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Learning From and With Incarcerated Women: Emerging Lessons From a Participatory Action Study of Sexuality Education

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Abstract: This article offers (a) an exploration of the value of participatory action models of both sexuality education and sexuality research and (b) a reflection on the process of offering jail-based sexuality education for women of color vulnerable to systemic social inequalities. In an ongoing participatory action research project in San Francisco County Jail, health educators, a faculty researcher, students, and recently incarcerated women are exploring the role of HIV in the sexual lives of incarcerated women of color. Using ethnographic, interview, and analytic response data from this project and building on critical analyses of race, sexuality, incarceration, and pedagogy, emerging lessons include new understandings of participatory action research in incarcerated settings, of jails as a site of sexuality education, and of the contexts in which women navigate HIV risk.

Key words: sex education; HIV; incarceration; women of color; participatory action research

In January 2007, researchers from San Francisco State University's Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality (CRGS), HIV educators from the San Francisco Department of Public Health Forensic AIDS Project (FAP), and women incarcerated in San Francisco County Jail #8 (CJ8) embarked on an exploration of HIV risk and safer sex negotiation. University researchers, community-based educators, and incarcerated women came together as co-researchers² with the aim of bringing the concerns

and insights of incarcerated women to the fore of discussions of HIV and incarceration. Through this ongoing project, collaborators hope to contribute to broad efforts to illuminate and challenge the roles that incarceration, HIV, education, and research play in women's lives.

These workshops, titled RISE (Reach Inward for Self-Empowerment), are one of the first projects to address these issues in collaboration with incarcerated women in California. The project has adopted a participatory action research (PAR) framework, which integrates ideas from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986). Participatory action researchers prioritize learning for and with—not only about—disenfranchised people. Students, teachers, study participants, and researchers work together on shared concerns. People who might

¹ We list author names in alphabetical order. The first two authors led study design and implementation. The first author led the writing of this manuscript, with all coauthors making significant contributions to the final product.

² In an effort to distinguish people's different contributions and relationships to the project, we refer in this article to *incarcerated researchers* and *outside researchers*.

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otherwise be only the objects of study act as co-researchers, participating in research design and inquiry that supports their making meaningful social change in their lives.

In a series of workshops and training sessions, incarcerated women learned about HIV prevention, examined the obstacles to implementing prevention methods, and explored strategies for challenging those obstacles. Incarcerated women gained research skills as they interviewed one another about HIV risk and prevention and worked with researchers to analyze the information they had gathered. They also acquired skills and knowledge that prepared them to act as peer health educators, both in jail and after their release. No matter what role they played in the RISE workshops, incarcerated researchers had an opportunity to voice their understandings and experiences of HIV, well-being, and safety. In doing so, they became better able promote health and justice in their own lives, with their families, and in their communities.

In the following pages, we explore the lessons emerging in our efforts to conduct sexuality education and research for and with incarcerated women. We first offer a brief review of the literature on incarceration, HIV, and women of color, along with a description of the project. Next, we explore three lessons that have emerged through this process of offering jail-based sexuality education: (a) the importance of using a PAR framework, (b) the implications of locating critical sexuality education in jails, and (c) the need for rethinking sexuality to include vulnerability, safety, and risk. We conclude by considering the value of sexuality education and research—not simply HIV education and research—that insist on the transformative practice of working *with* incarcerated women.

HIV, Incarceration, and Women of Color

Studying HIV and sexuality in jails brings with it a responsibility to understand and respond to the racism and sexism that inform the experiences of women of color in the United States. Indeed, gendered inequalities characterize women's paths to incarceration. Before entering jail or prison, many incarcerated women endure sexual and gender violence and discrimination—for example, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; vilification of their sexual desires; denial of their capacity to mother; and inadequate sexuality education (Daane, 2003; Richie, 1996, 2002; Wyatt et al., 2002). Incarcerated women are typically young, poor, unemployed, undereducated, and without affordable and safe housing (Conly, 1998; Covington & Bloom, 2007). Many are addicted to or abusing drugs (Kantor, 2003). Violence and discrimination often continue during their incarceration at the hands of

jail deputies and others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006; Human Rights Watch, 1996).

The number of incarcerated women has grown 4.6% each year from 1995 to 2005. Currently, more than 1 million women are under the surveillance of the criminal justice system (The Sentencing Project, 2007). Since 1985, the population of women in jail or prison has at least tripled throughout the United States and although the number of women incarcerated remains much lower than the number of incarcerated men, the rate of increase for women has been more than twice that for men (Harrison & Beck, 2005). These rates are closely linked to efforts to get tough on crime: In California and elsewhere, harsher punishments for drug-related crimes have led, in turn, to an increase in the number of women of color in state correctional facilities (Petersilia, 2006).

