Passagens. Revista Internacional de História Política e Cultura Jurídica
Rio de Janeiro: vol. 17, nº 3, setembro-dezembro, 2025, p. 381-395.

https://doi.org/10.15175/gq7hrf02

Articles

Human Rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment: a critical legal perspective

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the relationship between human rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment within contemporary criminal justice systems. While international human rights instruments—such as the ICCPR and the Mandela Rules—emphasize the reintegration of offenders as a core objective of incarceration, the practical realization of this principle often remains elusive. Drawing on a critical legal perspective, this study interrogates the extent to which legal systems operationalize rehabilitation as a rights-based imperative, and how structural inequalities, political narratives, and penal ideologies shape its implementation. The paper examines the doctrinal evolution of rehabilitation in comparative jurisdictions and exposes the disjuncture between normative commitments and carceral realities—marked by overcrowding, inadequate support systems, and punitive sentencing regimes. Through engagement with Foucauldian theory, post-colonial critiques, and feminist legal scholarship, the research challenges the assumption that rehabilitation is inherently benevolent or universally accessible. It argues that rehabilitative frameworks, while ostensibly progressive, may reproduce disciplinary control and reinforce societal hierarchies. Ultimately, the study calls for a reimagining of penal reform grounded in dignity, equity, and transformative justice. By situating rehabilitation within a broader human rights discourse, this paper highlights its potential as a genuine vehicle for social reintegration and legal accountability.

Keywords: rehabilitation; human rights; social reintegration; punishment; transformative justice.

Direitos humanos e o objetivo de reabilitação da punição: uma perspectiva jurídica crítica

Resumo

Este artigo explora criticamente a relação entre os direitos humanos e o objetivo de reabilitação da punição nos sistemas de justiça criminal contemporâneos. Embora os instrumentos internacionais de direitos humanos — como o PIDCP e as Regras de Mandela — enfatizem a reintegração dos infratores como um objetivo central do encarceramento, a realização prática desse princípio muitas vezes permanece difícil. Com base em uma perspectiva jurídica crítica, este estudo questiona até que ponto os sistemas jurídicos operacionalizam a reabilitação como um imperativo baseado em direitos e como as desigualdades estruturais, as narrativas políticas e as ideologias penais moldam sua implementação. O artigo examina a evolução doutrinária da reabilitação em jurisdições comparadas e expõe a desconexão entre os compromissos normativos e as realidades carcerárias — marcadas por superlotação, sistemas de apoio inadequados e regimes de sentenças punitivas. Por meio do envolvimento com a teoria foucaultiana, críticas pós-coloniais e estudos jurídicos feministas, a pesquisa desafia a suposição de que a reabilitação é inerentemente benevolente ou universalmente acessível. Ela argumenta que as estruturas de reabilitação, embora ostensivamente progressistas, podem reproduzir o controle disciplinar e reforçar as hierarquias sociais. Em última análise, o estudo apela a uma reimaginação da reforma penal baseada na dignidade, equidade e justiça

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Received on April 17, 2025 and approved for publication on August 7, 2025.

transformadora. Ao situar a reabilitação num discurso mais amplo sobre direitos humanos, este artigo destaca o seu potencial como um veículo genuíno para a reintegração social e a responsabilização jurídica.

Palavras-chave: reabilitação; direitos humanos; reintegração social; punição; justiça transformadora.

Los derechos humanos y el propósito rehabilitador de las penas: una perspectiva jurídica crítica

