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## FEMINIST PRISON ABOLITIONISM

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### Introduction

Prison abolitionism is theory, movement and practice that argues that prisons are fundamentally destructive institutions that undermine safety, fail to deter harmful behaviour and reproduce oppression, exploitation and violence. This chapter examines some key abolitionist perspectives, demonstrating abolition's contribution to feminist criminologies, as well as drawing out key tensions between abolition and some feminist tendencies. The first section outlines what prison abolition is and key pragmatic reasons for abolition. The second section demonstrates the overlapping political goals of prison abolitionism and intersectional feminism, in particular examining the role prisons play in reproducing inequality and violence. The tensions between abolitionism and “carceral” forms of feminism are examined in the third section, with a focus on responses to violence against women and sexual violence in particular.

### What is prison abolition?

Like feminism, prison abolitionism has multiple tendencies, with contested meanings that have changed over time. Indeed, for almost as long as there have been prisons, there have been abolitionists (Knopp et al. 1976). When prisons were first introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand, there is evidence of strong Māori resistance to imprisonment as a method for dealing with harm (Roper et al. 1989). Although these hapū and iwi (social, political and genealogical units) were unlikely to have used the word “abolitionist” to describe their politics, their resistance demonstrates the incompatibility of the idea of imprisonment with tikanga Māori – that is, Māori laws, rules or customs (Lamusse and McIntosh 2020).

Prison abolitionism in the twentieth century can be traced back to the formation of KRUM (a Swedish acronym for the National Swedish Association for Penal

Reform) in Sweden in 1966, and the publication of Thomas Mathiesen's (1974) *Politics of Abolition*. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the abolitionist group Movement Against Prisons (MAP) NZ formed in the early 1970s and continued until the late 2000s to advocate for abolition and, later, reform of prisons. However, contemporary prison abolitionism is arguably most influenced by the work of the Black Marxist feminist Angela Davis, particularly her book *Are prisons obsolete?* (Davis 2003). The influence of Davis is felt beyond the United States and is explicitly acknowledged as key to the formation of the prison abolitionist organisation People Against Prisons Aotearoa (Lamusse 2020). Davis also speaks at every biannual conference in Australia of the feminist prison abolitionist organisation Sisters Inside.

Although its meaning is contested by abolitionist scholars and activists, prison abolitionism can generally be taken to mean the moral, political and criminological project that seeks the end of prisons. For some, abolition simply means the end of prisons as the main form of punishment, while, for others, abolition involves the creation of an entirely different society in which prisons are impossible to imagine (Davis 2003, 2014). Indeed, for these abolitionists, abolition is about more than getting rid of prisons. Prisons are a tool for the reproduction of colonisation, capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression, but those forms of oppression are not limited to imprisonment. From this perspective, abolitionism "is based on economic and social justice for all, concern for all victims, and reconciliation within a caring community" (Knopp et al. 1976, p. 7). With this in mind, abolition is a long-term strategy to not only close down prisons but also create social and economic conditions that encourage empowerment, healing and reciprocity.

Prison abolitionism can be contrasted with prison reformism. While both abolitionists and reformers see prisons as flawed and often violent institutions, reformers argue that they can be improved to become more humane, rehabilitative or effective. On the other hand, abolitionists argue that prisons are fundamentally inhumane and violent institutions that reproduce suffering and oppression. In other words, prison reformers seek to improve prisons, while abolitionists aim to end them.

Understanding this distinction between reformism and abolitionism leads us to ask why abolitionists argue that prisons are fundamentally flawed? Lamusse and McIntosh (2020) argue there are "pragmatic," criminological arguments for abolition, as well as moral and political ones. The rest of this section discusses the pragmatic reasons for abolition, while the next section discusses the moral and political reasons.

The pragmatic reasoning for abolition assesses prisons according to the standards of their supposed purposes of rehabilitation, safety, deterrence, and justice for victims. Abolitionists argue that imprisonment not only fails to achieve each of these purposes, but also ultimately entrenches inequality, oppression and violence.

