cultural practices within the confines of the prison environment. The ability to engage in food-related activities can thus serve as a critical outlet for self-expression and identity formation among inmates (Smoyer 2014a). However, cooking within prison cells is generally against prison policies as most correctional centers only allow offenders to prepare meals that require hot water (Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Female offenders in prison, including those who work in the kitchen, would often prepare food using makeshift methods, such as trash bags, microwaves, and hairdryers, despite these actions violating prison policies. While recognized as unlawful, these practices were seen by offenders as ways to support each other and make the best of their constrained environments (Smoyer and Blankenship 2014).

The manner in which offenders secure food in the informal food system reflects their position within the prison hierarchy, which symbolizes the power or status they have in the center, as well as the amount of time they have already served in prison. The significance of these informal foodways is underscored by Smoyer's research (2014b), which highlights how the sharing and distribution of food among inmates can serve as a marker of social identity and relational dynamics. In her study, Smoyer (2014b) notes that how female inmates share food from the commissary can delineate "good" from "bad" offenders, suggesting that food practices are deeply intertwined with social hierarchies and perceptions of morality within the prison context. This sharing behavior not only fosters social bonds but also reinforces the isolation of those who lack external financial support, further complicating their relationships with the outside world (Smoyer 2014a). Informal foodways thus become a vital aspect of the prison experience, shaping not only the daily lives of inmates but also their identities and relationships with one another. Through the process of food exchange and preparation, female offenders often demonstrate how they exercise the power of negotiation and resistance through their daily food practices (Smoyer and Lopes 2017). Cooking improvisation and sharing of food among incarcerated women should be viewed through a social justice lens, as it highlights the urgency to reclaim dignity, equity, and communal care within a system of oppression (Ugelvik 2011; Woods-Brown et al. 2024).

The implications of informal foodways extend beyond mere nourishment—they play a crucial role in the psychosocial well-being of inmates. Research indicates that supportive relationships and social networks are essential for the health and well-being of incarcerated individuals, particularly for women, who may rely more heavily on these connections for emotional support (Smoyer 2014a). The informal sharing of food can foster a sense of community and belonging among inmates. Conversely, the lack of access to informal foodways can exacerbate feelings of isolation and rejection, further entrenching the social divides within

the prison population (Smoyer 2014c). Despite the power dynamics among female offenders, relations and a sense of community stem from tasks such as preparing meals and cooking together. Communal cooking embodies the empathetic personalities of offenders as helping and supporting others allow them to view themselves as “good” individuals (Smoyer 2014c).

Challenges to Food Provision in Prison

Food constraints, including the quality of food, could result in malnutrition or obesity among prisoners (Smith 2002), especially in developing countries (Woods-Brown et al. 2024). Studies have shown that the dietary deficiencies prevalent among inmates can have significant health implications, contributing to chronic diseases and mental health challenges (Gould et al. 2013). The formal meal system often fails to provide adequate nutrition, leading inmates to seek alternative sources of food through informal channels.

The practical implementation of food policy and legislation in South African prisons faces several challenges. Matters such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and staff shortages can hinder the effective delivery of nutritional services to inmates (Klingelhöfer et al. 2015). In addition, the quality of food has been a subject of concern with reports indicating that many prisoners receive meals that do not meet the required nutritional standards (SALC 2025). The situation underscores the need for ongoing assessments and reforms to ensure that the food provided is not only adequate but also safe and nutritious (Misihairabgwi et al. 2019). The accountability of the correctional institution is an instrumental tool in engineering change to these reforms, as an effective oversight mechanism is imperative to prevent mismanagement, corruption, and rights violations in the provision of food (Department of Correctional Services 2006; Alberts et al. 2017). Furthermore, the frequent use of improvised cooking in prison cells and communal areas raises various safety concerns, such as the risk of burns, contamination, and disciplinary punishment, highlighting the need for safer, regulated methods or alternatives within correctional facilities for prisoners to prepare food (Smoyer and Lopes 2017; Montford 2022).

The involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups in advocating for better food provision in prisons has also been significant. These organizations often conduct assessments and provide recommendations to DCS, highlighting areas for improvement and advocating for the rights of inmates to receive adequate nutrition (Alberts et al. 2017). Their efforts contribute to raising awareness about the importance of nutrition in correctional settings and the need for systemic changes to improve food provision (Mommaerts et al. 2023). Furthermore, the South African government has recognized the importance of monitoring and evaluating the impact of food provision policies on inmate health outcomes. This includes assessing the nutritional quality of meals served in correctional facilities and the overall health status of inmates (Charlton et al. 2014). Such evaluations are critical for identifying gaps in service delivery and ensuring that policies are effectively implemented (Peter et al. 2017).

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Pete and Crocker (2011) emphasized irregularities related to food and preparation in South African correctional centers both during and after apartheid. The following challenges were identified and experienced by both male and female offenders:

- Food shortages and mismanagement are challenges that offenders experience directly, and they have little control over formal foodways in prison.
- Food allocated to offenders may be used by prison officials, thereby increasing the shortage of food available to incarcerated offenders within the system.
- Food shortages result in offenders stealing food or food being eaten before it can reach offenders in communal or overcrowded cells (this stems from the lack of efficient distribution and management systems).
- Most correctional centers lack proper dining facilities, which results in food being served directly to over-crowded cells thus compromising hygiene standards.
- Inadequate monitoring of food distribution among offenders (food inequality) can stir up violence among inmates and negatively affect the health of offenders.

In their meta-ethnographic synthesis of twenty-seven papers integrating first-hand experiences of food in prison from ten countries, Woods-Brown et al (2024, 9) noted that "none of the studies reported any positive comments about the quality of prison-issued food." They identified the following challenges with food provision in correctional centers:

- The poor quality of food, bland and tasteless food, and minimal provision of fresh fruit and vegetables in the prison diet.
- The absence of control and choice around prison food, which results in unhealthy foods purchased from the commissary.
- Small portion sizes and prisoners being constantly hungry because they do not have funds to supplement their meals with products from the commissary.
- Timing of prison meals, especially issuing dinner in the early afternoon with long gaps between dinner and breakfast.
- Experiences of food as both concrete and symbolic forms of punishment (also referred to as the weaponization of food within the broader disciplinary and control process).
- Foods that do not reflect culture and family life and the loss of decision-making in caring for the self.

The Jali Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate alleged incidents of corruption, maladministration, and violence or intimidation in DCS (Republic of South Africa 2001). The Commission's final report acknowledged that "food is an important commodity inside the prison and that it is used as a commodity not only by prisoners but also members" (Jali Commission of Inquiry 2006, 456). Malpractices included selling food to inmates, smuggling food, gang members assaulting cooks when they are dissatisfied with

meals, prison wardens consuming food meant for inmates, poor quality and insufficient food, unfair food distribution that favors some prisoners, and inadequate stockkeeping.

Methodology

The study used qualitative procedures to determine incarcerated women's experiences with informal foodways in a South African prison. An explorative research purpose was necessary to capture the lived experiences of how women source food (for example, from the commissary or through bartering) and the techniques they use to prepare meals with minimal cooking infrastructure and utensils. To date, no similar research has been conducted in South Africa. The study entailed basic research because no intervention stemmed from the empirical results.

The research design amounted to case studies that pursue a research question through the in-depth investigation of a real-life phenomenon for contextual richness. More specifically, a collective case study design was used to study multiple cases simultaneously to gain insight into the common experiences of women and informal foodways in a correctional center. In other words, rather than treating each participant as a unique source, the study drew upon imprisoned women's collective experiences to generate shared insights into prison foodways.

Due to the qualitative and explorative nature of the study, random sampling procedures were deemed redundant (Steyn and Booyens 2017). Instead, an availability and voluntary sampling strategy was followed where corrections officials approached female inmates with a verbal invitation to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria amounted to any woman who was serving a custodial sentence, regardless of the duration of the sentence, their age, and what offenses they committed. The twenty-three women who showed interest in the research were subsequently informed about its purpose and procedures of the research, after which the interviews took place. The interviews were voice-recorded to facilitate transcription and to ensure that their views and experiences were properly captured. A semi-structured schedule guided the interviews and probing took place to elicit detailed responses. The questions posed on foodways and meal preparation in the prison were formulated following a review of the literature on prisons and food. The interviews took place in the empty classrooms of the prison school, which allowed sufficient privacy for the women to share their experiences regarding food and foodways. The transcribed interviews were subjected to content analyses, during which four main themes and thirteen sub-themes emerged. To do the qualitative data justice, direct quotations are woven together to create rich descriptions of female offenders' experiences with informal foodways in prison.

