



S. Social Impact

"Made in Prison": Promoting employment in jails through social entrepreneurship

ESCP Impact Paper No 2021-46-EN

Sofia Kriem
ESCP Business School

[“Made in Prison”: Promoting employment in jails through social entrepreneurship

Sofia Kriem*
ESCP Business School

Abstract

This article, while acknowledging the usual lack of transparency in the corporate use of prison labor and its different forms of abuse, aims to broaden the debate and to highlight the positive rise of innovative social entrepreneurship projects for the prison workforce. It focuses mainly on the case study of Pietà, a social and eco-responsible fashion initiative that manufactures and distributes its clothes from the prisons of Lima, Peru. Having built its brand image around the prison culture and by fully embracing the recruitment of inmates, Pietà offers insights into ways to balance ethics and business in the prison environment, with a view to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

Keywords: sustainable development, inclusion, prison labor

*Ph.D. Student

“Made in Prison”: Promoting employment in jails through social entrepreneurship

"Inmates are working to produce hand sanitizer to protect against the spread of COVID-19. Some of these workers get paid as low as \$0.16 an hour! Now is the time to end this last vestige of slavery. It's time to pass the Prison Minimum Wage Act". With this tweet from N. Nick Perry, Assemblyman of the State of New York, it is clear how the current health crisis has highlighted the debate on prison labor and its abuse, bringing it back to the forefront. In order to contain the spread of the pandemic, incarcerated populations have been mobilized in different countries throughout the globe. Prisoners were called upon to produce protective equipment and make up for shortages in masks, sanitizers and coffins, to wash potentially contaminated linen of hospitals and to dig mass graves (Samar, 2020; Carlee Purdum, 2020). The conditions for this mobilization have in fact been criticized, as inmates are denied access to basic hygiene products and medical care (Samar, 2020) as well as to decent wages.

Far from being trivial, this episode reflects deeper realities and long-standing breaches in prison labor. The abuse of penal work has indeed been widely discussed by scholars, journalists and civil society. As a highly controversial and sensitive matter, prison labor is often the ground for questionable and unethical practices (Van Zyl Smit & Dunkel, 1999). The different investigations conducted paint a rather gloomy picture of work in prisons. The limited access to work, the low-skill activities available and the poor working conditions hinder, in the eyes of experts, the ability of prison labor to prepare inmates for social and professional rehabilitation and raise questions about abusive and exploitative behavior. Very low wages, piece-rate payment systems, heavy workloads, bad health and safety environments, and almost no social protection undermine the claims in favor of prison labor (Rambaud & Rohmer, 2010). Penal labor, which mainly involves activities of prison maintenance and operations, as well as manufacturing and industrial production, generally falling under the umbrella of simple and repetitive manual tasks, is undertaken for the account of prison administration or for private companies and subcontractors.

With this background in mind, it is quite easy to understand why prison labor, which in fact is a full part of global supply chains, is kept out of sight. Names of leading groups have indeed been mentioned in the media and the literature and were accused of a lack of transparency in their direct or indirect use of prison labor and blamed for taking part in maintaining a system deemed to be morally outrageous; a system seen as dehumanizing and which reduces prisoners to the mere capacity of production. In the face of these accusations, many brands defend themselves from being directly involved and claim not to be aware of their suppliers' practices (Rambaud & Rohmer, 2010). On the other hand, other companies were compelled to apologize for proven past cases of forced prison labor.

This short overview of prison labor brings up the central point of ethics and transparency in the management of prison human resources and corporate supply chains. While fully acknowledging the weaknesses of the current system and stressing the need to address the root causes of violence and crime, this paper aims to shed light on creative and socially responsible entrepreneurial initiatives engaging with prison workforce. It looks at the case of Pietà, a Peruvian clothing company, which openly uses inmates to produce its garment line and which has built its brand identity around prison life, culture and on valuing its workers. The idea of this paper is definitely not to portray an ideal picture of this case, nor deny its limits, but rather to show that there are some inspiring initiatives today that can pave the way for the reform of prison labor. To foster this thinking, the article draws on a press review and on the analysis of the content of the website and communication tools of Pietà.