Resumen

Este artículo explora de forma crítica la relación entre los derechos humanos y el propósito rehabilitador de las penas en los sistemas de justicia penal contemporáneos. Si bien los instrumentos internacionales de derechos humanos, como el PIDCP y las Reglas Mandela, hacen hincapié en la reintegración de los delincuentes como objetivo fundamental del encarcelamiento, la aplicación práctica de este principio sigue siendo a menudo difícil de alcanzar. Desde una perspectiva jurídica crítica, este estudio cuestiona en qué medida los sistemas jurídicos ponen en práctica la rehabilitación como un imperativo basado en los derechos, y cómo las desigualdades estructurales, los discursos políticos y las ideologías penales configuran su aplicación. El artículo examina la evolución doctrinal de la rehabilitación en jurisdicciones comparadas y pone de manifiesto la disyuntiva entre los compromisos normativos y la realidad carcelaria, caracterizada por el hacinamiento, la insuficiencia de los sistemas de apoyo y los regímenes de penas punitivos. A través del análisis de la teoría foucaultiana, las críticas poscoloniales y los estudios jurídicos feministas, la investigación cuestiona la suposición de que la rehabilitación es intrínsecamente benévola o universalmente accesible. Sostiene que los marcos de rehabilitación, aunque aparentemente progresistas, pueden reproducir el control disciplinario y reforzar las jerarquías sociales. En última instancia, el estudio aboga por una reformulación de la reforma penal basada en la dignidad, la equidad y la justicia transformadora. Al situar la rehabilitación en un discurso más amplio sobre los derechos humanos, este artículo destaca su potencial como vehículo genuino para la reintegración social y la responsabilidad jurídica.

Palabras clave: rehabilitación; derechos humanos; reintegración social; castigo; justicia transformadora.

Les droits de l'homme et l'objectif de réinsertion de la peine : une perspective juridique critique

Résumé

Cet article explore de manière critique la relation entre les droits de l'homme et l'objectif de réinsertion de la peine dans les systèmes pénaux contemporains. Alors que les instruments internationaux relatifs aux droits de l'homme, tels que le PIDCP et les Règles Mandela, mettent l'accent sur la réinsertion des délinquants comme objectif central de l'incarcération, la mise en œuvre pratique de ce principe reste souvent difficile à atteindre. S'appuyant sur une perspective juridique critique, cette étude examine dans quelle mesure les systèmes juridiques mettent en œuvre la réinsertion en tant qu'impératif fondé sur les droits, et comment les inégalités structurelles, les discours politiques et les idéologies pénales influencent sa mise en œuvre. L'article examine l'évolution doctrinale de la réinsertion dans différentes juridictions et met en évidence le décalage entre les engagements normatifs et les réalités carcérales, marquées par la surpopulation, l'insuffisance des systèmes de soutien et les régimes de peines punitifs. En s'appuyant sur la théorie foucaldienne, les critiques postcoloniales et les études juridiques féministes, la recherche remet en question l'hypothèse selon laquelle la réinsertion est intrinsèquement bienveillante ou universellement accessible. Elle soutient que les cadres de réinsertion, bien qu'apparemment progressistes, peuvent reproduire le contrôle disciplinaire et renforcer les hiérarchies sociales. En fin de compte, l'étude appelle à repenser la réforme pénale en se fondant sur la dignité, l'équité et la justice transformatrice. En situant la réinsertion dans un discours plus large sur les droits humains, cet article met en évidence son potentiel en tant que véritable vecteur de réintégration sociale et de responsabilité juridique.

Mots clés : réinsertion ; droits humains ; réintégration sociale ; punition ; justice transformatrice.

Menschenrechte und der rehabilitative Zweck von Strafen: eine kritische rechtliche Perspektive

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht kritisch die Beziehung zwischen Menschenrechten und dem rehabilitativen Zweck von Strafen innerhalb zeitgenössischer Strafrechtssysteme. Während internationale Menschenrechtsinstrumente – wie der ICCPR und die Mandela-Regeln – die Wiedereingliederung von Straftätern als Kernziel der Inhaftierung betonen, bleibt die praktische Umsetzung dieses Prinzips oft schwer fassbar. Ausgehend von einer kritischen rechtlichen Perspektive untersucht diese Studie, inwieweit Rechtssysteme die Resozialisierung als rechtsbasierte Notwendigkeit umsetzen und wie strukturelle Ungleichheiten, politische Narrative und Strafideologien ihre Umsetzung beeinflussen. Der Beitrag untersucht die dogmatische Entwicklung der Resozialisierung in vergleichbaren Rechtssystemen und deckt die Diskrepanz zwischen normativen Verpflichtungen und der Realität in Haftanstalten auf, die durch Überbelegung, unzureichende Unterstützungssysteme und strenge Strafmaße gekennzeichnet ist. Unter Einbeziehung der Foucaultschen Theorie, postkolonialer Kritik und feministischer Rechtswissenschaft hinterfragt die Studie die Annahme, dass Rehabilitation von Natur aus wohlwollend oder universell zugänglich ist. Sie argumentiert, dass Rehabilitationsrahmen, obwohl sie vordergründig fortschrittlich sind, disziplinäre Kontrolle reproduzieren und gesellschaftliche Hierarchien verstärken können. Letztendlich fordert die Studie eine Neukonzeption der Strafrechtsreform, die auf Würde, Gerechtigkeit und transformativer Gerechtigkeit basiert. Indem sie die Rehabilitation in einen breiteren Menschenrechtsdiskurs einordnet, hebt diese Arbeit ihr Potenzial als echtes Instrument für soziale Wiedereingliederung und rechtliche Rechenschaftspflicht hervor.