## **Rehabilitation**

First, given the priority that imprisonment holds within our justice system, the public can legitimately hope that time spent in prison could be used to improve

people's lives. For people struggling with addiction, lack of education, poor health or unemployment, prison programmes could be seen to offer people the help they need. However, studies of in-prison rehabilitation programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad have consistently shown that community-based rehabilitation is substantially more effective (Anderson et al. 2018). Where rehabilitation aims to reduce the use of violence as a response to problems, Aotearoa New Zealand health researchers argue "prison culture is recognised as encouraging prisoners to adapt in ways that are more harmful than helpful (i.e. maladaptations) such as hyper-vigilance, paranoia, and aggression" (National Health Committee 2010, p. 32). For people who need mental health or substance disorder therapy, prisons are "non-therapeutic environments. They exacerbate prisoners' existing health problems and can introduce new health problems" (National Health Committee 2010, p. 4). Finally, the process of institutionalisation or prisonisation, where people become so adjusted to life in prison that they cannot adapt to life outside prison, means (re)habilitation can be undone with the chaos and uncertainty of release. Even when people receive effective treatment and habilitation in prison, the compounded pressures post-release of high rates of unemployment, homelessness and social isolation can undermine this (Johnston 2016).

### ***Deterrence***

Second, abolitionists argue that the idea that prisons deter harmful behaviour is a myth. Deterrence theory assumes that a person will be deterred from criminalised activity if they (1) know the action is criminalised, (2) believe there is a high likelihood they will be caught, (3) are certain they will be punished, (4) are aware of the punishment and believe that the cost would outweigh the benefit of the criminalised action, and (5) are able to change their action in light of this (see JustSpeak 2014). However, in practice, this theory breaks down for several reasons. It assumes a substantial degree of "rationality" and "forethought" that is not necessarily present when someone engages in criminalised activity. Further, very few instances of criminalised behaviour ever come into contact with the official criminal justice system. The New Zealand Ministry of Justice's 2018 crime victims survey, for example, found that there were an estimated 1,777,000 instances of victimisation in the 12-month reporting period. Of those victimisations, only 23 per cent were reported to the police. In other words, only a small proportion of incidents came to the attention of authorities, substantially limiting the ability of the state to punish and deter. Moreover, even if every victimisation led to punishment, an actual experience of imprisonment fails to deter future criminalised activity (Anderson et al. 2018). Of the approximately 7,000 people sentenced to imprisonment each year in Aotearoa New Zealand (Shannon 2019), 43.2 per cent of people released from prison are reimprisoned within two years (Department of Corrections 2018). Abolitionists, therefore, argue that prisons fail to deter criminalised behaviour.

### ***Safety***

Linked to the issue of deterrence is a third reason for abolition: that prisons fail to keep people safe. Indeed, as noted above, abolitionists contend that police and prison intervention only occurs in a small subset of instances of harmful behaviour (Knopp et al. 1976). This means that even if prisons were an effective means for keeping people safe, they would only ensure safety from a small proportion of harmful incidents. Some may argue, however, that prisons provide safety through *containment*, meaning putting people in prison prevents them from harming others, at least while they are in prison. In response to this, abolitionists note that prisons can be violent places, where cycles of violence can be reproduced and intensified. As more than 99 per cent of imprisoned people are eventually released (Lamusse 2017), it is important to address the effects of that maladaptive environment on people coming out of prison (Roper et al. 1989; National Health Committee 2010). Consequently, abolitionists reason that while prison temporarily contains a small number of people, it eventually releases them into society where they are more likely to hurt others.

### ***Justice for victims***

Abolitionists also argue that the criminal justice system fundamentally fails victims. Criminal justice processes are not led by the needs of victims but are conducted according to justice traditions handed down by the colonial legal system. Victims are often, at best, “witnesses” to the process. Their victimisation is a tool used by prosecutors to achieve a guilty verdict. As Fay Honey Knopp argues, not “only is the victim the forgotten person in the process, but in cases involving sexual victimization, the victim is usually the one who is blamed, who is on trial, and who must prove that victimization has occurred” (1994, p. 204). In this adversarial system, victims often feel “unheard, misunderstood and re-victimised” (Te Uepū Hāpai i te Ora 2019, p. 14).