As of June 2002, 165,800 women were incarcerated in federal prisons and local jails (Harrison & Karberg, 2003); almost two thirds of the women in U.S. prisons and jails are women of color (Greenfeld & Snell, 2000). In the United States, Black women are more than twice as likely as Hispanic women and over four times as likely as White women to be incarcerated (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 2007). Although they are not incarcerated at the same high rates as other people of color in California, Asian and Pacific Islander men and women are incarcerated at a younger age than members of other racial groups (Oh & Umemoto, 2005).

These same inequalities compromise women's sexual and reproductive well-being and put them at risk for HIV infection (Kim, 2003). Incarcerated women of color are at particular risk. In 2005, HIV-positive diagnoses for African American women were over 20 times those for White women and four times those for Latinas (CDC, 2007). African American and Latina women represent about one quarter of all women in the United States, but they comprise over 80% of 2005 AIDS diagnoses (CDC). Despite a recent decrease in the rate of HIV cases from 2001 to 2005 (CDC), HIV infection is six times as prevalent among incarcerated women in the United States as it is among U.S. women in general (Zaitzow & West, 2003). Further highlighting gender inequalities, the rate of HIV infection among incarcerated women has exceeded that of incarcerated men for more than a decade (Maruschak, 2005).

Incarcerated women's risk of HIV infection reveals an entanglement of sexual intimacy, risk, and vulnerability. Women's lower earning power and lowered economic status increases their vulnerability to HIV, limits their access to health care and education, and makes it difficult for them to leave relationships that compromise their well-being

(Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). For instance, women at risk for HIV infection have high prevalence rates of intimate partner violence (Cohen et al., 2000); this history of abuse suggests that these women may have limited ability to negotiate sexual concerns with their partners (Gómez & Marín, 1996; Melendez, Hoffman, Exner, Leu, & Erhardt, 2003). Heterosexist and homophobic environments further trap incarcerated women between, on the one hand, social demands that they conform to heteronormative expectations—partner with men, mother, find fulfillment in these conventional relationships—and, on the other hand, what may be nonconforming sexual desires for other women (Richie, 2005). Heteronormative expectations also routinely render queer sexualities invisible in providers' efforts to address the sexual needs of incarcerated women (Zierler & Krieger, 1997).

Jail-based programs may represent an opportunity for service providers and advocates to make visible and then address the needs of disenfranchised women (McClelland, Teplin, Abram, & Jacobs, 2002). In contrast to state and federal prisons, jails are city and county facilities in which women usually serve shorter terms, typically 72 hours to 5 months. The overall higher turnover in jails means greater uncertainty and volatility in the incarcerated population and, ironically, greater opportunity to provide short-term education, health care, and other services to which women may not routinely have access outside of jail (Clarke et al., 2006).

HIV education, in particular, represents an opportunity for jail-based educators to address the sexual, racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities that put many women at risk of infection (Zierler & Krieger, 1997). Workshops and classrooms that embrace questions not only of disease and prevention but also of desire, power, and entitlement encourage teachers and learners to explore the social conditions that compromise sexual, psychological, political, and social well-being (Fields & Tolman, 2006; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Embracing a critical, liberatory model of education (Freire, 1986; hooks, 1994), HIV education can include talk about incarceration, poverty, drug abuse and addiction, inadequate housing, violence, and sexual exploitation. This approach can, in turn, help incarcerated women identify what they need, learn how to care for one another, and acquire strategies for improving poor conditions so they have a better chance of thriving upon their release.

PAR Sexuality Education and Research in Jail

Jail-based HIV and sexuality education may indeed be an opportunity to interrupt racist, sexist, and heteronormative conditions. However, to seek social change

through jail-based HIV education also means seeking transformation through the oppressive social institutions of the jail and the oppressive social conditions of racism, sexism, and incarceration. PAR offers a framework that allows researchers and educators to respond to these limiting conditions. PAR investigators work with research participants in an effort to increase understanding and produce meaningful research (Cahill, 2004). Participants' contributions strengthen the research process, increasing its validity, accessibility, and connection to social justice (Cahill, 2007; Fine et al., 2003). For researchers, community partnerships thus allow new theories to emerge and increase the likelihood that interventions will be feasible and appropriate to the audience (Schensul, 1999).

PAR assumes many shapes. In our study, three distinct groups—university researchers, public-health department educators, and incarcerated researchers—worked together. Disparities in power relations among PAR's cooperating groups make collaborative and egalitarian relationships difficult—indeed, some critics (Healy, 2001; Williams, Labonte, Randall, & Muhajarine, 2005) believe they are impossible. In this project, achieving complete equality between members of traditionally privileged groups (researchers, educators, free women, White women, the middle class, people with college and postgraduate degrees) and those in traditionally marginalized groups (trainees, students, incarcerated women, women of color, low-income people, people without higher educations) was inevitably elusive.