In terms of the research setting, the female correctional center houses roughly 180 inmates, including minors, pregnant women, women with children under the age of two years (who stay with their mothers in prison), adults, and elderly offenders. The correctional center accommodates all types of offenders, from minor economic repeat offenders to women found guilty of murder. As elsewhere in South Africa (Artz et al. 2012), the female prison

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does not have a dedicated kitchen, and the women do not participate in the preparation of prison meals. Instead, men who are awaiting trial in the adjacent male prison cook and prepare meals for the women.

The study adhered to the standard ethical considerations that apply to research in the social sciences. The participants voluntarily shared their experiences, and they could withdraw from the interview at any time. No personal information was gathered that could identify individual participants, and their responses are linked to alphabetic indicators in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participants had access to the researcher in case they had follow-up questions and debriefing was made available, although none of the participants requested the service. The study received ethics approval from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, and permission to gather data at the prison was granted by the National Department of Correctional Services.

Results

The results are organized around three main themes: the prison shop, cooking methods and techniques, and challenges in accessing and preparing food.

The Prison Shop—Purchasing and Products

Initially, prisoners received food from visitors. As one participant shared: "They used to allow food from outside...I used to get two foods, Tuesdays and Thursdays. They would bring maybe [name of fast food chain] or whatever. It is not allowed anymore" (Participant R). The practice ceased following the death of a prisoner: "The problem was drugs. People always look for ways to get drugs in. There was one woman, her people put drugs in the food and she had a massive overdose that night. It was terrible, she died" (Participant L). Following this incident, "We can only buy food from the shop which only opens once in a month with money paid into our accounts" (Participant B). However, a participant explains that "There is a limit on how much a person can spend depending on a person's category" (Participant K). "Per month, you can only buy food for R960, A group. B group is R760, C is less" (Participant G). The sections were explained by another participant as follows: "A section is for the lifers, B section is for the mothers, babies and gogos [colloquial term for elderly women]. C section is shorter, that's where I am, as my sentence is shorter. And D section is where people who are still in trial stay" (Participant H). In addition to the financial restrictions, not all women receive funds from their family and friends: "If you keep coming back to prison and you stole from your family for drugs, they are not going to support you in prison" (Participant L). Participants shared the belief that the amount of funds available is based on the notion "that you cannot have too much. You need to be controlled because here you cannot have too much" (Participant M). Further, some women do not receive the full allowable amount from family and friends: "I get little money because they must look after my child at home. The church ladies visit me, and sometimes they leave R200" (Participant P).

In terms of the products for sale, “we buy canned and tinned fish, corned beef, mayonnaise, atchar, and spices so that our food has taste” (Participant J). It was noted that the products are “not luxury items. They used to sell spaghetti and macaroni, also rice, but they took that away. So now they only have noodles. And it is very difficult to live on noodles only” (Participant O). The products are predominantly non-perishable foods, although fresh produce such as cheese and yogurt are sometimes available. The availability of stock tends to be limited: “They sell per section. One day this section will buy, the next day that section. The shop is open for three or four days per month. By the time the shop gets here, everything is sold out. Then they don’t have soya mince left, they don’t have any [brand of breakfast cereal], stuff like that” (Participant S). Further, “They prioritize the people who have longer sentences first. In my opinion, the A section is more privileged than C section” (Participant H). Apart from stock issues, most offenders shared the view that they often find themselves in a dilemma with their choices due to the limitations on funds and cost of items in the store. “The food is too expensive. A tin of fish is not less than R30, in brine. We have this limit that we can buy for each month. You have to choose: is it food or is it toiletries” (Participant S). Another participant stated that “the R960 limit is not enough for me because as a woman I still need to buy not only food from it, but sanitary pads every month as well to supplement the small pack that we get from the center, unlike male offender ... the sanitary pads are very expensive” (Participant A). Further, “What is the priority? Is it coffee, sugar or is it toiletries, the soap and lotion? You have to choose, now you have to choose, what is it, hygiene or this? It is a tough choice to make” (Participant M). The diversity of products also appears constrained: “The shop caters for the majority of prisoners ... They don’t sell stuff like muesli. Some women want, for example, yogurts and so on, but you don’t always get it. About every three months they would sell yogurts, but sometimes the best-by date is near so I don’t buy it because I cannot store it. We don’t have fridges” (Participant S).

