INCARCERATED WOMAN TAKES A STAND AGAINST RECIDIVISM AND PLEADS FOR HELP

*By Jamila T Davis*



More women are entering the United States Prison System than any other country in the world! According to the Sentencing Project's September 12, 2012 Fact Sheet, the number of incarcerated women in prison in the U.S. increased by 646% between 1980 and 2010, rising from 15,118 to 112,797.1. According to this report, more than 205,000 women are now incarcerated in our nation, including in local jails.

One of the most concerning issues about the alarming rates of incarcerated women in the U.S. is that most of these women are mothers. What will happen to the future of the children of these women? How will they manage to survive with the absence of their mothers?

The biggest misconception about this unique population of women is their make-up. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of these women are not armed-robbers, rapist, murderers or violent offenders that are a threat to society, they are non-violent drug offenders. Although many of these women have victimized others through their crimes, most of them are also victims. Studies show 57.2 percent of females report abuse before admission to state prison versus 16.1 percent of males. Additionally, 6 in 10 women in state prison had experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past. (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, published December 1999).

Law makers and criminal justice advocates have spent many years collecting data and researching the cause behind the dramatically increasing female incarcerated population. There are still many unanswered questions: Why are so many women committing crimes? And, after these women are released from prison, why are so many returning?

The truth is most women offenders have unique needs that must be addressed, yet the rehabilitation efforts for both male and female offenders are typically treated as one in the same. Too frightened to expose their own vulnerability, very few women actually address their past issues that led to their imprisonment. Instead, life's adversities and their own low-self esteem often keep them bound. As a result, they remain stagnant- a prisoner both emotionally and physically. How do I know? I am one of these women! I am a prisoner.

On July 16, 2008, I was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in federal prison for bank fraud. I was convicted of being the 25 year old mastermind who devised an elaborate mortgage fraud scheme to victimize the now defunct Lehman Brothers Bank. In my case, time wasn't on my side. Just 59 days after I was sentenced as a mastermind and Lehman's victimizer, Lehman collapsed and was exposed for its nationwide fraudulent lending practices which ultimately caused the company's demise and plummeted the 2008 worldwide Credit Crisis which nearly destroyed the American economy.

At the age of 31 years old, I was sent to prison to serve a lengthy sentence, and I was forced to leave my two small children behind. As the prison bars shut behind me, I had no clue how I would manage. I would often close my eyes tightly, wishing I would just die. That didn't work, so I had no choice but to find a way to cope.

Prison life for me was a drastic change. From my three-level luxury condo to a 5 1/2 x 9 prison cubicle, I was forced to adjust. I was accustomed to secured living behind the gates of my gated community, but that was no comparison to the barbed-wired fences and the armed guards that surrounded my new home - the Danbury Federal Correctional Institution for women, in Connecticut. At first glance, the women I was surrounded by were very different. Many of them did not share my background, nor have the prestige I experienced as a lead go-to-person in the Hip-Hop Music Industry and multimillionaire. Yet, as time went by I discovered, for the most part, we were one in the same.

We were women who were plagued by the thorn of materialism and low self-esteem. Our lives became a chase, seeking inner fulfillment. We chased acceptance, notoriety and the esteem of our peers. We utilized material possessions and the esteem of others to define our self-worth. Caught up in the chase, people, places and things became our idols. Many of us abused drugs and alcohol and they also became our gods. Seeking to repress our inner void we were willing to do whatever it took.

Desperate, we sought after peace and happiness, yet we chose the wrong avenue to obtain them. Many of us were told from a young age that we would never amount to anything and we would end up in jail, these prophetic daggers ignited and became our reality. Others were robbed of their childhood and innocence. Confused on how to obtain emotional healing, we vigorously chased false idols, believing our fulfillment lied within them. Consequently, our new homes are behind the prison walls.

As a whole, we aren't bad people and our lives are no different from many others in society who just haven't got caught. We are women who have experienced trying times in life and made bad choices which have altered our futures. Do we deserve to be thrown away or forgotten? You be the judge!

During my imprisonment I noticed a vicious cycle of women being housed and released, only to return again. I found that there was a lack of programs and resources that fostered true rehabilitation. I desperately wanted to correct my character defects that led to my imprisonment, so I decided to begin a new chase. This time I wisely chased after inner healing and restoration. The first dilemma I encountered was genuinely accepting responsibility for my own actions. For me is was easy to blame the crooked bank who reported me as their victim to cover up their own in-house fraud. My ideology was that there should have never been a loss in my case, because the bank's attorney, Jeffrey Greenbaum, colluded to sell the properties to a vested investor in the bank for a 14 million dollar discount, rather than accepting available full price purchase offers. It was hard for me to come to grips with my 12 1/2 year prison sentence based significantly on the fictitious loss created by the bank representatives who profited from the sale of the properties.