### **Why is prison abolition a feminist issue?**

In addition to pragmatic reasons for abolition, abolitionists also offer reasons for the political necessity of abolition (Lamusse and McIntosh 2020), following Angela Davis’s definition of intersectionality as not “so much intersectionality of identities, but intersectionality of struggles” (2016, p. 144). Intersectional feminism is here taken to mean the political project for the liberation of oppressed and exploited people, highlighting the interconnections and enmeshment of structures such as heteropatriarchy, capitalism, racism and settler colonisation.

### ***Abolition as an intersectional struggle***

In the context of colonised Aotearoa New Zealand, understanding the role prisons play in reproducing settler colonialism is crucial for intersectional feminism. Māori

prison abolitionist scholars and activists note that Māori did not have prisons prior to colonisation (Jackson 2017; Kopeke-Te Aho et al. 2017). Instead, various *iwi*, *hapū* and *whānau* (family or extended family) had *tikanga* to respond to harmful behaviour. Moana Jackson (1988, 2017) argues that the principles of *tikanga* Māori, seeking to restore balance where harm has occurred, are incompatible with the colonially imposed prison system, which isolates individuals and undermines the process of restoration. Indeed, a recent Māori-led review of the criminal justice system found that the justice system is a colonial imposition that is creating extremely negative outcomes for Māori and, in order to respond to the crisis of the justice system, prison abolition and decolonisation of the justice system are required (Te Ohu Whakatika 2019).

Abolitionists argue that prisons are a tool for the reproduction of colonisation by disempowering and impoverishing Māori communities through mass imprisonment. The statistics on this are stark, with Māori making up just 15 per cent of the general population of Aotearoa New Zealand and over 50 per cent of the prison population. For imprisoned Māori women, this discrepancy is even greater (McIntosh 2013). However, this is not stated to reinforce the racist notion that Māori are somehow more criminogenic than non-Māori. Indeed, recalling that there are approximately 1,777,000 victimisations but only around 7,000 people sent to prison each year, it is crucial to distinguish between the large number of people who engage in criminalised activities and those who are imprisoned for them. It is only ever a small subset of those who hurt others who are ever sent to prison. This means that the makeup of the prison population is not determined by who commits crimes, but by who is more likely to be policed and swept into the criminal justice system. In the American context, this is why Davis argues, “One has a greater chance of going to jail or prison if one is a young black man than if one is actually a law-breaker” (1998, p. 105). As a result, “the prison is the perfect site for the simultaneous production and concealment of racism” (Davis 1998, p. 67).

This “simultaneous production and concealment” extends to the role that prisons play in relation to poverty. Abolitionists argue that prisons attempt to disappear social problems by disappearing people. Prisons have become convenient places to deposit poor people, with up to 87 per cent of people imprisoned in Aotearoa New Zealand being unemployed or having no taxable income prior to imprisonment (Arbuckle 2017). Therefore, “the cycle of confinement in which many Māori exist is a real and almost inevitable consequence of the racial and economic inequalities which exist within New Zealand society” (Jackson 1988, p. 100).

How, then, do prisons reproduce this “cycle”? First, for many people who experience imprisonment personally, “incarceration marks a downwards shift in the life trajectory,” leading to long-term unemployment and underemployment, insecure housing and homelessness, social isolation, deteriorating health and poverty (McIntosh 2013, p. 439). In addition, while individuals are imprisoned, incarceration is always a collective experience, with collective ramifications and collective harm (Roper et al. 1989; McIntosh 2013). As Tracey McIntosh argues in her case study of Māori women’s imprisonment, “there are collateral effects and consequences which

spread from the individual outwards, reverberating along the radiating threads of social relationships and connections” (2013, p. 439). What are these “collateral effects”? For many households, from a group of students renting a flat to a dual-income working-class family paying off a mortgage, the sudden loss of a household member can have substantial immediate effects. For households that are dependent on the income of the incarcerated person, imprisonment can lead to the inability to pay rent and bills and can substantially reduce the standard of living of that household. In other words, the imprisonment of one member of a *whānau* can lead to the greater economic impoverishment of the entire *whānau*.

