

Augustana College

Augustana Digital Commons

Audre Lorde Writing Prize

Prizewinners

Spring 2019

Disrupting the Androcentric Prison System

Amber Hanke

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward>



Part of the [Courts Commons](#), [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminal Procedure Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Law and Society Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Hanke, Amber. "Disrupting the Androcentric Prison System" (2019). *Audre Lorde Writing Prize*.
<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/wollstonecraftaward/35>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Audre Lorde Writing Prize by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Amber Hanke

Disrupting the Androcentric Prison System

Women and Change in US 201: Simonsen

2019 Spring Term

Long Analytical Essay

Disrupting the Androcentric Prison System

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.” Nelson Mandela said this in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. He discusses his life and the twenty-seven years he spent in prison, as well as the conditions he faced while incarcerated. Within Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey’s book, *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, they discuss various topics some of which include the effects of incarceration on parenthood and reproductive healthcare. But what about the intersection of incarceration and reproductive healthcare? Prison systems were made with men’s bodies in mind and any other body within that system disrupts it. When other bodies are not considered, they are harmed within the Prison Industrial complex. How are female inmate’s reproductive health harmed and limited by the prison system, since they do not fit into the default male model that has been created? A woman’s menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and ability to have children is severely harmed as a result of the prison industrial complex.

Our society is built upon Patriarchal structures and causes us to value certain traits, characteristics, and bodies over others. The bodies that our society prefers are males. With the ideal traits and characteristics containing dominance, mind, and self. Any other traits were automatically seen as trivial or lesser than and female bodies were put into a category below males. Allan G. Johnson is a sociologist who has studied privilege, oppression, and inequality. He describes the hierarchy of characteristics within our Patriarchal culture in his piece, “Patriarchy, the System”. He states, “Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things...and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity regulated to the marginal position of other” (Johnson 74). Masculinity within our

Patriarchal culture is seen as the most desirable and on top of the hierarchy we have within our society, therefore putting femininity down on the hierarchy. This makes women and the traits that society associates with women as the “other” or less desirable. These patriarchal attitudes were brought into the prison system, therefore making the prison industrial complex another patriarchal structure within our society further causing women’s bodies to struggle.

Our Patriarchal prison industrial complex is androcentric. Androcentric means that the male is the default standard and anything else is the “other”. The creation of prisons were built with specific androcentric ideas of what specific bodies and narratives in prisons look like, and those were not any concepts regarding females. Over time we can see how the prison system has had to make some changes to try and accommodate women. Nicole Hahn Rafter was a feminist criminology professor at Northeastern University where she established the United States’ first courses about women and crime in society. Her teachings and writings showed the prominent differences between the male and female prisons and the major reproductive healthcare struggles that women go through while navigating this male created system. In addition to this, she also shows how the prison system has evolved for females. Rafter describes the changes of the prison system for females in three waves within her book, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons*. The first wave is where female inmates were alongside men in what is called the general population section prison. Here, females were constantly subjected to sexual assault and various forms of degradation. In order to combat these issues, the second wave moved female inmates to separate housing. However, there were still issues with separate housing because women did not receive the same resources as men did while in prison. Finally, the third wave moved female inmates to a different building and the punishments women received forced them to conform to traditional gender roles. Rafter also discusses how women are still being discriminated against when it

comes to programs and healthcare (Rafter 378). Even though our prison system has tried to make accommodations for females to fit in a male created space, there are still many issues, especially when it comes to the reproductive healthcare of women in prison. Prison healthcare is not the best in general, even for men, however it is even worse for women because their body, the “other”, disrupts the androcentric prison system so much they cannot get the healthcare or programs that they need and want. Their bodies have suffered physically, mentally, and emotionally within the prison system because of the male experience standard. Female issues are still not being thought of, therefore causing female inmates to continue suffering within prison systems because their body is the “other”.