These structural disparities mirrored disparities in co-researchers' access to project resources. Outside researchers had easy access to the data and other project materials, including funding, staff time, and supplies. Incarcerated researchers' participation and access to the data were contingent on the outside researchers returning to the jail each week, granting incarcerated women admittance to the workshop, and bringing data for analysis. Established researchers may always have an advantage in PAR given their greater experience and comfort with the research process, but the militarism and restriction inherent to jails and prisons make PAR with incarcerated populations particularly challenging (Fine & Torre, 2006; Fine et al., 2003). For example, jail staff, lawyers, judges, and medical staff could call incarcerated researchers into other appointments that conflicted with the workshop meeting times or even place the entire housing unit (called a *pod*) into lockdown (in which no movement or visitors are allowed).

Given that incarcerated co-researchers' participation was always contingent on a number of conditions beyond their control, the outside researchers tried to

maximize incarcerated women's access to the project. As we discuss subsequently in the description of the RISE project, we designed a workshop series that would allow incarcerated women to join the project at many points and, whenever they entered, to help determine the next steps in data collection, analysis, and dissemination. This gesture built on two PAR practices: first, offering a series of training and research sessions in which all participants could collaborate in study design, implementation, and analysis (Lewin, 1946; McTaggart, 1997) and, second, equipping co-researchers with the skills necessary for meaningful participation (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003). The cyclical structure of the workshops allowed incarcerated researchers to bring their insights about HIV, sexuality, race, and jail to the project and facilitated the project's critical response to the institutional demands of the jail. The design complemented the grounded and dialectical process of ethnographic data collection and analysis, which involves participant observation, interviewing, content coding, and analytic memos. The cyclical structure is also well suited for the dynamism of the jail population: Like ethnographers, FAP educators work reiteratively, offering their workshops in repeated series to ensure a variety of topics for those women who are incarcerated for longer periods of time.

The RISE Workshops

This contingent and promising collaboration resumed each week inside CJ8, with incarcerated women, students, educators, and researchers sitting together in a circle. There, the outside researchers strove to render their practices transparent to their collaborators. With the support of more experienced incarcerated researchers, the outside researchers (including the coauthors of this article) explained research ethics, described writing field notes after workshops, and emphasized repeatedly their hope that women would join them as paid research assistants after their release from CJ8. The coauthors of this article come from a variety of backgrounds and levels of formal training. Jessica is a researcher and faculty member at San Francisco State University; Isela is an HIV counseling, testing, and linkages coordinator with FAP. Together, they designed and now lead the study. Kathleen and Margaret are graduate student research assistants. Catherine (Cat) is a formerly incarcerated woman and a project research assistant.

We are women of color and White women; in our 20s, 30s, and 40s; lesbian, queer, and straight; mothers and women who are not parenting; people who have spent time in jail, prison, and treatment centers; and people who have never been locked up. We bring years of

experience—professional and personal—to our shared commitment to understanding and bettering the lives of women confronting systemic oppression, violence, risk of HIV infection, and incarceration. We are only 5 of over 80 women who have contributed to this study as participants, researchers, educators, mentors, and consultants. Other team members include undergraduate and graduate students and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. In this article, consistent with our practice in the workshops, we refer to ourselves by our first names in an effort to mark us as women and to level educational and occupational hierarchies. We use real names when referring to outside researchers and pseudonyms when referring to incarcerated researchers.

Background

Women constitute approximately 14% of San Francisco County's adult incarcerated population. The racial-ethnic composition of the female population in San Francisco County Jails reflects the pattern in California and throughout the United States: Jails and prisons house a disproportionate number of African American and Latina women. Asian and Pacific Islanders constitute 4% of the women incarcerated in San Francisco; Native American women, 2%. Non-Latina Whites are a significant but disproportionately small minority at 20%. All incarcerated women in CJ8 are 18 or older, and most are between the ages of 25 and 44.

The San Francisco Sheriff's Department does not make formal data available about incarcerated women's backgrounds. However, FAP staff members estimate that 8 in 10 of the women with whom they work in San Francisco County Jails are drug users and that almost half are incarcerated for drug offenses. A combination of movement and stability—arrests, releases, lockdowns, and other conditions—render jailed women a particularly dynamic population. Each week, about 10 prisoners (both men and women) are sentenced from San Francisco County Jails to prison terms in the California Department of Corrections; additionally, about 40 parole violators are booked in neighboring San Francisco County Jail #9 and then transported to prison. Many women stay in jail for no more than 72 hours. Those who stay beyond that are likely to be in CJ8 for 4 to 6 months.

