

# Moms in prison: A personal story

*By Kristi Miller Anderson, Ph.D.*

**T**en years ago, I walked into a women's prison for the first time. As I entered the dark and oppressive atmosphere, I had no idea that I was about to meet women who are, today, some of my most favorite people on the planet. I hoped for a positive influence in their lives; what I didn't anticipate was the significance of their influence and impact on me over time. Prison is a cold world constructed of concrete

and metal, nothing about it is soft. However, together in a community, the harshness fades. We often found warmth around the topic of motherhood; a common concern that transcends the walls, gates and locks separating my free world from theirs in prison. In this arena, we shared the same vulnerability, the same hope and the same pain.

In my initial role in that prison, I was a professor hired by a local

seminary to offer theology classes to women serving life sentences. I remember the first day of class so clearly. I suppose I was expecting to see women who looked and acted like the cast of "Orange is the New Black." Instead, I was met with gray hair, glasses, kind eyes and shy smiles. Most of the women were long removed from the events that led them to prison; some had already been incarcerated 20 years and had a



istock/tinmapong

lifetime to go. “Crushed” is the first word that came to mind that day. I was in a room filled with women crushed by their own bad choices, crushed by men and the abuses of this world, and crushed by the loss of family ties.

### Trauma magnified

The women’s population within the criminal justice system has skyrocketed over the past 40 years. From 1980 to 2017, the rate of women incarcerated in the United States increased nearly nine-fold, from 26,378 to 225,060; double the rate of incarceration for men.<sup>1</sup> For a mother, incarceration in and of itself virtually guarantees mental and emotional trauma and even abuse for the children including issues like reactive attachment disorders and bullying. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, more than five million children, or one in 14, have had a parent in a state or federal prison at some point during their lives.<sup>2</sup> It is well known that kids with incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school; they also have a much higher likelihood of coming in contact with the criminal justice system. Breaking this inter-generational cycle of trauma-to-incarceration requires effective evidence-based interventions. The Bureau of Justice statistics reveal an alarmingly high rate of mental illness among female inmates, far higher than their male population.<sup>3</sup> A high incidence of sexual trauma is one suggestion for the increased rate of mental disorders among women.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence and effect of domestic violence and sexual abuse upon this segment of the population is under researched. The uniqueness of

the mental and emotional suffering within the female prison population is ever present. For corrections staff, chaplains and ministry volunteers, these women come to us with gaping emotional and psychological wounds deep in their souls. Their need for a sense of “family” further compounds the problem.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 75% to 80% of these women are mothers, and the majority of their children are minors during the time of their incarceration.<sup>6</sup>

---

**I was in a room filled with women crushed by their own bad choices, crushed by men and the abuses of this world, and crushed by the loss of family ties.**

---

### Teacher to chaplain

When I moved into a chaplain role for the prison, women in various emotional states, experiencing all kinds of situations walked into my office every day. The grief and suffering these women carry is truly incomprehensible. Yet through all the stories of crisis, the concern for their children was always paramount. While the trials and atrocities encountered by these women

toughened them, they maintained a soft place for their children. It’s the one corner of their heart and soul they wouldn’t allow to calcify, and because of this tender piece of inner real estate, they remained vulnerable. Feelings of absence and loss being ever-present, the sadness and pain of separation from their children was always alive in their eyes.

I was eager to help the women do their time in a productive manner; to help them leave prison in better shape than when they came in. Yet, I soon realized that many of these women were “stuck” in their grief and pain. The underlying trauma and anxiety related to their families had to be addressed before they could move towards emotional health and wholeness and engage in more productive activities.

Every mother can identify with the unrest associated with being away from her children. When our children are not with us, there is a homing device in the back of our minds constantly pinging, searching, trying to locate them — and by the way it doesn’t ever switch off, even when they are grown and gone from home! An incarcerated mother has the same angst of absence, but they also carry the guilt and shame of knowing that the separation is their fault. Due to the actions of their mother, the children are very likely left in dangerous and difficult circumstances. Not only does a mom suffer under the tremendous burden of guilt, she also must come to grips with being powerless to go to the aid of her child.

### A gift to mothers

In an attempt to give these incarcerated moms a glimmer of hope in

## NEWS&VIEWS

their pain and grief, I wrote a book for them called “Hannah’s Gift.” It’s about a woman named Hannah mentioned in the Old Testament book, 1 Samuel.

Hannah didn’t get to raise her son in her home in the traditional sense either; she had to leave him with the priest to be raised in the Tabernacle to fulfill her promise to the Lord. In

the story, the environment of the Tabernacle is not healthy. The priest had evil sons who perpetrated misdeeds and participated in all kinds of scandal; and it appears their father was unwilling and unable to stop them. So, not only did Hannah endure the pain of being separated from her son, she also had to trust God to protect and provide for him in uncertain

situations. She had few visits with him, but she made the most of the very limited and restricted role she played in his life. Despite Hannah’s circumstances, and because of her influence, Samuel, her son, grew up to be a positive change agent in his day. The story is clear in presenting Hannah as the true hero. Hannah’s virtue is on display in sharp contrast to the

### HANNAH’S GIFT

“Hannah’s Gift” is a faith-based study for incarcerated mothers being taught in 32 states and in 16 foreign countries.

For more information, visit Lifeline Global at [lifelineglobal.org/hannahs-gift](http://lifelineglobal.org/hannahs-gift)

and check out this video for an overview of the “Hannah’s Gift” prison program, [drive.google.com/file/d/1th04Ou6\\_3ApR4vzayL2CBkQ9nwAO6swB/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1th04Ou6_3ApR4vzayL2CBkQ9nwAO6swB/view)



*Pictured are some of the women who have found strength and support from the “Hannah’s Gift” prison program.*

inept men of her day who abdicated their roles of responsibility.

Hannah's story gives incarcerated mothers a model for parenting well from a distance. Her influence on her son's life, even during difficult times and dysfunctional situations, helped shape him into a world leader. The small group discussion format of the "Hannah's Gift" study fosters a support network among the mothers. They find a place and a pattern with which to process their pain and anxiety. This is also a place where hope can grow for their own legacy. Hannah's story teaches us that amazing things can still happen in a family affected by the tragedy of incarceration.

If we want to see our women in prisons take advantage of

rehabilitative opportunities, we must be mindful to address the mental and emotional suffering that stays on the surface of their minds concerning their children. If we create a path to manage these ever-present struggles, we can help them develop the coping skills needed to take steps of progress in other areas.

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Fact Sheet (2019). Incarcerated Women and Girls. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project. Retrieved from <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016). Children of Incarcerated Parents, a Shared Sentence. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence/>

<sup>3</sup> Bronson, Jennifer; Berzofsky, Marcus. (2017). Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by

Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-12. Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Villa, The Marshall Project (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, Kristi Miller. Beautiful Woman (2018). Lifeline Publishers. My latest book explores the innate wiring of a women for her family, and how that dynamic plays into helping her successfully reenter society after prison.

<sup>6</sup> Glaze, L.E., and Maruschak, L.M. (2009). Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

*Dr. Kristi Miller Anderson began her advocacy for incarcerated women as a chaplain, education coordinator and assistant warden of programming at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. She speaks frequently to women in prison and jail and encourages and gives thought leadership to groups who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. You can visit her website at [kristimilleranderson.com](http://kristimilleranderson.com).*

**It's Never Too Early to Plan Ahead**

Join us for future ACA Winter Conferences and Congresses of Correction!