V-Day 2019 Spotlight on Women in Prison, Detention Centers, and Formerly Incarcerated Women

Over the past 20 years, V-Day has provided the support and tools for activists across the globe to host benefit events, including Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, and other artistic works in order to raise awareness and funds for grassroots groups striving to end violence against all women and girls. Every year, the V-Day Spotlight campaign calls attention to a particular group of women who are experiencing elevated levels of violence and disproportionate socio-political marginalization, in an effort to raise awareness for the issues they face and aid the community groups working to address these injustices.

V-Day’s 2018-2019 Spotlight, created in collaboration with formerly incarcerated women and activists, will focus on Women in Prisons and Jails, Detention Centers, and Formerly Incarcerated Women. A direct connection exists between violence and abuse done to women and girls and the risk that those women and girls will be directly impacted by incarceration. In the U.S., 86% of women in prison were sexually and/or physically abused prior to incarceration, as reported by The Vera Institute for Justice in 2017. In the aftermath of abuse, trauma can lead to substance abuse and addiction, which can easily become a pathway to more violence, crime and/or incarceration.

This year V-Day’s Spotlight will include advocates for decarceration of women in prison and for programs in prisons, jails and detention centers whose goal is to help them process their experiences and heal. These advocates acknowledge, as do many in the decarceration movement, that the past violence and poverty experienced by women is often a direct pipeline to incarceration. The socio-economic forces that underlie women’s incarceration are troubling, and have a damaging and lasting impact on families and communities. The vast majority of women in prison would not be there if there were adequate resources in their own communities that provided education, jobs, mental health and physical health treatment; if the issues they face were framed as structural racism and poverty; if programs inside prisons acknowledged women’s past experiences with violence and offered resources to process and heal from those experiences.

As part of this year’s V-Day Spotlight, we will call for an end to the punishment paradigm, for replacing the current punitive model with a public health and a restorative justice approach. Through this Spotlight, we seek to bring higher ethical standards of treatment to the incarcerated population while bringing attention to the racism, poverty, and violence that has lead to the incarceration of many women in general, and women of color in particular.

The Astronomical Growth of Women Impacted by Incarceration
The United States has 5% of the world’s population and a staggering 25% of the world’s incarcerated people; a system of mass incarceration has been created, with 2.1 million people behind bars and nearly 5 million more on probation or parole. This system is a business, with corporations profiting off the backs of vulnerable individuals who were served into it via a pipeline of injustice that finds its roots in inequity and racism.

The vast majority of this large incarcerated population is poor, Black and Hispanic, with women being the fastest-growing segment. In fact, the United States has the world’s highest rate of incarcerated women in the world. Despite the fact that only 4% of the world’s female population lives in the United States, this group makes up over 30% of the world’s women in prison population. Since 1980, the number of women in prison has grown 700%. In addition to the numbers of incarcerated women, 1.2 million women live under the control of the criminal justice through parole or probation. In addition, when a woman goes to prison, her family and community are deeply affected. More than 60% of women in state prisons in the United States have a child under the age of 18.

Women of color are at far greater risk of being incarcerated. In 2016, the imprisonment rate for African American women—96 per 100,000—was twice the rate of that for white women—49 per 100,000. Hispanic women were imprisoned at 1.4 times the rate of white women.

The growth of women in prison has been twice as high as that of men since 1980, though men continue to make up the vast majority. However, women in communities that have been targeted by mass incarceration bear the brunt of raising children alone and shoring up their families financially and emotionally. Women are carrying the enormous economic, physical and emotional burdens of mass incarceration, often suffering severe health problems, as well as the isolation due to the persistent stigma of incarceration in our society.

Immigration and Detention Centers: Impact on Women

In the United States, the immigration crisis under the Trump Administration has left a staggering number of refugees in over 200 immigrant prisons and jails. According to Freedom for Immigrants it is unclear how many facilities exist in the U.S. and around the world. In April 2018, The Intercept reported that it had unearthed hundreds of complaints about sexual and physical abuse in detention centers at the hands of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents.

