

Race, Class, Gender, & Prisons

Excerpts from "Race, Class, Gender and Prisons," a talk given by INCITE! co-Founder, Beth Richie, on a panel discussion that occurred as a part of the art installation, [Voices in Time, Lives in Limbo](#)

I want to talk tonight about the perfection of the movement to remove women of color, especially women that have experienced violence, from our communities and put them into the criminal justice system. **I think there are very few places where we can see such a perfect exhibition of racism and gender oppression than when we look over the walls of a women's correctional facility.** There we will get a perfect glimpse of how racism feeds people into the system, how gender oppression, especially violence against women, keeps women in the system.

There really is no better place to look for a perfect example of what poverty does to destroy people's lives than women's prisons and jails. **If we're interested in knowing how perfectly violence against women works to coerce women into behavior, activities, situations that they would rather not be in, we could look in jails and prisons and see how perfectly violence against women works.** Jails and prisons and probation departments and even secure halfway houses show us how perfectly conservative ideology in this country about safety and risk has dominated public policy.

As some of my colleagues on the panel will discuss, **if we're interested in understanding how perfectly civil and human rights are being eroded in this country, how blatant violations of rights are accepted in the service of maintaining gender, racial, national, cultural subordination, we could see that perfectly if we look in women's jails and prisons.** We could see perfect sexual repression, xenophobia in perfect terms, the perfect oppression of young people, and we could go on and on.

There is no better place to understand that the increasingly concentrated disadvantage in this country is based on race, class, and, I would argue, gender than in the women that are incarcerated. We might start that perfect story at the Cook County Jail where there are 1,000 women tonight. 70% of them are Black women. Like most of the women in jails and prisons in this country,

- most of them - 80% -- are detained there because of their involvement in non-violent crimes, mostly crimes of survival to take care of themselves and their children;
- most of them are mothers, and most of these Black mothers that are detained for non-violent crimes have no idea where their children are;
- most of them are poor and they've lived lives that have been characterized by conditions of poverty. They've had long periods of unemployment. They've probably been homeless for most of their adult, if not also their juvenile, lives;
- they've had very little access to the incredible health resources that this country offers. They probably have HIV, TB, asthma, diabetes, depression, some anxiety disorder, substance abuse problems;
- they've probably been involved in prostitution. Conservative estimates would say about 30% of them, but anybody that has gone to a jail or prison or spent time with women that have been there knows that it's probably much more than that;
- according to the official data, which we have good reason to distrust, but even conservative data would suggest that they have a rate of violence against women three times higher than the national average. Some studies suggest that 60% of the women in jails or prisons in this country have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner, but in 20 years of going to jails and prisons and working with women I have rarely encountered somebody who has not experienced some form of violence or coerced sexual activity. **They are at high risk of physical and sexual abuse from their intimate partners, co-dependents, parents before that, authority figures in the system, and others that have a lot of power to make decisions that will impact the lives of these women, such as drug treatment counselors and prison guards who have coerced women into sexual encounters.**

So that's the picture from the jail. It's a picture of perfect racial disadvantage, perfect use of violence against women so that women get incarcerated instead of getting support services...

It's a picture of perfect racial stigma attached to being poor and in trouble with law in this country. It's a perfect picture of abandonment from their communities, including communities of color, and their prison activist allies and by society. These are people held in almost perfect and complete isolation from us.

And what makes the picture even more perfect is that if we took a map of Chicago or New York or Houston or Atlanta or any major city in the country and increasingly in less urban areas and we put a circle around the neighborhoods that most of the women come from we would find the worst public transportation, the worst schools, the fewest parks, the most abandoned buildings, the most liquor stores, the highest rates of children that have been removed from their homes.

And instead of women being free to organize around these things, we'd find disproportionate and increasing levels of surveillance of women and their families. Surveillance by court orders, ankle bracelets, probation and parole departments, high tech cameras perched on top of high buildings and unmarked police cars. We'd see a disproportionate number of child welfare workers, mandatory treatment counselors and, of course, the highest rates of incarceration of women of color. **It's like a perfect picture, and, of course, you recognize that when I'm using the 'perfect metaphor' here it is not to say how good it is, but to say how perfectly orchestrated this movement to incarcerate women of color really is.**

Although we know people that live in low-income communities are not more violent or less respectful or more reckless, this country has found a perfect way to warehouse women and girls of color and men of color and boys of color who live in disadvantaged communities by not responding to violence and being reckless with their lives when they incarcerate them. In fact, it's a perfect plan. **So violence against women becomes a much more serious problem when Black women and other women of color have to worry about police brutality at the same time we are worrying about our own safety and health.**

...If we've used drugs to numb pain or if we are abused by someone who's on parole or on probation, if we allow someone who is on parole or probation to live with us in Chicago public housing, if we have contraband in our bathrooms, those are the things that make us vulnerable to greater violence and cause that violence to be ignored by both our community and the system. In these cases, we are much more likely to end up in jail or prison.

So we have mass incarceration on the one hand, that's the set of criminal justice and social policy that target women of color and result in huge overrepresentations of women of color in the criminal justice system. On the other hand we have a national agenda that advocates criminalization, the tendency to respond to any social problem by developing a law that makes illegal many behaviors that are about survival. We have a national agenda that is increasingly advocating the erosion of civil and human rights in this country as a strategy to allegedly increase someone's safety - it's not clear whose safety they are concerned with. **Then we have gender oppression not only in the larger community, but also in communities of color where violence against women is not a priority, so much so that in some communities men who have used violence against women receive honors like Image Awards from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.**

So it makes a very complete picture for us. Since we have been witness to this picture, I believe we now have some responsibility to take action to change the picture. **Just imagine if we worked to change the processes of racism and sexism that lead to the mass incarceration of women of color in this country, that's the background to the picture.**