

A blog post by Professor Linda M. Alcoff on two panel discussions sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women and Society at the Graduate Center, CUNY: “Navigating Freedom” on September 30, 2014 and “Prison is a form of violence against women.” on October 9, 2014.

The Center for the Study of Women and Society organized a two part program this Fall around specific gender issues in the prison industrial complex. The numbers of women in prison is steadily rising (though rates for African American women are down, while whites and Latinas are up).



The first program featured Rev. Vivian Nixon, co-founder of the Inside Out Coalition, Yolanda Johnson-Peterkin, an associate with the New York Women in Prison Project, and our own colleague at CUNY, Michelle Fine, a scholar and activist in this area. Their focus was on women’s experiences in prison as well as the difficulties they face in the community after release.

As Rev. Nixon reminded us, the United States imprisons 25% of the global population of prisoners, although we only have 5% of the global population overall. The disproportionate percentage of people of color in prison is not backed up by any study showing that people of color commit more crimes. The collateral consequences of imprisonment follow individuals throughout their lives; in essence, they lose their rights as citizens. Protracted probation curtails their freedom of movement but also their freedom of speech. She suggests that this population loses the habit of saying—and even thinking—freely. Johnson-Peterkin offered a fascinating discussion of “gender responsive” practices inside prisons, designed to recognize women’s differences. Two-thirds of women in prison are convicted for non-violent crimes; many involve abusive partners in one way or another. Women in prison have much less support from families and friends than male prisoners; she recounted being surprised at the much shorter lines to wait for visits with women in jail. Women in prison are often experiencing PTSD and become re-traumatized by aggressive prison practices. Upon release women return to challenged communities with bad housing options and poor social services. Each speaker spoke out strongly, however, against the idea that anyone inside would rather stay there than get out: that is a lie propagated by some films (e.g. *The Shawshank Redemption*) that they find ludicrous.

This program brought seasoned activists, scholars and organizers to a broad public audience, bringing home the real world issues of life both inside and outside of prison. As Johnson-Peterkin put it at one point, the discourse around prison policy

she has sometimes heard is about how prisoners “need to be humanized.” There is a long way to go before this society comes to terms with the fact that the real source of dehumanization is the justice system itself.



Our second program was co-sponsored with the Center for Place, Culture and Politics and organized by Interference Archive in connection with “Self-Determination Inside/Out,” an exhibit that explores how movements inside prison transform life on the outside. It featured Victoria Law, co-founder of Books Through Bars NYC, as moderator. Speakers included: Cecily McMillan, an Occupy Wall Street activist who served two months in Rikers for allegedly assaulting a police officer; Amy Meacham, an organizer with the Correctional Association who served 8 years in prison; and Sharon Richardson, a Reentry Specialist with STEPS who served two decades in prison.

It is no exaggeration to say that, despite a SRO crowd, there was not a dry eye in the house. Each speaker articulately recounted extremely severe cases of injustice in their lives and also at the hands of the justice system that were not perpetrated by ‘mistakes’ in the process of the justice system but by routine practices. Women cannot fight back against physical abuse or attack, they cannot bring even long and severe histories of domestic abuse into trial, and they can lose custody of their children when they fight against domestic violence. Panelists were also asked to explore the intersections of race and gender in their prison experience, and spoke about learning very forceful lessons about the nature, and nuances, of white privilege.

At both programs panelists mentioned an initiative currently under way: to pass the **Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act (A.4314-C/S.3337-C)**. The point of this bill is to establish a more fair sentencing structure for survivors convicted of crimes directly related to the abuse they suffered. We are appending a sample letter of support for this Act below, with information about where to send your letters.

Date _____

Dear _____
(see blank)

I am writing to urge you to support the **Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act (A.4314-C/S.3337-C)**. This bill is critical because it will allow New York to take a significant step toward addressing the years of injustice faced by DV survivor-defendants whose lives have been shattered by abuse. By establishing a more fair and compassionate sentencing structure for survivors convicted of crimes directly related to the abuse they suffered, the Act makes it less likely that survivors will be victimized by the very system that should help protect them.

The bill would: (1) allow judges to sentence survivors to shorter prison terms and, in some cases, community-based alternative-to-incarceration programs instead of prison and (2) provide survivors currently in prison the opportunity to apply for resentencing, thereby granting much-deserved relief for incarcerated survivors who often pose no threat to public safety. The Act contains protections to ensure appropriate use of this discretion.

Eligibility for shorter prison terms and alternative to incarceration programs (ATIs) for women survivors is particularly appropriate as they most often have no prior criminal records, no history of violence and extremely low recidivism rates. Community-based ATIs are far more effective than prison in allowing survivors to rebuild family relationships, recover from abuse, and positively participate in their communities. Allowing survivors to live in the community while serving sentences also permits them to maintain ties to children and lessen the trauma of separation – thereby increasing the likelihood that children will receive the support they need to become healthy, productive adults.

In addition, New York can save substantial costs by sentencing DV survivors to lower sentences and alternative programs. It costs approximately \$55,000 per year to incarcerate a person in a New York State prison, yet only about \$11,000 per person per year for an ATI program in New York City. ATIs can save taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars each year. Domestic and international human rights standards uphold the right of women – and all people – to live free from violence. Our government has recognized its responsibility to preserve this right and provide support for DV survivors. This responsibility does not end when a survivor becomes involved in the criminal justice system because of the abuse she suffers – in part because the lack of adequate protection, intervention and support is what often leads to this involvement in the first place.

I strongly urge you to support the DV Survivors Justice Act, critical legislation for survivors of domestic violence and all community members in your district and across the state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Signature _____ Print Name _____

Full Address _____
(Please provide full street address and zip code. No P.O. Boxes please.)

Zip _____

Please return completed form to the Women in Prison Project of the Correctional Association of New York, by mail: 2090 Adam Clayton Powell Blvd. Suite 200, New York, NY 10027, or fax: (212) 473-2807.