Pietà: a fashion brand born in the prisons of Lima

Created by the French national Thomas Jacob in 2012, Pietà is a brand of handmade clothing produced in the prisons of Lima, Peru. The idea behind this project arose rather by chance, when the founder, while on an internship in Peru, was invited to attend a play in prison (Lasjaunias, 2014). On this occasion, he interacted with the inmates and became aware of their desire to fill their time with productive activities. The correctional facility at hand, had garment workshops and sewing machines, but these were only being used to meet the direct needs of the inmates.

From this Pietà emerges, a creative and social fashion project, which builds on the long Peruvian textile tradition and capitalizes on the land's richness and the population's know-how in dressmaking. In fact, the business uses local and natural materials (cashmere, silk, alpaca, pima cotton) (Swash, 2014) and works with inmates, sometimes with previous experience in clothing (sewing, knitting, embroidery and leather goods). The inmates working for the project receive a salary equivalent to the Peruvian minimum wage (Rosengren, 2020) and enjoy a reduced sentence based on the number of days worked. Before its official launching, the company spent its first year developing its concept and brand identity, building trust with inmates, and making prototypes.

From the start, Pietà has succeeded in establishing itself in three Peruvian prisons, two for men and one for women, and has hired around 100 workers in total to produce no less than 200,000 items and is now making about a thousand pieces a week (Rosengren, 2020). Growing gradually, Pietà has seen its range of products for men expand to women and children and has opened its own stores in well-known shopping malls in Lima, after selling its products mainly through its showroom, through multi-brand channels and through its website.

Pietà's story is very enlightening when it comes to understanding the ways of launching an entrepreneurial project in prison. It illustrates greatly the institutional, human and material challenges faced by such initiatives. From an institutional point of view, the company must cope with the changing legal environment and needs to be skillful when dealing with prison administration. On the human level, building a trustworthy relationship with inmates, mediating between prisoners and adjusting to the turnover of released or transferred population is key to the success of the project. Material challenges include limited financial resources, logistics constraints in high-security prisons, and limited access to workshops and teams.

Pietà: a brand identity built around the prison theme

"Impertinent, irreverent, independent and spontaneous". Strong adjectives that Pietà uses to describe itself. In its statements, the brand owns and claims its boundary-crossing character and its desire to shake up the codes of the fashion industry. Drawing its inspiration from the reality of Peruvian prisons, from the experiences, the daily life and the emotions of the inmates, Pietà builds its artistic direction on the Peruvian identity and the prison life. Consisting of four vertical lines crossed by a horizontal one, the logo symbolizes both prison bars and time countdown, recalling the engravings made by inmates in solitary confinement on the walls of their cells. The aesthetics of Pietà's creations, the choice of its editorial line and the arrangement of its stores, all converge towards the development of a concept reflecting prison culture.

With minimalist cuts, spare and graphic patterns, and cold colors, the clothes convey a unisex, casual, and urban look and feature iconic prison symbols (Pang, 2014; Swash, 2014). T-shirts, hoodies, joggers, and caps are available mostly in black and white and stamped

with designs and slogans, combining poetry, activism, and humor. On the clothing, fingerprints are printed, chained wrists, a court verdict page or a plea against the death penalty. Slogans, in capital letters, also appeal to the public: "Handmade by inmates", "No miracles here" and "Blind justice". To ensure artistic consistency in these collections, the founder is the one in charge of the design phase of the items (Lasjaunias, 2014). Inmates are invited to make suggestions and share their opinions but are nonetheless not truly active in the creative process, as their wide socio-cultural diversity might potentially undermine the overall coherence of the line.

Beyond the textile creations, the brand's advertising content also supports the originality of the project and reinforces its positioning. Using several channels, Pietà shares photos and videos shot in prisons. The prison setting is omnipresent across the sequences, creating an atmosphere of harshness and promiscuity, but also humanity. Barbed wire and fences, sexy posters and pictures of drug traffickers, graffiti, sports fields and telephone booths appear throughout the images. Captured mainly in black and white, they feature the inmates, wearing the brand's clothes and posing as models. The soundtracks add depth to these images. Electro sounds and Latino music, with evocative and meaningful lyrics, are mixed with the sounds of police sirens and the hubbub of the crowd.

Pietà: a tribute to the inmates.

The initiative of Pietà shows that prison can also be a space for talent and beauty. In contrast to the widespread stigmatizing vision of inmates, the brand praises their potential. By being open about the use of prison labor, valuing the work done and acknowledging the dignity of inmates, Pietà honors the prisoners.

