Spotlight Blog Series on Women in Prison & Detention

V-Day's Spotlight on Women in Prison, Detention Centers, and Formerly Incarcerated Women has been created in collaboration with Kathy Boudin and Cheryl Wilkins and formerly incarcerated women and activists working on prison reform and prison abolition. In this blog series you will hear from women whose lives have been profoundly impacted by the prison and detention system on issues as far ranging as: trauma and abuse; shackling; transgender experiences; dignity; health and mental health; experiences of long term inmates; the youth/school to prison pipeline; the experiences of mothers and children navigating the immigration system; higher education in prison; and reentry and technology.

Women and Incarceration

The Women’s Media Center’s recent article, “Women’s Incarceration: Frequent Starting Point is Childhood Sexual Abuse,” looks at the overshadowed story of the role trauma plays in the lives of women and girls in the criminal justice system. The movement that is spiraling forward led by women who are currently and formerly incarcerated is challenging these unjust laws and systems together. We can all contribute to an unstoppable movement that overcomes the mass incarceration of women and girls by starting with understanding that often the root cause of why women enter the prison system is the trauma and abuse that they have experienced. It could be any of us.

“If they come for me in the morning, they will come for you in the night.” — Angela Y. Davis

Trauma and Abuse

November 30, 2018

- Mass incarceration is the social justice issue of our time. The incarceration rate has quadrupled in the past 40 years: 65 million people with criminal records, 4 million under probation, 1.7 million children with an incarcerated parent. Mass incarceration is about more than people in prison; it is about the structures, laws and strategies that drive a racialized justice system, intersecting with class and gender.

- Why are women the fastest growing population to enter prison? That is the million dollar question, that should be addressed and scrutinized more thoroughly. In this 10-part series we will explore and inform the reader about the mass incarceration of women and girls. In this first blog we will highlight the effects of trauma and abuse.
• Although 93% of those incarcerated are men, the incarceration rate for women has soared 800% in 30 years. Today 1.2 million women – mostly poor mothers of color – are under criminal justice supervision. One woman incarcerated has an exponential impact, burdening communities and families. More broadly, women in communities directly impacted by mass incarceration carry multiple burdens that oftentimes leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the needed responsibilities of being a primary caretaker of their children. Substance and alcohol abuse are often times utilize as coping mechanisms to escape the mundane realities of poverty, while other women enter unhealthy relationships due to low self-esteem, economic disparity, or generational abuse.

Recent studies have linked the rise of women being incarcerated to their exposure to trauma and abuse starting at a very young age. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Criminal Justice Article, Pipeline to Prison¹, mirrors my childhood experiences where trauma and abuse was the number one factor that caused me to go to prison.

I was one of those young girls who experienced trauma and abuse at a young age. When I was 11 years old, I was uprooted from a loving home with my grandmother, to a home where verbal, physical, and emotional abuse occurred daily from my mother and her boyfriend, who were both addicted to drugs and alcohol. Being vulnerable and unsure of my place in the world left me with the feeling, if my mother didn’t love me who would. At the age of thirteen I tried to escape the abuse by running away. After living on the streets for several months, I met a 22 year old girl who took me in, but unbeknownst to me she forced me to have sex with her. I was not attracted to girls at the time but with no job or money this was my way of paying for food and rent. Throughout the year that I stayed with her, there would be hell to pay and as they say, “I jumped out of the frying pan into the fire”. She also sold me to men who sexually abused me in exchange for money and drugs. Funny how life works, I became the very thing I was running from and like my mother, I turned to drugs to numb the pain. Ultimately, I got tired of the sexual abuse and returned to the lesser of two evils, rationalizing, I would rather be beaten and screamed at than used as a sex toy; but upon returning my mother surprised me and called the police. I was hauled off to Spofford Juvenile Detention Center and for the next 3 years I was bounced around from psychiatric centers to group homes, none of which addressed the root causes of my issue. Sadly, that stint only lasted 2 months because I was older and expected to be an adult, when the only experience I had was sexually pleasing a man. I was forced to take care of my younger brother and clean up my mother’s house. The extra responsibilities and the abuse were more than I could bare and once again I was back on the streets wanting to escape the abuse. This way of life lasted only two months before I was arrested at the age of 17 for murder and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

¹ http://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/womens-incarceration-frequent-starting-point-is-childhood-abuse
My first few years in prison I tried to make sense of my life up until that point by asking these questions:

• How did I go from the abused to the abuser?
• Why couldn’t my mother love me?
• Why didn’t the court systems protect me from my drug and alcohol addicted mother and her boyfriend?
• Why couldn’t the doctors see that I was a broken child, whose wounds ran deeper than the sentence I received?

Prisons is no place to fight your demons, in fact, I had my first fight a month after I arrived. I was walking down the corridor still in my own little world singing a tune when a woman almost twice my size came out of her cell screaming at me, “shut the fuck up, who do you think you are waking people up bitch.” I was startled and before I could apologize she lunged at me with a metal afro pick and struck me across my face. That was my introduction to realizing that prison is full with women who were broken just like me.

I was one of the youngest women to enter a maximum security state prison and the youngest woman to receive a 50 year sentence. I came to the conclusion that this is my home for the next 50 years and I will probably end up dying in here. The state forced me to attend school and surprisingly I gravitated towards it. Books allowed me an opportunity to dream and envision a life that I never knew. I travelled the world, learning about different cultures and the more I learned, the more I saw how women were treated badly, particularly poor women and women of color. For the first time, I was able to forgive my mom, who was a single parent raising 5 kids, one with special needs. My thoughts of her changed from seeing her as a frustrated, angry, bitter woman, to a scared, fragile, little girl who was not capable of dealing with life so she used drugs and alcohol to escape. After graduating from college, I spent the rest of my time in prison, doing a lot of introspective work on myself and also working in the parenting center, assisting mothers who unfortunately was just like my mother and needed to figure out where to start the process of becoming a better mother, sister, daughter, woman, community member. I started with being accountable for my transgressions and forgiving myself. After spending 39 years in prison, I was finally released 60 days ago and I have wholesome friends and family in my life.

As I reflect on my life now from outside of prison, I shared my life with so many women who like myself were affected by trauma. But also, we were not and are not the helpless, wounded people that define us solely as victims. I worked with other women building an AIDS program, creating and teaching parenting classes; other women created a family violence program and many of us younger people created a program to talk with at risk youth. If it’s possible, please understand that we can be badly damaged by trauma and in need healing, but part of that healing process is about recognizing our strengths and being able to do positive things.
- RS

RS was arrested at age 17, served 39 years in prison, and recently came home at the age of 56. She is busy building a new life and being a mother, doing all the things a person has to take care of after 39 years in prison, including making a contribution to issues faced by women impacted by incarceration.