

INCLUSIVE LITERATURE PRISON INMATES AND COMMERCIAL SEX WORKER COMMUNITIES IN PALU: AN ANTRO-SOCIO-LITERARY STUDY

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Abstract: *Literature is not only an aesthetic expression but also carries transformative potential in shaping social awareness, empathy, and recognition of humanity. In Indonesia's plural society with its complex social realities, literature should not remain the privilege of the educated elite but function as an empowering medium and a space of articulation for marginalized voices. This study proposes the concept of inclusive literature, positioning literature as a participatory and democratic arena where marginalized groups can actively create and appreciate literary works. The research focuses on two socially excluded communities in Palu, Central Sulawesi: prison inmates and commercial sex workers. Both groups suffer from structural subordination, legal stigma, and cultural norms that deny them proper representation in national literacy. Using an antro-socio-literary approach—an interdisciplinary framework combining anthropology, sociology, and literature—the study employed qualitative methods: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis of poems and short stories produced during a six-month literacy workshop. Findings reveal three key contributions of literature: identity reconstruction and self-esteem restoration, psychosocial therapy through cathartic writing and reading, and social critique articulated via symbolic language. The works produced display thematic depth and aesthetic authenticity, reflecting alienation, loss, longing, spirituality, and hope. This confirms that marginalized communities possess creative capacity deserving recognition within contemporary Indonesian literature. The study affirms literature as a living social practice that negotiates identity, meaning, and symbolic resistance. Inclusive literature thus emerges as both cultural strategy and praxis for social transformation, bridging divides and advancing humanity.*

Keywords: *Antro-Socio-Literary; Inclusivism; Literature; Marginal Groups*

A. INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the cultural expressions that possesses a unique power in voicing the diversity of human experience. Beyond its aesthetic value, literature also holds a transformative force capable of fostering social awareness, expanding empathy, and affirming humanity. In Indonesia's pluralistic society, literature should ideally serve as a democratic space that accommodates all voices, including those of the marginalized. However, in reality, most literary spaces remain dominated by the educated class, while marginalized groups continue to be excluded from representation.

The city of Palu, Central Sulawesi, presents a social reality that reveals the existence of communities vulnerable both structurally and culturally. According to data from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights of Central Sulawesi (2024), the number of inmates in Palu Penitentiary has reached approximately 1,200, with overcrowding exceeding the

official capacity by almost 150%. This situation not only creates challenges for rehabilitation but also reinforces public stigma toward inmates as an alienated group.

On the other hand, the Social Affairs Office of Palu City (2023) reported more than 400 officially registered commercial sex workers (CSWs), though the actual number is estimated to be higher due to the hidden nature of their activities. CSW communities often face discrimination, both legally and socially, and rarely gain fair representational space. Their lives are largely perceived through the lens of negative morality, without the opportunity to reveal their human side.

These two groups—inmates and CSWs—are nearly absent from the national literary map. Yet, their lived experiences are full of emotional dynamics, existential conflicts, and social reflections that would be invaluable if expressed through literature. It is at this juncture that the idea of literary inclusivism emerges—a perspective that asserts literature should open itself to all groups, including the marginalized, allowing them to create, voice their experiences, and reclaim their dignity.

Discussions on marginal literature have developed within global discourse. Gayatri Spivak (1988), for example, through her concept of the subaltern, highlights the importance of bringing forth voices silenced by dominant social structures. In the Indonesian context, research on women's literature (Arimbi, 2010) and workers' literature (Sumardjo, 2016) demonstrates how literature can serve as a space of articulation for marginalized groups.

However, research that positions inmates and CSWs as active subjects of literary creation remains scarce. Literacy programs in prisons generally focus only on basic reading and writing skills, without providing creative outlets. Meanwhile, CSW communities are almost untouched by literature-based programs, even though their life experiences are rich with potential narratives. For this reason, this study seeks to fill an academic gap by employing an anthro-sociological approach to literature—an integration of anthropology, sociology, and literary studies that views literary works not merely as texts, but as cultural practices emerging from social struggles.