The collateral effects extend far beyond the economic impact. In particular, imprisonment, especially for longer periods of time, can lead to relationship breakdown. Where the incarcerated person is a woman who was, until their imprisonment, the primary caregiver for a child or children, incarceration can lead to the removal of children by the state. Indeed, research in Aotearoa New Zealand suggests significant negative collateral impacts on the children of incarcerated people. Gordon (2011) estimates approximately 30,000 children experience parental incarceration each year in the country. Aotearoa New Zealand reports on the children of incarcerated people found a multitude of negative consequences (Gordon 2011; Gordon and MacGibbon 2011). Parental incarceration can cause negative impacts on the emotional health of children, sometimes amounting to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and is associated with poor physical health and mental health generally. Gordon and MacGibbon’s study also finds “very poor” educational outcomes for children of incarcerated people, “with many treading a line towards early exclusion from school and leaving with no qualifications” (2011, p. 5). Indeed, it is from this population – those who experience the structural violence of poverty – that the prison population is recruited. The collateral effects of the incarceration of parents through the impoverishment of *whānau* thus reproduces this structural violence and encourages intergenerational incarceration.

Abolitionists contend, then, that the criminal justice system takes the people who are most marginalised in society, blames them as individuals for the conditions they inherited and then reproduces those conditions. This is what Beth Richie calls a “prison nation,” an ideology where we “blame people for their suffering. Whatever is wrong with them it is their fault” (2015, p. 269). Counter to the ideology of the prison nation, abolitionists argue that Māori did not choose to be colonised or to have their wealth, land, language and culture taken. Māori did not choose to experience the disproportionate intergenerational poverty and disempowerment brought forth by colonisation. When the prison population is not constituted by the people who do the most harm, but by those who are the most marginalised, it is crucial to stress that Māori did not choose this.

Taking these arguments as a whole, the prison simultaneously (1) extracts the most marginalised and places them in a prison environment that undermines their health and wellbeing; (2) pushes these people into social instability, which (3) undermines the livelihoods of the *whānau* of current and formerly incarcerated people, making other

whānau members more likely to be caught in the criminal justice system; (4) collectively disempowers entire communities by entrenching intergenerational poverty and incarceration; and (5) blames the individuals for this collective, societal failure. Prisons thus play a crucial ideological role in providing a convenient excuse to blame the least powerful people in society for our social problems.

### ***Prisons as sites of violence***

In addition to the role prisons play in reproducing the structural violence of racism and poverty, abolitionists also argue that prisons are a factory for the reproduction of interpersonal violence, including violence against women. Many abolitionists argue that the process of imprisonment itself is violent, as it forcibly removes people from their social environment, undermines their bodily autonomy, and relies on the coercive power of the threat of further violence in order to maintain order (Knopp et al. 1976; Lambie 2011; Martinot 2014; Davis 2016; Carlton and Russell 2018). Additionally, the prison environment itself can be extremely violent, with recent self-reported surveys of Aotearoa New Zealand prisoners finding 52 per cent of participants at Ngawha Prison had been victimised (Boshier 2019a), 31 per cent of Whanganui Prison participants had been physically assaulted (Boshier 2018), and 11 per cent of participants at Wiri Prison had been sexually assaulted, all while in prison (Boshier 2019b). In none of those surveys were the majority of victimised people willing to report their experiences to prison officials.

