

Women's Facilities:
Addressing the Unsanitary Conditions

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Introduction

I decided to research the issues in women's facilities and the unsanitary conditions they face behind bars because I want to delve deeper into the series of traumatic events and unsafe conditions that affect the way these women are treated in prisons. Women have faced various obstacles throughout the years because of their sexuality, however, incarcerated women often experience mistreatment and dehumanization within the criminal justice system. In this paper, we will analyze some of the reasons behind the unsanitary conditions that women live in and help the readers understand why the United States prisons are worse than others.

It is very evident that prisons and jails have many ongoing issues that need to be addressed. James Kilgore (2015), author of *Understanding Mass Incarceration*, describes some of these issues as the cause of overcrowding prisons. James Kilgore states that “With only five percent of the world's population, the United States holds twenty-five percent of the world's population” (Kilgore, 2015, Pg. 1). Nonetheless, since 1980, the number of incarcerated women has rapidly increased, growing faster than the number of males (Kennedy, 2019). The significant increase in the number of female inmates raises concerns about the social structures present in these institutions, particularly concerning the unsanitary conditions that disproportionately affect women in prison. Sadly, US prisons have become warehouses for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, people suffering from mental illness, and individuals struggling with drug addiction, and with no resources available, it has contributed to such horrendous conditions within women's facilities.

Unfortunately, incidents of sexual assault regularly happen in women's facilities, much like they do in communities. Whether initiated by fellow inmates or staff members, it is women who endure the brunt of these distressing incidents. With this being said, the Vera Institute of Justice reports that 86% of inmates who are women have experienced prior sexual assault and 77% have experienced domestic abuse (Booker & Warren, 2017). A significant number of women entering the prison system have previous experiences with sexual assault, which often leads to the development of mental health challenges. When such horrific events continue inside correctional facilities, this is especially intensified. Sadly enough, due to the differences in authority, 60 percent of all assaults go unreported. Oftentimes, women fear the penalties they may receive for trying to speak up which causes the oppressors to not be held accountable. As a result, many women who are imprisoned struggle with persistent physical and psychological safety concerns while they are in custody, and their constitutional rights often aren't sufficiently upheld (Kennedy, 2019). To make matters worse, women in prisons are commonly made to undergo the technique known as strip- searching, which compels them to take off their clothing and engage in humiliating physical acts with private portions of their bodies. Being strip searched can be particularly upsetting for women who have already suffered sexual abuse, but tragically, it is still a common procedure in women's prisons (Hutchison, 2019).

Furthermore, it is clear that sexual assault is only one aspect of their awful situation. Mental illness, substance addiction, the risk of developing sexually transmitted illnesses, and the horrible circumstances in the prison environment all conspire to make these women's lives a nightmare. Unfortunately, the staff at these facilities often lack the necessary training and resources to successfully address these serious issues. As a result, women in jail continue to suffer on a daily basis, trapped in a circle of despair (Booker & Warren, 2017). This unpleasant reality is worsened by the way that our society and legislative structures are built in our nation. Despite their significant impact, these challenges are frequently neglected and under-prioritized, resulting in a serious lack of resources dedicated to effectively addressing such issues.

The practical issue of unpleasant conditions in women's prisons is a concerning display of contemporary inequality, with profound consequences for imprisoned women's life chances and life expectancies. Women already experience inequities in access to diversion programs, which are crucial for rehabilitation and reintegration into society, according to the 2018 Prison Policy Initiative research (Kennedy, 2019). This gender disparity is strongly related to the rise in female incarceration. This rise can be associated with a complex combination of causes like violence, poverty, and gender reintegration into society difficult.

Unacceptable imprisonment environments are a symptom of society's greater gender disparities and socioeconomic injustices (Hutchison, 2019). The lack of sanitary facilities is symbolic of a system that not only fails to safeguard imprisoned women's fundamental human rights but also creates their marginalization. As a result, the effects extend to life expectancy, as the physical and emotional toll of such situations can lead to worsening health and well-being, emphasizing the critical need for social reform and the abolition of these systemic injustices. As we dive deeper into this research, we will have the opportunity to explore in greater detail the underlying factors contributing to unsanitary conditions and the challenges faced by incarcerated women. In addition, we will look for alternative ways to resolve these systemic challenges once and for all.