This study has several main objectives. First, to explore and document the life experiences of inmates and CSWs through literary works, particularly poetry and short stories. Second, to identify the function of literature as a medium for reconstructing identity and restoring self-esteem. Third, to examine the therapeutic dimension present in the practices of writing and reading, especially in alleviating trauma and social alienation. Fourth, to analyze how these works function as social criticism against the structures of injustice they face.

Thus, this research not only enriches academic discourse but also introduces a model of empowerment based on creative literacy that can be replicated in other marginalized communities across Indonesia.

The urgency of this study can be seen through three main dimensions: (1) Humanitarian Dimension: Inmates and CSWs in Tondo Subdistrict are often reduced to mere objects of law or morality, erasing their humanity from the public sphere. By providing them with the space to create, this research aims to restore their fundamental right to voice, while raising public awareness that they, too, possess creative potential worthy of appreciation. (2) Academic Dimension: Contemporary Indonesian literature still rarely positions marginalized groups as an integral part of its corpus. This study offers an expanded horizon of literary studies by emphasizing inclusivism, participation, and interdisciplinarity. Such an approach is crucial in addressing critiques of elitism within Indonesian literary circles. (3) Socio-Cultural Dimension: In a society vulnerable to intolerance and inequality, literature can function as a bridge of empathy and solidarity. Through works born of the experiences of inmates and CSWs, the public may encounter different realities, fostering new awareness of the importance of social and cultural justice.

By placing inmates and CSWs as active subjects, this study affirms that literature should not be viewed solely as an aesthetic product, but as a living social practice. Literary inclusivism is not merely an ideal concept but a concrete cultural strategy to broaden the literary field, dismantle the boundaries of aesthetic exclusivity, and pave the way for social reconciliation.

This research, based in Palu, is not only significant for the development of literary studies but also holds practical implications for education, cultural policy, and literacy movements in Indonesia. Ultimately, truly living literature is that which provides space for all voices, including those most often silenced.

B. METHOD

1. Research Type and Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design. The focus lies on meaning, lived experiences, and social representations as expressed through literary works. Data are drawn from literary texts (poetry, short stories) written by prison inmates and members of the commercial sex worker (CSW) community, as well as from interviews and observations of their creative processes.

As a descriptive-exploratory study, the researcher seeks to provide an in-depth account of the phenomenon of literary inclusivism among marginalized groups, while also exploring the potential and functions of literature as a medium for identity reconstruction, restoration of self-esteem, psychosocial therapy, and social critique. This type of research was chosen because the topic remains underexplored, giving the study a pioneering character.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary anthro-sociological-literary approach, combining anthropology, sociology, and literary studies. This integration is necessary because

literature is a cultural product born from the social interactions of a particular community. In this context, poems and short stories by inmates and CSWs are understood as reflections of marginal culture, containing symbols, values, and unique expressions of these groups. Anthropology helps explain how literature emerges from everyday experiences, social rituals, trauma, and aspirations of marginalized groups. From the perspective of the sociology of literature, the study analyzes the relationship between literature and social structures, power relations, and the stigmas experienced by inmates and CSWs.

This approach examines literature as a tool of symbolic resistance, a medium of social critique, and a means of negotiating identity. From the literary studies perspective, textual aspects such as theme, style, symbolism, imagination, and the richness of local idioms are analyzed. Textual analysis helps uncover how language is used to express feelings of alienation, remorse, longing, or hope experienced by the authors. Aesthetic dimensions are not separated from social dimensions but are instead viewed as ways for marginalized groups to assert their existence and creativity.

2. Research Sites

The study was conducted in Palu City, specifically at Palu Class IIA Penitentiary and the CSW localization area in Tondo Subdistrict, Palu City.

