Women Leaving Prison: Justice-Seeking Spiritual Support for Female Returning Citizens

2019 CST CONFERENCE
OPTION FOR THE POOR: ENGAGING THE SOCIAL TRADITION
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Outline

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   ▶ Who are women behind bars?: Demographics and backgrounds.
   ▶ Women’s pathways to prison.
   ▶ The role of faith behind bars.

2. Faith Beyond Bars
   ▶ Women’s spiritual and religious experiences during reentry.

3. Project Sister Connect
   ▶ A model for revised prison ministry praxis that is grounded in the Two Feet of Love in Action and the Catholic Social Tradition.
Language Care:

“One of the simplest methods to keep humanity at the center of discussions about crime and punishment is always to employ humanizing language” (Stern, 2014, p. 10).

Sisters Inside > Inmate

Returning Sisters > Female Returning Citizen

God talk and inclusive language
Setting the Stage

- Who are sisters inside?: Demographics and backgrounds.
- Sisters’ pathways to prison.
- The role of faith behind bars.
Who Are Sisters Inside?*

Women from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds;
most with histories of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse;
many who have struggled with addiction and substance abuse;
most with mental illness;
many who have experiences of poverty/economic marginalization; and
the vast majority of whom are mothers.

*Much of the data is woefully outdated due to the limited number of government-sponsored and government-sanctioned studies conducted.
Instead stresses the ways in which power structures and systems of oppression work to circumscribe the life experiences of persons socially located at the intersections of multiple vulnerabilities (Bernard, 2013, p. 5). If women’s intersecting social locations, and their concomitant experiences of oppression compel or constrain them to crime, it is essential then to understand the backgrounds of sisters inside in order to grasp their pathways to prison and to anticipate their needs at the time of reentry.

Many sisters inside have histories of “multiple marginality” as their intersecting social locations relegate them to the borders of society (Vigil, 1995, p. 125). As marginalized members of society, these women are vulnerable to both abuse and criminal involvement. As noted above, utilizing a feminist pathways perspective helps to evidence how women are more likely to become involved in crime as a result of their racial/ethnic backgrounds, their attempts to cope with psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, and their experiences of substance abuse, mental illness, and poverty.

Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds of Sisters Inside

Racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately impacted by incarceration. This is true for men and women alike. Although “Blacks and Hispanics make up only 24% of the U.S. population, 63% of women in state prisons and 67% of women in federal prisons are Black or Hispanic, a practice that indicates that women of color are significantly overrepresented behind bars” (Mallicoat, 2015, p. 381). Table 1.1 depicts the racial/ethnic demographics of women in state and federal correctional facilities in 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Female Inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>52,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>21,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>104,968</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Carson & Anderson (2016).

1Detail may not sum to total due to rounding, inclusion of inmates age seventeen or younger in the total count, and missing race or Hispanic origin data.
Who Are Sisters Inside?
Survivors of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse.
dispose one to involvement in criminal behaviors that, without the influence of substance, may otherwise not have occurred (Moon, Thompson, & Bennett, 1993). Second, according to Cobbina, For a number of women their initiation in crime occurred as the result of their drug addiction. Drug use played a significant role in escalating their involvement in economic crime because women perceived the criminal world as an attractive alternative to obtain money for the purpose of supporting their drug habit. (2009, p. 58) A third way in which drugs and alcohol relate to women’s criminal activity is through the influence of family, peers, and intimates. “Drugs are part of the relationship network of women” (Pollock, 2002, p. 61). Addiction often afflicts the families of many individuals known to the justice system, and a significant portion of female inmates are introduced to drugs and alcohol by family members. In Cobbina’s (2009) study, 23 percent of the study’s incarcerated participants and 25 percent of formerly incarcerated participants “stated that their initiation into the drug world began as a result of their exposure to illicit substances by their family during adolescence” (p. 38). Finally, many women begin using and abusing substances as a result of their intimate relationships and many maintain unhealthy or abusive intimate relationships due to the role these relationships play in their drug use or dependence. According to Moon, Thompson, and Bennett (1994), sisters inside were frequently introduced to drugs by addicted male partners. This was true for approximately 15 percent of incarcerated women and 8 percent of formerly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic Category</th>
<th>Prevalence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Proctor (2012).
The prevalence of mental illness is higher among female inmates than among male.