Critical Analysis of Inequality and the Crime Punishment System

In 1719, the first jail system was established in York, Maine, followed by the establishment of prisons in 1891 through the Three Prison Act. The initial goals of jails and prisons were to rehabilitate criminals in hopes of teaching them how to integrate successfully back into society. The way these systems facilitated work was through penitence. These institutions were designed to isolate offenders and make them feel sorrow for their wrong doings as well as make them regret their actions in hopes of avoiding such offenses in the future. Unfortunately, as new laws were passed such as The Three Strike Law, established in 1994, the jail and prison systems directed their shifts from rehabilitation to punishment which have contributed to the unsanitary conditions women are facing.

Systemic Failures

These new acts and policies became a form of punishment for women behind bars. In the 1970's the Penal Harm movement was introduced to the United States correctional facilities by policy makers. The Penal Harm movement stated that stricter punishments needed to be enforced amongst inmates along with depriving them of their freedom because of their actions.

With this being said, Chelsi Lamberton, writer of *A Legal Analysis of Health Care for Incarcerated Women in the United States*, explains that because of this new act, women's healthcare is at risk in these facilities. As a form of punishment, women are denied access to menstrual hygiene resources as well as access to a doctor which is a basic necessity that is crucial for their well-being. Due to the lack of healthcare, we often find women living with one of the worst illnesses in these facilities. As there are no accessible resources, these diseases end up spreading through the prison facilities causing a violation of the women's Eighth Amendment which states that individuals behind bars must not receive worse or unusual punishments behind bars (Lamberton, 2020).

Nonetheless, prior to the establishment of the Penal Harm movement, the primary responsibilities of correctional officials within the prison system were mostly focused on correcting inmate conduct and keeping order. On the other hand, medical providers, in this pre-Penal Harm era, focused on attending to "prisoner's welfare and treating them with compassion, dignity, and humanity" (Vaughn & Smith, 1999, p.177). At this point, the correctional system acknowledged the significance of providing healthcare with a focus on the well-being and dignity of jailed inmates. However,

once the Penal Harm movement gained popularity, a fundamental transformation in the structures and objectives of the correctional system occurred. As a result of this movement, correctional officers began prioritizing harsher penalties and depriving inmates of some necessities. Consequently, medical providers found themselves compelled to adapt to this new framework, and practice what is known as "penal harm medicine."

Penal harm medicine arose from the shifting roles and competing goals of custodial and medical workers. The colliding distinctions between security-focused custodial workers and compassionate, welfare-oriented medical practitioners produced a difficult situation for both groups. In this changing environment, "nurses and other healthcare personnel had to adjust to a mindset in which the "primacy of security" took priority over prisoner wellness" (Vaughn & Smith, 1999, p.177). In such an environment, medical practitioners found themselves in a difficult situation in which their ethical values to offer compassionate and dignified treatment clashed with the punitive and security-focused attitude. This disparity not only damaged healthcare quality, but also contributed to the generally hostile environment within women's prisons, where inmates' well-being was routinely outweighed by an emphasis on discipline and punishment. The conflicting goals and duties of the Penal Harm movement produced a difficult and frequently harmful atmosphere for both healthcare personnel and imprisoned women, resulting in negative effects on their physical and emotional health.

Furthermore, the logic of "law and order" which came to be in the 1970's led to the criminalization of Latina migrants through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. RCA played a central role in the militarization of the border

and expanded the War on Drugs to include the border (Escobar, 2022). However, it contributed to the increased migration of women through family reunification policies. As a result, women are being locked up in what is known as solitary confinement spaces. Understanding the Roots of Latina Migrants Captivity by Martha Escobar, the author explains that in these immigration detention centers, women are being deprived of food, sunlight, and medical/hygienic access. Alongside being deprived of essential resources in immigration centers, women in state and federal facilities also experience these horrific living situations. Mandy Conte, a former inmate at the only women's prison in Vermont testified that the showers in these facilities smelled like sewers and provided evidence of maggots and mold found all over the facilities (Heintz, 2022). With no effective cleanliness within prisons and jails, these situations create a hazard amongst women's health.