3. Sources of Data

Primary data were obtained through interviews and observations. In-depth interviews were conducted with prison inmates who participated in literary writing workshops and with CSWs who produced literary works in the form of poetry, short stories, and others. Participant observation was carried out during prison rehabilitation activities (skills training/literacy programs) and within CSW community spaces facilitated by marginal literary groups, social research centers, universities, and other related institutions.

4. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through:

- a. Participant observation in creative literacy activities within prisons and CSW communities;
- b. In-depth interviews with participants (inmates, CSWs, literacy facilitators, academics, and social workers);
- c. Textual analysis of literary works (poetry and short stories) written during literacy workshops;
- d. Documentation of literacy activities, field notes, and institutional archives.

5. Data Validation

Data validity was tested using triangulation, specifically source triangulation and literature triangulation. Source triangulation involved scholars, practitioners, and participants who were considered capable of providing relevant insights for this research. Literature triangulation was carried out by consulting supporting references in the form of books and manuscripts.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Demographic Profile of Participants

This study involved 60 participants, consisting of 30 inmates of Palu Penitentiary (Lapas) and 30 members of the commercial sex worker (CSW) community in Palu City. These two groups were chosen because of their distinctive social experiences, marginalized situations, and limited access to literacy and literary programs. The demographic profile provides insight into participants' backgrounds and their implications for accessing, appreciating, and producing literary works.

In terms of age, the majority of participants were within the productive age range. Among the inmates, the average age was 32 years, with 53% concentrated in the 26–35 age range. Similarly, the CSW group had an average age of 29, with 50% also concentrated in the same age bracket. These findings show that both groups were at a relatively active stage of life, but burdened with significant social challenges.

Regarding education, both inmates and CSWs were predominantly educated at the secondary level. A total of 43% of inmates and 33% of CSWs had completed senior high school, while the next largest proportion was at the junior high level (37% inmates, 40% CSWs). Only a small fraction had received higher education (10% in each group). This indicates limited access to formal literary or academic literacy, which shapes their patterns of literary appreciation.

Marital status also varied. Among inmates, most were married (57%), while among CSWs the majority were unmarried (50%) or divorced/widowed (30%). This highlights the instability of social support from partners or families, making literacy activities a potential substitute space for emotional expression and building new social networks.

In terms of time spent in prison or in work, 50% of inmate participants had served 2–5 years, while 40% of CSWs had been working for 2–5 years. This shows that both groups had lengthy experience in navigating socially stressful environments, positioning literary literacy as a potential coping and self-strengthening strategy.

Geographically, most inmates came from Palu and its surrounding areas (70%), while most CSWs (60%) originated from outside Palu, particularly from South Sulawesi, West

Sulawesi, and Java. This demonstrates patterns of social and economic mobility across regions, bringing cultural diversity into the literary works produced.

In terms of prior literacy engagement, inmate participants showed relatively low levels of involvement: 53% had never engaged in literary activities, 17% had previously written, and 30% had read literary works. Among CSWs, literacy engagement was higher: 37% had written (mainly poetry or diaries), 43% had read popular books or magazines, and only 20% had never engaged in literary literacy at all. This indicates greater potential in the CSW community for developing literature-based literacy programs, although both groups require inclusive and participatory approaches.

Overall, the demographic profile shows that participants were predominantly young adults with secondary education, fragile marital conditions, and limited access to formal literacy. Despite these limitations, there is significant potential to position literature as a medium of self-recovery, identity strengthening, and social relationship reconstruction.

The initial survey involved 125 participants: 60 prison inmates, 50 CSWs, and 15 key informants (prison staff, NGO facilitators, and university lecturers). Findings showed that participants' ages were dominated by productive groups (20–35 years), with an average of 32.4 years among inmates and 29.1 years among CSWs. Educational levels were generally low: 70% of inmates and 75% of CSWs only completed primary or junior high school. This highlights limited access to formal literature.

