

DECEMBER 6, 2021

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1st VIRTUAL CONVENING OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED WOMEN



In a historic event, approximately 90 formerly incarcerated women from 21 countries came together for a virtual convening on December 6, 2021 to share experiences, learn from one another, and discuss opportunities for joint advocacy. As noted in the opening session, women came together not only to listen to each other, but also to break through the barriers of distance and language (interpretation was provided into 8 languages). They took time from their work and family responsibilities to be part of this network that is growing day by day. Together, these women are working together to support each other and to end the incarceration of women and girls around the world.

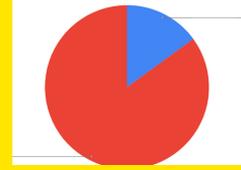
WHO ARE WE

6.3 Years

Average sentence
(Sentences range
from 6 weeks to 38 years)

15%

of cases are still ongoing

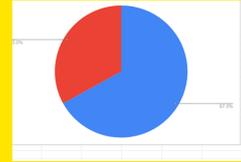


6.6 Years

participants have been
out of prison for an average of
6.6 years

67%

Approximate number of women who were
in prison for the first time



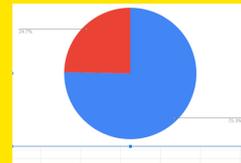
79.6%

had experiences with **individual violence**
before, during and after incarceration



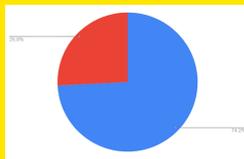
75.3%

had experiences with **institutional violence**
before, during and after incarceration



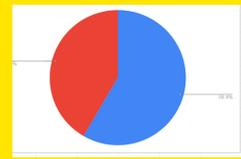
74.2%

are **caregivers** for children or other family
members



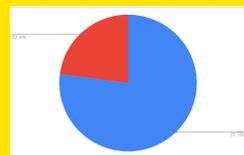
58.4%

have **incarcerated relatives**



77.1%

are **single heads of household**



87.2%

reported being
affiliated with an organization



We will turn our pain into power! We will make change together!

Prior to the convening, the women were asked to fill out a survey to help understand who would be participating, as individuals and as a group. The survey is a “work in progress” as not all participants have yet completed it; however, the preliminary results show the above.

SHARING EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN'S INCARCERATION AROUND THE WORLD



The above map illustrates the countries represented in the meeting:

Participants in the international convening shared experiences of life in prison and coming out of prison, and advocacy efforts underway to address issues related to women's incarceration. Intended to be a safe space where they could share freely, the meeting was held under rules of confidentiality and without outside observers. Despite the virtual nature of the meeting, the women spoke freely about the realities in their countries and the pain and suffering caused by incarceration. Feedback after the convening revealed that despite cultural and geographical differences, participants were surprised to see that the experience of incarceration is surprisingly similar around the world.

Moreover, many had never had an opportunity to share their stories with a non-judgmental audience; others noted that they had no idea that organizations of formerly incarcerated women exist in some countries. And others emphasized how important it was to them to know that they are not alone.

"Despite all our differences, I saw how much we have in common."

"I see that our stories repeat themselves in one way or another. It is as if there is a manual being used around the world. It is terrible!"

"The more I hear your stories, the more I heal inside."

SOME OF THE POINTS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE DISCUSSION INCLUDE:



Women suffer horrendous conditions in prison, including extreme overcrowding and lack of access to basic necessities like food and water, and they don't have access to hygiene products (in particular for menstruation). In some cases, they only get one meal a day; they are hungry all the time, and often the food is rotten. You need money to pay for good food and/or for someone to cook it for you.

Women's rights are continually violated in prison. Women are treated like animals. There is no effort to teach women skills that will be useful coming out of prison, or to provide them with employment opportunities and other help when they are released.

The very prison authorities that are supposed to protect and rehabilitate women behind bars, do the opposite: They abuse women in prison, discriminate against and harass certain people, inflict harsh disciplinary procedures, and are violent. More attention needs to be paid to sexual assault, torture and violence in prison.

Prison officials have failed to provide the minimal protections needed with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, and being cut off from families and friends due to pandemic-related restrictions has caused much emotional suffering.

Participants shared the difficulties of being separated from families and in particular the extremely negative consequences for those who have children, who may have nobody to care for them or end up in negligent state facilities. Some also talked about giving birth in prison and the pain of having to give up their babies.

The racism, stigma and discrimination faced by women in prison, and upon release, happens around the world. They are rejected and stigmatized by their families, neighbors and society more broadly. Many do not have homes to go back to. It is very hard to get a job coming out of prison, as employers do not want to hire people with criminal records. More support is needed to help women coming out of prison reunite with their families and get back on their feet.

Harsh and punitive drug laws are a leading cause of women's incarceration. Women who use drugs end up cycling in and out of the criminal legal system. It is one of the main reasons that women's incarceration has increased rapidly around the world.

Patriarchal societies create a disproportionate impact of incarceration on women. Legal systems are racist, sexist, and homophobic.

Even in countries without the death penalty, people die in prison, and authorities fail to investigate, or cover up what happened, and do not provide information to their families.

SOME OF THE ADVOCACY EXPERIENCES SHARED INCLUDE:

Spain: Awareness-raising to educate people about what happens in prisons.

New Zealand: Using our stories and journeys to help others who are in the system.

Colombia: Making people aware of the “Bangkok Rules” (a set of 70 rules related to women in contact with the law adopted by the United Nations in 2010); Campaign to collect sanitary napkins and toilet paper for women in prison.

United States: Reimagining communities; Clemency campaigns; Legislation on alternatives to incarceration for primary caregivers.

Kenya: Denouncing abuses and violence committed by prison authorities.

Brazil: Organizing women coming out of prison and family members of people in prison; Creating organizations to defend the rights of detained people.



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

What do we want to tell the world? What can we do together that we can't do apart?

There was general agreement that working together, the voices of formerly incarcerated women will be stronger. The world needs to understand the horrors faced by women behind bars. They demand to be treated humanely and not be taken for granted. They are human beings, mothers, family members, and support our societies in so many ways. They deserve to be heard. Working together, formerly incarcerated women can combat the negative stereotypes and change the narrative about who they are.

“We will shout to the top of our voices!”

“Every day we are stronger, and we will be heard and change will come!”

As a first step forward, participants agreed on an international call to action: the elaboration of an **international declaration of formerly incarcerated women**. A participatory process for that will be developed in early 2022.

FINAL REFLECTIONS



The virtual convening was a moving and emotional experience for those who participated. It showed that women want to tell their stories, and that more space is needed to do that, and that working together, they are stronger.

“Today has been so hopeful. We have shared so much that we have in common, and I hear a desire to continue building our movement. I am so excited to be part of building our movement.”

“Let the world know about us and...change the way the world looks at us. We are sisters, mothers, and we are human beings. Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences.”

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