This experience of violence is heavily gendered, with different rates of violence in men's and women's prisons, and gendered impacts. An example of gendered violence is the routine use of strip searches in prisons. In Aotearoa New Zealand prisons, this means the person being searched is forced to remove their clothes while an officer can "rub" that person's hair and touch any part of their body, "including, for example, rolls of fat, genitalia, and breasts" (Corrections Act 2004, sec. 90(2)). As prison abolitionists argue, this is a form of coerced sexual contact amounting to sexual assault (Lamusse et al. 2016). While this practice is routine, including every time an incarcerated person enters or leaves a prison, the experience is gendered. A Corrections study on Aotearoa New Zealand prisoners has found that 53 per cent of women prisoners have experienced some form of sexual victimisation in their lifetimes, compared with 15 per cent of male prisoners (Bevan 2017).

Another Corrections study found people in prison are four times as likely as the general population to have had a lifetime diagnosis of PTSD (Indig et al. 2016). A PTSD diagnosis is also heavily gendered, with 52.1 per cent of women in prison and 22.0 per cent of men in prison having had a lifetime diagnosis, compared with 8.1 per cent and 3.7 per cent in the general population. With this particularly vulnerable population, Pereira demonstrates that while "an essential element of flashbacks typical of PTSD is the sense of powerlessness reinforced in every aspect of prison life, strip searching is analogous to a re-enactment of sexual assault" (Pereira 2001, p. 189). As a result, there is a long history of feminists fighting for

the abolition of strip searches of women, most notably in Australia (Carlton and Russell 2018).

Understanding the gendered nature of men's imprisonment and victimisation is also crucial as a part of a broader feminist prison abolitionist perspective. Feminists and other scholars of masculinities have long observed the dominant, toxic masculinities that are bred and intensified in prison, as "the prison environment encourages aggression and reinforces hypermasculinity" (Ricciardelli 2013, p. 188). The gendered consequences of this environment for people leaving prison are the potential for the extension of the prisonised hypermasculinity beyond the walls, resulting in the violent victimisation of people in these men's lives. From an abolitionist perspective, prisons play a role in the reproduction of the most toxic forms of patriarchal masculinities, and attempts to seriously grapple with patriarchal violence require prison abolition.

### **Carceral feminism and abolitionist feminism**

Despite this feminist case for prison abolitionism, there are still key tensions between prison abolition and some strains of feminist praxis. Just as there are multiple strains of abolitionism, there are multiple strains of feminism. The strain(s) of feminism most in tension with abolitionism are variably named "dominant" or "dominating feminism" (Whalley and Hackett 2017, p. 457), "conservative" feminism (Gruber 2009) or what Elizabeth Bernstein names "carceral feminism" (2007, p. 143). Carceral feminism is a politics and framework, the proponents of which advocate for criminal justice solutions to violence against women. Carceral feminists seek longer prison sentences, mandatory arrest policies and more police and prison intervention generally in cases of violence against women. Underpinning this framework are two key assumptions: (1) that men's violence against women must be seriously addressed; and (2) that the criminal justice system is an effective method for addressing this violence. As demonstrated throughout the rest of this chapter, while abolitionists agree with the first assumption, they believe the second to be inaccurate.

### ***Carceral feminist responses to violence against women***

A carceral feminist response to violence against women would argue that a perpetrator of patriarchal violence should be punished with imprisonment, which would prevent future sexual violence from that person, and deter others from perpetrating. From this perspective, they advocate for the strengthening of the criminal justice system's ability to control and intervene in order to protect women from violence.

From a pragmatic perspective, abolitionists argue that this kind of strategy, which has led to more punitive legislation in the West (see Bumiller 2008; Gruber 2009; Richie 2012), has not increased women's freedom from patriarchal violence. If we look at victimisation rates for sexual and intimate partner violence, Beth Richie notes there is "no solid longitudinal research on the relationship between

specialized new laws, legal procedures, or mandatory protocols and changes in rates of violence against women in more disadvantaged communities” (2012, p. 83).