Prison Food, Bartering, and Illegal Foodways

Informal foodways—attaining food from the correctional store, bartering, and smuggling—has become unavoidable because many offenders experience the food from the formal meal system as unpalatable. “It makes me sad to the point that I cry when we eat the food in here because you just end up eating for survival because the way it’s prepared here is terrible. I even miss food from home. It’s painful to think about. Sometimes we even say that the way they prepare food, it’s not for people but for pigs” (Participant J). Offenders emphasized their dissatisfaction with the food from the formal meal system. For example, one participant shared: “When we get beans or similar food from the kitchen and it is not nice, we wash it. You have to wash it. I don’t know what the kitchen does with the food” (Participant O). Participants shared the common opinion that their dissatisfaction with the prison food is the

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motivation behind purchases from the store: "I normally buy sauces like mayonnaise and sweet-chili sauce because the food does not have taste" (Participant I).

Food exchange and services in the form of bartering is a reality in prison: "Cigarettes are the main item we use to barter. You can buy anything with cigarettes ... You can buy fruit, meat and even clothing with cigarettes" (Participant T). The same participant noted that some offenders go to the extent of ensuring a sufficient supply of this correctional currency: "I make sure that I buy a carton of cigarettes each month so that, for example now at the end of the month with supplies, I can barter. If you haven't smoked in a day or two days and you are a smoker, then I buy your fruit." Offenders also trade services for food and other necessities within the center: "For offenders who do not receive money from family, food is a means of exchange. They come to me asking for a piece job. I don't smoke and I don't have cigarettes, but they will work for food" (Participant L). Another participant shared the following example: "There is someone who is willing, they will say 'Okay, I'll tell you what. Wash my T-shirts, do something and then in return I will buy them something'. And that is how it is" (Participant M). "You can do their laundry, you can cook for them, it happens daily" (Participant O). However, bartering sometimes results in conflict: "They would sell their food for cigarettes and then steal someone else's food. So yes, it is terrible" (Participant W).

The food environment within the correction center includes other exchange dynamics. For example, one participant shared the following: "You know, I think, it is probably not the right time or place to say it, but there are many ways of getting stuff in, if you hear what I'm saying. If your family is willing to pay, there are many ways" (Participant W). Regardless of the risks involved or the rules and regulations of the correctional facility, "There is huge smuggling of food in prisons, in corrections. Food is a necessity and many of us don't see it as smuggling. Sometimes I help the wardens with their [academic] assignments in exchange for food. We have a problem with fruit, perhaps once a week we get fruit, so the sergeant brings it in for me" (Participant L). However, "if you pay for from outside, it is usually half-half. Let's say it is R500. R250 goes to the warden and you get R250 to spend on food" (Participant L). In addition to these internal foodway practices, some offenders can support their families externally: "It is like a business, making money. What happens is they will buy groceries for R1000 and sell it to the inmates. The money they make goes to their families. The money is sent to their families outside" (Participant O).

