



Reimagining Prison Reform from the Inside

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Within conversations about prison reform, it is remarkably rare for discussions of women's prison experiences to center questions of agency, reinforcing the idea that justice-involved women have a passive mindset or lack the ability to develop a critical sense of agency. Yet, research demonstrates that women who have direct experience in the carceral system have much to add to the future of reform, and incarcerated women bring and develop different strengths, abilities, and knowledge in the system that should be at the center of recommendations about policy change and the current swell of U.S. prison reform activism. Women's prisons can be alternative locations where grassroots feminist ideas can be located, nurtured, and become sites of transformative change.

Exclusion of Justice-Involved Women in Policy Debates

There is a pervasive idea that incarcerated women do not have the intelligence or enough distance from their incarcerated experiences to make an accurate and objective assessment of the problems and solutions. This idea is false and contributes to the silencing and exclusion of justice-involved women both within and outside of prison and jails, and deprives women of the opportunity to engage prison officials in meaningful ways.

For instance, research on women and prisons document numerous examples where incarcerated women leverage their experiences and perspectives to give input to a system that has not allowed them to be heard. Incarcerated women have testified at special legislative hearings, giving them the opportunity to lay out the realities of prison life and offer solutions to senators. Incarcerated women collaborate with researchers and advocacy groups to coauthor research reports and political newsletters. Incarcerated women organize groups to lobby and campaign on their behalf.

This allows them to have input in the direction of reform and the actions to be implemented. Most importantly, incarcerated women articulate a complex understanding of structural inequalities and offer proactive solutions that may not occur to those without lived experiences within the justice system. The silencing and exclusion of justice-involved women both within and outside of prison is the consequence of a profound power imbalance and entrenched stigma and judgement of historically oppressed people. A cultural shift in changing how we view and engage incarcerated women requires a shift in institutional and structural practices.

Power Imbalances within Accepted Expertise

Yet, despite their obvious contributions to policy reform, yielding expertise to justice-involved women creates an uncomfortable situation for those who occupy positions of authority, including scholars, policymakers, health officials, social workers, lawyers, and special-interest groups. As a result, the prevailing knowledge on criminality and punishment is set nearly exclusively by those in positions of power. Professional credentials and social status have set the standard for how expertise is legitimized, yet research suggests that knowledge that emerges from personal experience will be more accurate than findings from researchers and professionals who claim to be objective or impartial, but fail to center the contributions of those in carceral settings.

Too often, there remains a moral superiority even in research that denies incarcerated women the right to express their feelings and thoughts. The silencing of certain voices, then, can be detrimental to women's well-being as policy reforms lack the critical changes women need in prisons and jails. Without such recognition, incarcerated women will continue to experience marginalization and dehumanization.

Recommendations

Prison reform organizations and policymakers engaged in prison reform work must create space that honors incarcerated women themselves, what they have to say about how they experience those structures, and their ideas about structural changes in prison and criminal policy reforms. This means that policymakers and prison reform organizations must stop telling justice-involved women that they know what's best for them. The emphasis on "we know what's best so we're going to tell you what would be helpful to you" fails to consider what could be gained by learning and growing from what incarcerated women have to tell and show us. Only then can we know what listening to their voices implies for us as a culture and our work.

I recommend yielding expertise to women who are victimized in multiple ways by institutional structures of discrimination inherent to the criminal justice system but find ways to survive and pursue leadership and educational opportunities to make a difference from the inside. Many organizations, such as the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, participate in policy initiatives designed to liberate more women from carceral settings and change conditions within prisons and jails. This could be used as a model for legislators and legal and policy scholars to more consistently engage with these women and for real change to be actualized.

Listening to the voices of incarcerated women will also require attention to the role of power in carceral settings and prison reform work. A practical step forward would be to require annual diversity and leadership training for all prison staff using a feminist, empowerment, and anti-oppressive model to guide their work. This approach would require an overhaul of the training manual to one that centers the experiences of incarcerated women and activists.

Tackling the role of power in prison reform work will require "experts" to look at improvement strategies and ask: to what extent are power disparities underlying causes of the problem? Experts, policymakers, and researchers committed to real change must be motivated by the desire to understand and amplify the solutions for the true causes of inequality, rather than power, status, or political goals. To do so would mean taking concrete steps towards creating meaningful reform.