Schlüsselwörter: Rehabilitation; Menschenrechte; soziale Wiedereingliederung; Bestrafung; transformative Gerechtigkeit.

人权与刑罚的康复目的：批判性法律视角

摘要

本文探讨了当代刑法体系中人权目标与刑罚的再教育目标之间的关系。尽管《公民权利和政治权利国际公约》和《曼德拉规则》等国际人权文书强调罪犯重返社会是监禁的核心目标，但这一原则的最终实现仍然很难。本研究以批判性视角，探讨法律体系在多大程度上将“重返社会”作为一项基本权利来实施，以及社会的结构性不平等、政治叙事和刑罚意识形态如何影响基本权利的实施。本文考察了比较法学领域中再教育理论的演变，并揭示了规范性承诺与监狱现实 (过度拥挤、系统支持不足和惩罚性量刑等) 之间的脱节。作者综合了福柯理论、后殖民主义批判和女权主义法学思想，挑战了法学界流行的“再教育本质上是仁慈的或普遍可得的”这一假设。作者认为，“重返社会”的再教育框架虽然表面上是进步的，但它更可能会强化社会对个人的纪律性控制并且固化社会等级制度。最后，本研究呼吁重新构建以个人尊严、公平和转化型正义为基础的刑罚改革。作者将“重返社会-恢复性再教育”置于更广泛的人权话语中，强调了人权法、法律问责和重返社会这三者之间的艰难平衡

关键词： 恢复性再教育；人权；重返社会；惩罚；转化型正义

Introduction

The intersection of human rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment represents one of the most significant and evolving areas within contemporary legal discourse. As global societies grapple with issues of mass incarceration, disproportionate sentencing, and systemic injustice, the focus of penal policy is increasingly shifting from retribution to reform (Alschuler, 2003). Rehabilitation, as a principle of sentencing and penal administration, posits that individuals who have committed crimes can change, and that the state has a duty to facilitate that transformation. Within this framework, punishment is not an end in itself, but

a means toward reintegration into society. However, the actual realization of this ideal is often complicated by legal, political, and institutional tensions—particularly when weighed against competing goals of deterrence, retribution, and public safety. Human rights instruments, both international and domestic, have played a pivotal role in shaping the rehabilitative vision of justice. Core documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules) emphasize the dignity of all persons, including those who are incarcerated. These frameworks advocate not only for the humane treatment of prisoners but also for their social reintegration as a foundational goal of punishment. Consequently, the right to rehabilitation has emerged as a normative standard, gaining recognition in constitutional jurisprudence, regional human rights courts, and national legal systems across both developed and developing nations.

Despite these advancements, the implementation of rehabilitation-oriented policies remains uneven and often symbolic (Reddy, 2008). In many jurisdictions, overcrowded prisons, under-resourced correctional facilities, and punitive public sentiments undermine the practical enforcement of rehabilitative rights. Moreover, political rhetoric that prioritizes “law and order” often marginalizes rehabilitative efforts, casting them as lenient or naïve. This creates a fundamental disjuncture between the normative aspirations of human rights law and the operational realities of criminal justice systems. In this context, a critical legal perspective is essential—not only to interrogate the failures of legal systems in fulfilling rehabilitative goals but also to expose the structural biases and power dynamics that shape penal outcomes. Furthermore, critical legal scholars argue that the rehabilitative ideal must be scrutinized through a broader socio-legal lens. While rehabilitation is frequently presented as a progressive alternative to harsh punishment, it is not immune from coercive or disciplinary elements. Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power, for example, reveals how rehabilitative practices can serve as tools of social control, masking punitive mechanisms behind therapeutic rhetoric (Hass, 1996). Similarly, post-colonial and feminist legal critiques highlight how marginalized populations—particularly racial minorities, the poor, and women—are often excluded from meaningful rehabilitative opportunities. Thus, while the rehabilitative model appears more humane on the surface, its application is deeply embedded in societal hierarchies and institutional structures that merit close examination.