Cooking Methods and Prison Recipes

The facilities available for offenders to prepare meals are limited, with one participant sharing that: "It is against the rules to have cooking utensils" (Participant L). Offenders "used the microwaves in the offices to cook rice. Then some said, but you are bandits, you are not allowed to cook rice in the microwaves, and they took it away. It is very difficult. If only we could cook in our sections" (Participant O). The lack of appliances results in innovative techniques to

prepare food: “You make a board from tinfoil, or if you can get a metal plate, you turn the iron upside down, you use a blanket to balance the iron and then you use it as a heating element. And we use the iron to toast bread, it really is nice” (Participant L). During one interview, the participant pointed to an open-coil heater and related how they repurpose it for a stove: “Look at the item on the floor, what do you see? That is enough to give you an idea of what to do with it and how” (Participant M). Some participants appeared aware of the dangers of having electric appliances in their cells or repurposing electric equipment for cooking: “There is a problem at present. Not here, but on the male prison’s side. The men smuggle on a large scale. They illegally have sandwich makers, they have pots and pans, they have small stoves for cooking. But the problem is that sometimes something catches fire. Sometimes something happens and someone gets burnt. The food falls over, and it is on top of the bed. So, the managers are trying to stop that. About two months ago they stopped selling rice and spaghetti. They removed it from the shop so that we cannot cook it in the sections. They still sell two-minute noodles, but that is something you don’t have to cook” (Participant L).

The boiling water method is a common strategy to prepare food, as explained by one participant: “What you do is you put your noodles in a bowl and pour hot water and wait for five minutes and then drain the water and add the spices” (Participant B). Alternatively, “We cook rice in the kettle. If you are in the fortunate position, and I am honest about it, there are ways to get a piece of meat, you put it in a plastic bag and you boil the meat in the kettle” (Participant W). However, preserving food once it has been prepared remains problematic; as one participant explained: “You will buy a tin of fish for R27, it is a big tin, so you must make sure that it lasts you for three days ... Because there is no fridge, you must put it in a container on the floor under your bed. That is your fridge, so it can last and not spoil” (Participant P). An alternative is to club together to optimize food acquisition and collective consumption: “Sometimes we decide to prepare meals together because it works out cheaper. You know, you cannot eat a tin of food by yourself, and it is much nicer if we combine two or three tins together to make a meal out of it” (Participant T).

Apart from repurposing existing appliances, offenders have created some methods to prepare meals despite their challenges: “We call it the microwave, it is a white container, not real Tupperware because the prison staff say that we steal their Tupperware. So, we have a plastic bowl which is placed in another bowl filled with boiling water to heat up food” (Participant W). Offenders also adapt recipes from the outside, as one participant explained: “I had a friend in here, she took powdered milk and added a bit of coffee powder and other stuff to make a type of fudge. I must say, people are very creative with what they prepare in prison” (Participant V). Another dessert recipe was explained as follows: “The tart with biscuits, custard and tinned peaches is put on the floor and left for two days before it is ready ... Yes, under the bed [where it is cool]” (Participant W). For a different recipe, “they buy condensed milk, they will buy lemon juice, [powdered milk brand], coco butter and biscuits. They mix the lemon juice with [powdered milk brand] to make a white cream and melt the

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butter and put the coco, making chocolate. And then they put custard, this [name of custard brand]. They make some sort of trifle to put on the biscuits and stuff. They put that under the bed so that it settles for the following day"(Participant P).

Apart from desserts, other interesting dishes with minimal ingredients were discussed. For example, one participant explained: "We have a recipe with corned beef, so often we will add tomato and onion relish. Other times we add chakalaka. Until recently we could buy macaroni at the shop and it is quite tricky to make it because you have to add and strain boiling water a couple of times before it is soft. We experimented with the two-minute noodles and it works with tuna, achar, sweet corn and a little bit of tomato" (Participant U). However, participants shared that, without the correct appliances, cooking in prison cells can be challenging. "We get porridge every single day. We add a tinned tomato relish, cheese and corned beef which we buy at the shop ... That processed cheese and porridge must be mashed with the corned beef and left to rest for a while before you can put it in the microwave. So, it is a long process" (Participant W).