Sexual Abuse and its Effects

Additionally, Mandy Conte explains how sexual abuse from staff also creates their living situation traumatic and unsanitary. As many experience sexual abuse from officers and other staff members, women often end up contracting and spreading diseases such as STDs (Heintz, 2022). The unsanitary conditions in women's facilities often go beyond dirtiness in cells and bathrooms. Women consist of 7% of the prison population, however, 33% of women are victims of sexual abuse by a staff member (Gilson, 2019). Male correctional officers and staff have engaged in regular verbal degradation and harassment of female prisoners, thus contributing to a custodial environment in the state prisons for women which is often highly sexualized and excessively hostile. In states such as California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and the

District of California prisons can be terrifying for women because of the sexual abuse they encounter with male officers thus creating a pigsty environment.

The Human Rights Watch organization conducted a two-year experiment in these state facilities which showed the different forms of sexual abuse women face in their day-to-day lives along with the negative effects it brought upon them. Studies found that whether it's molestation, rape, or conducted assaults, these women run a high risk of sexually transmitted diseases along with mental and physical illnesses (Humans Rights Watch, 1996). With this being said, women are likely to get pregnant due to the assaults or contract diseases due to the abuse. Without proper care, women are giving birth in spaces where the baby is prone to such diseases, and inmates are often found spreading and contracting sexually transmitted diseases that can lead to death such as HIV (Gormley, et. al, 2020). Sadly, the study's findings also revealed that these women are unable to receive assistance because male officers use their full authority to bribe them and deny them access to goods if they do not comply (Humans Rights Watch, 1996).

The Impacts on Health

As women go through a series of sexual assaults and harsh punishments, incarcerated women greatly suffer from mental issues that worsen their lifestyles in prisons. A study conducted in Sweden prisons found that 61.7 percent of women were found to self-report mental and physical health problems (Augsburger, et.al, 2022).

In the United States, the percentage is much higher, exceeding 80 percent of women who suffer from mental and physical problems in prison systems (Bright, et.al, 2023). As prisons are built through the concept of punishment, prisons do not direct their funding towards resources such as therapy to help these individuals mentally. As these psychiatric conditions are left untreated, it worsens their food choices, physical activities, and substance abuse. This tends to become an unpleasant environment as women do not have access to support groups or medication that will help improve their mental capacity. As women's facilities focus on the consequences for these inmates, this often leads to starvation and suicide attempts that become indigent to these women's stability.

Women's facilities in the United States place less emphasis on women's health, which has a negative impact on how women live and maintain themselves in prison environments. Health issues are more common in women in prison than in the general population, however, little is known about their perspective on the healthcare they receive. When conducting an interview at one of the women's prisons in Arkansas, many former inmates were able to provide possible solutions to such distressed environments. As the interviews were being conducted three important themes were able to rise from the interviews. any women were able to speak up about 1) the poor physical healthcare in prisons, 2) wanting more specialty care in these facilities, and 3) wanting healthcare providers to treat them with dignity and respect (Norris, et. al, 2022).

As incarcerated women have a higher prevalence of childhood trauma, sexual victimization, mental illness, addiction, and sexually-transmitted diseases, interviewees found that a systematic change needs to be made. Some of these changes included greater control over healthcare provided in prison, improved access to prison-based medical specialties along with providing healthcare education on the particular requirements of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women (Norris, et. al, 2022).

Solutions for Systemic Inequality

The terrible circumstances in which women are imprisoned in the United States deserve immediate attention and support. Comprehensive research into the present legislative framework, as well as the obvious lack of resources that contribute to these awful conditions, has revealed the need for significant solutions. To successfully address these issues, it is important to analyze successful models used in other prison systems across the world and adapt them in the United States prison systems. By using a comparative approach, we may find optimal practices that prioritize the well-being of jailed persons while keeping the required parts of punishment and rehabilitation. This analysis will not only allow us to fix the unclean living circumstances, but it will also provide the groundwork for a more compassionate and functional prison system in the United States, with a specific emphasis on improving the lives of incarcerated women.

