



addressing the Unique Challenges  
Facing Women of Color Since 1997



# Women of Color Network

## Reports from the Field

An Economic Policy & Leadership Series

**Survivors of Violence & Economic Security: Focus on Reentry Populations**

**Written by Purvi Shah, WOCN Economic Policy and Leadership Senior Consultant**

### Introduction

Economic security and violence against women are deeply connected across communities. Especially in our current challenged economy, we witness the disproportionate impact of economic inequities on survivors of color, Tribal survivors, and our communities. Along with access to food, housing, and safety, access to economic opportunity and security is necessary for self-sufficiency. Within this economic landscape, the Women of Color Network (WOCN) seeks to ensure that the economic security challenges facing women of color and Tribal survivors are examined and addressed so that all survivors can be supported and reached effectively.

In this time of economic crisis, many anti-violence programs have been forced to roll back services. The needs of under-represented communities may be unintentionally overlooked or even disregarded as too complex to address – leading to a further **need for a stronger safety net for survivors of color and Tribal communities**. Simultaneously, we see that culturally specific organizations and Tribal programs continue to serve survivors with innovative responses that respond to economic security needs.

During this period of economic crisis, **WOCN aims to ensure a safety net for all survivors, leadership of advocates of color and Tribal advocates, and a voice for our communities**. From 2011-2013, through the Economic Policy & Leadership Project, WOCN documented how diverse survivors are affected by economic factors as well as promising methods of response. This series of five reports from the field emerges from WOCN forums where Tribal and women of color advocates from the fields of violence against women, social

justice, and economic justice shared challenges and recommendations for survivor support in relation to economic security. Through these field reports, we give voice to the expertise of on-the-ground advocates and aim to support Tribal advocates & advocates of color and their allies – including other advocates, local/state programs, and policy partners – in furthering more effective program development and response within domestic violence and sexual assault programs. Through understanding specific needs and advancing the recommendations in these field reports, advocates, programs, institutions, and policymakers can better remove barriers and improve access while building a better understanding of the intersection of communities of color and Tribal communities, domestic violence and sexual assault, and economic security. Furthermore, these reports can inform policy conversations and policymakers in shaping policies more effectively for our communities. Finally, these reports demonstrate the advocacy leadership of Tribal and women of color advocates – and the power of their voices.

## **Defining the Economic Needs of Diverse Survivors**

In 2011, WOCN convened the National Women of Color Economic Policy and Leadership Summit comprising participants from across the United States and Tribal sovereign nations to ask, **“What are the economic needs of survivors from our communities and how do we ensure a safety net and support?”** Based on advocate input from the 2011 National Summit, WOCN identified two overarching areas vital to the economic security of women of color and Tribal survivors: **(1), the need for [Strengthening Institutional Services](#)** to challenge external, systemic, and internal racism & bias to ensure inclusivity as well as **(2), the importance of [Policy Advocacy, development, and education](#)** to better reach and serve our communities. Moreover, the 2011 National Summit attendees delineated three policy issues requiring specific attention: **(3), [Reentry Populations](#)**; **(4) [Tribal Sexual Assault](#)**; and, **(5) access to [T- and U-Visas](#) for undocumented survivors.**

Subsequent to the 2011 National Summit, WOCN held three Women of Color Regional Forums in 2013 to gather information and recommendations to reduce economic marginalization in the above five arenas. These events were hosted by the Women of Color Network and funded by the Office on Violence Against Women.

**Reflecting the expertise of advocates, activists, and survivors, this issue report from the field examines the compounding economic challenges faced by survivors reentering communities after being incarcerated.** This field report provides recommendations to support the safety and economic security of reentry populations. Along with personal accounts and field advocacy, this valuable information can work alongside national data to build economic security and safety of ALL communities, families, and survivors.