Collective Cooking and Relationships in Prison

Amid constrained cooking facilities and limited food sources, offenders tend to support each other. "When food runs out, it runs out. It's heartbreaking because not everyone has family who can bring them money so I share with people who don't have anything" (Participant H). It is noteworthy that the food challenges faced by offenders appear to unite them, as shown with the following account: "It strengthens relationships because food is scarce because you cannot buy everything yourself. It will be too expensive for me to make a tart for myself because you need a tin of condensed milk, a tin of mixed fruit, plus the tennis biscuits, plus plus plus. And remember, you only have R960 per month. If we don't work together, there is no pudding" (Participant L). Several participants related how sharing ingredients and creating recipes foster a sense of unity among female inmates, with one stating: "We are a few women together in a communal cell. We enjoy saying 'Okay, tonight we are preparing so and so', and each one contributes something to dinner. We joke saying that we need to compile a prison cookbook before our release. But yes, we put in extra effort to make meals a bit more normal here in prison" (Participant U). Participants also found ways to celebrate milestones together: "Some women cook together with birthdays, some of them over the festive holidays. Some of them do that in the sections, they cook together and they, I think, to remind themselves how far they've come ... Remembering who they were, who they are still. The bit that is left of them" (Participant M). Similarly, "Each one contributes something and we make it work, we eat together. We love doing it. We prepare and eat together on special days like birthdays. There is a variety of prison pudding recipes which we adapted from outside. For example, as students we will celebrate when the exams are finalized" (Participant L). Another participant elaborated that "Here, you must understand, in the community of a different community which has been

secluded, I tend to call us the forgotten nation. Hidden from the outside world, we have developed a culture whereby we come up with our own recipes similar to what we had outside. As a result of that we sit down and we share amongst ourselves. It then creates this understanding of what it is like to be in here. You know, that with some people, especially those who have been here for quite some time, they will say ‘Do you remember year so and so. This is what we once upon a time had and then we mixed it with this and we did that’. So, it kind of proves something for us inside “(Participant M). Sharing information on cooking and prison recipes appears commonplace: “One of the inmates wrote down the recipes for the meals she made in prison. That was very interesting because one doesn’t know you can prepare meals in ways that you’ve never thought is possible” (Participant V).

Conclusion

Women incarcerated within correctional facilities face significant challenges related to their dependence on rigid formal foodways. Their daily diets are strictly regulated, leaving little room for personal choice. While the commissary offers some relief by allowing purchases that can enhance meal experiences, offenders often rely on external financial support to access these options—a luxury not afforded to all due to the economic constraints faced by their families (Agboola 2016). As a result, a systemic hierarchy emerges based on the nature of offenses, the corresponding prison sections, and the duration of sentences, which further constrain incarcerated women’s control over their culinary experiences. The food provided remains largely unpalatable and repetitive, particularly the starch components of meals, leading to a profound sense of disempowerment among the women (Woods-Brown et al. 2024). The products available from the commissary appear essential in making meals more appetizing and the food experience more bearable. Questions can rightfully be asked whether it is fair for women to purchase condiments and flavorings with the constrained funds that they receive from outside, while it is the correctional system’s responsibility to provide adequate and quality meals. Adding to this concern, it is not clear who benefits from the profits of the commissary. Apart from the lack of funding, the range of products are basic, which further constrains the notion of choice.

Despite the legal provisions and robust policy environment for food provision in prison, the lived food experiences of female offenders echo those of imprisoned men in Scotland (Woods-Brown et al. 2024). As a result, the women interviewed had nothing positive to say about the meals that they received. Informal foodways serve as mechanisms to counteract feelings of despair and despondence.

The restrictions on food sources, including the shift from allowing visitors to bring food to a reliance on prison shops, reinforce feelings of discontent. Participants consistently report dissatisfaction with the institutional food, describing it as nutritionally inadequate and lacking in taste. This frustration has prompted many to adopt informal methods of food

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acquisition, including bartering and smuggling items, which serve as adaptive strategies to navigate the economic disparities present within correctional centers (Smoyer 2015). These behaviors illuminate the stark choices female offenders face, often having to forgo hygiene products for the sake of food, which reveals the extent of financial strain on food experienced by incarcerated women.

Furthermore, the informal food system depends on but also feeds into the prison battering practice, wherein food serves as a trade commodity to obtain other products and services. The exchange of food for tobacco products suggests that food might even be traded for illicit substances. As participants stated, cigarettes appear to be the standard currency to either sell or purchase food in the informal prison economy. Notably, the Jali Commission stated that the presence of illicit products and items in prison is a direct result of correctional staff participating in smuggling practices (Department of Correctional Services 2006). Wardens not only bring in food in exchange for services but also cash that is used to buy food. These illicit practices fall outside the functioning of the commissary, which is a cashless operation within the confines of the prison walls. The evidence further suggests that smuggling takes place to secure meal products and preferences that are scarce or absent from the woman's diet, for example, fresh meat.