Legislation Framework

Considering the conditions that women live with inside the prison systems of the United States, change needs to be made for the well-being of these women. Luckily, not all prisons around the world revolve around the concept of punishment but rather rehabilitation. While the United States focuses on depriving women of their freedom and basic needs by implementing concepts and rules such as the Penal Harm and 'Law and Order,' South Africa's Prisons revolve around the Bangkok Rules. The Bangkok Rules give policy members, authorities, and prison staff the guidance to reduce the incarceration of women and meet their basic necessities in case of imprisonment (Van Hout & Wessels, 2021). South Africa's women prisons have been able to adopt these rules which have resulted in the banning of gender-based discrimination and required facilities to meet women's needs.

As for Norway, its ideology when incarcerating individuals has been focused on what is called "criminal care". Norway ranks number one in having the best prisons in the world. Due to their inclusivity policies, their prisons are designed to rehabilitate their citizens by teaching them necessary skills in order to integrate back into society, rather than keeping them in horrific conditions as punishment. Are Hoiland and Nina Hassen, authors of *The Norwegian Prison System: Halden Prison and Beyond* (2022), explain to us that Norwegian prisons adopt a humanitarian approach, aiming to treat inmates with dignity and respect. The primary goal is creating a rehabilitative rather than a punishing atmosphere (pg. 2). Norway believes that allowing formerly incarcerated individuals access to resources that meet women's needs, such as employment, will help reduce recidivism rates. One can see this success by analyzing their recidivism rates. In Norwegian prisons, women's

needs are successfully met through the accessing employment, thus reintegrating back into society with ease and maintaining recidivisms as low as 25 percent (Skardhamar & Telle, 2012). In the United States, accessing resources is much harder to do than in Norway. The United States is known to be the number one country with one of the highest recidivism rates amounting to 68 percent. If the United States focused on adopting policies like the Bangkok guidelines rather than the Penal Harm or 'Law and Order' acts and shift its focal point to healing, the filthy state in women facilities would improve. Women's prisons in the United States will help focus on the development of recognition, protection, and promotion of human rights of prisoners and the assessment of incarcerated women's situation over time. Therefore, it is important to change some of the policies that have shaped the United States prison systems in order to tackle the root problem of why women are being incarcerated rather than treating them with no dignity.

Furthermore, California enacted the California Public Safety Realignment Act through Assembly Bill 1909. The bill helped to reduce the overcrowding of women in jails. This legislative initiative attempted to address the issue of overpopulation in prison facilities, particularly amongst women. The Realignment Act intentionally transferred management of lower-level criminal offenders from the state prison and parole systems to the county jail and probation systems. This effort resulted in a significant drop in state prison imprisonment rates, with around 27,000 people incarcerated in the year after its adoption (Prindle, et.al, 2022). This successful case study demonstrates the good impact of refocusing attention on alternative systems, with an emphasis on a decentralized approach. The national adoption of regulations similar to California's Public Safety Realignment Act promises to offer women in the criminal

justice system more tailored attention to accommodate their particular needs. The repercussions of reduced jail overcrowding go beyond statistical benefits (Prindle, et. al, 2022). It is evident that women's prison conditions can vary from county to county and are impacted by a variety of circumstances. In many instances, jails are overcrowded, which influence the living circumstances of prisoners, particularly women. Lack of resources can lead to crowded living spaces, limited access to amenities, and strained staff-inmate ratios. However, due to California's Public Safety Realignment Act, Women are being given the option to live in more humane and sanitary circumstances as the burden on jail facilities diminishes and services are being expanded (Turner, et. al, 2015, pg. 13). This change toward healthier and safer living circumstances is critical to creating an atmosphere that promotes recovery and reintegration. As a result, by passing similar legislation across the country, we not only address the immediate issue of overcrowding, but also promote the well-being and dignity of incarcerated women, which contributes to a more fair and efficient criminal justice system.