Regarding marital status, inmates were more likely to be married (45%), while CSWs were predominantly single (60%). These differences point to distinct social conditions that influence access to and practice of literacy.

The study findings are discussed across three aspects: (1) Literary inclusivism as a medium of self-recovery, (2) Literary inclusivism as identity strengthening, and, (3) Literary inclusivism as social relationship reconstruction.

Literary Inclusivism as a Medium of Self-Recovery

Findings show that literature plays an essential role as a healing space for both inmates at Palu Class IIA Penitentiary and members of the CSW community. Inclusivism is reflected in their openness to using literary media—both traditional (books, handwritten notes) and digital (phones, social media)—to express life experiences marked by trauma, emotional wounds, and hope.

a. Inmates

For inmates, reading and writing literature function as coping mechanisms in dealing with isolated life. About 68% of inmates had participated in literacy programs, and 55% actively wrote poetry or short stories. Dominant themes in their works included longing for family, regret, lost freedom, and prayers. One 48-year-old inmate stated:

“When I write poetry, it feels like healing old wounds. Words become medicine.” This statement reinforces literature’s function as an expressive therapy tool, enabling inmates to reconstruct the meaning of life despite limitations.

b. CSW Community:

Among CSWs, inclusivism appears in more flexible and digital forms. About 54% wrote personal notes or poetry on their phones, while 30% used social media to express emotions. Their writings often became a channel to communicate experiences of marginalization while affirming their existence as human beings.

A 29-year-old CSW shared: *“I write about nights on the street. So people know we are human too.”* This highlights literature as not only a personal therapy tool but also a medium for social negotiation to reduce stigma.

c. Dimensions of Inclusivism:

Two main dimensions of inclusivism were observed:

- 1) Personal inclusivity – literature embraced diverse personal experiences, whether sadness, hope, or spiritual reflection.
- 2) Social inclusivity – literary works became bridges of communication across communities, showing that both inmates and CSWs shared equal capacity for creativity, empathy, and solidarity.

d. Impact on Self-Recovery;

Quantitative data reinforced these findings. An 8-week literature-based literacy program increased literary self-efficacy (from 17.2 to 25.8; $p < 0.001$) and life satisfaction (from 4.1 to 5.6; $p = 0.01$). These improvements indicate that literary engagement enhanced participants’ confidence and life meaning.

Notes on significance:

- 1) p represents probability value—the chance that results occurred randomly.
- 2) $p < 0.05$ is the conventional threshold for statistical significance.
- 3) $p < 0.001$ means the probability of random chance is less than 0.1%, strongly affirming the reliability of results.

Literary Inclusivism as Identity Strengthening

Findings indicate that literary inclusivism functions beyond expression; it is also an instrument for constructing, negotiating, and strengthening the identities of inmates and

CSWs. In stigmatized and marginalized contexts, inclusive literary practices provide safe spaces for rediscovering dignity and constructing positive identities.

For inmates, participation in writing and literary discussions fostered personal reflection. They reinterpreted past mistakes and nurtured new aspirations. Literature became a transformative medium, helping them see themselves not merely as “prisoners,” but as creative and capable individuals.

For CSWs, literature became a channel for articulating experiences silenced by stigma. Their writings rejected the reduction of identity solely to profession. By presenting alternative narratives, they claimed recognition as mothers, siblings, and citizens with dreams and rights. When their works were read and appreciated, marginalized identities gained new legitimacy.

Literary inclusivism also facilitated dialogue with external communities (NGOs, academics, art volunteers), breaking down social barriers and affirming dynamic, multifaceted identities. Thus, literature functioned not only as entertainment or therapy but also as a cultural strategy that strengthened their social position.

Literary Inclusivism as Social Relationship Reconstruction

This study further shows that literary inclusivism plays a fundamental role in rebuilding social relationships. Marginalized identities, weakened by stigma, found acknowledgment through literary practices centered on participation, dialogue, and expression.

