

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/breaking-the-silence-about-women-in-prison>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

We like to think incarcerated women are so different from the general population. But that's simply not true. I often say: If you want to understand sexism in America, go to a women's prison.

Gender bias for incarcerated women is the same bias that forces free women to have to choose between career and becoming a homemaker, accept less pay for doing the same jobs as our male counterparts, or put up with seemingly endless jokes about our hormones and poor logic. Women who are incarcerated are told again and again that they can't be good moms. Children are told to be ashamed of their incarcerated moms, while incarcerated dads are not similarly shamed. Women and especially moms are expected to exemplify purity and wholesomeness, regardless of the crosses we bear. Women have to grin and bear it, no matter how cruel people are or how much abuse and trauma we endure. And when we step out of line, we are shamed, abused, and silenced.

Many justice-involved women have experienced trauma during their lifetimes. However, jails and prisons offer little or no trauma-informed care or mental health services. No one wants to talk about what it is like to have a monthly menstrual cycle while incarcerated and how humiliating this can be when men run the prison. Pap smears don't happen, mammograms go incomplete, and rape goes unreported. Thus, the trauma that women experience prior to prison goes untreated and they become more traumatized by incarceration.

Even when policies are intended to help, they fall short. One example: The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). When it was created it did not include statistics of female-on-female sexual violence. I can tell you from first-hand survival: incarcerated women routinely experience sexual assault at the hands of each other. Male guards may find this funny or stimulating, and speaking up to them makes you a target for more abuse. Just as in the outside world, women can be treated as mere objects for pleasure.

More often than not, when there is research on, outreach for, and interest about incarcerated women, [such studies fall short](#). However, Vera's recently released report, [Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform](#) which focuses on women in jails on a national level is comprehensive, fact-based, and offers concrete insights to what honestly happens to women in jails in this country. It also offers substantive ways of changing the system and reducing the number of justice-involved women. The report proves that women who are in jail are suffering because of ignorance and gender bias.

While the prison reform movement overall has achieved an increasingly rare political status, bipartisan support, justice-involved women are still left out of the public eye. President Obama visited a federal male prison last year and the world watched, discussed, and vowed to take action. Women's prisons, however, remain largely ignored by politicians. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, as of April 2016, 6.7 percent of all inmates were women. Yes, this is a small percentage, but it is also the fastest-growing group of inmates. Women and our unique struggles are no less significant to our country than the challenges of men. The Vera report is one of the most validating studies I have ever read and does not shy away from the horrors of jail for women in this country.

If we want real change for justice-involved women, those in power must speak up and expose the truth about what life is like for the women who live in prison every day. Conversations about the trauma-to-prison pipeline for women are dissected in private meetings, but in order to achieve true reform, these issues need to be on the front page of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. This is a call to action for prominent figures like President Barack Obama, Attorney General Loretta Lynch, and presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. I ask you: When it comes down to it, will you speak for women and girls, even when they don't match a perfect ideal?

Gender is a protected class. The late Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote that when a person walks through prison gates, that individual does not give up her constitutional rights. Justice-involved women should not have to give up their right to be free of discrimination. Not even in prison.

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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