Confronting Abuse

Fortunately, when looking into Sweden's prison systems, specifically the Hinseberg women's facility, we get to understand ways to help reduce such assaults on the inmates. Though Hinseberg prison facility prioritizes the needs of their inmates, they also focus on the needs of its staff members. As stated in *Prison Cultures and Social Representations*, "Prison officers, often as a consequence of their specific work environment, experience fear, anxiety, frustration...more so than happiness, hope, and satisfaction" (Lindberg, 2005). It's evident that Prison officers carry a load of work which can cause all sorts of emotions. In the United States prison system, not much help goes towards tackling issues

that prison staff encounter. This ultimately leads to staff members exploiting on the inmates causing sexual assault, discrimination, and poor treatment amongst women in these facilities. Hinseberg prison in Sweden, on the other hand, provides counseling and emotional support groups to prison officers that allow them to express their emotions. By doing so, Hinseberg has been able to take stress off staff members which has created a better environment between officers and inmates. Aside from changing policies, the United States women prisons should also focus on providing a support system where prison staff can relieve stress rather than feeling anxious, and fearful.

This will allow staff members to focus more on women's necessities providing them with proper hygienic care, pregnancy-related issues, and reproductive health services thus creating a clean safe space for women (Lamberton, 2020).

To add on, an important change in training approaches is required to build an effective support structure for prison staff and drastically minimize the unsanitary circumstances encountered by incarcerated women. Rather than using a military-style approach, jail institutions must embrace procedural justice as a fundamental premise. Within the criminal judicial system, procedural justice stresses impartiality, openness, and courteous treatment. Training programs for prison employees may be adjusted to highlight communication skills, empathy, and a complete grasp of the specific issues experienced by imprisoned women through the implementation of a procedural justice framework (Cohen & Headley, 2023). This method not only creates a more caring and supportive atmosphere but also improves the general interaction between staff and inmates. When prison officials are given the skills they need to interact with convicts in a fair and polite manner, it creates trust and legitimacy within the prison community.

Furthermore, it is very important to consider reinforcing the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), which was once passed in 2003. Reinforcing the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) in prison systems around the country is a key step in protecting the well-being of incarcerated women and improving the overall environment within correctional facilities. The emphasis on setting standards for the prevention and response to prison rape, along with the zero-tolerance policy for sexual assault, addresses a wide variety of sexually abusive behavior that women in jail frequently experience (Smith, 2020). Prisons may drastically reduce incidents of sexual abuse, harassment, and assault by enacting and following these principles, therefore creating an environment that emphasizes the safety and dignity of female inmates. The benefits of PREA extend beyond the incarcerated population to encompass the well-being of prison staff members. The mandatory education and training components of PREA equip staff with the knowledge and tools to identify, prevent, and appropriately handle incidents of sexual misconduct (Smith, 2020). This not only enhances the safety of women prisoners but also contributes to the creation of a professional and accountable work culture within correctional facilities. Additionally, the centralized reporting system established by PREA ensures swift action against staff members who violate its standards. This mechanism not only holds individuals accountable but also fosters a culture of transparency and responsibility among prison staff, ultimately contributing to a safer and more respectful working environment for everyone involved.

Resource Improvements

The MeToo movement is a great resource that uses the momentum produced by such campaigns to call attention to the unsanitary circumstances that incarcerated women face on a daily basis. These movements establish a platform for change by stressing the interconnectivity of multiple types of abuse, which extends beyond the immediate problems of sexual assault. They serve as a catalyst for addressing the underlying reasons of abuse, such as poor living circumstances, a lack of access to healthcare, and systematic negligence (Codon, 2023). In essence, movements like #MeToo serve as effective advocacy tools, amplifying the voices of jailed women and driving social reforms in perception and policy. By framing the issue as one of power dynamics and racialized gender inequality, these campaigns force a complete reevaluation of the whole prison system, opening the way for significant improvements in the living conditions and treatment of incarcerated women. Moreover, when analyzing Sweden's prisons, Sweden conducted research in the women's prison systems to help analyze solutions to help these women as they believe that it is often forgotten that women suffer greatly from medical issues. In 2017 5.6 percent of women in Sweden were imprisoned for non-violent crimes (Augsburger, et.al, 2022). The study showed that more than half of these women were suffering from substance abuse, depression, and stress. When interviewing these women, half of them explained that their symptoms only worsened. Taking this into consideration, medical care such as rehab, therapy, and doctor visits was provided for these women in hopes of improving their poor health and behaviors. In the end, results showed that having access to these types of resources helped improve women's behavior along with their mental and physical state.