Therefore, I toiled for many nights in denial of my own unethical behavior. After studying the Bible for numerous hours and reading every self-help book I could get my hands on, I gained a new perspective. I realized that my fate was based on my own poor choice to take part in what I knew was unethical behavior, whether I intended to cause anyone harm or not, my choice to participate made me guilty.

I also discovered that I didn't love myself enough. Caught up in the chase, I failed to care for "self," tap into my potential and discover the beauty of my own inner being. I was too worried about what was happening on the outside, so I neglected to go within. My crisis actually turned out to be a wake-up call and a plea from Heaven to change my way of thinking. This time-out gave me the opportunity to work on my greatest asset- myself.

I learned the hard way that all shortcuts come with consequences, whether immediate or in the future. I now teach others, you can not cheat the system and expect to get away with it. In a dark place in my life, I discovered my purpose and my ability to write. As I removed the mask of deception that I once hid behind to cover my own vulnerabilities and insecurities, I began to heal and I become spiritually free. I quickly learned that the women around me could also benefit from my findings. Therefore, with the help of family members and friends, I created a nondenominational, faith-based, three book series for incarcerated women, entitled the Voices of Consequences Enrichment Series. My books empower women to heal, recognize their potential and recapture their dreams.

Through my books, I help women pinpoint the character flaws that have caused them to remain stagnated. Through real-life examples that imprisoned women can identify with, I help my readers view their lives and crimes from a different perspective. I speak to women in a candid voice that they can recognize and understand. I provide words of encouragement, and include testimonies of other women who overcame incarceration and excelled in life. These stories stir the hearts of women and inspire them to pursue their dreams.

Unlike many of the teaching tools geared to incarcerated individuals, I don't speak down to my readers. I speak face-to-face to them, for we are the same, exposing the truth of our dilemmas. Through my approach, I have discovered as women change their thinking patterns, they are able to change their lives.

In conjunction with my book series, I also created a workbook/journal for each book in the series to assist women in their healing process. I discovered by writing down their answers and journaling, women are able to easily pinpoint their areas of weakness and are able to track their progress. After completing the workbook/journal I thought my mission was complete, but it was difficult to have outsiders implement group sessions without my presence. Therefore, I created a Curriculum Guide that includes detailed lesson plans and handouts. This guide enables group sessions to be set-up anywhere, administered by proctors who need no special training.

As a novice writer and a prisoner I had many handicaps to overcome. I knew God was using me as a voice, but I had no idea of the ultimate results of my work. I have had no greater professional or personal accomplishment than receiving letters from women prisoners around the country about the effects my books have had on their lives. Instead of chasing money and notoriety, my new passion has become transforming lives. These women's testimonies bring healing to my soul and make me realize there is purpose in my pain.

More importantly, the effect my books have had on the lives of imprisoned women demonstrate that there is a solution to combat recidivism amongst our population. We are not garbage that can not be fixed. We are humans who can benefit from the compassion of others.

Although I am a prisoner, I realize I can still make a difference. It is my goal to have my books placed in prison facilities around the world that house women. My writings are my love letters to women in need. I know how it feels to be lonely and abandoned, so I can easily relate to my audience. Through my books women are able to see that someone just like them cares, and they too can make a difference despite their current circumstances. First hand I've learned, love and compassion have the ability to pierce the heart and cause significant change.

Therefore, I urge criminal justice practitioners, Judges, Congressional figures and our nation's leaders to lend incarcerated women in our nation a helping hand. Your love, concern and compassion can make a difference and break barriers of bondage. We need you! Please don't view us as a number or just another statistic. We are women of various cultures, creeds, backgrounds and social classes, varying in age. We have numerous skill sets and talents that can be beneficial to others. We are mothers, daughters, lovers and friends of productive members of society, who suffer because of our absence. Please don't forget we are HUMANS, who made some mistakes.

Please examine the policies that govern our nation's criminal justice system and create viable sentencing alternatives for women that address our unique needs. Don't just throw us in the cages of prison, hoping long periods of incarceration will address our issues. Lengthy sentences for nonviolent offenders don't just hurt us and our loved ones, they cost tax payers substantial dollars.

Therefore, I beg you to create alternatives that allow us to pay our way forward and that benefit society as a whole. Most importantly, please give us the adequate guidance and resources to become a greater "self." We can change. I did!

Jamila T. Davis, author of the Voices of Consequences Enrichment Series, is a self-help expert, motivational speaker and a women's prison reform activist, who is currently a federal inmate. At age 25, she was a multimillionaire, high-flying real estate investor with ties to the hip-hop world. At age 31, she was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in federal prison for her role in a multimillion-dollar bank fraud scheme. While imprisoned, Davis has helped to change the lives of many through her inspirational books and cautionary tales, based on her real-life experiences. For more information about Jamila T. Davis and to check out her latest memoir The High Price I Had To Pay visit [http://www.voicesbooks.com](http://www.voicesbooks.com/) or [http://www.Facebook.com/authorJamilaTDavis](http://www.facebook.com/authorJamilaTDavis)