## Voices from the Field

Given the on-the-ground expertise of advocates, we start with their powerful voices. Here are some of the key frameworks, barriers, and solutions in reference to survivors reentering communities after incarceration **voiced by Tribal and women of color advocates who attended our forums:**

- There is a stigma associated with incarcerated mothers and a consequent fast-tracking adoption of children whose mothers are incarcerated;
- The counseling, trauma response, job skills, continuing education, educational resources, and services that survivors need while incarcerated are often not provided;
- Access for transportation is key for job hunting and working after incarceration;
- Entrepreneurship skills training – one example is gardening or making your OWN food – enables survivors not to rely on systems but to advance on their own terms;
- In Arizona, advocates reported a lack of medication and healthcare when one needs it – which affects reentry populations; and,
- In California, advocates reported that survivors with felony records have difficulty getting a job as well as housing.

WOCN is grateful for the vital expertise shared by Tribal and women of color advocates during these convenings – expertise that forms the basis of the following critical barriers and recommendations for change. In particular, it is the dedication of Tribal and women of color advocates that enabled a focus on supporting a population often overlooked by mainstream providers – survivors reentering communities.

## Context and Scope of the Barriers

Throughout the United States, a disproportionate number of people of color are incarcerated – leading to inevitable impacts on our families and communities. Furthermore, the rate of women being incarcerated is notably increasing. According to The Sentencing Project, “The number of women in prison increased by 646% between 1980 and 2010” with the rate of increase nearly 1.5 times the rate for men.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this gender disparity, racial and ethnic disparities continue to make their mark: “The chance of a woman being sent to prison varies by race. As of 2001, the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment was: 1 in 19 for black women; 1 in 45 for Hispanic women; and, 1 in 118 for white women” which results in black women being incarcerated at three times the rate of white women and Hispanic women 1.6 times the rate of incarceration for white

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<sup>1</sup>“Incarcerated Women.” The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform. Revised September 2012. [http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/cc\\_Incarcerated\\_Women\\_Factsheet\\_Sep24sp.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/cc_Incarcerated_Women_Factsheet_Sep24sp.pdf)

women.<sup>2</sup> The larger context of racism, disproportionate lack of access to resources, and limited options for safety and economic security underpin the racial and gender disparity in the rising rates of women’s incarceration. For immigrant women, fears of deportation may also surface.

Prior to incarceration, women have often faced a number of traumas from racism to homelessness, and may have complex mental health needs. **For survivors of violence, incarceration may be a result of attempts to protect themselves or to survive abuse.** Indeed, there is a strong link between women who have been incarcerated and prior experiences of abuse. In a factsheet on “Abuse History Among Incarcerated Women,” the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women notes a study of 65 incarcerated women by R. G. Bradley & K. M. Davino which ascertained, “86.2% of the participants reported a history of childhood sexual abuse, 56.9% reported a history of childhood physical abuse, 67.7% reported a history of sexual assault in adulthood, and 84.6% reported a history of physical abuse in adult relationships.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, “43% of the women reported having been victimized by all four types of abuse (both physical and sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood)” and “only 5% of the sample did not report any abuse.”<sup>4</sup> Given a context of lifelong experiences of violence, the experience of incarceration itself – with additional threats of violence, sexual assault, and birthing traumas – can continue and/or amplify a cycle of trauma and victimization.

Moreover, a lack of economic security perpetuates women’s vulnerability. Not only do women often rely on their partners for economic access, but also women reentering communities face a host of complex challenges to economic security and self-sufficiency. Advocates shared that these challenges can include a lack of job opportunities, difficulty in accessing employers as well as employment counseling or mental health services or reliable transportation, struggles for sustainability if working minimum wage positions, and an inability to access student grants or a basic necessity such as safe and affordable housing. In addition, advocates report that employers often are not equipped to support survivors who may need trauma-informed services in order to heal and be fully productive. Compounding these institutional challenges is the fact that technology has shifted rapidly and the changing work environment can be daunting for any reentering community member who may lack exposure to current tools. Advocates from WOCN’s gatherings observe that a growing compassion deficit is appearing in communities due to the economic setbacks of recent years: as people focus on their own needs and as community service providers work to meet the increasing demand, community members

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> “Abuse History Among Incarcerated Women.” National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women. Revised May 20, 2011. [http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NCDBW\\_AbuseHistoryAmongIncarceratedWomen\\_updated\\_5-20-2011.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NCDBW_AbuseHistoryAmongIncarceratedWomen_updated_5-20-2011.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

and programs are less likely to support and have compassion for reentering survivors and others seeking assistance.