Workshop Design

The research team's work focused on HIV education for women currently incarcerated in CJ8. Each RISE workshop cycle consisted of four 2-hour training and research sessions. Because of the transitory nature of the jail population and a desire to include as many women as

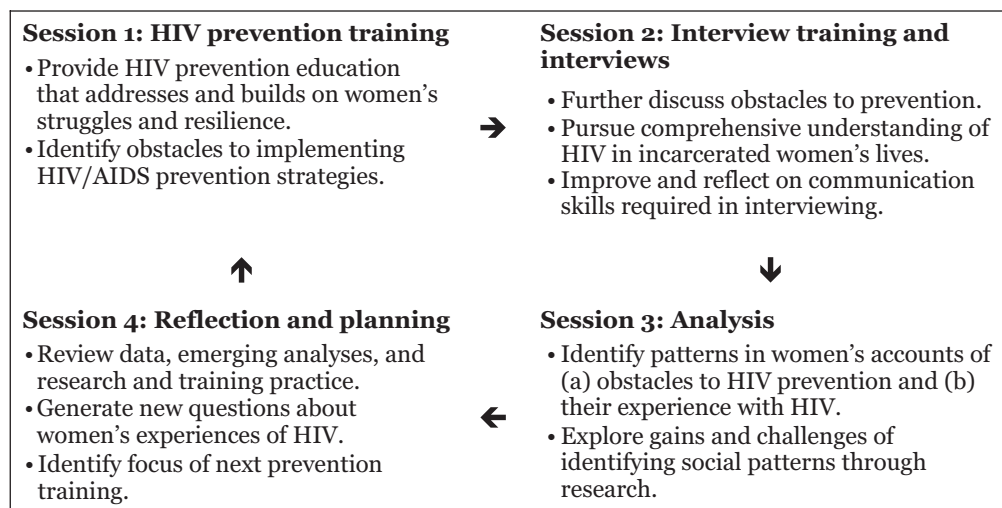
possible, Jessica and Isela designed four cycles of workshops that would allow women to participate in the research project even if they entered the housing unit after the workshop cycle began. Figure 1 depicts workshop aims and activities. In the first session, outside researchers led a discussion of HIV-prevention strategies. The session concluded with the incarcerated and outside co-researchers together identifying obstacles to women acting on these lessons. Questions raised in this discussion informed an interview guide that the entire team constructed cooperatively. In the second session, outside researchers trained women to implement the interview guide. Incarcerated researchers then interviewed one another in pairs, audio recording their conversations. The session concluded with a discussion of the women's experiences talking and listening in the interviews.

In the following week, student research assistants reviewed the interviews and, working with Isela and Jessica, identified one to three transcripts to transcribe and bring into the third workshop. During that session, outside researchers facilitated the incarcerated researchers' open coding of the excerpts, in which they examined transcripts and field notes broadly for themes, patterns, and categories (Charmaz, 2000). The team reflected again on the project's research practices in this third session, exploring the women's reactions to analyzing data. These data contributed to the team's emerging and comprehensive understanding of HIV-negative and HIV-positive incarcerated women's experiences with HIV and AIDS, including the obstacles that incarcerated women confront when

trying to implement protection strategies. These analyses generated new questions and observations for discussion in the fourth workshop session. The outcomes of that discussion guided the structure and content of the next cycle of sessions, when the series began anew. For example, when interviews about discussing safer sex with partners revealed that women stayed in relationships they considered bad for them, the next series of workshops focused on women's decisions to stay in unhealthy relationships and obstacles to their leaving those relationships.

Workshops began in January 2007 and continued through June 2007 in a CJ8 pod specifically dedicated to drug treatment. All women in the pod were drug users or addicts, and all participated in the pod's schedule of treatment activities, including groups, work assignments, classes, and self-governance. In all, 74 women from the pod participated in at least one session, with an average attendance at three RISE sessions. Incarcerated workshop participants were an average of 36 years old, with ages ranging from 19 to 63. In a typical workshop, 9 women were African American, 3 women were Latina, 1 was Asian/Pacific Islander; and 1 was American Indian or Alaskan. Three quarters of women were mothers, with an average of three children. Workshop participants had an average of five male sex partners, fewer than one female sex partner, and no transgender partners in the last year. Almost 4 in 10 women had had sex for money, food, or drugs in the last year, and approximately 2 in 10 had injected drugs. Over the course of 15 workshops, three participants reported HIV-positive status.

Figure 1. RISE (Research on Inequality, Sexuality, and Education) workshop cycle.



All incarcerated researchers received refreshments—for example, juice, granola bars, cheese, and crackers—and \$20 on their jail account (books) for their participation in project workshops (for a maximum payment of \$80 for four workshops). Students, faculty, and community-based educators participated in workshops as part of paid positions. The team held workshops in a meeting room inside the treatment pod. Deputies could look through a wall of windows to watch what happened inside the workshops, but they could not hear the discussions.