Additionally, medical care should not only be given in prisons, however, such resources should also be given in these women's communities. The Affordable Care Act allows up to thirteen million Americans to get health insurance through an expansion of the Medicaid program (Patel et. al, 2014). With this being said, correctional staff members can help inmates sign up for medical programs upon their release to ensure access to help in their communities. Medical treatment is a critical component of effective reintegration into society. It addresses individuals' health requirements and contributes to their general well-being, which is critical for a successful return to the community. Women who have been jailed may have special mental health needs. Access to mental health treatments, such as counseling or therapy, can be facilitated by community-based medical care, assisting in addressing the psychological impact of incarceration and improving mental well-being. Finally, participating in community-based healthcare services enables previously imprisoned women to become active members of their communities. This participation may go beyond healthcare, generating a sense of belonging and positively impacting society as a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research delves into the extensive issues of unsanitary conditions faced by women in the United States prison facilities. This research sheds light on the series of traumatic incidents and societal failures that contribute to their mistreatment. The dehumanization and insufficient living circumstances suffered by jailed women, particularly in overcrowded jails, are at the center of this investigation. This issue is inseparably related to the criminal justice system, since punitive adaptations in laws and policies, such

as the Penal Harm movement, have resulted in the worsening of women's medical needs and sanitary conditions. The societal cost of this problem is significant since it disproportionately affects women from underprivileged backgrounds, restricting their life opportunities and preventing their reintegration into society. The critical analysis component of this research breaks down the problem into multiple aspects. It starts by looking at the social circumstances within jails, stressing the high rate of sexual assault, mental health issues, and a lack of resources, all of which contribute to the unsanitary living conditions.

The examination of systemic flaws highlights the impact of policy shifts from rehabilitation to punishment, with an emphasis on criminal harm care and the negative effects on healthcare quality. The essay also looks at how immigration policies contribute to the filthy conditions in these facility centers.

The structural solutions section presents numerous ways to approach the challenges. The research proposes a change from punitive tactics to rehabilitation by drawing on international examples such as South Africa's Bangkok Rules and the rehabilitative focus of Norwegian prisons. Legislative frameworks such as the California Public Safety Realignment Act serve as examples, highlighting the favorable influence of decentralization on living circumstances. Furthermore, tackling abuse through the implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act and incorporating a procedural justice framework into staff training are critical steps in ensuring a safer and more respectful environment.

To address the issues outlined in the essay regarding the unsanitary conditions and mistreatment of women in U.S. prisons, several

steps that can be taken at an individual, institutional, and societal level. At the individual level, education and awareness are critical. Individuals can join in awareness campaigns, information sharing, and advocacy initiatives to bring attention to the issues of incarcerated women. Supporting groups that strive for jail reform and women's rights can be a beneficial way to help. Individuals might also look for volunteer or internship opportunities with groups focusing on criminal justice reform to obtain personal knowledge and actively contribute to a good change.

At the institutional level, there is a need for policy changes and reforms within the prison system. Advocacy efforts should be aimed at maintaining and increasing the implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), ensuring that requirements for sexual assault prevention and response are strictly enforced. Furthermore, it is crucial to promote a transition in prison culture away from punitive methods and toward rehabilitation. Supporting projects that focus on mental health treatment, access to healthcare services, and educational programs for jailed women fall under this category.

On a societal level, engaging with and supporting movements like #MeToo could help amplify the voices of incarcerated women while also drawing attention to greater concerns of gender-based inequality within the criminal justice system. Advocating for legislative improvements, such as California's Public Safety Realignment Act, can help to reduce jail overcrowding, resulting in better living circumstances. It is critical to encourage a social shift in mindset toward rehabilitation rather than punishment, which may be accomplished through educational programs, community conversations, and media campaigns.

Final Consideration

Creating change in the treatment of incarcerated women and the conditions they face requires a multifaceted approach. By combining individual efforts, institutional reforms, and societal advocacy, we can work toward a criminal justice system that upholds human rights, dignity, and rehabilitation for all. As an individual, one can contribute by staying informed, participating in relevant initiatives, and advocating for justice and equality in your academic and social circles. By being an informed and engaged member of society, you can play a role in shaping a future that prioritizes the well-being of all individuals, including those within the criminal justice system.

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