Our society organizes and constructs itself around various bodies of people, not thinking about other bodies and how people may be different, therefore causing the “other” bodies of women within prison to have a hard time getting the products they need when it comes time for their menstrual cycle. Chandra Bozelko is a formerly incarcerated woman who is currently a prison reform advocate and writer who was interviewed by *Women’s Health* magazine. Bozelko discusses her experience with menstrual cycles within the prison system and how hard it was. Bozelko states, “You have to place an order a week ahead via a slip, and if there’s a mistake anywhere along the way, which is fairly common, you just don’t get your items... There’s a shortage of prison jobs, and even if you get one, you earn about 75 cents a day... So to have to spend \$2.34 for 24 pads is a quarter of your weekly paycheck, keeping in mind that you’d also have to buy soap, shampoo, toothpaste, and all the other hygiene items that are basic to human existence” (“The Sickening Truth About What It’s Like to Get Your Period in Prison”). Here, we can see how buying and ordering these items is problematic. These products are so expensive, especially when thinking about intersectionality, women who are poor may either have barely

any money or no money at all to get the products that they need. Not everyone in prison has access to people on the outside who may be able to give them funds or people on the outside may not have money to give the woman. Women of color also may have less resources due to discrimination and oppression. In addition to this, some prisons may have personal products that are even more expensive making it impossible to get, therefore causing women to not have any control over their needs or bodies.

While paying the price is one way to get personal products in some prisons, some women must bargain their way through the male constructed system where they have no power. Some prisons have low or no cost personal products, however that does not mean they are any more easily accessible. A Woman's Worth, Inc. is an organization that works to provide women with access to personal products while incarcerated. They state that pads and tampons are, "...used as a bargaining chip or power/negotiating tool over women" ("Healthy Woman"). Here we can see that necessary items that women need to live their lives are being used in a manner that gives them no power. Prison already takes away who you are as a person and any kind of power that you have. Leaving women to have no power over their bodies when it comes to their menstrual cycle. Bozelko further goes on to state that she remembers seeing that guards would ask invasive questions like how long their period was going to last or why would they need another one when they just got one yesterday. In addition to this, she also stated that it was not uncommon for women to bleed through their pants and the guards to make fun of them for it. ("The Sickening Truth About What It's Like to Get Your Period in Prison"). Women within prison have no control over their bodies and the necessary items that they need. They even get shamed for natural occurrences in their bodies. This shows how women's bodies were not thought of when it comes to the construction of the prison system. The system is so much thought of as male, that

something such as a menstrual cycle is an add on and deviates from the default. Women's bodies are not covered, therefore leaving them with no power over their bodies when it comes to menstrual cycles. Instead, women's bodies are being dominated by other forces. Allan G. Johnson also within his piece on the Patriarchy also discusses how the action of having power over something or someone is desired by our society because not being willing to use your power is a sign of "weakness" that our society associates with feminine. A female inmate's body and all aspects that come with her is seen as a "weak" and "defective" body that must be overpowered by those who power over others in certain situations or else what is the point of power according to our society.

Another "defect" of the "other" bodies that prison systems did not consider is what would happen if an inmate were to be pregnant while incarcerated and the necessary services required for that inmate. Female inmates who are pregnant do not get the care they need and sometimes their health concerns are not taken seriously. Estalyn Marquis is a lawyer who wrote an article called, "Nothing Less Than the Dignity of Man": Women Prisoners, Reproductive Health, and Unequal Access to Justice Under the Eighth Amendment". Within this piece she describes the story of Michelle Lea Martinez, a Latina woman, who was pregnant in prison. Martinez had vaginal bleeding and requested to visit the jail's medical unit because that could be a sign of a miscarriage. The staff at the Palm Beach, Florida jail refused to take Martinez to take the medical unit because she had not written her name on a list to get seen by the nurse who usually takes care of the pregnant inmates. Martinez was really scared of what was happening to her body and her babies' life. So, with this fear, Martinez slammed her thumb in a door. Within minutes she had received care for not only her thumb, but her vaginal bleeding too. A realization dawned on Martinez that in order to receive proper healthcare as a woman, you needed to have an injury that