73.1% of women in state prisons and 61.2% of women in federal prisons present with mental health problems (James & Glaze, 2006).

These statistics are especially striking when compared to the 12% of women in society generally who have symptoms of a mental health disorder (Bloom & Covington, 2008).
Poverty/Economic Marginalization

Myth of self-sufficiency

Wage inequity plaguing women in the U.S.

Sisters inside between the ages of 24 and 72 earned a median annual income of $13,890 prior to their incarceration as compared to the $23,745 earned by their non-incarcerated sisters (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015).
In 2007, an estimated 1.7 million minor children in America had a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

“Since 1991, the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled, up 131%” (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008, p. 2).

Nearly 62% of sisters in state prisons and nearly 56% of sisters in federal prisons are mothers to minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Sisters inside face the possibility of losing all custody and rights of their children.

In 2000, 54% of mothers in state prisons had not seen their minor children since their admission (Mumola, 2000).
One pathway to prison is paved by childhood victimization and mental illness/substance abuse; according to Richie (2001), another pathway to prison is paved by extreme marginalization, including homelessness, poverty, and other injustices that result from the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender; and according to Covington (1998), a third pathway is paved by relational dysfunction, such as that which can result from interpersonal violence during adulthood and concomitant mental illness and substance abuse. As one of the early theorists to adopt a pathways perspective, Daly (1992) constructed a taxonomy of five prototypical pathways to prison. Table 1.4 depicts Daly’s taxonomy of pathways to prison.

Brennan et al. (2012) analyzed scholarship from numerous disciplines that utilized distinct methods and identified significant consensus regarding women’s common pathways to prison. In addition, they administered two quantitative measures, the Women’s Risk/Needs Assessment (WRNA; Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010) and the COMPAS Reentry Assessment (Brennan & Dieterich, 2007), to 718 soon-to-be-released women at two California women’s prisons. Based on their theoretical and empirical research, the authors then constructed a taxonomy of women’s pathways to crime. They identified four superordinate pathways to prison that were then further differentiated into eight subordinate pathways, which typified the experiences of all but 16 of the study’s 718 participants. Table 1.5 depicts the taxonomy of pathways constructed by Brennan et al.

The taxonomies developed by Daly (1992) and Brennan et al. (2012) evidence how addiction, mental illness, abuse, and other micro- and macro-level factors lead women to prison.

### Table 1.4  Daly’s Taxonomy of Pathways to Prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Street women</td>
<td>Women who enter street life in order to escape a life of violence and victimization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-connected women</td>
<td>Women who use drugs, associate with drug-connected friends and intimates, and often end up trafficking drugs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmed-and-harming women</td>
<td>Women who display hostility that resulted from the abuse and neglect they experienced in childhood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battered women</td>
<td>Women who engaged in criminal behavior as a direct result of or in retaliation against abusive partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other women</td>
<td>Women who engaged in property and/or economic crimes motivated by greed and economic gain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Daly (1992).
oppressions directly impact women's pathways to prison. Moreover, they demonstrate the inadequacy of individual and pathological explanations for women's criminality and incarceration.

As stated elsewhere, not only do women's pathways to prison differ from men's, but the crimes they commit differ as well. Although the gender gap is shrinking as fewer men and more women are arrested for crimes, the majority of women's offenses fall into only a few categories (Pollock, 2014). Table 1.6 depicts the type and prevalence of offenses committed by women and men in 2015.

As evidenced above, women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for drug-related crimes (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 that vowed to “get tough on crime” resulted in mandatory

### Table 1.6 Offense Type by Gender in 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense Type</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from Carson & Anderson (2016).*
The Role of Faith Behind Bars

- The word “penitentiary” itself is derived from the term “penance.”
- The very first prisons in the U.S. were established and controlled by people of faith.
- Every day thousands of faith-based volunteers enter prisons across the country (Johnson, 2013).
- According to Erzen (2017), “The state saves precious money by outsourcing the labor of running programs in prison to religious volunteers” (p. 164).
- Many sisters enter the prison gates feeling broken and in need of healing. For some, like Desiree, prison is a way that God “sits you down” in order to change and to grow.
Barriers to Reentry

- Super-Structural Level: Classism, Racism, Sexism, and Ableism
- Structural Level: Laws and Policies
- Family & Environmental Level: Family, Friends, Social and Physical Environment
- Micro Level: Individual Returning Sister
Faith Beyond Bars
Who is God?