This research seeks to critically analyze the relationship between human rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment, with an emphasis on identifying legal inconsistencies, exposing normative gaps, and exploring the transformative potential of rights-based approaches. By engaging with international jurisprudence, national legal

doctrines, and critical theoretical frameworks, this study aims to uncover the possibilities and limitations of rehabilitation as a human rights imperative. The central question underpinning this inquiry is not merely whether rehabilitation is a legally protected goal, but how legal systems operationalize this goal in practice—and to what extent these efforts genuinely reflect the values of human dignity, social justice, and reintegration. In doing so, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of how criminal law can be reimagined as a vehicle not just for punishment, but for meaningful social restoration.

Methodology

This research employs the doctrinal legal research methodology, a traditional and authoritative approach within the field of legal scholarship. Doctrinal research is particularly suited to the investigation of legal principles, statutes, case law, and scholarly commentary, offering a robust framework for examining the existing body of law. In this study, the doctrinal method is utilized to critically analyze the legal foundations and policy implications of early release mechanisms, with particular attention to the tension between rehabilitation and public safety. The methodology involves a systematic examination of primary and secondary legal sources, including constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, judicial decisions, legal commentaries, law commission reports, and relevant international human rights instruments. These sources are interpreted to uncover and synthesize the legal doctrines that inform early release policies in various jurisdictions. By studying these materials, the research identifies prevailing trends, inconsistencies, and doctrinal developments related to the rehabilitative purpose of punishment and its compatibility with community protection imperatives.

Secondary sources—such as peer-reviewed journals, books by legal scholars, and policy analysis—are employed to contextualize and critique the application of legal rules. The research relies heavily on proper citation practices to ensure academic integrity and to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of previous scholarship. The doctrinal method further supports comparative analysis, enabling the study to evaluate legal approaches across jurisdictions that have implemented early release policies with differing emphases on rehabilitation and risk management. It aids in discerning how courts and legislatures reconcile individual rights with societal concerns and how these reconciliations align with human rights obligations under international law. Overall, this methodology facilitates a structured and nuanced understanding of the legal landscape, offering insights into how early release can be shaped as a mechanism of justice that respects both the integrative needs of offenders and the legitimate safety interests of the community. The findings derived

through this doctrinal approach aim to contribute to the broader discourse on penal reform and inform both legal theory and policy development.

Results and Discussions

Penal Theories

Penal theories serve as the foundational philosophies guiding the objectives and justification of punishment within legal systems. Among the most prominent are the retributive, deterrent, and rehabilitative theories. Each offers a distinct perspective on why individuals should be punished and what goals punishment should serve within society. The retributive theory is rooted in the moral concept of just deserts—the idea that punishment is a necessary response to wrongdoing, proportionate to the harm caused. This theory views punishment not as a tool for future benefit, but as an end in itself. Retribution emphasizes accountability and moral blameworthiness, asserting that individuals who violate the law deserve to suffer in proportion to their offenses. Its focus is backward-looking, concerned with what the offender has done rather than what they might become. Retributive justice holds intuitive appeal in societies where notions of justice are closely tied to fairness and moral balance. However, critics argue that it often neglects broader social contexts of crime and provides limited space for the possibility of reform or reconciliation.