Such isolation has become intrinsic to the status of reentering populations. In addition to the above economic struggles, **advocates note that reentering survivors struggle to recover their basic civic and social status including voter rights, getting their records cleared, and rebuilding bonds in their communities and families – especially with children.** Indeed, advocates reported that systems often work to displace children from incarcerated mothers whether through removal of children upon birth in a prison or through fast-track adoption procedures. In addition to the social and familial challenge of regaining parental authority, reentering survivors often struggle with the courts and criminal justice system to prove their capacity to mother. Survivors of violence may also find that abusive partners continue to interrupt their recoveries by manipulating parole processes, filing false claims, or disrupting home environments. As a result, a new cycle of abuse may ensue, leaving survivors even more vulnerable to additional personal and systemic harm.

As advocates in the field know, the challenges facing survivors reentering communities are daunting and require concerted attention from each of us. Advocates at our gatherings noted the need to be attentive to the additional challenges that face juvenile and elder survivors reentering communities. Nonetheless, through the following advocate, program, institutional, and policy recommendations, we can better work to interrupt gender violence and support formerly-incarcerated survivors who are returning citizens in their efforts to re-join communities, maintain safety, and achieve economic security.

## **Recommendations for Advocates**

Advocates from WOCN's forums indicated that serving survivors reentering communities successfully begins with moving from judgment to understanding and to ensuring appropriate services through the following recommendations:

- Embrace the complexity and understanding that survivors may have participated in illegal or questionable activities in the process of surviving;
- Empower survivors with information on their rights in relation to law enforcement;
- Consolidate meetings and case plans to help focus survivors' energies and reduce re-victimization or trauma;

- Provide safety planning for survivors when going to, being at, or leaving their work environments;
- Foster linkages to housing, mental health, substance abuse, transportation, and childcare services as needed;
- Foster entrepreneurial skills such as gardening as microenterprise and growing one's own food to support individual and community health;
- Strive to extend timelines for shelter, job training support, etc. to enable successful outcomes and true integration for reentering survivors;
- Enable family and community support and healing in a holistic manner. For example, this could involve supporting supervised visitation or family reunification processes so that survivors can regain parental status and family connections; and
- Foster avenues for creative responses, storytelling, mentoring, and sharing of success on the reentry process and timelines.

## **Recommendations for Programs**

Advocates noted the power and potential of anti-violence programs to foster alternative responses to criminal justice systems as well as facilitating a stronger safety network for reentering survivors through these strategies:

- Further community and restorative justice models to support unserved, underserved, and inadequately-served populations including LGBTQI, Tribal, and communities of color disproportionately impacted by criminal justice systems as well as poverty and oppression. For example, one path to supporting individual and community healing and cultural values could be to enable Tribal members to obtain a pardon from Tribal leaders;
- Partner with jails and prisons to support survivors prior to the release date and to enable a continuity of support and services subsequent to release;
- Work with public defenders offices to enable abuser accountability as well as restitution for survivors of violence;
- Further judicial training and education to reduce survivors' re-victimization;
- Partner with vocational schools, colleges, and universities to further educational options;

- Foster linkages to employers to enhance survivors' access to jobs, and hold collaborative job fairs for reentering survivors; and
- Endeavor to adjust agency and governmental policies that limit the capacity for organizations to work with abusers and survivors.

## **Recommendations for Institutions**

Advocates noted that reforming prison contexts can have a profound influence on survivors as they reenter communities. In addition to maintaining a safe environment free of additional violence, jails and prisons can support survivors in furthering their economic capacity while incarcerated through these means:

- Design and implement a formalized reentry process 12 months prior to the survivor's release;
- Foster linkages to transitional housing programs or community centers to enable a safety net for survivors to reenter in safe environments;
- Enable the development of a coordinated case plan with a local community-based agency or anti-violence program for each reentering survivor;
- Offer mental health access and support groups for survivors to address trauma from a harm reduction and trauma-informed perspective;
- Provide access to literacy development and continuing education as well as information on budgeting & financial management and supporting economic literacy generally;
- Enable subsidized employment opportunities to foster on-the-job training and resume-building;
- Further support groups institutionally by including strategy sessions on resources, future education or job prospects, and models for avoiding economic dependence; and
- Promote an environment that gives the message that reentry skills development begins from the first day of incarceration.