Abolitionists argue that carceral feminist approaches would always fail to improve safety. First, as noted in the previous section, prisons do not serve as a deterrent. This is particularly the case in instances of sexual violence. Following the logic of deterrence theory, for a person to be deterred from violence, they need to be certain of the likelihood of punishment. However, the extremely low rates of punishment for sexual violence undermines this deterrent effect. The New Zealand Department of Justice estimates that there were almost 200,000 instances of sexual assault in the year 2017–2018 (NZCVS Project Team 2019), compared with 2,950 convictions for sexual offences and 500 sentences to imprisonment (Ministry of Justice 2019). In other words, approximately 0.25 per cent of instances of sexual harm resulted in imprisonment. Beyond imprisonment, however, this means that in almost every instance of sexual violence, the person who harmed received no intervention whatsoever. Not only is there no effective deterrent, but there is often no official response at all.

From another perspective, when only an estimated 0.25 per cent of instances of sexual assault result in imprisonment, an approach that advocates for imprisonment in 100 per cent of instances would lead to a farcical situation. Extrapolating based on Aotearoa New Zealand’s current sentencing and prison rates, incarceration as a response to all instances of sexual violence would result in roughly 770,000 people in prison for sexual violence at any given time. This figure of 770,000 people is around 15 per cent of the total Aotearoa New Zealand population, and incarcerating them would cost 25 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product. This is, of course, an absurd and impossible scenario. It is important, however, because the ridiculousness of this scenario demonstrates the lack of seriousness with which carceral feminism takes sexual harm. Incarceration simply cannot be a serious response to sexual violence because, if it were, it would lead to social and economic ruin. Therefore, abolitionists argue that carceral feminism does not take a practical or serious response to sexual violence.

### ***Individual responsibility and structural violence***

For abolitionists, the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in addressing sexual violence is ingrained in the structure of the system. This is because of the individualising narrative of the criminal justice process. In this process, the criminal court assumes that criminalised behaviour is the result of an individual’s decision-making. It ultimately decides the degree to which a person before it is individually responsible for the matter at hand and may impose punishment on that individual. The message that the criminal justice system sends is that sexual violence is caused by bad people. Justice, from that perspective, is the punishment of that bad person.

However, as noted above, it is only a small subset of people who sexually harm who are convicted of sexual offences. As a result, the social problem of sexual violence is effectively blamed on the small number of individuals who are

constructed as “sick,” “monstrous” and violent (Whalley and Hackett 2017; Ilea 2018). Within the individualising discourse, the person who sexually harms “is constructed as a ‘type of person,’ his sexual offences as indicative of a flawed character, innate dispositions and inherent risk that are difficult (if not impossible) to correct” (Ilea 2018, p. 358). Aya Gruber argues that the “hatred of criminals is dependent on criminals being wholly unlike average persons and therefore dis-entitled to empathy, sympathy, compassion, or humane treatment” (2009, p. 640). For Gruber, the perverse side effect of this demonisation is that it counter-constructs seemingly “ordinary” perpetrators of sexual violence as incapable of that violence.

Indeed, it is important to reiterate the normalcy of sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand. The 2018 *New Zealand crime and victims survey* found about one in three (34 per cent) women and one in eight men (12 per cent) have experienced violence in their lifetimes (NZCVS Project Team 2019). Unfortunately, sexual victimisation is shockingly normal. Given that most of these victimisations are also caused by someone we know, rather than a stranger, the ordinariness of people who commit sexual violence must also be stressed. The hundreds of thousands of perpetrators of sexual violence look more like our fathers, boyfriends, uncles, brothers and friends than monsters lurking in bushes.

In competition with the “sick individual” discourse, abolitionists argue that sexual violence can only ever be understood in its social context (Knopp 1994; Morris 1995; Davis 1998; Ilea 2018). Feminist prison abolitionists argue that individualising blame for sexual violence prevents society from seeing the structural roots of violence. Instead, it sends the message that the source of sexual violence – the individual incarcerated – has been dealt with and justice has been done. Abolitionists then ask “whether incarcerating individual perpetrators does anything more than reproduce the very violence that the perpetrators have allegedly committed. In other words criminalization allows the problem to persist” (Davis 2016, p. 105). In order to grapple with men’s violence, we need to address not only the supposed “monsters” but the “ordinary” men in our lives who consider themselves entitled to the bodies of others, but who would never see themselves as rapists.