In contrast, the deterrence theory positions punishment as a forward-looking mechanism aimed at preventing future crimes (Nagin, 2013). Deterrence is grounded in rational choice theory, presuming that individuals weigh the potential costs of illegal conduct against perceived benefits. It takes two forms: general deterrence, which aims to discourage the public at large by making an example of offenders, and specific deterrence, which seeks to prevent the same individual from reoffending. While deterrence has been influential in shaping policies such as mandatory minimums and “three strikes” laws, its effectiveness is contested. Empirical studies have shown that the certainty of punishment—rather than its severity—is what most impacts criminal behaviour. Furthermore, over-reliance on deterrence often results in harsh sentencing practices that contribute to mass incarceration, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Standing in contrast to both is the rehabilitative theory, which conceptualizes punishment as a means to reform the offender and facilitate their reintegration into society. This theory prioritizes addressing the underlying causes of criminal behaviour—such as poverty, addiction, or trauma—through education, therapy, and skill-building within correctional settings. Rehabilitation views crime as, in many

cases, a symptom of social and psychological dysfunction that can be treated rather than simply punished. Its goals are humane and pragmatic: to reduce recidivism, promote social stability, and honour the offender's potential for change. However, critics argue that rehabilitation may downplay individual responsibility or be difficult to implement uniformly across justice systems strained by limited resources and institutional bias (Phelps, 2011). A critical comparison of these theories reveals that rehabilitative justice aligns most closely with modern human rights principles, particularly those enshrined in international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules). These frameworks emphasize the inherent dignity of the individual, the right to personal development, and the importance of preparing offenders for eventual reintegration. While retributive and deterrent models often prioritize state power and punitive certainty, rehabilitation underscores the human capacity for transformation. In systems that claim to uphold justice not merely as punishment but as restoration, rehabilitation provides a more ethically and socially responsive approach.

Nevertheless, no single theory offers a complete solution to the challenges of criminal justice. In practice, most legal systems adopt a hybrid model, combining elements of all three theories. The challenge lies in ensuring that punitive policies are proportionate, preventive measures are evidence-based, and rehabilitative interventions are meaningful and accessible. As this research explores the legal tensions between rehabilitation and public safety, these underlying penal theories offer a necessary lens for understanding how justice is conceptualized and operationalized in early release frameworks.

Critical Legal Theory

Critical Legal Theory offers a powerful lens through which to question the foundational assumptions of mainstream legal thought, especially as they relate to criminal justice and punishment. Rather than viewing law as a neutral or objective institution, critical theorists argue that legal systems reflect and reproduce broader structures of power, inequality, and control. When applied to penal systems, Critical Legal Theory challenges the legitimacy of punitive frameworks that claim to promote justice while perpetuating social exclusion, racial and gender hierarchies, and institutional violence. One of the most influential contributions to this discourse comes from Michel Foucault, whose theory of discipline and surveillance reframes punishment not merely as a legal response to crime, but as a method of social control (Steinert, 1983). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) traces the historical shift

from public executions to modern prison systems, arguing that punishment evolved to become more covert and psychological, emphasizing observation, normalization, and internalized control. Prisons, parole systems, and even early release mechanisms, in this view, are not merely sites of rehabilitation but instruments of disciplinary power. Through constant surveillance—both literal and symbolic—the state extends its reach beyond prison walls, shaping behaviour in ways that reinforce conformity and obedience rather than meaningful transformation. This raises critical concerns about whether rehabilitative systems, when administered through disciplinary institutions, truly empower individuals or subtly coerce them into submission.

Building on this critique, post-colonial and feminist legal theorists have illuminated how penal systems disproportionately impact marginalized populations (Haney, 2000). Post-colonial critiques highlight how colonial legacies of domination, exploitation, and racial hierarchy continue to shape criminal justice institutions in former colonies. Laws that once served colonial interests—such as vagrancy laws, sedition statutes, or police powers—often remain embedded in modern legal systems, targeting the same populations (e.g., indigenous groups, the urban poor, ethnic minorities) under the guise of law and order. Feminist critiques similarly expose how penal systems fail to address the structural roots of gender-based violence, while at times criminalizing women—especially poor, racialized, or LGBTQ+ women—for acts of survival or resistance. These critiques call into question the universality and neutrality of penal policies, including early release, urging legal scholars and practitioners to consider whose interests are truly being served. Within this critical landscape, restorative justice emerges as both an alternative and a complement to rehabilitation. Unlike traditional punishment models that centre on the state and the offender, restorative justice focuses on healing the harm caused by crime through inclusive dialogue, accountability, and community participation. Victims, offenders, and community members engage in processes such as mediation, conferencing, or circles, aiming to repair relationships and reintegrate the offender in a constructive way (Gailey, 2015). Restorative justice challenges the punitive assumptions of retribution and deterrence by emphasizing empathy, mutual understanding, and personal growth. When integrated with rehabilitative aims, restorative justice can deepen the impact of early release programs by fostering genuine responsibility and social reconciliation, rather than simply conditioning release on good behaviour or risk scores. However, critical legal theorists caution that even restorative and rehabilitative approaches can be co-opted by the very systems they aim to reform. Without structural change, such programs risk becoming bureaucratic rituals or tools of soft coercion, failing to address the deeper injustices embedded in the criminal justice system (Walgrave, 2004). As such, Critical Legal Theory does not merely