a man would be able to sustain as well (Marquis 203). Martinez's experience within her life shows that women have a hard time getting the treatment that they need until they have an injury that a man would be able to have. Therefore, showing that women's health concerns are not thought of as much. Healthcare in prison is gendered and there is a "right" injury and concern and then there is a "wrong" injury and concern. Prioritizing certain bodies, male, over other bodies. In addition to this, Martinez's identity of a Latina woman may have played a role in this as well. A white woman may have been taken more seriously or taken into consideration quicker because of white privilege.

The lack of care and attention that pregnant female inmates receive while they are incarcerated, can also be due to our society's long history of who is encouraged to have children. When it comes to women who have been incarcerated, they are sometimes discouraged and even given a deal not to have children. These categories that our society discourage from having children include, minorities, the poor, people who have mental illnesses, and people who have been incarcerated. Sometimes our society goes as far as to sterilize these people who our society seems "unfit" to have children. According to The Boston Globe, a news organization, discusses past cases of sterilization with people who dealt with the incarceration system. Their article, "Nashville prosecutors require sterilization as part of plea deals", states, "In West Virginia, a 21-year-old unmarried mother of three agreed to have her tubes tied in 2009 as part of her probation after she pleaded guilty to possession with intent to distribute marijuana... nearly 150 female prisoners had been sterilized between 2006 and 2010" (Burke). Women have no control over their bodies when it comes to dealing with the incarceration system, other people are making decisions for them and also coercing the women to make certain decisions. Within the piece, "Women's Bodies, Women's Health", Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey discuss how

sterilization abuse is a concern to women and has been a common practice. They state, "...has been a concern of low-income women, especially women of color, for many years. Sterilization, without women's full knowledge or consent, has been a common practice in the United States for poor Latina, African American, and Native American women" (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 217). Sterilization has a long history in the United States, especially when it comes to groups of women such as these. Women who have been incarcerated are seen as "unfit" mothers who are criminals and should not have children. Women who are incarcerated are also sometimes unknowingly sterilized as well. Within the movie, *No Mas Bebés*, tells the story of minority women who had no idea that they were sterilized. Our society thinks a "real woman" as someone who must have children. So, in order to dominate her body, the incarceration system gets rid of this option so that the ones that society thinks should reproduce can. All of this showing how once a woman deals with the incarceration system her body is sometimes permanently harmed, as well as showing how she has no control over her body.

The prison industrial complex stems from various roots of racism, sexism, patriarchal, and oppressive foundations. How can we fix this? The bigger issue that we would have to deal with is the foundations that the prison system is built on. The issues within the system are so engrained into it that it would have to get fully dismantled, remade, and reformed to a system that would actually help people instead of hurting them. The new reformed system should not be built with one body being the ideal or default, it should be inclusive to everyone and their personal needs because everyone is different. There would need to be more resources for people who need them, such as more accessible healthcare and free items such as personal products. Women do not need to be paying money for personal products, they must be provided to them and must be the number that they need. They should not have to ask and should not feel

powerless when it comes to their bodies. The power differences would also need to change and be more level, since sometimes prison officials can get on a power trip. Our prison system can make laws that incorporates the United Nations' Bangkok Rules. The United Nations' Bangkok Rules is a guideline regarding women in prison, their health, and rights. According to The United Nations' Bangkok Rules, it states that not providing proper women inmates with access to personal products constitutes, "...inhuman or degrading treatment" (Guidance Document 36). Not providing proper access violates a women's rights while incarcerated. Since there are no exact laws that back this up because these are just guidelines, they are not enforceable. However, maybe we can as voters and people can push government officials to make laws that would be helping women while incarcerated and adopt some of the topics brought up within the Bangkok rules. It is important to do this because women inside are harmed and it is not ethically right. This is the image that our country is putting out into the world and getting judged by. Incorporating the Bangkok rules is important so women inside are treated with equity. You may also advocate for reproductive justice instead of reproductive rights. Rights are more individualized, and justice is more looking at the bigger picture looking at structural changes that effect entire groups. Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, ACRJ, is a big advocate for the reproductive justice movement. Within "Reproductive Justice: Vision, Analysis, and Action for a Stronger Movement" states, "Repeatedly, economic, social, and institutional policies have severely affected women's choice to determine reproduction" (ACRJ 244). Here we see how important it is for us to be advocates for reproductive justice because it deals with these big structural issues and policies that effect a women's control over her health. If we spread the awareness of reproductive justice, and not only think about rights, we may bring the bigger picture to the forefront of the conversation.