However, while carceral responses to men’s violence may be ineffective at addressing structural issues of patriarchal violence, they are highly effective at reproducing oppressive racist and colonial structures. Given that almost every instance of crime generally and sexual violence specifically does not end in imprisonment, the question of who ultimately goes to prison is crucial. Indeed, it is not by virtue of having done harm that a person is imprisoned, but of their degree of social marginalisation. As a result, the punitive turn in the criminal justice system in Aotearoa New Zealand has seen a massive increase in the Māori incarceration rate, from approximately 325 per 100,000 people in 1991 to 695 per 100,000 in 2018.<sup>1</sup> As demonstrated in the previous section, imprisonment has long-lasting, intergenerational effects that reproduce poverty and structural racism.

Abolitionists argue that this is because carceral feminism assumes a race- and class-neutral state, in which all people who come before the court are treated equally

(Whalley and Hackett 2017). However, feminist prison abolitionists contend that prisons “reinforce dominant relations of power, especially racism, classism, ableism, and colonial oppression” (Lamble 2011, p. 246). As such, criminal law reforms pursued in the name of ending violence against women instead expanded the reach and power of the already oppressive criminal justice system.

The question remains, however, what to do instead of prisons in order to seriously address violence against women. What does a response that takes patriarchal violence seriously look like? Although this chapter cannot outline in detail the various alternatives, there are some important principles of abolitionist alternatives to outline. First, abolitionist alternatives aim to provide victims with recognition that they have been harmed and deserve redress (Morris 1995). This recognition and redress could be in the form of monetary compensation or state-funded victim support. Second, in attempting to prevent intimate partner violence, anti-carceral feminists argue that one of the most effective means of preventing male partner violence is increasing the economic independence of women, by increasing wages, benefits and other income (Coker 2001; Bumiller 2008; Gruber 2009). Third, as difficult as it can feel, justice processes would also require recognising the dignity of all people involved, including the perpetrators of harm. Taking a restorative or transformative justice approach (Morris 1995), an abolitionist approach to addressing male violence would require a commitment to transforming the person who has harmed to prevent future violence and repairing the harm they have done. What this looks like in practice and at a societal level, however, remains a challenge for prison abolitionism.

## **Conclusion: Strategies and hope for the future**

Even with an understanding of the harm that prisons cause and the need for abolition, the prospect of creating a criminal justice system without prisons can seem daunting, if not impossible. Indeed, the prison is so entrenched in our cultural imagination that it can be difficult to imagine a world without it (Davis 2003). However, this process of imagining a world without prisons is necessary if we take seriously the intersectional feminist task of struggling to end oppression and exploitation. Further, from a pragmatic point of view, prison abolition is also a more practical response to harm than the current approach. As prison abolitionists argue, prisons ultimately do not rehabilitate, deter crime, create safety or provide justice for victims. Imprisonment cannot work as a solution to harm, because imprisonment punishes the most marginalised people and reproduces structural oppression and injustice.

However, prisons continue to exist for a reason. As abolitionists argue, they ultimately serve the interests of the most powerful in society by blaming social problems on the marginalised and disenfranchised (Knopp et al. 1976; Morris 1995; Davis 2003). That means challenging the prison system also requires challenging the power structures that prisons support. This is no easy task, but the struggle for justice never is. It is also important to remember, therefore, that transformational

social change often seems impossible right up until the moment it happens. The role of prison abolitionists is, therefore, to organise for social change until the seemingly impossible becomes reality.

## Study questions

1. What are the “pragmatic” reasons for prison abolition?
2. Why is prison abolition a feminist issue?
3. Why do prison abolitionists argue that prisons are a bad way to address violence against women?

## Note

- 1 Based on my analysis of data provided to me under the Official Information Act.

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