advocate for better outcomes within existing frameworks—it demands a reimagining of legal and penal institutions altogether. It calls for a shift in how society understands crime, accountability, and justice, urging legal scholars to confront the political and economic foundations of punishment.

In the context of this research, Critical Legal Theory provides an essential counterpoint to conventional legal analysis. It encourages a more reflective and socially grounded approach to early release policies, one that acknowledges not just the legal texts and procedures, but also the broader systems of power that shape their implementation and impact. By integrating Foucauldian, post-colonial, and feminist perspectives, alongside the promise of restorative justice, this framework allows for a more nuanced and ethically grounded understanding of how rehabilitation and public safety might truly be balanced in law.

International and Regional Human Rights Frameworks

The global legal commitment to uphold human dignity within penal systems is deeply rooted in international and regional human rights instruments. These frameworks provide normative guidance for the treatment of incarcerated individuals and shape legal expectations regarding rehabilitation and early release. At the heart of these instruments is the recognition that incarceration, while involving the deprivation of liberty, must never entail the loss of fundamental human rights or dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, serves as the foundational document of modern human rights law (Humphrey, 1949). Article 5 of the UDHR explicitly states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” affirming the principle that punishment must not violate an individual's inherent dignity. Furthermore, Article 10 and 11 reinforce the ideals of fair trial and the presumption of innocence, emphasizing that justice must be administered with fairness and humanity. Although the UDHR is not legally binding, its principles have attained the status of customary international law and significantly influence the interpretation of binding treaties.

Building on the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Article 10, codifies the right of all persons deprived of their liberty to be treated “with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.” This article forms the bedrock of the rehabilitative principle in international human rights law. It obliges state parties to ensure that the aim of the penitentiary system is the reformation and social rehabilitation of prisoners. The Human Rights Committee, the treaty-monitoring body for the ICCPR, has consistently stressed that rehabilitation should be central to prison policy

and that prolonged or indefinite detention without the prospect of release is inconsistent with the covenant's objectives. To provide practical guidance for prison administration, the United Nations adopted the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, revised in 2015 and now known as the Nelson Mandela Rules (Kasey, 2016). These rules do not constitute a binding treaty, but they represent internationally recognized standards for the humane treatment of prisoners. Notably, Rule 4 emphasizes that the primary purpose of imprisonment is to protect society through reintegration and rehabilitation, rather than retribution. The Mandela Rules advocate for individualized treatment plans, vocational and educational programs, and efforts to maintain prisoners' connections with society—principles that support the case for early release mechanisms grounded in rehabilitation.

At the regional level, human rights instruments further elaborate and enforce these global standards. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), enforced by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), has played a pivotal role in shaping prison law and policy. The Court has held in several landmark cases, such as Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom (2013), that life imprisonment without a real prospect of release violates Article 3 of the ECHR, which prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. The ECtHR has affirmed that rehabilitation and reintegration must be concrete goals in sentencing, especially for life-sentenced prisoners, and that access to early release is a fundamental aspect of ensuring human dignity. In the Inter-American Human Rights System, the American Convention on Human Rights and its interpretative jurisprudence by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have also endorsed the rehabilitative purpose of punishment. The Court has ruled that detention conditions must conform to standards of dignity and that states must provide prisoners with realistic opportunities for personal development and reintegration. Moreover, it has stressed that prolonged pre-trial detention and over-incarceration, especially when disproportionately affecting marginalized communities, amount to structural human rights violations.