## **Recommendations for Policymakers**

Advocates indicated policymakers hold solutions not only for enabling smoother reentry but also to prevent incarceration through adopting these recommendations:

- Work to revise mandatory arrest laws or insist that police officers do not make speedy assessments to determine aggressors in crisis situations. With same-sex and gender non-conforming relationships, survivors may be unjustly targeted because the immediate facts may not reflect the overarching pattern of violence or power and control dynamics in a relationship. In addition to training police officers on such cases, training for probation officers can assist in understanding the varied dynamics of gender violence and fostering responses that do not bring additional harm to survivors; and
- Expand resources for second chance programs including resources for community-based programs, job skills development and training, access to housing and health services as well as relocation resources.

## Conclusion

Advocates from the WOCN forums believe that understanding the links between abuse, incarceration, and reentry is not only vital but that appropriate responses can **end generational patterns and cycles of violence**. Susan Burton, founder and director of A New Way of Life, started her organization upon realizing the discrepancy in services available when reentering communities. After having access herself to employment and mental health services, she asked why every returning citizen did not have such opportunity. As the Women’s Advocacy Project of the Women’s Prison Association notes, “The alarming rate of growth in women’s incarceration has a devastating impact on us as women, and on our families and communities. Women enter the criminal justice system with a variety of issues such as substance abuse, poverty, domestic violence, mental health and health concerns, homelessness, and low levels of formal education. If these issues were addressed on the community level, many women might never enter into the criminal justice system, let alone prison.”<sup>5</sup> With the above recommendations from Tribal and women of color advocates from the field, we believe that not only can we work to create a stronger safety net for survivors reentering communities but that we can embolden the capacity for self-sufficiency, health, and community safety.

For more information about the content of this publication, please contact us at:

The Women of Color Network  
3605 Vartan Way Suite 101  
Harrisburg, PA 17110  
1-800-537-2238  
<http://www.womenofcolornetwork.org>

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<sup>5</sup> “Shifting Resources from Prisons to Communities: Recommendations for Change from the Women’s Advocacy Project.” Women’s Prison Association: Institute on Women and Criminal Justice: The Women’s Advocacy Project. December 2007. <http://66.29.139.159/pdf/2007%20Recommendations%20Final%20Version.pdf>



## More Information and Resources

In addition to the advocate expertise above, the following online resources can provide further information, expertise, and hands-on program strategies for supporting survivors reentering our communities:

A New Way of Life Re-entry Project: <http://anewwayoflife.org/employment-rights/>

The Council of State Governments: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/federal-interagency-reentry-council/publications/snapshot-women-and-reentry>

Health Right 360: <http://www.healthright360.org/services-offered/resource-center>

National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women: <http://www.ncdbw.org/>

National Women's Prison Project: <http://www.nwpp-inc.com/servicesprovided.htm>

Our Place DC: <http://www.ourplacedc.org/re-entry-services-at-our-place-dc/>

Time for Change Foundation: <http://www.timeforchangefoundation.org/program-services/work-to-win/>

Women and Prison: <http://womenandprison.org/about/>

Women on the Rise Telling HerStory: <http://womenontherise-worth.org/index.htm#top>

Women's Prison Association: [http://66.29.139.159/pdf/Recommendations\\_2006.pdf](http://66.29.139.159/pdf/Recommendations_2006.pdf)

## WOCN Economic Policy and Leadership Reports Series

The WOCN policy reports (published 2014) emerged from advocate expertise during the 2011 National Economic Policy and Leadership Summit and a series of three regional convenings in 2013. The reports explore [Strengthening Institutional Services](#); the need for [Policy Advocacy](#); [Reentry Populations](#); [Tribal Sexual Assault](#); and [T- and U-Visas](#), and present the direct expertise of advocates working to end violence across the country. The reports provide background, a scope of the problem, and offer targeted recommendations for advocates, agencies, and policymakers. We look forward to your responses and to ensuring economic access for all survivors!

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