

# Abolition is a Feminist Project

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## an Invitation to Iowa City

This paper is an invitation to deepen both abolition and feminism in Iowa City. Our town is a site of ethical struggle as institutions (police, hospitals, schools, courts) often, and despite individuals' best intentions, enact violence. We frequently find ourselves in competition over public resources, rather than working together.

The founders of INCITE propose that feminists concerned with abolition seek a society based on three principles: freedom, accountability, and reciprocity (2002 INCITE! Critical Resistance Statement). Most feminist researchers and advocates embrace these principles, cultivating an ethic of care that extends beyond family and kin to include the environment, local communities, economic and social relations. If 'abolition' evokes an act of dismantling structures, as a project it has always focused on building community accountability, possibility, and justice.

Feminism is a deeply familiar term. Amidst impassioned debates over its meaning, this word continues to describe a collection of beliefs and social movements organized toward sex and gender equity and justice. Abolition has long been a feminist goal, and feminists continue to contribute to and benefit from abolition as we work towards economic, political, cultural, reproductive, religious and social freedoms. Most feminists undertake this work by understanding gender as intertwined with race, class, sexuality, and colonialism. Indigenous feminists who focus on tribal sovereignty and violence against Indigenous women understand this trauma to be a colonial legacy. Many of us continue to grapple with the problem of white women's interests taking precedence – lack of support or understanding of abolition among many white feminists is a case in point.

Below, we offer information about gender and institutional violence (focusing on prisons, schools, reproductive justice and domestic violence). We also offer research-based and evidence-tested practices, which we invite city council members to consider tailoring to fit Iowa City as we strive to create a town that is safer for all who live and work here.

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## Prisons are a feminist issue.

The United States currently imprisons over 2.1 million people. In 1972 that number was only 200,000. Our jails have neither money nor staff to support the people they confine. *Research shows that, as prisons have become a for-profit industry, they increasingly contribute to the very cycles of crime they purport to prevent.*

Even as crime rates have declined, our country now has the distinction of the highest rates of incarceration in the world (Rhodes 2001). Incarcerated people are held in unsafe, degrading conditions and denied access to healthcare; they participate in a coercive work system that relies on unfree labor to produce everyday products for both government entities and private companies. In 2018, about 200 prisoners helped fight deadly California wildfires, earning \$1.45 a day (Fathi 2018). Once incarcerated, most people die a social death, never able to rejoin their communities or shed the experience of incarceration. Prisons create and reinforce social inequality that is cumulative, diffuse and intergenerational. Their impacts are often compounded by the purposeful isolation of prison facilities, which makes it difficult to bear witness to ongoing sexual violence and other cruelty behind bars. People held in these prisons are made invisible and are robbed of communication, custody, visits or therapy that could keep families intact. When released from prison, people are rarely helped in meaningful ways. Instead, they struggle to find work that pays a living wage, to reconnect with former support networks, to access psychological and physical health care, or to address the trauma caused by confinement. They are often plagued by restitution, ongoing penalties, and rules related to parole that set up impossible and contradictory demands.

While men make up 90% of the prison population, women are the fastest growing segment of incarcerated people (Davis and Shaylor 2001)<sup>π</sup>. Many are the primary caregiver for one or more children. Tragically, the children left behind are far more likely to encounter difficulty in academic work, socializing with peers, and they are at risk for future incarceration. Once incarcerated, women are subject to higher rates of pre-term birth, harsher disciplinary punishments, higher rates of abuse, and a loss of control over their reproductive health. There is increasing attention to the forms of gendered and racialized violence associated with prisons, yet little attention to gender inequity in sentencing. Women often spend more time in jails because their incomes are lower on average, such that making bail is a bigger hurdle. Women languishing in jail often experience high levels of psychological distress, as underlying mental health issues are often exacerbated by separation, deprivation and confinement. Many women behind bars were victims of prolonged sexual and physical trauma prior to incarceration, then face more gender-based violence inside the prisons. These issues are further exacerbated for LGBTQ\* people. While approximately 10% of incarcerated men fall under this umbrella, nearly one third of incarcerated women identify as one or more of these categories. They receive longer sentences and are subject to higher rates of abuse and assault by both staff and

other inmates. Transgender people held in prisons and jails are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than their cis-gender peers.

It is a fact that people of color, especially people who identify as Black, Indigenous and/or LatinX are incarcerated at much higher rates in the United States than people who identify as White. The impact of incarceration on individuals and communities extends long after people have been released. Inside prisons, many lack access to education, healthcare, and reliable social support. Prisons and jails tax the environment by generating high levels of sewage, industrial, medical and physical waste. Real estate depreciates in 'prison towns' and the only new jobs created are tied to work within the prison. These low-wage jobs pose physical and psychological dangers to those who are employed. Prison growth impacts local school systems and economic ecosystems of small towns where prisons are often built. Feminist abolition understands the interlocking negative impacts of over-policing and prison economies, and seeks healthier, more sustainable social support systems that improve life for all residents in towns like our own.

