

Lilith

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Jewish Women on Both Sides of the Prison Walls

In the mid-1970s, **Karen Ramos**, a divorced Jewish mother of two, was living in New York with a man she'd met working in the garment district. When he asked her to bring envelopes of his "textile samples" from home, she unsuspectingly complied. The envelopes, as it happened, contained cocaine, and the transaction was photographed. Under New York State's Rockefeller drug laws, these circumstances spelled a sentence of 15 years to life. Since then, the number of incarcerated women in New York State has increased by 500 percent, nearly double the rate for men, reflecting a trend nationwide. In November, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that the number of women in state and federal prisons is at an all-time high, with the incarceration rate for females increasing at nearly twice that of men. In a 1978 interview, Ramos told Lilith that she intended to devote her life to law reform. "I've seen the injustices," she said.



Tamar Kraft-Stolar

Many Jewish women have, like Karen Ramos, seen the injustices—although most of them, luckier than Karen, have observed them from the outside. As a result, growing numbers of Jewish women are committed to revamping the U.S. criminal justice system and changing society's perception of female convicts.

One of these activists is **Tamar Kraft-Stolar**, director of the Correctional Association of New York's Women in Prison Project. The daughter of parents she describes as "Jewish radical lawyers," she invests about 60 hours a week in her job, which includes monitoring conditions at women's

correctional facilities and coordinating an annual lobbying day in Albany.

"Many women are incarcerated for minor drug offenses," Kraft-Stolar notes, but also for other crimes such as property offenses. She says that perpetrators of such crimes are rarely a threat to public safety, and are well suited to counseling and treatment programs—consuming far fewer tax dollars than prisons. These, says Kraft-Stolar, "allow women offenders to serve their time while addressing the underlying problems that led to their behavior." Equally important, "They allow women to stay connected to their families and communities," while prisons are often located hundreds of miles away. Since 75 percent of women are mothers and their children's main caregivers, plucking them from their homes for minor infractions also means cruel and unusual punishment for thousands of kids.

Under the one-punishment-fits-all sentencing laws of former New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, judges cannot consider mitigating factors or even a defendant's role. This hurts women, who tend to have low-level roles such as drug-carrying "mules." Since one way to evade time is to provide information, drug lords sometimes manage to snitch their way to freedom, while underlings have few such bargaining chips.

Martha Stewart notwithstanding, most women in prison are from poor communities of color. **Phyllis Chesler**, author of *Women and Madness* and *Mothers on Trial* among other books, is a psychotherapist and an expert courtroom witness who has testified on behalf of women denied health care and otherwise mistreated in prison. "Through my involvement with the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements in the 1960s," Chesler says she saw "more African-Americans going to jail than seemed just." That trend has intensified.

Few Jewish women are behind bars; of the 2,821 women incarcerated in New York State, only 40 are Jewish. "Maybe the Jewish women are all in therapy," Chesler speculates. And she's not joking. Middle-class women address their problems with therapy or

treatment, while poor women without that recourse have more difficulty kicking a drug habit, and sometimes resort to other criminal behaviors to fund it. Furthermore, residents of poor neighborhoods with heavy police presence are more likely to be arrested on drug charges, while their counterparts in affluent areas engage in drug use and sale with few legal consequences.

Chesler also points to the role of domestic violence: "Prison is the ultimate punishment for staying in an abusive relationship," she says.

One Jewish woman—we'll call her **Sarah**—served time for killing her abusive husband. He had been obsessively jealous and increasingly violent. He bound and gagged her. He broke her arm. "Eventually, the crime... I don't really recall exactly what happened. I'd had an argument with my husband, and he forced me to take pills. He told me he would hit me if I didn't take them, so I took them. I certainly take responsibility, but I don't have an actual recollection of the event of him being shot." Sarah pleaded guilty to manslaughter in the first degree and received a sentence of three to 10 years. During the three years she served, she participated in the Jewish events—religious services and Bible study—held in the prison. Today Sarah works for an organization that helps survivors of domestic violence. "I don't want what happened to me to happen to other women."

The personal experience of violence at home led feminist playwright **Eve Ensler** to a similar conclusion. The acclaimed author of "The Vagina Monologues" and the new play "The Good Body," Ensler is another Jewish woman who has survived abuse. For the past six years, she has been teaching a writing class to violent female offenders at Bedford Hills prison for women in Westchester County, outside New York City. "What I've seen," she told Lilith, "is how much women in prison long to tell their stories." Her class was filmed for the PBS documentary "What I Want My Words To Do." "I would venture to say that 80 percent of the women have suffered violence," says Ensler, whose work on projects such as V-day focuses on ending violence against women.

But abuse, she notes, does not absolve women of accountability. "As one of the women said, 'Not everybody responds by killing people.' What I'm very moved by is how willing the women in my class are to take responsibility." A Jewish inmate in Ensler's class, **Judith Clark**, was in prison for activities with the Weather Underground. In the film, she discusses a Yom Kippur meditation "about why Judaism wouldn't be for the death penalty." It said "that as long as someone is alive, there is hope that they will change, and take responsibility. But if you take that away, you stop a process." Kraft-Stolar concurs. "Women incarcerated for violent offenses still deserve to be treated humanely. Having these women serve such long periods of time isn't in anyone's interest—not the community, not the victim's family, or the inmate, who languishes in prison even after she's shown remorse and completely changed her thinking."

As for the drug war, public opinion is turning against New York State's Rockefeller-era mandatory-sentencing laws, and many politicians favor some reform, although a deal has yet to materialize. The efforts of Kraft-Stolar and the Women in Prison Project have borne fruit in other legislative victories, including temporary-release eligibility for prisoners incarcerated for defending themselves against their abusers. The Women in Prison Project is now working on passage of another bill, co-sponsored by New York State Assemblywoman **Helene Weinstein**, which would make these women eligible for expanded merit time. In the words of Eve Ensler, "We need to create world where people are not frozen forever in one terrible mistake."



Eve Ensler