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2 https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org/detention-statistics/
3 https://www.freedomforimmigrants.org/detention-statistics/
This is just the tip of the iceberg. Women and children in detention, as with women and girls in prison, are not safe. These assaults follow an alarming trend in U.S. detention centers, which number close to 100 now. The New York Times reports that while ICE has reported 1,310 claims of sexual abuse against detainees between 2013 to 2017, the actual numbers are likely much higher according to experts monitoring the issue. ProPublica reports: “Using state public records laws, ProPublica has obtained police reports and call logs concerning more than 70 of the approximately 100 immigrant youth shelters run by the U.S. Health and Human Services department’s Office of Refugee Resettlement. While not a comprehensive assessment of the conditions at these shelters, the records challenge the Trump administration’s assertion that the shelters are safe havens for children. The reports document hundreds of allegations of sexual offenses, fights and missing children.”

Global Incarceration of Women

Globally, the rate at which women are being imprisoned has grown by 53% since 2000.6 One explanation for this alarming trend is globalization. Michelle Chen reports in The Nation: “The incarceration rate and rising gender-based violence, paradoxically, track the growing levels of freedom and public activity among women. Compared with North American and Europe, the parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa where globalization has had its most severe effects have also undergone significant social changes: young women face unprecedented pressures in education and work, including migration from rural areas and poor countries for jobs, while the expectation remains that they will still care for their families and children.” In essence, women are more at risk for imprisonment than before because the work they engage in, or actions they are forced to take, are deemed illegal by the state—actions which they are compelled to do because of their economic status. In essence, globalization is putting tremendous pressure on women living at society’s margins. Families must be fed, and women are forced to do whatever it takes to put food on the table, with devastating consequences. Take Thailand, for example, where as a “war on drugs” is being waged. There, more and more women are being sent to prison for selling drugs or possessing a small amount of them.

Women Inside Prison and the Loss of Rights, Family and Dignity

6 https://www.thenation.com/article/its-a-worldwide-trend-more-women-are-being-imprisoned-than-ever-before/
7 https://www.thenation.com/article/its-a-worldwide-trend-more-women-are-being-imprisoned-than-ever-before/
Once behind bars, women face widespread injustice: inadequate health care sexual abuse; daily humiliation and degradation. Many women lose their parental rights; some are forced to give birth in shackles, while pregnant women in Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers are often neglected and denied proper medical care.

Trans women in particular face harassment and violence. In the U.S., with the rollback of Obama-era policies that sought to protect trans people in the prison system, the Trump administration states that in most cases it will “use biological sex as the initial determination for housing”, posing great risk for these individuals. Many transgender immigrant women leave their home countries to seek refuge from violence and injustices, but are often met with similar violence upon arriving in the US and are put in ICE detention centers. Trans women are especially vulnerable to abuse in these facilities; facing harassment and abuse from law enforcement and being denied proper medical care when necessary. Roxana Hernandez, a Honduran transgender woman, died from HIV-related complications triggered by the detention centers notorious “ice-box” conditions. In 2016, the Movement Advancement Project and the Center for American Progress reported that while 1.2 percent of heterosexual inmates report sexual assault by other inmates in prison and jails, 24.1 percent of trans inmates report at least one sexual assault.9

With little to no programming in place to help incarcerated individuals reflect on or come to terms with their history and the trauma suffered during incarceration, the criminal justice system is further oppressing and damaging incarcerated women. And, when women— and men— are released from prison, they are met by an unwelcoming world that stigmatizes formerly incarcerated individuals, creating even more barriers to financial, physical and emotional well-being, all of which prevents them from becoming healthy and productive members of society. It is not surprising that the return rate to prison is so high. Within three years approximately two-thirds of the people returning from prison are rearrested.1

**Returning Home from Incarceration**

Women returning home face continuing punishments, stigma, and exclusion in their communities and the society at large. When women return home a key need is to rebuild the relationships with their children. Yet finding a job and housing is a challenge. Nearly all formerly incarcerated women have stories about being turned down for jobs and apartments, having to check boxes on employment and school applications, paying money for parole supervision and required programs when they have a minimum salary; not being allowed to vote, and the general stigma for having been in prison- defined as “ex offender”, “ex felon,” “ex con,” a continuing conflation of a person’s full individuality with a conviction and imprisonment. For most women, they return to the

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9 [http://www.lgbtmap.org/criminal-justice](http://www.lgbtmap.org/criminal-justice)
same community conditions they lived in before going to prison, where structural determinants of race and socio-economic status persist.