The workshop room was small, allowing only 18 women to sit comfortably. Each week, 14 incarcerated women, Jessica, Isela, and two student research assistants attended. The limited space, along with the unexpected popularity of the workshops, meant that the outside researchers had to turn incarcerated women away each week. The team kept a waiting list of women hoping to join the group. To allow the project to benefit from participants' growing experience as researchers, women who had previously attended a workshop had priority. Because the outside researchers wanted to understand HIV in the context of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities, women of color were the next priority, then White women. In order to make room for newcomers, women left the cycle after four workshops. Of the 74 women who attended a RISE session, 37 completed four sessions and graduated from the workshop. Those who wanted to continue working with the project joined a graduates group of 5 to 8 women. The graduates took on special projects, including conducting focus groups on women's health concerns and then advocating for better treatment from jail medical staff, as well as conducting an evaluation of the workshops and presenting the results to the pod.

Incarcerated women participated in the RISE workshops and graduates groups for material and other, less tangible reasons. Most came, at least initially, perhaps because of the financial incentives. However, as Cat noted after she joined the team as a research assistant, motivations shifted for some women as they came to know and appreciate what the workshops offered them:

Those walls in that classroom became safe for that time. The room we were in gave us a more confidential scene so we [could] be free to talk comfortably amongst each other. People I never spoke to became new friends. Being able to share such things helped bring compassion, empathy, respect, honesty, and trust. We were able to be ourselves and say what we felt without anyone passing judgment on us...At first I think the reason that women attended the class was for the money, but as it

went on, we were there to just feel important and acknowledged.

For many women, the workshops were an opportunity to do more than pass the time or earn some extra money (though these remained priorities). Increasingly, incarcerated women attended to be a part of a conversation that built personal and social resources. The compensation encouraged them to attend, but the humanizing experiences inside the classroom convinced them to stay.

Like the workshops, data collection and analysis have been ongoing, grounded, and dialectical (Charmaz, 2000). Throughout the training and research series, the university-based researchers recorded detailed field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Student research assistants also produced notes-on-notes (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) in which they reflected on the data they gathered in their field notes. Midway through the workshop series, outside researchers brought their emerging analyses to the incarcerated researchers for feedback. The analyses that emerged in student notes-on-notes and in the workshops informed future interviews, trainings, and participant observation. Now, in the second year of the project, outside researchers are engaged in further open and focused coding of the transcripts and field notes. As in the open coding that incarcerated researchers did during the workshops, team members aim to explore what emerges through a close reading of the data rather than work with a predetermined set of codes. Outside researchers continue to seek feedback on the analyses from incarcerated researchers and RISE workshop graduates. In workshops inside CJ8 and in the San Francisco Women's Reentry Center,³ the team holds feedback workshops and presents work in progress. A recent feedback workshop with six formerly incarcerated researchers focused on the analysis presented in this article.

Lessons Learned

In the following discussion, Jessica, Isela, Kathleen, Margaret, and Cat explore themes that are emerging through the analysis of the RISE sessions. We highlight lessons learned that we expect will be of special interest to sexuality educators and sexuality researchers striving to effect change in the lives of incarcerated women. In doing so, we emphasize the value of jails as sites of sexuality education for women of color vulnerable to systemic

³ The San Francisco Women's Reentry Center opened in 2006 to provide services to women with histories of involvement with the courts and the criminal justice system.

social inequalities and highlight the value of participatory action models of both sexuality education and sexuality research.

Rethinking Institutional and Interpersonal Roles and Relationships

The collaboration between FAP and CRGS represents one of the first times—if not the first time—that the San Francisco Department of Public Health and San Francisco State University have come together to explore and improve the lives of incarcerated women. Incarcerated women of color played a central role in this collaboration. Their participation enabled them to work side by side with community-based health educators, university faculty, and students. Outside researchers welcomed the incarcerated women, who brought their expertise and enthusiasm to the project. The partnership introduced new possibilities for how the incarcerated researchers might connect with government systems, whether city public health departments or state universities.

In what became an especially important exercise, at least once every workshop cycle, outside researchers outlined the many roles that the team of co-researchers might play in the workshop—researcher, research assistant, participant, interviewer, interviewee, teacher, student, expert. They invited the incarcerated researchers to recognize the roles they already had assumed and to assume roles that built on their established strengths. In her field notes, Jessica described the first time she facilitated this discussion:

I said that we often have visions of experts as people with degrees, wearing lab coats or suits, and having official recognition for their expertise. However, if we expanded the idea of “expert” to include different sorts of knowledge and people, we’d recognize how many of us hold expertise that’s valuable. Earlier, when we were distributing snacks, I heard Denise tell Jasmine that she had to eat all of the snacks before returning to the pod. I noted that this was one sort of expertise that is important and undervalued. Women become experts on life in the pod, and they share that valuable expertise with women who have just arrived. That information helps them survive the pod, know what they can get away with, and what is nonnegotiable. That expertise had also helped us, coming from outside, understand the rules and what we could get away with when facilitating these workshops.

