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Gendered Norms in Community-Based Engagement: Oral Histories of the Women of the Elsinore Bennu

Think Tank for Restorative Justice

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The state of the criminal justice system in the United States is one in need of repair. A local Pittsburgh group—the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice—challenges its members and the community to engage in restorative justice. The group comprises professors, returning citizens, police officers, and lawyers to initiate change through restorative justice in communities impacted by crime. Within the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice (EBTT), gendered norms are also evident. Questioning the meaning behind gendered narratives is crucial to understanding the overall experiences women face on a daily basis. Through my project, I discuss gendered norms through an oral history methodology. Importantly, using an oral history methodology allows for sharing the authentic experiences of narrators. Each oral history captures the role of gender, community-based engagement, and the intergenerational aspects of working within the larger community. The three women—Dr. Cathleen Appelt, Dr. Sarah Kuehn, and Dr. Cindy LaCom challenge traditional male dominated spaces through their involvement with the returning citizens and what society deems as typical mass incarceration narratives. Thus, each narrator’s experience with the returning citizens has a gendered component. The shared experiences within the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice pertaining to gender, their roles within the EBTT and working groups, and the intergenerational dynamics at play within the EBTT are evident in each narrator’s oral history.

Moreover, I used an oral history methodology, which involves a narrator and interviewer. As the interviewer, I asked questions about how gender affects the EBTT and Inside-Out classes and how the role of gender changes or challenges these traditionally male dominated spaces. In addition to my specific project questions, I also asked each narrator questions compiled from the class oral history project for the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice Oral History Project. The project’s goal using an oral history methodology was to document each narrator’s community engagement through their oral history as a measure for changing patriarchal norms and establishing justice. The significance of the project is an analysis of how restorative justice, the prison system, gender, mass incarceration, and the returning citizens all fit together to inform change.

Additionally, terminology, such as returning citizen and restorative justice are central to understanding the EBTT Oral History Project and my own continued project of the women in the EBTT. Returning citizens are men and women returning to society after a period of incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Restorative justice is defined as the process of healing broken relationships in communities harmed by crime, in which the victim, offender, and the community come together to resolve the harm done and discuss its implications for the future.<sup>2</sup> The EBTT is guided by these principles, and part of resolving harmful stereotypes involves a discussion of mass incarceration and its implications for communities, as well as how gender plays into these stereotypes.

Furthermore, it is important to understand mass incarceration from a broader perspective to put the three oral histories into context. According to Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, about a million Black men can be found in prisons and jails.<sup>3</sup> However, their “disappearing” is relatively silent on the media’s part.<sup>4</sup> In Alexander’s analysis, mass incarceration is a normalized societal practice, in addition to the War on Drugs, that many people do not see these problems, given the silence of the media.<sup>5</sup> In addition to Alexander’s analysis, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s article, “From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control” is crucial in contextualizing all three oral histories. Crenshaw highlights that there are many women incarcerated throughout the United States and that this

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<sup>1</sup> “What is a Returning Citizen?,” United Returning Citizens, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://unitedreturningcitizens.org/2020/09/10/what-is-a-returning-citizen/>.

<sup>2</sup> Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice Pamphlet, *Elsinore-Bennu—An Inside-Out Think Tank* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2020), 223.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 225.

disproportionately impacts women of color.<sup>6</sup> As I will discuss with each oral history, women are there, in the prison system and outside of it too in communities left behind, but the overall discussion on the impact of both incarcerated women and women in communities throughout the United States is largely left out. Many incarcerated women are domestic violence survivors; however, oftentimes self-defense, especially with women of color, is perceived as aggressive, in which the criminal justice system warrants arrest.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the implications of gender and mass incarceration for women both on the outside and inside have lasting societal impacts within the context of Dr. Appelt, Dr. Kuehn, and Dr. LaCom's oral histories.