**State Violence and Criminalization**

At the same time, state violence and the criminalization of dissent on a global scale put many women who are social justice activists behind bars, where they are detained, often without rights granted to them by international human rights law, such as the basic right to legal representation. In this way it is easy to see how, according to the BBC, half of the world’s prison population is held in the United States, China and Russia alone.10

As the democratic space continues to shrink and political repression is increasingly used as a tactic by authoritarian regimes, those trapped in the system of imprisonment are under threat.

**Women Impacted by Incarceration, Inside and Out: Engines of Change**

Women who are incarcerated are largely invisible and ignored, both when they are “on the inside” and when they are released. Yet, in fact, they have always been and are rapidly growing as a force for change. Consider the powerful story of Roslyn Smith in her own words, who was arrested at 17 and is now in her 38th year in prison serving a sentence of “50 to life”:

“Did you see no potential in me? You noted my high IQ, how ‘articulate’ I was, how ‘mature’. I’d run away from home because I refused to let my mother keep hurting me. You put me in a home for bad kids; my roommate wasn’t even sane. I left there, too, so you put me in a group home. You call that help? No matter who I tried to tell, no one got it. So then you sentenced me, said no hope for rehabilitation, said I’m as good as dead. Just like my mother: kicks, flights of stairs, words that made me flinch. Well, you were both wrong. I have a life. I have a beautiful daughter, a college education. I teach parenting skills. I made a difference in people’s lives. You never gave me a chance, so I made my own. My poverty, skin color, background, past- who at age 17 can’t change, won’t grow? You robbed me of my youth, of my belief in justice. But from the graveyard, the barbed wire and the cinderblock, I’m resurrected. I’m somebody.”11

Women like Roslyn are planners, dreamers, survivors, creators, mothers, community holders, program developers, organizers, writers, artists, entrepreneurs and more...

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10 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/uk/06/prisons/html/n2page1.stm
Paradigms that only focus on the role of women as victims tend to render women passive; they focus on a woman’s weaknesses or limitations rather than on her strengths. Women-during incarceration and women when they return home—can be critical agents of their own change. They can inspire and help other women to change; they can tackle the social problems that they confront inside the prison, and upon going home, they can help change the structural conditions that reinforce the pipelines to prison. During incarceration, women help each other survive, teach classes in parenting, build peer organizations to address the HIV/AIDS crisis, organize college programs after the Pell grants were removed, bring class action law suits representing women in prison for fighting back against their abusers, advocate for decent health care, and create and lead re-entry programs that prepare women to return.

And women who return home are continuing the work they began in prison, with many playing roles in the social service sector helping peers during re-entry to meet their basic survival, family and growth needs. Formerly incarcerated women are creating housing support, writing books, and providing health care. They are also advocates and teachers, bringing the reality of mass incarceration and its casualties into the academic world and striving for policy change; creating organizations that focus on the empowerment of formerly incarcerated women and men, and their families. During their years on the inside, many women like Roslyn Smith received an education and learned how to get things done—they want their lives to have meaning, they want to be part of making change. Women in prison and after they come home form critical collaborations with people outside prison: lawyers, doctors, public health and social workers, advocates, and organizers. After returning home, more and more of the women themselves are becoming professionals in different careers. These efforts must be recognized and nurtured. These women must no longer be invisible. Their stories must be heard and their contributions recognized. The leadership and vision of women both incarcerated and home is playing a central role in the growing movement to end mass incarceration.

**Take Action: Bring The V-Day Spotlight To Your Community**

This V-Season we are strongly encouraging V-Day benefit productions of *The Vagina Monologues* and *A Memory, a Monologue, a Rant, and a Prayer* to elevate the voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women through their events, casting, and fundraising.

Organizers can take this opportunity to centralize these narratives, and explore how incarceration is tied to larger systematic forces of oppression, which disproportionately target marginalized communities.