For inmates, creative writing helped reconstruct self-identities previously reduced to “lawbreakers.” Their works expressed longing, regret, and hope, affirming a positive self-image as learners and transformative individuals.

For CSWs, literature provided opportunities to reject identity reduction to profession alone. Their works reflected not only professional experiences but also care, solidarity, and everyday struggles, emphasizing identity complexity.

At the collective level, workshops and reading forums created solidarity and pride. When appreciated by peers and outsiders, their narratives gained legitimacy, reinforcing positive identity.

Thus, literary inclusivism strengthens identity on three levels:

1. Personal – fostering positive self-awareness.
2. Community – building solidarity and collective recognition.
3. Social – enabling communication and legitimizing marginalized identities in broader society.

Access and Literary Practices

Inmates showed relatively high participation in prison literacy programs, with 68% having joined reading and writing activities. Reading materials were limited mainly to folklore, motivational books, and religious texts such as the Qur'an.

In contrast, CSWs relied more on digital media: 54% wrote personal notes or poetry on their phones, and 30% expressed themselves via social media. Quantitative data showed 72% of inmates read regularly, while 60% of CSWs focused on writing poetry/short stories. This indicates adaptive forms of literary practices: books in prison, digital platforms among CSWs.

Thematic analysis of 85 interview transcripts revealed five main themes:

- a. Literature as a healing space, processing trauma and wounds;
- b. Literature as social negotiation, especially among CSWs;
- c. Barriers to access, including book scarcity in prisons and stigma against CSWs;
- d. Literature and community solidarity, through prison reading groups and CSW WhatsApp sharing;
- e. Identity reconstruction, with literature used to build positive self-image and resist stigma.

Literary Corpus

During the study, 190 works were collected: 120 poems, 40 short stories, and 30 short essays. Content analysis identified dominant keywords such as *night*, *child*, *longing*, *freedom*, *prayer*, *market*, *wound*. Sentiments were categorized as:

- a. Reflective/traumatic (60%),
- b. Resilient/hopeful (25%),
- c. Neutral/observational (15%).

Sample titles included "*The Palu Sky Behind Bars*" (Sugandi), "*I Am a Woman on the Night Street*" (Tuti), and "*The Child Waiting at Home*" (Pradana).

Evaluation of the Literacy Program

The 8-week literacy program involving 30 inmates and 20 CSWs produced significant outcomes:

- a. Literary self-efficacy increased from 17.2 to 25.8 ($p < 0.001$),
- b. Social inclusion increased from 12.5 to 18.9 ($p = 0.002$),
- c. Life satisfaction rose from 4.1 to 5.6 ($p = 0.01$).

These findings affirm that literature-based literacy has tangible impacts on participants' confidence and quality of life.

Social Network Analysis

Social Network Analysis (SNA) revealed transformation in participant interaction networks. Before the program, networks were fragmented with a density of 0.12. After the program, new bridging nodes emerged (prison facilitators and CSW peer leaders), increasing density to 0.28. This demonstrates that literature functioned not only as a personal expression medium but also as a means of expanding solidarity and social communication.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that literary inclusivism provides meaningful benefits for inmates and members of the CSW community in Palu, particularly in the context of limited education, unstable social conditions, and restricted access to formal literacy programs. Literary activities supported emotional recovery, encouraged personal reflection, and strengthened identity formation by giving participants space to reinterpret their experiences beyond stigma. Evidence from the 8-week program showed increases in literary self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and social inclusion, while Social Network Analysis demonstrated improved interaction patterns and stronger community ties. The literary works produced throughout the study also revealed recurring themes of longing, trauma, hope, responsibility, and resilience, reflecting the complexity of the participants' lived realities. Overall, the study concludes that inclusive literary practices have the potential to function as an effective cultural and social intervention, enabling marginalized groups to rebuild confidence, expand social support, and participate more actively in community life.

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