New members of the RISE project, as well as outside researchers, became students in these moments, learning from incarcerated women’s expertise about the context in which the RISE workshops occurred. More experienced

incarcerated women became experts as they shared insights to which only they had access. Outside and incarcerated researchers also examined the extent to which research required them to take on active roles: If we call ourselves educators, for example, we are then responsible for teaching others. Claiming a role meant committing to an activity. In addition, the roles were cyclical: Educators need students and interviewers need interviewees. Thus, these roles put the co-researchers into multiple and overlapping relationships with one another.

As they explored the available roles, incarcerated women talked about being (a) educators when they shared information with others, (b) researchers because they did not rest until they got to the bottom of things, and (c) students because they observed and paid attention in the world. One morning, Sandra talked about preferring to be the interviewee because she thought she had better answers to questions than she did questions. Jaye offered that she was probably an expert because of all she had experienced and survived in her life. After a coding session another morning, the outside researchers described learning from the patterns the incarcerated researchers had identified in women’s lives; the discussion in this article of risk, intimacy, and transformation reflects only a portion of what the outside researchers learned from the incarcerated researchers.

This exchange between members of the research team was crucial to the success of this PAR study. One aim of this study was to understand the feasibility of conducting PAR with university researchers, public-health educators, and incarcerated women. Outside researchers made a habit of checking in with their incarcerated colleagues about the emerging analysis and their experience of contributing as co-researchers. The team discussed emerging analyses midway through the workshop series. For instance, the outside researchers presented the following statement to the incarcerated researchers for feedback: “In these workshops, many women have accepted the responsibilities of being a student, researcher, interviewer, and expert. Playing these roles has put their own perspectives into new light.” The incarcerated researchers responded on slips of paper, keeping their identities confidential. In two typical responses, incarcerated women offered, “I think the different roles are cool, showing us we all have potential as women to be responsible and healthy” and “Yes, I like taking responsibility to listen to other stories and then take a look at my own life.” The stories that incarcerated researchers shared and elicited in peer-to-peer interviews provided contexts through which to explore their own lives and to understand women’s experiences of incarceration and HIV more broadly.

Incarcerated researchers routinely commented on the personal value of assuming new roles, entering new relationships, and having new conversations. At her fourth and final workshop, Anna said that she had talked more than usual, felt especially comfortable in the room, and was not ready to leave RISE. That same day, another woman said that she had learned that talk brings closure on hurt feelings. Still another woman commented that talking had felt good that day, saying, “I don’t talk about my business with people other than my partner.” The conversation in the workshop seems to have felt surprisingly good for her. During another workshop, Marla commented that the workshops helped her hold on to the sense of a future. As a researcher, she felt connected to the work she used to do as a nurse. She would still have to go through a 2-year probationary period because of her felony conviction, but, with workshops like this, Marla thought she could stay connected to and nurture the intelligent part of herself.

By claiming and exploring their roles in this collaborative process, incarcerated researchers also assumed greater control over the project’s aims and outcomes. Jessica and Isela designed the study, secured funding, recruited student assistants, and entered the jail with a clear sense of purpose. However, once others joined the project, Isela and Jessica had to reconsider those purposes when they conflicted with or detracted from those of the student and incarcerated co-researchers.

As discussed previously, more incarcerated women wanted to attend the workshops than the outside researchers could accommodate in each session. In order to include more women and to secure long-term participation among incarcerated researchers, Jessica and Isela decided to make additional weekly visits to the pod to meet with groups of RISE graduates. The first cohort of 8 graduates conducted a listening session in which all women living in the pod met to discuss health concerns. Primary among the issues raised were the routine violation of confidentiality, delayed access to necessary psychological and medical care, and women being reduced to their reproductive capacities. With support from Isela and Jessica, the graduates presented the results of the session in a written report, held a series of meetings with Jail Health Services, and successfully advocated for improved accessibility and quality of medical services for women in CJ8. Through a careful analysis and thoughtful dissemination of data, workshop graduates helped improve the health services available to women incarcerated in San Francisco.