The celebration of inmates goes with not silencing their work and not keeping them in the shadows. In this case, each item of clothing bears an inscription with the name of the prison where it was produced and the name of the person who made it. The inmates, by not being kept anonymous, see their identity as individuals and workers recognized. By showing their faces and making their voices heard through the different communication materials, the inmates partially appropriate their identity and history. One of the short films made, for instance, ends with a powerful sentence from the narrator, an inmate, who tells the story of Pietà: "We are not just a brand of clothes. We are".

Through its designs and communication tools, the brand carries a strong message of inclusion and values of work, effort and human dignity.

In fact, the manual and craft work of inmates is embedded within the discourse of Pietà, which offers entirely handmade products. Its advertising videos pay attention to the gestures of making the clothes. By showing the entire production process, from cutting to silk-screening to sewing, Pietà unveils the essence of inmates' work and praises manual labor. Symbols of hard work, the inmates' hands are represented over and over again in the videos. Hands are cutting patterns, hands are sewing fabrics and hands are embroidering designs. The notion of effort is thus ever-present in Pietà's communication. The words of an inmate in a promotional video are particularly striking: "We got the best out of each other to build Pietà. With sweat, effort and hard work, nothing is impossible". This idea of effort is also constant through the designs and conception of the clothes. Powerful messages are printed on the clothes and commend the efforts of incarcerated people: "Every Effort is beautiful. Cartel Pietà, for those who come from nothing. We are not perfect. We will never be. But we do our best, with effort, self-discipline, dedication and determination".

Human dignity is thus a value that is strongly expressed through the identity of Pietà's and its communication elements. The name of the brand, far from being insignificant, reveals the key place given to this value in the development of the project. As it happens, the name

of the brand is a direct reference to the well-known sculpture of Michelangelo, The Pietà, which symbolizes both the acceptance of divine will and the desire for revival (Lasjaunias, 2014). Rooted in a country where religion is an essential component of Peruvian culture and where poverty goes hand in hand with delinquency, the Pietà project pays homage through its name to the prisoners, who, in the words of its founder Thomas Jacob, accept their fate and endure this hardship with strength and dignity. The Pietà, a masterpiece of the Renaissance, represents the Biblical scene of the sorrowful Virgin holding the body of the dead Jesus on her knees. The peacefulness that emanates from both Christ and the Virgin Mary, whose faces express neither sadness nor pain, takes precedence over the dramatic intensity of this scene and evokes the acceptance of one's fate. The Pietà, the last step before the Resurrection, also embodies the idea of renewal, thus echoing the prisoners' desire to move forward.

Conclusion

At a time when companies hide the direct or indirect use of prison labor in their production and supply chain, Pietà's initiative sheds an interesting light on how to approach transparency, using penal labor. Owning such a stance clearly implies vigilance about the ethical concerns of the project. If the company's mission of rehabilitating inmates through fashion is commendable, its effectiveness needs to be qualified. Fashion is one of the least protective and safe sectors for workers in developing countries, with poor prospects for the future upon release. While it goes without saying that some will see this project as a well-crafted marketing strategy for business purposes, it does provide some insights into how to reconcile ethics and economic viability for prison labor and to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, as recommended by the 16th United Nations Sustainable Development Goal.

References

- Ahmad, S. (2020, October 26), The Shadow Workforce: Prison Labor and International Trade, *Harvard International Review*.
- Carlee Purdum, J. (2020, April 21), States are putting prisoners to work manufacturing coronavirus supplies, *The Conversation*.
- Lasjaunias, A. (2014, May 12), La mode derrière les barreaux, *Le Monde*.
- Pang, J.C. (2014, August 28), An inspiring Fashion Collective Springs From Peru's Prison System, *The New York Times*.
- Rambaud G. Rohmer N. (2010), « Le Travail en prison. Enquête sur le business carcéral », Autrement, Paris.
- Rosengren I. (2020, July 2), The fashion labels whose clothes are made by prisoners, *BBC News*.
- Swash R. (2014, November 24), Insider chic: the fashion label created behind bars, *The Guardian*.
- Van Zyl Smit D. Dünkel F. (1999), « Prison Labour: Salvation or Slavery ? International Perspectives », Routledge.