



BUILDING A GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR OPEN SOCIETY

## OSI Forum: A World Apart—Women, Prison, and Life Behind Bars

Moderator Deborah Small introduced the panel's theme by noting "in a lot of ways, we have not come that far" from the medieval era, in which women were tortured for such "crimes" as laziness, disobedience, adultery, or other forms of behavior considered to be outside the norm. "We no longer put women on the rack or subject them to public humiliation," she said, but the kinds of punishments inflicted on women today can be considered to be torturous by modern-day standards.

In light of the increased rate of incarceration of women and the low-level crimes for which they tend to be punished (and punished in a manner far in excess of their crimes), Small said, we must ask: Is it appropriate to use our criminal justice system for this? Is it appropriate to remove these women from society, to strip them of their humanity, to break up their families?

After Cristina Rathbone read from [her book](#) a passage about one woman's agonizing ordeal of adapting to life at MCI Framingham prison, Vivian Nixon spoke of her own experience adjusting to being incarcerated. She recalled an immediate and devastating sense of loss, guilt, and a painful loss of dignity. What unsettled Nixon the most, she said, was that people become so accustomed to being imprisoned. Years after being freed, at times she still finds it difficult "to escape that feeling of being in prison."

Eve Ensler cited the remark that "prisons have become permanent housing for the poor." Ensler, who has conducted a [writing program at a women's correctional facility](#), said she was struck by how desperate women were for an outlet—like writing—with which to examine and to transform their lives. The path to prison is "not mysterious"—it is a step-by-step process involving poverty, violence, lack of opportunity. "But we don't want to look at any of that," Ensler said, "we just want to lock people up." The challenge is to look at prisons as a place that can be truly about rehabilitation.

The history of women's incarceration is "almost like a history of who is the 'other' at a particular period of time," Small said. It's no coincidence, therefore, that "the rise in women's incarceration coincided with an attack on the welfare state" and the "demonization of poor women," she said.

Rathbone agreed that the history of the issue has been cyclical; while the last 15 years has emphasized a punitive approach, "we are now entering another period of reform." Although that is unlikely to last, "it has always been the same kinds of women who are locked up in prison," she remarked: the poor, addicts, social outsiders.

"Most women in prison have led extremely traumatic lives," Nixon added. Their crimes are "moral crimes": addiction, selling drugs for economic reasons, and crimes coerced by an abusive mate. While conceding that there are people in prison for violent crimes, Nixon questioned whether they deserve to be treated more inhumanely than anyone else.

Ensler concurred about the need to blur the lines between those convicted of violent as opposed to nonviolent crimes. The correctional system does not address women on an individual basis, she said; "it lumps them into categories." But "people are very specific, and it requires time, care, and focus to treat people individually."

Small cited the importance of drawing attention to the level of self-inflicted violence these women experience. Two-thirds of the women in the prison that Rathbone wrote about needed some form of mental health services as a result of their incarceration, she said.

Following up on Small's comments, Rathbone cited the "bizarre" manner in which trauma is handled at Framingham. If an inmate's family member has died, the inmate is brought to a room filled with people wearing rubber gloves and protective gear, where they inform her that this person has died. "When you freak out," Rathbone said, "they strap you down and keep you there until you've calmed down, and they call that 'suicide prevention.'" If inmates want to avoid going crazy, she said, one of the first things they learn is to avoid telling anyone that they are feeling depressed. If an inmate discloses depression, fear, and suicidal feelings, Rathbone said, she is locked up in isolation until she "feels better."

Small praised Rathbone's book for its realistic discussion of women's sexuality in prison. Nixon criticized the perception that women voluntarily enter into sexual relationships with male correction officers. "It's a power relationship that is so

unequal,” she said, that women’s needs for basic things like toothbrushes or dental floss “often supercede dignity.”

In many prisons inmates are not allowed to touch each other, Ensler noted. She was moved, she said, “by the way women in prison build community and the way they are able to connect in spite of everything they cannot do.” The issue again raises questions such as: What is the function of correctional facilities? Are we simply locking up two million people, Ensler asked, or are we going to look at why they are there?

Finally, Small asked the panelists what they would like to see generated from discussions such as this. Nixon responded “We will not all wake up one day with a revelation” about how we want to treat people. “Every individual has to make a decision” about the type of society they want to live in and the type of changes they want to see, and to act on that decision, she said.

Ensler expressed concern for long-term prisoners: “When you put people in prison for more than 15 years, I don’t really know what the function of that is.” People are changeable and transformable, she said, and the long-term prisoners she has spent time with “have done more work on themselves than anyone I’ve met in my life.” The benefit they could contribute to society could be “huge.”

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