On a smaller scale, schools and colleges could run a donation drive where personal products are collected and then donated to women's prisons to help make a difference. Open discussions to raise awareness to this issue is good, since sometimes people are not aware of the issues that are happening within our prison system. This is due to our society pushing inmates away and keeping them away from everyone else, making it easy to forget about them, therefore, not realizing all the wrongs within our prison system. Getting involved with organizations like, Women's Worth Inc., that helps bring accessible products to women in prison is also advantageous.

In conclusion, having knowledge and bringing awareness to this topic is important. Knowing about reproductive justice and its role that it plays to help fight these issues is also important. Personally, before reading this article I had no idea what reproductive justice was. I had only ever heard of reproductive rights. After reading it, justice made so much more sense since in our society we have so many issues at the structural level because that is what our society is built on. In order to make changes in our society a lot of it would need to be happening at the structural level to address those oppressive, racist, and sexist attitudes. So, it is important to make people aware of reproductive justice, especially when it comes to the reproductive healthcare of women in prison. I knew there were issues, but I had not known the true extent of how bad it really was and I'm sure a lot of people are not aware of this. These readings have furthered my knowledge on the reproductive healthcare of women in prison and what needs to be changed. Big changes are always hard, but they must be done so no one is further harmed than they already have been. Little changes such as providing personal products may seem like a small step for the population, but it will have a large impact on the individual's life.

Work Cited

- Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. "Reproductive Justice: Vision, analysis, and Action for a Stronger Movement." *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, edited by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 6th ed, McGraw-Hill, 2013, pp. 243-247.
- Atabay, Tomris. *Guidance Document on the United Nations Rules on the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (The Bangkok Rules)*. Penal Reform International (PRI), 2015.
- Burke, Sheila. "Nashville Prosecutors Require Sterilization as Part of Plea Deals." *BostonGlobe.com*, The Boston Globe, 29 Mar. 2015, www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2015/03/28/attorneys-say-sterilizations-were-part-plea-deal-talks/oArBniU59sFicImHpfqFUN/story.html?hootPostID=b61322f6537a63488008f94b54bd111e.
- "Healthy Woman." Healthy Woman, awomansworthinc.org/.
- Johnson, Allan G. "Patriarchy, the System." *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, edited by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 6th ed, McGraw-Hill, 2013, pp. 68-77.
- Kirk, Gwyn, and Okazawa-Rey, Margo. "Women's Bodies, Women's Health." *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, edited by Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 6th ed, McGraw-Hill, 2013, pp. 209-226.
- Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Little Brown & Co, 1994.
- Marusic, Kristina. "The Sickening Truth About What It's Like to Get Your Period in Prison." *Women's Health*, 9 Mar. 2019, www.womenshealthmag.com/life/a19997775/women-jail-periods/.
- Marquis, E. (2018). "Nothing Less Than the Dignity of Man": Women Prisoners, Reproductive Health, and Unequal Access to Justice Under the Eighth Amendment. 203-230. Retrieved May 7, 2019.
- Tajima-Pena, Renee, director. *No Mas Bebés*. 2015.
- Rafter, Nicole Hahn. *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons 1800-1935*. Northeastern Univ. Press, 1985.