

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/mass-incarceration-and-its-impact-are-devastating-to-women>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[9to5, National Association of Working Women](#) of which I am the Georgia chapter director understands the devastating impact mass incarceration has on women. The rate of growth for female imprisonment has outpaced men by more than 50 percent between 1980 and 2014. Now there are more than 1 million women behind bars or under some form of correctional supervision.

Because the number of incarcerated women has increased, so have the number of women living with a criminal record. Having a criminal record makes it harder to find a job and maintain stability upon release from jail or prison.

Given these realities, I did not find it surprising in 2011 when members of the Georgia chapter of 9to5 expressed a desire to launch a Ban the Box campaign in Atlanta. I was thrilled to help the chapter launch its campaign and work to affect change. The goal was to make Atlanta the first city in Georgia to eliminate the checkbox question of past criminal offenses on public employment applications.

After little more than a year of organizing, Atlanta responded to our demand by banning the box on city employment applications.

The Georgia chapter of 9to5 went on to join other community and criminal justice organizations to urge Governor Nathan Deal to issue an executive order banning the box on state employment applications, as well. Earlier this year, Deal made history by becoming the first governor of a Southern state to issue an executive order banning the box.

When 30 women, almost all African-American, came together in 2011 in the IBEW union hall to discuss launching the Ban the Box campaign, we never expected that just four years later, President Barack Obama would issue an executive order banning the box on federal employee applications. We at 9to5 are excited to see the momentum behind reform.

But we know Ban the Box is just a first step in addressing our flawed legal system.

The footage of women like [Sandra Bland](#) being slammed to the ground by a police officer and the testimony of [over a dozen Black women](#) describing how they were sexually assaulted by an Oklahoma police officer have caused many to realize that its not just men of color who are deeply affected by the need for criminal justice reform.

The pathways through which women enter the justice system are different from those of men. Women entering prisons and jails are much more likely to have experienced poverty, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, or other forms of victimization often linked to their offending behavior. This means many women are being incarcerated simply because they are defending themselves against an abusive spouse or intimate partner.

For example, Florida woman Marissa Alexander was initially sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing a warning shot at her abusive husband. As a woman, Alexander didnt have the right to stand her ground when she felt she was in danger. Women are not only criminalized for defending themselves but they are often criminalized for being survivors of sexual exploitation. In Atlanta, the city ranked number one for sex trafficking, we see women being charged for prostitution who are actually victims of pimping and other forms of sexual exploitation.

Thats why its important to ensure women have every opportunity to access community supports, and to find jobs that will afford them self sufficiency and sustainable lives. Its time to ban the box everywhere and to provide supportive solutions to victims rather than incarcerating women for practicing self defense. Its time to reduce reliance on and the stigma surrounding the criminal record.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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