Moreover, the informal food systems developed within these settings are not only a means of survival but also a reflection of the women's ingenuity. The use of improvisation in meal preparation, such as employing household items to create cooking appliances, showcases their resilience despite facing substantial environmental constraints. Of concern is the repurposing of household items into cooking appliances, in particular, the repurposing of electric equipment into heating and cooking apparatus. This innovation can lead to safety hazards, underscoring the precariousness of their culinary practices. The preservation of food in the absence of refrigeration poses further health risks, specifically regarding tinned food such as fish, the consumption of which is stretched over days.

An alternative to this challenge is women clubbing together to optimize food acquisition and collective consumption. Joint meal preparation strengthens relationships among female prisoners. On the one hand, collective cooking, in all likelihood, provides a means of enhancing the quality and variety of meals that the woman can prepare themselves while, on the other hand, leading to a sense of sharing and easing the punitive experience—perhaps even regaining a sense of normalcy and control over what is consumed. Undoubtedly, shared cooking to celebrate important milestones contributes to experiences of cooperation and communalism to counteract the isolatory and secluded nature of life in prison.

The act of cooking together emerges as a powerful counter-narrative to Goffman's theory of total institutions as it provides women with a platform to assert their identity and agency in an environment designed to suppress it (Goffman 2001). Bandura's concept of self-efficacy further elucidates how these shared culinary practices empower incarcerated women (Astray-Caneda et al. 2011). By engaging together in meal preparation, they not only enhance the

quality of food but also reclaim a sense of conventionality and control over their lives, fostering emotional resilience and community ties in prison. This communal approach resonates with Parsons' (2017) perspective on the benefits of cooperative activities, indicating that such interactions can mitigate the oppressive dynamics of the prison experience while promoting a shared sense of *ubuntu* (an African philosophy that individual wellbeing is tied to the collective), including community and solidarity among women.

Collectively, the findings illustrate that food in correctional facilities serves as more than a mere nutritional requirement. It functions as an influential tool for social engagement, enabling female offenders to create supportive networks. Future studies should focus on the transformative qualities of communal cooking as an essential practice that enhances the incarceration experience and fosters a culture of cooperation among offenders, potentially influencing policies around food provision and preparation in prisons. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for correctional policy reforms that ensure nutritional adequacy, gender-responsive meal planning, and food programs that allow the participation and input of female offenders within the center (Wood-Brown et al. 2024). Establishing monitored food committees in prison sections and increasing the transparency and offering of the commissary are potential strategies to ensure accountability and equitable practices across formal correctional food systems (Agboola 2016).

The challenges faced by incarcerated women, such as food access, preparation, and the social dynamics within the correctional environment, uncover a landscape of resilience and agency against systematic oppression (Smoyer and Lopes 2017). The methods of informal food practices developed by offenders highlight their ability to reconstruct their identities, offering a profound commentary on the intersections of gender, community, and institutional limitations within correctional systems.

Acknowledgment

The financial support of the Mellon Foundation is acknowledged.

AI Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the use of Scite.ai to source information on South African policy documents and legislation on the provision of food in correctional facilities. The prompts used include keyword combinations such as "food prison policy South Africa," "prison nutrition legislation," "Correctional Services Act food," and "prison diet regulations South Africa" were entered into the tool to surface citations and links to primary sources (e.g., the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998, associated Regulations, and related gazettes). The output from these prompts was used to access the original texts to synthesize the literature on the policy environment. While the authors acknowledge the usage of AI, the authors maintain that they are the sole authors of this article and take full responsibility for the content therein, as outlined in COPE recommendations.

Informed Consent

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Prof. Francois Steyn: Head of Department, Criminology, University of Free State, Bloemfontein, Free State, South Africa
Corresponding Author's Email: steynf@ufs.ac.za

Dr. Krinesha George Messif: Lecturer, Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa
Email: krinesha.george@up.ac.za