The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is a system in which putting people behind bars becomes a means to generate revenue, increasingly for the private companies who build and operate prisons, provide contracted services to prisons and benefit from a pool of unfree workers subject to super-exploitation (Davis and Shaylor 2001). The United States is the global leader in prisons and, through the War on Drugs, actively promoted prison expansion across the world (Reynolds 2008). Multinational prison corporations such as Corrections Corporation of America have fueled this expansion with its aggressive strategy of pursuing foreign markets (Sudbury 2005).

## **Abolition affirms all school children's worth and potential.**

Two-thirds of American high schools employ armed police officers (Lindsay, Lee, & Lloyd 2018). Black girls are suspended at a rate that is 6x higher than their white female peers. Darker skinned Black girls are suspended 3x more frequently than peers with lighter skin (Love 2019). Often labeled disruptive and defiant, Black girls are seen as women, never girls, in what researchers refer to as age compression, and its consequences cause material harm to their young bodies (Morris 2016). For example, in 2015, a viral video circulated revealing a school police officer in South Carolina forcibly removing a student from her desk after she did not turn in her cell phone. The police officer put her in a headlock, flipped the desk over, and ultimately arrested her for refusing to leave the classroom (Associated Press 2016). This is not an isolated incident. Black girls, as young as six and seven years of age, are routinely criminalized as a result of punitive school discipline policies for behaviors that would not make their white peers subject to police brutality. In a stunning recent example, a 15-year-old Black girl in a predominantly white high school in

Michigan was incarcerated in May 2020 for, supposedly, violating her probation. The violation in question: she did not complete her homework after the transition to online education in the midst of a global pandemic (Cohen, 2020). Native students are subjected to violence in ways reminiscent of the Indian boarding schools. Teachers and administrators cut off the braids of Indigenous boys—as punishment, as a requirement for graduation, or to force conformity with white practices. All students of color experience similar acts of aggression carried out by school teachers and administrators.

What happens when our students belong to multiple communities that are subject to discrimination, harassment, and violence? Abolitionist feminism compels us to consider the school reality of Black girls who are part of the LGBTQ community, who are Muslim, immigrants, disabled, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated (Love 2019). Schools are a reflection of society and cannot on their own act as a cure-all for society's ills. Abolitionists in education call for the dismantling of discipline policies and pedagogies that continue to inflict trauma on Black and Brown students and prevent the learning, growth and development that are the aims of education. Abolitionist work in education is replacing standardized testing in favor of culturally and historically responsive frameworks for learning (Muhammad, 2019). Abolitionists and feminists are developing curricula built on anti-racist pedagogies (Baker-Bell, 2019; Simmons, 2020). And abolitionists are eradicating discipline policies such as isolation rooms, dress and hair expectations centered in whiteness, and armed police officers that extend the violence of a police state.

## **Abolition promotes reproductive justice.**

Incarceration is a weapon of reproductive violence. In the United States, pregnancy is increasingly subject to surveillance and criminalization. In recent years, pregnant women have been arrested and detained for falling down a flight of stairs, seeking medical assistance for miscarriage, disclosing addiction, birthing at home, and attempting suicide (Fixmer-Oraiz 2019; Paltrow and Flavin 2013). These human rights violations are deeply gendered and unevenly distributed: women of color, immigrant women, and women living in poverty are disproportionately targeted by state violence and punishment while pregnant.

There is a profound dearth of data on pregnancy in prison. The most recent comprehensive study included 57% of the women currently incarcerated in the United States—it found that 3.8% of incoming female prisoners were pregnant and that there were 753 live births, 46 miscarriages, four stillbirths and 11 abortions among female prisoners in a single year (Sufrin 2019). Moreover, the authors of this study note: “three quarters of incarcerated women are of childbearing age (between 18 and 44 years). Two thirds are mothers and the primary caregivers to young children, and up to 84% have been pregnant in the past” (Sufrin et al 2019).

While in detention, pregnant people are subject to unique forms of harm directly tied to their pregnancy status—threatened with violence, denied access to prenatal care, shackled during birth, and deprived of postpartum contact with their baby and appropriate health care. Most babies born to incarcerated mothers are separated within 24 hours and many enter state custody. Due to federal laws that govern parental rights for children in foster care, a 15-month sentence can result in termination of parental rights and thus lifelong family separation (Clarke and Simon, 2013). Foster care perpetuates and extends the reproductive violence of the criminal justice system—the current child welfare system is widely recognized by scholars of race and gender as “a state-run program that disrupts, restructures, and polices Black families” (Roberts 2002; see also Briggs 2020). Black children are overrepresented in foster care; they are also “moved more often, receive fewer services, and are less likely to be either returned home or adopted than other children” (Roberts, 2002). Taken in concert with other forms of state surveillance from racial profiling to juvenile detention and prisons, foster care may be the first of many devastating encounters BIPOC children have with state policing and punishment.