Similarly, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights enshrines the right to dignity in Article 5, along with the prohibition of cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has developed soft law instruments, such as the Robben Island Guidelines, which affirm the Charter's commitment to humane treatment in detention settings. Although enforcement mechanisms in the African system face limitations, the normative emphasis on rehabilitation and humane conditions provides a growing platform for prison reform across the continent. Collectively, these international and regional frameworks construct a legal and moral architecture that supports the rehabilitative purpose of punishment and calls for humane, rights-respecting early

release policies. They establish that effective criminal justice must balance public safety with the recognition of prisoners' inherent dignity, and that punitive excess—particularly in the form of life imprisonment without review or inhumane detention conditions—is inconsistent with contemporary human rights law. As such, these instruments are vital to any legal analysis that seeks to reimagine punishment not as an end in itself, but as a process oriented toward transformation, accountability, and reintegration.

Tensions Between Human Rights and Penal Practice

Despite the strong normative foundation established by international human rights instruments, the realization of these principles within penal systems remains deeply problematic. A wide chasm exists between the ideals of dignity, humane treatment, and rehabilitation on one hand, and the punitive realities of incarceration on the other. This disconnect, driven by systemic obstacles and structural inertia, continues to undermine the transformative potential of a human-rights-based penal philosophy. A major systemic obstacle is the pervasive influence of political populism and penal populism. In many democracies, criminal justice policy is increasingly shaped not by empirical evidence or human rights considerations, but by political expediency and the desire to appeal to public sentiment. Politicians often adopt "tough on crime" rhetoric to project strength and control, resulting in harsh sentencing laws, mandatory minimums, and reduced prospects for parole. This approach tends to side line rehabilitative strategies, framing early release as a threat to public safety rather than a pathway to social reintegration. The political cost of being perceived as lenient fuels a climate where rights-based discourse around prisoner treatment is drowned out by fear-based narratives.

The problem is compounded by over-incarceration and underfunded correctional systems (Bleich, 1989). Prisons in many jurisdictions are chronically overcrowded, with infrastructure strained far beyond capacity. This strain makes it nearly impossible to provide effective rehabilitative services such as counselling, education, vocational training, or mental health support. In such environments, incarceration serves only a custodial or punitive function, directly contravening international standards that emphasize the reintegration of offenders. Understaffing, poor training of personnel, and lack of funding for community-based alternatives further exacerbate the issue, turning prisons into warehouses of human suffering rather than spaces for transformation. A third obstacle is the discriminatory application and access to rehabilitation programs, which starkly reveals the inequality embedded in criminal justice systems. Marginalized groups—such as racial minorities,

women, indigenous populations, and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds—often face systemic biases that limit their access to parole, early release, or quality rehabilitation services. For example, parole boards may be more likely to view expressions of remorse or "rehabilitative progress" through cultural or class-based lenses, disadvantaging individuals who do not conform to dominant social norms. The result is a form of structural exclusion that undermines the universality of human rights protections.

Beyond these systemic barriers lies what can be termed the "implementation gap"—the persistent failure of states to operationalize rights guaranteed in international treaties. While many countries have formally ratified instruments like the ICCPR or incorporated human rights principles into their constitutions, the practical impact of these commitments is often negligible. Laws on the books do not necessarily translate into rights in action. Correctional institutions frequently lack the mechanisms, incentives, or political support to ensure compliance with human rights norms. Rights-respecting language becomes symbolic rather than functional, creating a legal façade rather than genuine reform. This gap is maintained and exacerbated by bureaucratic resistance and punitive institutional cultures. Many prison systems operate within rigid hierarchies that prize order and discipline over personal development or care. Institutional inertia and the fear of reputational risk deter innovation, especially when it comes to releasing prisoners early or providing them with meaningful autonomy. Correctional officers, parole officials, and prison administrators often default to conservative decision-making out of concern for public backlash, liability, or professional discipline. Even when human rights training is provided, it is rarely coupled with structural support or cultural change, limiting its effectiveness. These tensions are vividly illustrated through comparative case studies. In the United Kingdom, for instance, reforms emphasizing rehabilitation and early release have been repeatedly undermined by political pressure and high-profile crimes that trigger moral panic. The United States, with the world's largest prison population, remains mired in mass incarceration and racial disparities, with parole systems that are often opaque and discretionary. India, despite constitutional commitments to dignity and reform, struggles with overcrowding, lengthy pre-trial detention, and limited rehabilitative infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. South Africa, though progressive in its legal commitments post-apartheid, continues to battle systemic inequality and violence within its correctional facilities, hindering the fulfilment of rehabilitative goals. These jurisdictions reflect a common pattern: the entrenchment of punitive cultures, despite formal allegiance to human rights principles.

