



INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN

INTERNATIONAL DECLARATION

We, as formerly incarcerated women, believe it is time to end the imprisonment of women and girls around the world.

Prison systems have a long and troubled history. In the 21st century, we continue to lock people up, isolating them from the world in deplorable and dehumanizing conditions that violate basic human rights. We know that punishment is not a solution to conflicts and harm, but the incarceration of people has not made communities safer. On the contrary, the deprivation of liberty and other rights is the easiest way to avoid seeking solutions to socio-economic problems.

We must change the paradigm from punishment to restorative and transformative justice; in other words, invest resources in policies that do not center prisons as the solution to social conflicts, and take into account the individual needs of women and their families. We must adopt more humane approaches that guarantee human and socio-economic rights, such as work, social security, education, food, water, and housing, among others.

As long as the punitive approach continues and prisons for women and girls continue to exist, governments must provide adequate physical and bed space in all female detention centers; guarantee access to physical and mental health services, including unbiased trauma and drug counseling and treatment, oriented towards preventing suicides, drug overdoses and over-medication; and provide adequate food and potable water, as well as functioning showers and toilets. Governments must also put an end to sexual and other forms of violence against women in prison.

Women and those who identify as LGBTQIA+, should not be subject to dehumanizing language or gender-based discrimination, and should have access to medical care that affirms their gender identity. Governments, civil society and other stakeholders must endeavor to sensitize the public through campaigns to end discrimination against women and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ in prison and when they come out of prison.

With regards to the current penal systems, pretrial detention should be the exception, not the rule; investigations and trials should be carried out in a timely and efficient manner; and there should be access to free and fair legal representation before and during the trial. The death penalty must

be eliminated. Moreover, sentences are too harsh for women and, for the most part, make use of moral and gender concepts (such as motherhood, alcohol and other drug use by women, and criminalization of poverty, among others).

Women should benefit from alternatives to incarceration, as mandated by the “Bangkok Rules,” including during pretrial detention and after sentencing, so as not to break up families and harm children. It is more productive to reinvest the resources of the criminal justice system into funding solutions that improve the lives of women, their families and their communities. The circumstances of each woman in prison, including their economic, social, family and health situations, should be reviewed in order to empty the prisons.

The development of programs aimed at social inclusion and reducing inequalities are urgently needed. Prisons should have rigorous programs that provide free life skills and educational training, so that upon release from prison women can create their own jobs or find formal employment.

In addition, given the barriers to access decent work, awareness campaigns and policies should be put in place such that a criminal record cannot be used to deny employment, and ideally policies should be established to expunge criminal records altogether. Initiatives to provide startup capital are also important, as can be seen in some isolated examples around the world.

Upon release, women should be provided the opportunity to go to halfway houses or other forms of transitional housing, where we can be counseled and prepared to reconnect with society, especially those who have spent many years in prison. Women should also be provided with financial assistance, official identification documents, and assistance in reuniting with our children.

While we respect the sovereignty of countries, women should not be denied visas or forced to leave a country solely on grounds of past criminal records.

The formerly incarcerated women who are part of and are building this network believe in reinventing social paradigms and in building and supporting communities and empowerment for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and girls around the world. We believe that now is the time to invest in initiatives led by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and girls and their families, addressing stigma and discrimination, and reducing the damage of centuries of purely punitive penal policies that have negatively impacted millions of people, including those deprived of liberty, their families and communities.