

Teaching Sociology

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[Voices from Inside](#) challenges the current direction of prison law that is moving rapidly toward vindictive rather than rehabilitative imprisonment. Karina Epperlein's sensitively rendered story of four women able to recover their humanity even inside prison walls, poignantly illustrates the positive, life-affirming value of creative rehabilitation as a path for prisoners to discover the roots of their rage, to gain insight into its sources, and to prepare themselves for a productive life upon release.

Epperlein, a German native who has been living in the United States for 14 years, is a theater artist who volunteered her skills weekly from 1992 to 1996 at the Dublin, California Women's Federal Correctional Institution. *Voices from Inside* documents her four years with a multicultural group of inmates at Dublin developing a program of instruction in, as she describes, "breathing, sound, movement, drawing, writing and sharing." Viewers quickly see that the program went far beyond this modest description. At first simply a retreat for the prisoners from the brutality that is prison life, their weekly sessions in the recreation hall ("the barn"), soon became an opportunity for creative release and new understandings of their rage as a means of coping with life behind bars. With Epperlein's support and encouragement from one another, the breathing became moans and screams, the sound became hums, rhythms, drumming, chants and songs, the movement, drawing and writing became creative dancing and poetry, all expressing the participants' anger and pain, their sadness and hope, their hidden strengths and emerging self-esteem. Thrilled with their new understandings and newly found talents, the participants organized an original theater piece of their own music, song, and dance that they presented during two nights for their fellow inmates and for prison volunteers. A poignant tribute to their ongoing transformations was the first question from a fellow inmate at the start of the question and answer period following the presentation: "Have (any of) you been incarcerated?"

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Voices from Inside does a fine job of taking the viewer through the development of both the program and the self-described changes in the participants. Through on-screen interviews with four of the program participants, we learn about their lives, the experiences leading up to their incarceration, and the reasons for their anger and frustration with the prison system. Chief among the latter is separation from their families. Three of the four women have dependent children and the women's anguish at being separated from them as they grow is palpable: "I feel like the living dead;" "Got a mama, can't touch her, babies, can't love 'em;" "I can only see my kids through glass." Each begins to cry as she thinks and talks about her children. Epperlein interviews children of two of the prisoners at their homes. They speak of the difficulties of having a

mother in prison, of not being able to touch her, of rarely even seeing her, of not having her around when they are troubled. One especially misses his mother's way of "calm(ing) your heart down," of "mak(ing) you so touchworthy."

This is a hopeful, uplifting video, superbly edited and produced. *Voices from Inside* documents some of the possibilities of creative, rehabilitative programming for inmates. However, it does not shy away from recognizing what prison is: "having to do what they want," explains one participant; "It's no privacy, not even on my period. Prison is sleepless nights, flashlights every two and a half hours, peeping Toms watching your every move. Prison is having to endure, without becoming them." The prisoners' lives inside the prison are not shown or discussed here although pertinent facts and statistics about prisons and women in prison are mentioned and shown throughout the video. We learn that Dublin prison, for example, built for 300, houses 1200; its cells, intended for one, hold three. We learn that the 1.5 million prisoners in 1995 represent a three-fold increase overall since 1983, but a five-fold increase for women; that most women are in prison for nonviolent crimes. *Voices from Inside* puts flesh on these numerical bones: "How would you like livin' in a bathroom with someone you never knew?" "A circle of madness controls your life." We are jolted to hear that 80 percent of women in prison are mothers; most are single and have an average of two dependent children; to hear that 20,000 children in California, 1.5 million nationwide, have mothers in prison. Most cannot see their mothers--prisons are too far away from their mostly urban homes, and children have no one to bring them to visit. *Voices from Inside* connects human faces and human suffering with these numbers.

It is in the life stories, the close look we have of four powerful, committed women, that *Voices from Inside* becomes so useful for sociology classes dealing with issues and concepts such as labeling, re-socialization, gender, inequality, groups, deviance, crime and delinquency, social policy and families. Shown fairly early in an introductory class, for example, the video could be a frequent point of reference and basis for discussion for all of these topics. Unlike other, also excellent videos on women in prison--*Through the Wire*, for example, is a 1990 PBS P.O.V. documentary about the prison lives of three women convicted of politically motivated crimes who are serving time at the Lexington, Kentucky federal underground prison that uses isolation to break prisoners down, both physically and emotionally--*Voices from Inside* offers the lived experiences of four of the women in Epperlein's "circle of caring" and the experiences of their children. Their stories offer typically unavailable information describing prisoners, their pasts, their current lives, and their hopes and dreams. Students can connect real experience, real human beings, to the sociological analysis of gender inequality, or of social welfare and family policy: What will happen to Aida and her three dependent children when she is released and faces some of the new welfare policies that prohibit former prisoners from applying for welfare? What will happen when women like those we meet in the video who are gaining self-esteem and hope for their post-prison lives face the employment discrimination when female ex-prisoners search for jobs?