Gendered norms weave a commonality through each narrator's experience. Dr. Cathleen Appelt, interviewed on November 13 and December 7, 2021, is a sociologist of health, health care, and aging at Duquesne University. Her involvement in the EBTT started in December 2019. As a sociologist and think tank member, Dr. Appelt highlighted the role of gender as it intersects with race and age. She is one of the Big Idea Team facilitators, an intergenerational working group of the EBTT, that formed during Covid-19. The Big Idea Team comprises Duquesne students, returning citizens, local professionals, and professors. Dr. Appelt pointed out gendered language that members use, in addition to the intersection of gender and societal norms when many of the returning citizens entered prison.<sup>8</sup> Many of the returning citizens are in their seventies. The four returning citizens in the Big Idea Team are all men. When these men went to prison, women held different roles in society. Women were more oriented to domesticity rather than out in the workforce. Societal norms for women changed and are still changing in the present. As a result of changed societal roles for women, the returning citizens interact with Dr. Appelt and other

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<sup>6</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control," *UCLA Law Review* 59, no. 6 (2012): 1436, <https://www.uclalawreview.org/pdf/59-6-1.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Crenshaw, "From Private Violence," 1455.

<sup>8</sup> Cathleen Appelt, interview by Kathleen Burch, November 13, 2021, interview 1, transcript, Duquesne University Oral History Initiative, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.

women in the group in a different way than in their time before incarceration. Dr. Appelt noted that gendered language encompasses phrases, such as ma'am and formal titles, such as Ms.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Dr. Appelt discussed the impact of incarceration on women and communities. As one of the male returning citizens noted in a Big Idea Team meeting, ““What happens to communities when all the men are gone?””<sup>10</sup> When all the men leave because of incarceration in communities, structural change occurs. The dynamics of the structural change harms communities in breaking down barriers and gender stereotypes. The intergenerational dynamics of the Big Idea Team are evident as well. More than one dichotomy exists—African American and white, formerly incarcerated versus non-incarcerated status, male versus female, and ages ranging from traditional college age students to people in their seventies.<sup>11</sup> The Big Idea Team dichotomies work within the group and highlight the need for intergenerational cohesion. Women also tend to organize and lead events, thus, assuming the more traditional role of women as organizers.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Dr. Appelt, Dr. Sarah Kuehn, interviewed on December 7, 2021, expressed gendered norms in her oral history interview. As a criminologist and Slippery Rock University professor, Dr. Kuehn also works as an Inside-Out instructor. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program brings together incarcerated students with campus-based students for semester long courses, where all the students work together to learn and discuss differences.<sup>13</sup> The dichotomies of the EBTT are also true in Inside-Out classes. Inside-Out classes involve two groups of students and an instructor. For Dr. Kuehn, her university students are mostly in their early twenties, white, female, and non-incarcerated, whereas the “inside”

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<sup>9</sup> Appelt, interview 1, November 13, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Big Idea Team Meeting, December 6, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Cathleen Appelt, interview by Kathleen Burch, December 7, 2021, interview 2, transcript, Duquesne University Oral History Initiative, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>12</sup> Appelt, interview 1, November 13, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> “About Us,” The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.insideoutcenter.org/about-inside-out.html>.

students are serving life sentences, many of the men are African American, and older than the students.<sup>14</sup> The contrast of “inside” versus “outside” students plays into trust and forming a safe space where all students can collectively discuss and learn.

As a woman, Dr. Kuehn noted that her physical presence is not as authoritative as a man’s physical stature.<sup>15</sup> She referred to one of her colleagues in the EBTT, Dr. Norman Conti, also an Inside-Out instructor, as much more commanding than herself as a woman.<sup>16</sup> The physicality of women versus men demonstrates the need, as Dr. Kuehn pointed out, of gaining trust among the incarcerated men.<sup>17</sup> In her role as an Inside-Out instructor, Dr. Kuehn discussed how she is not in these classes to be the “white savior,” instead she is there to cultivate a learning environment that contributes to the knowledge of the incarcerated men and her students.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Dr. Kuehn noted that the prison system itself is gendered, with more resources going to men’s prisons.<sup>19</sup> Men are viewed as the dominant prison population, even though incarcerated women exist too. While the percentage of incarcerated men is higher than incarcerated women, with 93.3 percent male and 6.7 female for the prison populace, women are incarcerated.<sup>20</sup> The stereotypes of mass incarceration align with the resources ultimately. Therefore, gender plays a much larger role in mass incarceration than within the scope of societal norms.

