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# LESSONS ON ABOLITION FROM INSIDE WOMEN'S PRISONS

*Mianta McKnight*

*Additional contributions by Mychal Concepcion, Hakim Anderson and Christy Phillips, currently imprisoned at the Central California Women's Facility, Jane Dorotik, currently imprisoned at the California Institution for Women, and Misty Rojo, co-director at Justice Now and formerly imprisoned at the Central California Women's Facility.*

WE LEARN EARLY ON IN WOMEN'S PRISONS THAT INVOLVING THE POLICE or prison officers to resolve conflicts won't make the situation any better. My friend and fellow abolitionist Hakim Anderson recently expressed, "We don't go to the cops most often in here. So what we try to do is resolve it in a way where really and truly the cops won't have to get involved. I think that the same thing can happen outside of prison."

Looking at the outcome of involving officers explains why we choose to avoid any police involvement: it makes things far worse. We often find that someone is wrongfully accused, abused, or victimized by the people that are supposed to be there to bring the peace. Their presence creates a hostile/dangerous environment for the person who contacted them for resolution. Their goal is not to seek peace. That is not what the prison environment is designed for.

Justice Now organizer Christy Phillips explains that "now that we're seeing all these incidents perpetrated by the police, people are starting to see that the police officers are not always working in the best interest of the people. And they're almost untouchable, meaning they can commit murder in cold blood and there will be no consequences for them. Most of the time they're not even charged with a crime."

Though some claim that additional training will decrease police harassment, officers often use the information delivered through their training to manipulate and control people in women's prisons through intimidation and violence. Justice Now board member Mychal Conception makes it clear:

Custody [staff in prison] is trained in something called Gender Responsive Rehabilitation. It was to educate them so that they could treat us better, or treat the people in this prison better or in a more sensitive way. [But] they use this tool to educate themselves on how to scare or manipulate through threats of violence—and in some cases actual violence—to control the population here. So the people here who are actually supposed to be receiving rehabilitation from CDCR are actually being victimized by the same people.

Inside women's prisons, we have figured out how not to allow the police to further traumatize us. We have learned how to protect ourselves from their looming presence. We share these lessons with each other, and with new people who enter the prison system. We are seen as subhuman and at the mercy of the officers. This is why we put forth an extra effort to monitor ourselves. We do so out of a necessity to be safe. Cops apply the mentality of group punishment and everyone suffers as a result of one person's actions. It is not just one person's problem; it is a community problem. We come together to accomplish keeping the peace, and find resolution while handling situations in a way that doesn't further endanger us, especially in such a controlled environment.

We hold our community accountable using the respect earned by those who have been inside for a while to help. Misty Rojo, Justice Now co-director, remembers a time when an elder and well-respected peer inside stepped in and de-escalated a situation that would have resulted in police involvement.

At that time everything made me fight. I was away from my kids, I had a ten-year sentence. I didn't give a fuck. One day I was on my way out of the unit to go and fight someone. Now I can't even remember what it was about, but I know I was really upset. It was during a time in the day when people could get

in and out of their rooms, go to appointments, etc. An elder, Madalin Bloxson, stopped me and physically diverted me from where I was going to. She rolled me a cigarette, and talked to me. She talked to me about our moms. She made me realize that all the anger I was holding, all the frustration I was feeling, was nothing to do with the situation I was about to get in. She kept me from getting a serious write up for violent acts, which would have gone on my file and added to the perception of me as a violent person. I would have lost my parole date. I would have lost the ability for me to call my kids. Besides the fact I might have got hurt.

According to Hakim,

They say it takes a community to raise a child. So if we had a village that was willing to be a closely knitted village where everybody was on the same page and in sync and willing to work together, we would never need the officers. I think that that's what a world without prisons would look like, is everybody getting involved and not just turning a blind eye and saying, 'Oh, that don't have nothing to do with me or my kids, so I don't care,' or 'that's not my woman' or 'that's not my man,' 'that's not my mom.' It's being involved; it's being proactive.

Justice Now board member Jane Dorotik shared,

What I would like to see, for all—but especially for women currently involved in the criminal justice system—is a lot more community support. I'd like to see a shift in thinking from a mentality that describes good and bad, right or wrong, to thinking that embraces the mistakes and learning from them. Or trauma recovery programs. Or a real belief in rehabilitation and the fact that people can change.

We want to share these lessons with people outside prison, these lessons that are ingrained in who we are and how our community functions. We can't rely on anyone else—or any other system—to problem solve for us. So many of us have suffered abuse and violence in our lives before we get to where we are in women's prisons. To survive the day-to-day violence of the

oppressive environment we are in, we have to look after each other and use our resilience and creativity to stay safe. Being proactive in our problem-solving shows learning from our experiences, what we have seen take place around us, and knowing what has not worked in the past. Avoiding police and prison officer involvement proves to us that our voices do matter, our opinions do matter, and we have a choice in how we live even under those harsh circumstances of confinement.

Justice Now is an Oakland-based, grassroots activist-led legal advocacy clinic that works with people in the world's largest women's prisons. We are part of a strong movement for social justice and a world without prisons. We believe that it is possible to involve, empower, and honor people with direct lived experience of fighting and surviving the prison industrial complex, and that through long-term relationships with imprisoned leaders and activists, we can build programs and systems for critical education in the wider movement and wider society. Our work is designed to center the lived experience of people who are currently and formerly imprisoned.