**V-Day is a time for organizing, educating, mobilizing, supporting, policy changing, solidarity building. There are many ways to engage:**
Groups on campuses or different community organizations are encouraged to reach out to groups of formerly incarcerated women, and women who have experienced detention due to their identity and citizenship status and to connect to organizations in your community of formerly incarcerated women to collaborate together on V-Day.

Groups inside prisons or of formerly incarcerated women can initiate a V-Day production and also collaborate with students or other groups.

Events leading up to productions can be used to bring together communities and channel a creative energy centered around these themes—writing workshops, fundraisers, poetry slams, dance events—any event and activity that calls for the imperative focus and expression of testimonies of women’s incarceration and detention, and the need for a new system of justice.

Eve Ensler will create a new Spotlight monologue in collaboration with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women for V-Day activists to perform in their productions.

**V-Day’s History of Work on Women in Prison**

Throughout its twenty year history, V-Day has foregrounded the needs of women in prison and formerly incarcerated women.

In 2003 the PBS film *What I Want My Words To Do To You* documented the writing group that Eve Ensler, playwright and V-Day Founder, conducted with 15 women at Bedford Hills over the course of close to 8 years. For those in the group who got out of prison – Donna Hylton, Kathy Boudin and Betty Harris (since deceased) – and those who remain inside – Pamela Smart, Judith Clark, Monica Szlekovics, Betsy Ramos, Roslyn Smith and Cynthia Berry - the experience of being in the writing group was profound, pushing them to dig deep into their history and memories to grapple with their own culpability in the crimes they committed. It also provided a process for them to reflect on and better understand the ways in which their past experiences – both familial and interpersonal – influenced the paths they took which eventually lead to their crimes. The film premiered at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival where it won the Freedom of Expression award. The film has been screened by V-Day activists worldwide.

In 2006 V-Day created and then staged *Any One of Us: Words from Prison*, a theatrical piece based on writings from incarcerated women, which was conceived by Eve Ensler and directed as a centerpiece of the NYC Until the Violence Stops Festival by Rhodessa Jones. Since that shattering production, V-Day activists have staged the show annually, together with *The Vagina Monologues*, raising much needed awareness and funds for
groups working inside prisons and with women who are reentering society after being released. The impact of our work in prisons has been well documented.  

In 2014, as part of the One Billion Rising global campaign, the ONE BILLION RISING FOR JUSTICE U. S. Prisons Project was developed in partnership with formerly incarcerated V-Day and prison activists. Advocating for an alternative vision of justice, the campaign asked men, women and youth in U.S. prisons and jails—whether incarcerated or staff —what their vision of justice looks like: for themselves, for their victims, for their perpetrators, for their families, and for their communities. Through poetry, art, spoken word, music, song, dance, testimony, conversation, and theater, incarcerated individuals and staff expressed their vision of justice.

The One Billion Rising U.S. Prisons Project called for the following, and today, the 2018-2019 Spotlight Campaign calls for the same. In the coming weeks we will also issue an updated lists of demands we are developing:

- **Access to college education** in prison through Pell Grants and other means so that incarcerated individuals can channel energy towards something positive and develop skills that they can use when they get out. This is especially important because upon reentry many have lost their benefits, cannot reunite with their families, and face housing bans that prevent reunification with their families. For long term incarcerated individuals and incarcerated individuals incarcerated for life without parole, education can be make a critical and positive difference.

- **Sentencing reform so that punishments are less severe and more focused on rehabilitation.** We have to reform mandatory minimum sentencing laws, which prescribe sentences for fixed amounts of time, often for long periods that are outsized and punitive rather than restorative.

- **An end to solitary confinement**, an inhumane practice that has serious long-term psychological and physical effects.

- **Access to therapeutic programming** that recognizes the impact that an experience of past violence has on an individual’s chances of ending up in prison, and allows incarcerated individuals to reflect on this so that rehabilitation is possible. This includes substance abuse and mental health treatment, as well as access to comprehensive healthcare.

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• **Honoring the rights of incarcerated parents and their children**, which includes ending the practice of shackling mothers as they give birth and recover from their birth, allowing mothers and children access to each other – either through a nursery system or visitation – and keeping children out of foster care if the mother is arrested.

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