Additionally, Dr. Cindy LaCom, a Slippery Rock English professor and the Director of the Gender Studies Program, interviewed on December 4, 2021, discussed the fluidity of gender. The gender

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Kuehn, interview by Kathleen Burch, December 7, 2021, interview 1, transcript, Duquesne University Oral History Initiative, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>15</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> “Inmate Gender,” Federal Bureau of Prisons, accessed January 15, 2022, [https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics\\_inmate\\_gender.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_gender.jsp).

binary existed when many of the male returning citizens went to prison.<sup>21</sup> As returning citizens, the men experience gender constructs differently now. Gender is fluid. People use pronouns besides she/her and he/his. Gender fluidity is a major difference in society and one that the returning citizens experience within university settings. Dr. LaCom also discussed the “man up” concept and the harm language such as this brings upon communities.<sup>22</sup> “Manning up” is gendered. In this view, women do not hold the same role. As a follow-up to this issue, Dr. LaCom noted that gender stereotypes affect communities long before men become incarcerated.<sup>23</sup> Like Dr. Appelt and Dr. Kuehn, Dr. LaCom discussed the intersection of race, class, and gender. The dichotomies once again play out—in the prison system and in overall society. In relation to domestic abuse work, Dr. LaCom discussed the role of gender as well. Domestic abuse and violence relate to incarceration as many men end up in the system as a result of domestic violence.<sup>24</sup> The impact on the family is profound. Women lose men and men lose families.

In the narrator’s oral histories, all three women point to the fact that there are not any women returning citizens in the EBTT. Incarcerated women exist. Women returning to society from prison exist. Dr. Appelt discussed her work with women in the health field and stated that she most likely worked with at least one female returning citizen.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Kuehn discussed the ease of access to men’s prisons versus prisons for women.<sup>26</sup> Dr. LaCom discussed the silence of women returning citizens and the stigma attached to incarceration for women.<sup>27</sup> In all, no matter one’s gender, being a returning citizen is an ongoing process.

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<sup>21</sup> Cindy LaCom, interview by Kathleen Burch, December 4, 2021, interview 1, transcript, Duquesne University Oral History Initiative, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>22</sup> LaCom, interview 1, December 4, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> LaCom, interview 1, December 4, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> LaCom, interview 1, December 4, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Appelt, interview 1, November 13, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Kuehn, interview 1, December 7, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> LaCom, interview 1, December 4, 2021.



The state of the criminal justice system is in need of repair, as evidenced through the harmful stereotypes and mass incarceration that exist in society. Each oral history exemplifies a gendered component with the returning citizens and with societal narratives of mass incarceration. Dr. Appelt, Dr. Kuehn, and Dr. LaCom challenge traditional male dominated spaces through their work with the EBTT and in Inside-Out classes. Dr. Kuehn's work as an Inside-Out instructor helps to break down some of these harmful stereotypes. Using an oral history methodology also aids in breaking down stereotypes and this type of methodology is crucial for understanding the complexity of shared experiences. Dr. Appelt, Dr. Kuehn, and Dr. LaCom all share in several aspects of community-based engagement—working as women, working as professors, experiencing gendered norms, and sharing in their desire to change the narrative of returning citizens in a positive way. Similar to gendered norms, stereotypes surrounding mass incarceration, and thus, returning citizens, is prevalent. Systemic change needs to occur at the local, state, and federal levels. Mass incarceration is not the answer, just as stereotypes about gender roles in society and harmful stereotypes about returning citizens are not either.

Further research is needed to analyze women returning citizens' roles in reentry organizations, as both workers in these types of organizations and as returning citizens. As an oral historian, adding to the narrative of gendered mass incarceration is important to discuss, as resources and debunking stereotypes all play into the outcomes. Oral history methodology allows for each one of the narrators discussed to share their authentic experiences of womanhood in work, volunteer work, and in interactions with the EBTT and returning citizens. In each of the oral histories, all three narrators discussed how they challenged patriarchal norms and traditionally male dominated spaces through their work with the EBTT, Inside-Out classes, and as professors engaging in a community-based organization.

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