Jails as a Site of Critical Sexuality Education

As discussed previously, the opportunities available to outside researchers are dramatically greater than those

available to co-researchers on the inside. RISE’s transformative PAR took place inside a jail—a site of deprivation, an institution committed to constraining inmates’ minds and bodies and to regulating women’s sexuality. Indeed, sexual behavior in jail constitutes a felony. A handbook⁴ that jail staff members give to prisoners when they enter the jail indicates the following:

Prisoners shall not kiss, hold hands with, or affectionately touch another prisoner or any other person....[P]risoners shall not engage in, and shall not request, entice, or coerce any other person to engage in, any type of sexual conduct. Sexual conduct includes, but is not limited to, touching of breasts, buttocks, anus or genitals, oral copulation and vaginal or anal intercourse.

The RISE project workshops stood in stark contrast with the formal rules of San Francisco County Jails. The Sheriff’s Department’s prohibition of a wide range of intimate physical contact does not eliminate sexual behavior. Ironically, the existence of these rules acknowledges that enticements, coercions, and touch do, in fact, occur in CJ8. Throughout the workshops, women offered hints about their sexual lives in the jail. At times, they alluded to exploitative relationships. For example, some incarcerated women referred in passing to a sergeant as “my man.” Cat remembers deputies and prisoners flirting with each other, sometimes to pass the time, other times to assert power, and still other times for pleasure; reports in local newspapers and from human rights groups confirm that prisoners are vulnerable to such abuses from deputized staff (CDC, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 1996; Lee, 2006). Some of the sexual relationships the women described seemed more mutual but still forbidden. For example, women cryptically alluded to same-sex sexuality in the pod. However, when outside researchers asked directly about the possibility of women having sex with other women in CJ8, incarcerated researchers consistently denied that such behavior occurred.

Sexuality was both forbidden and welcome in the RISE workshops. The outside researchers never enjoyed the absolute trust of their incarcerated counterparts. Gaining collaborators’ trust may always be a challenge when co-researchers have little time to build relationships. In this study, outside researchers had, on average, 6 hours within which to establish rapport and then work with incarcerated researchers. However, in this study, disclosure reflected more than rapport, or its absence. Both disclosure and rapport may be particularly

⁴ Document on file with the authors.

challenging in relationships between people with such disparate formal claims to freedom and authority. Nevertheless, as time went on, incarcerated co-researchers recognized that in these workshops, they had some claim to sexual expression. They occasionally played with each other's hair or stroked another woman's arm in displays of friendship or affection. At the close of workshops, incarcerated and outside researchers sometimes hugged each other good-bye. Incarcerated and outside researchers speculated outside of workshops about their colleagues' sexual identities. In workshop discussions, some women revealed their sexual desires and identities—lesbian, bisexual, queer, straight.

As stated previously, an odd truth of the RISE work is that incarcerated women claimed their sexualities and explored their sexual desires, affections, and relationships at the same time that they struggled to navigate an institution that monitors all of their activities and actively prohibits sexual relationships. This tension characterizes many women's experiences in jail. The San Francisco County Jail is part of one of the most liberal sheriff's departments in the United States. While in CJ8, women have access to enriching experiences such as General Education Development (GED) classes and workshops on creative writing and performance. For some women, incarceration may be the only time they have access to health care and safe spaces for women. As one incarcerated researcher explained,

In addiction women tend to neglect their health and well-being. Some are just too scared to find out. So when they come to jail they figure they get the medical attention they need now. 'Cause when they're out they won't.

Jail thus becomes a place to get care that is otherwise not available. The bitter injustice is that these women must be in jail and stripped of many rights in order to gain that access.

This irony was ever-present. Inside the workshops, collaborators strove to create an alternative space in which incarcerated women, students, community health educators, and researchers entered relationships with one another. However, even as the incarcerated and outside researchers tried to assert women's rights to sexual freedom, expression, and justice, the jail rules and regulations bound what the RISE workshops could ever achieve. The outside researchers entered the jail only after they submitted to a formal clearance process, including background checks. Every Monday, the outside members of the team negotiated their access anew when they presented their bags for inspection; waited for deputies to release locks on security doors; and answered deputies' questions

about the cameras, voice recorders, and snacks they carried into the building. Incarcerated researchers could attend RISE workshops only if they remained in D Pod, if they had not been called into court or the medical clinic, and if the deputies granted them access.

The outside researchers strove to make incarcerated women's attendance at the workshops voluntary: For example, they did not call women into the room and they always reminded women that they could leave the workshops at any time. Nevertheless, the term *voluntary* means only so much in jail. RISE workshops were frequently a woman's only alternative to sitting on her bunk all day, and the \$20 compensation that the incarcerated women received made attendance difficult to refuse. Even the respite that the workshops represented could never be more than momentary. At the close of each workshop, incarcerated and outside co-researchers had little freedom to chat, debrief, or share ideas. Instead, incarcerated women had to get into a single-file line for lunch, and the outside researchers had to pack up and leave the jail.