- **God's omnipotence** - “God is in charge and He has the final say so. He shows us all around.”

- **God's providence** - “I do believe there are experiences whether it be prison, incarceration . . . whatever . . . it’s always God working in your favor.”

- **God is in adversity** - “I think God puts the same situation in your life until you get it right. It’s a test, because we don’t have the patience to go through it.”

- **How God responds** - “He made sure that everything I prayed for I got . . . My release, parole, everything. He just made it all happen for me.”

- **Being obedient to God and getting out of God's way** - “I know that God is great and He has the final say so. And I’m just so happy to say that I no longer put my hands in stuff. I move out of my own way so that He can lead the way.”
How Do Returning Sisters Experience God?

- **Desire to know God or a higher power** - “My spirit within myself that knows that it’s something greater, someone greater, and I yearn for that connection. Regardless of how much pained up I am I still want that connection.”

- **I need God** - “I wouldn’t have been able to get through what I’ve gotten through if it wouldn’t have been for God. I dare not give that to man, not at all. You’ve gotta have a higher power.”

- **God is working in me and supporting me to put my life back together** - “He’s [God’s] the one that’s got me through everything I’ve been through, you know, good or bad.”

- **Gratitude to God** - “I’m just so thankful that I have a higher power, that I was given the opportunity, a second chance, to be here.”

- **Giving up on God during reentry** - “After so many incarcerations and so many tries of getting it right, you kind of give up [on yourself and God].”

- **Blaming God** - “‘Man. He’s supposed to help me out.’ Then I’m like, ‘Well why is He not helping me out when I go to prison?’”
How Do Returning Sisters Experience the Church?

- Church support during reentry
- Relating to Church folk
- Barriers to Church participation
Project Sister Connect: Two Feet of Love in Action

Charitable Works
Charitable works include acts such as providing returning sisters with food, clothing, shelter, or job training.

Social Justice
Social justice includes actions such as advocating for changes in mandatory sentencing laws and instituting fair hiring practices by "banning the box."
Project Sister Connect

- “We get it where you are. That’s where we’re going to meet you at.”

- Project Sister Connect offers returning sisters the “close-knitness” that sisters said was so important in reentry.

- Project Sister Connect helps sisters to continue the spiritual journey they began when God sat them down.

- Due to the barriers, real or perceived, that sisters experience with the church, the sisterhood provides a supportive spiritual community.

- The sisterhood seeks to serve as the hands and feet of God.
The spiritual companion and coordinator has the greatest responsibility within the sisterhood. This sister establishes the relationship with a sister inside, a female inmate who will soon be a returning sister, through a process outlined below. She is responsible for writing to and visiting the sister inside on a regular basis in order to establish a relationship and, eventually, to conduct a strengths-based assessment, a process also explained below. As spiritual companion, this sister engages in a “special form of friendship that offers a space of freedom in which we can be honestly ourselves and explore our deepest spiritual longings” (Stewart-Sicking, 2016, p. 28). For some sisters inside, these spiritual longings may fit neatly within the Christian tradition and may be enhanced by the study of sacred scripture. For other sisters inside, they may identify as part of another religious tradition, as part of no religious tradition, or their spiritual and religious beliefs and practices may be more eclectic and “cafeteria style.” Regardless, the spiritual growth that can often occur inside needs to be nurtured and supported by a spiritual companion.

**Figure 4.1 “The Sisterhood of Project Sister Connect.”**

The Sisterhood of Project Sister Connect is comprised of five to seven support sisters who perform specific tasks to assist the returning sister by ameliorating the barriers she faces to successful reentry.

- Spiritual Companion and Coordinator
- Referral Resource
- Phone Friend
- Goal Auditor
- Technology and Career Counselor
- Parent-child Advocate
- 12-Step Sponsor
Project Sister Connect: Social Justice

- Project Sister Connect entails addressing structural injustices by advocating for and working toward reform in three areas:
  1. residential reentry programs,
  2. substance use treatment, and
  3. employment.

- Project Sister Connect also requires changing discriminatory and oppressive laws.
  1. Change policies at the state-level regarding returning citizens' access to state identification.
  2. All 50 states need to “ban the box.”
  3. Make affordable healthcare accessible to all returning citizens.