Recent immigration practices and policies reflect similar forms of racism and reproductive violence. Pregnant minors seeking asylum have been detained by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and subsequently denied access to abortion care, as ORR sends pregnant minors to anti-abortion Christian counseling centers in lieu of comprehensive reproductive health care clinics. Family separation at the US-Mexico border by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a devastating example of how incarceration, reproductive regulation, and the destruction of familial bonds intersect. Indeed, the Trump administration’s family separation policy was deliberately designed to punish mothers, to deter them from attempting to seek refuge in the United States, by weaponizing pregnancy and parenting itself (Briggs 2020; Fixmer-Oraiz 2019). To this day, in an egregious display of governmental incompetence and cruelty, children remain separated from their parents while the state claims it is unable to locate migrant children transferred into the foster care system.

In addition to reproductive surveillance, abuse, and the destruction of families, reports of forced or coerced sterilization in the criminal justice system have surfaced in Tennessee and California (Jolly 2020; Khan, 2017). With deep ties to eugenics, forced or coerced sterilization is the ultimate denial of reproductive self-determination.

Abolition is a matter of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice includes the right to have a child, to not have a child, and to parent the child(ren) one has in safety and dignity (Ross and Solinger, 2017). Abolition necessitates a robust social safety net, wherein housing, education, health care, living wages, employment opportunities, clean air and water are simply available to all. The capacity to parent in dignity and safety requires these conditions, and abolition demands them of us.

# Abolition reduces and prevents domestic violence.

Laws designed to prevent and address domestic violence are a major achievement of American feminist advocacy, but feminist research has identified their limitations. Not only have alarming rates of battering continued, but many women for whom 'home' is a dangerous place opt not to use available laws. Why? First, the law privileges male perspectives in defining assault as physical – visible bruises and injuries as proof – with (often male) judges frequently minimizing or excusing domestic violence against women. Second, while American law assumes an adversarial relationship between victim (assumed to be passive) and perpetrator – two people with diametrically opposed interests – women often say they wish to stop the abuse but maintain the relationship. The adversarial assumption maintains an impossible standard: women who express sympathy for their abuser are deemed unworthy of legal help, while those who fight back lose their status as victims who can claim abuse. Third, American society relies on criminalization as the main solution to social problems, and yet, domestic violence often occurs in relationships that involve love, dependency and ambivalence (Goldfarb 2011, 2016).

Policing and criminalization are not effective solutions to the widespread problem of domestic violence. Too many women do not report abuse because they would find it difficult to leave a partner, because they worry about fanning racist stereotypes of their communities, because they fear deportation or embroiling their partner in a criminal justice system that will further harm their families.

Gender violence occurs throughout the world, in different forms using different weapons. Criminalizing and incarcerating perpetrators is one among many possible responses to this problem. We have other options. Community-based methods of preventing and stopping gendered violence have existed, continue to exist, and are being invented across the world. Women in different times and places have taken collective action to hold abusers accountable. In Nigeria, for example, 'sitting on a man' was a practice whereby Igbo women gathered around the home of a known abuser as a form of redress (Van Allen 1972). In India, 'encircling' a person, home, factory or office has long been a popular form of protest. Women, acting collectively, have also used this tactic to shame an abuser into changing their behavior. British colonial officials in both Nigeria and India suppressed 'traditional practices' such as these and replaced them with modern, masculine institutions of policing, courts, and prisons in order to 'save' native women. When these western, colonial institutions fail to deliver justice, many colonized people revive or reinvent older practices in an effort to solve social problems. In North America, tribal governments have used traditional values in creating alternative approaches to confronting batterers of Native women.

Our point is that shifting community responsibility for women's safety to militarized police forces is neither a natural nor effective solution. Feminist abolition has outlined a number of approaches to the problem of domestic violence that are viable for Iowa City, including civil justice and community-based approaches as well as increasing social workers' roles in public health and safety.

## An invitation

Feminist abolition offers concrete, viable approaches to the problems of reproductive injustice, domestic violence, and sexed and gendered violence in schools and at the hands of the police. Many towns and cities work with these, adapting them to fit their communities' needs, histories and stories.

We appreciate each of you and are grateful to live in a town where city council members care for and about our community! As white and women of color feminist researchers at the University of Iowa and as residents of Iowa City, we invite you to relinquish any notion that our current system of criminalization/policing/prisons is a natural, effective or necessary solution to social problems – including gender inequity, sexism and heterosexism. The challenges this system presents us with, however, are ones many towns are solving. Let us work together to create a more just, inclusive and vital community where all residents flourish.

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July 22, 2020

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