The gap between human rights ideals and penal practice reveals a crisis not only of policy but of legal integrity. The dominance of populist politics, resource constraints,

discrimination, and institutional inertia has stalled the transition to a rehabilitative, rights-respecting penal paradigm. Bridging this divide requires not only legal reform, but a reimagining of justice itself—one that prioritizes humanity over vengeance, reintegration over exclusion, and rights over retribution.

Conclusion

The rehabilitative purpose of punishment, long recognized in theory and international law, remains an elusive ideal within contemporary penal practice. While penal theories have evolved to encompass a spectrum of aims—retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation—only the latter aligns substantively with the foundational principles of human dignity and humane treatment as enshrined in international human rights law. Retributive and deterrent models, often dominant in both rhetoric and policy, frame punishment as a necessary infliction of pain or fear. In contrast, rehabilitation conceives the offender as a person capable of transformation, whose reintegration into society is a legitimate objective of justice. From a normative standpoint, this shift towards rehabilitation is not merely progressive but necessary to fulfil a justice system's ethical and legal obligations under global human rights instruments. Critical legal theory offers valuable tools to interrogate why, despite legal recognition, rehabilitative ideals struggle in implementation. Foucault's critique of prisons as mechanisms of discipline and control rather than reform illustrates how penal institutions may reproduce inequality and subjugation rather than mitigate them. Feminist and post-colonial legal critiques further expose the penal system's embedded biases—highlighting the ways in which race, class, gender, and colonial legacies distort both the administration of justice and the delivery of rehabilitative services. In light of these critiques, restorative justice emerges as a compelling complement to rehabilitation, one that challenges the punitive assumptions of the state and focus on the process of justice around healing, accountability, and social reintegration.

International and regional human rights frameworks provide a compelling legal mandate for states to pursue rehabilitation as a core purpose of incarceration. Instruments such as the ICCPR, Mandela Rules, and jurisprudence from the European Court of Human Rights make it clear that punishment must be proportionate, humane, and forward-looking. These legal standards envision prisons as spaces of reform and learning, not merely containment or retribution. Yet, the realization of this vision is often hindered by entrenched systemic failures. Political populism, chronic underfunding, discrimination, and the bureaucratic inertia of penal institutions stand in stark contrast to the lofty ideals of human

rights law. The result is a persistent implementation gap where legal commitments to rehabilitation remain largely aspirational. Overcrowded prisons, inadequate parole systems, and discriminatory access to rehabilitative programs reveal how deeply penal practices can deviate from their declared purposes. Bridging this gap requires more than incremental reform—it demands a structural and ideological shift. Legal systems must recalibrate their understanding of punishment not as an endpoint of justice, but as a means to an end: the ethical and social reintegration of the offender. Ultimately, the pursuit of a rehabilitative penal paradigm is not a utopian exercise, but a legal and moral imperative grounded in international law and critical jurisprudence. Human rights demand that punishment serve not only the interests of the state or society, but also the individual potential of the offender. By integrating rehabilitation within both legal doctrine and institutional practice, states can move closer to a justice system that is genuinely transformative—one that not only holds individuals accountable, but restores their place within the fabric of human community.

How to cite this article:

ABNT

SAYYED, Hifajatali. Human Rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment: a critical legal perspective. *Passagens rev. int. hist. pol. e cult. jur.*, Niterói, v. 17, n. 3, p. 381-395, set.-dez. 2025. https://doi.org/10.15175/gq7hrf02

APA

Sayyed, H. (2025). Human Rights and the rehabilitative purpose of punishment: a critical legal perspective. *Passagens rev. int. hist. pol. e cult. jur.*, *17*(3), 381-395. https://doi.org/10.15175/gq7hrf02

Editor responsible for the evaluation process:

Gizlene Neder

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