Furthermore, the institution regularly interrupted the relationships emerging in the workshops. Margaret wrote in her field notes about a harsh interruption from one of the deputies, who stepped into a workshop that was already under way. While in the classroom, he asserted his authority over the women:

Deputy Park came in to get Leda Baker, one of the incarcerated researchers. She is sitting across from me, and she slowly gets up. The circle was broken. I winced when, before leaving, Deputy Park turned to Maxine Wilkins and said sharply, "Keep your arms out!" Maxine had been curled up inside her bright orange sweatshirt. When Deputy Park called her out, she scowled and slowly took her arms out of the sweater so we could all see them.

Removing one woman from the workshop and asserting his authority over the women, the deputy challenged the workshop's integrity as a cooperative space. Always, his interruption reminded us, we were subject to the jail's rules and discretion.

Jessica remembers another afternoon when she was in the pod and asked a deputy whether she could speak with Amy Dunlop, one of the incarcerated researchers who had expressed interest in applying for a research assistantship upon her release. As Jessica waited for Amy, other women approached her to ask how they could join the workshops. The deputy sternly told Jessica to meet with people in the classrooms, not in the middle of the pod where she would be available to answer questions that the inmates would inevitably have, as she said, "24-7" for "any civilian" who came into the pod. Jessica dutifully

assured the deputy that she appreciated the concern about keeping things orderly even though she felt she was not simply like any civilian: She had relationships with women in the jail, and the women had legitimate interests and concerns to express. The militaristic setting of the jail muted these particularities: The deputy saw little more than a generic civilian-inmate relationship and seemed unable to celebrate the interest and enthusiasm the women brought to their work with RISE.

Muting that enthusiasm threatened to dampen the transformative potential of women of color to discuss incarceration, HIV, and sexuality—topics infused with race and racial inequalities. We entered the RISE workshops convinced that the fight against racial inequity is entangled with the fight against incarceration. We seized the horrible opportunity that mass incarceration presents: The disproportionate number of women of color in jail means that within these institutions, women of color come together and, when permitted, can experience sexuality education side by side. In RISE workshops, incarcerated women of color sat together and shared their critical understandings of gender, race, poverty, and social inequalities; Black, Latina, and Asian/Pacific Islander women named and challenged social inequalities and, in doing so, challenged the conditions of incarceration. In an institution characterized by punishment and hierarchy, offering participatory, critical models of sexuality education may be a particularly liberatory act. Such instruction and collaboration may have the potential to interrupt—even momentarily—the silencing and dehumanizing conditions that women face in jail.

Rethinking Sexual Risk

In this jail-based PAR project, women came to difficult understandings of their lives, HIV risk, and incarceration as part of larger social structures and patterns. As one woman wrote in a comment on the meaning of participating in RISE workshops, “It makes you face the reality of things. You become interested when other women you know go through the same thing.” Another incarcerated researcher wrote, “I was scared to share my life with my sisters. Now I see we are all here not only to serve time but [also] to support each other.” This support emerged through HIV education that considered risk in the context of the women’s lives. We discussed our concerns for brothers and mothers who were HIV positive and explored women’s reluctance to insist on condom use because of the complications of love or prostitution. We spoke frankly about staff members providing HIV counseling and testing who were insensitive to clients’ concerns, as well as HIV researchers who exploited women in jail.

In these conversations, the outside researchers listened as their incarcerated collaborators described them and the institutions they represented as contributing to the risks that women navigate.

Once we recognized the contexts in which women navigate HIV risk, our definition of safer sex expanded beyond the usual concerns with condoms, latex, and bodily fluids. The co-researchers’ conversation indicated that women may be less consistently at risk of contracting HIV than they are vulnerable to living sexual lives characterized by a range of exploitations and disappointments. In interviews and workshop discussions, incarcerated researchers discussed a seemingly endless series of betrayals, including abductions and beatings, as well as verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of family members, partners, and strangers. For example, in one peer-to-peer interview, an incarcerated researcher said,

This is like probably like my fifth real relationship....OK, my baby daddy cheated on me. The second one, he hit me so I left him. The third one got somebody else pregnant while we were together. Then the last one before this previous relationship, he cheated on me too.

This woman had recently learned that in her current, and fifth, relationship, her partner was cheating on her while she was in jail. In another set of interviews, incarcerated researchers explored difficulties leaving relationships they considered unhealthy. One woman described

a time when I was 16 years old [and] I was involved with an older guy. This thing came up when he kidnapped me out of [a grocery store] and abused me for 3 days. I wasn’t in contact with my family, and they thought something happened to me.

Insisting on condoms and negotiating safer sex in these primary relationships would hardly secure these women safety in their sexual lives. Like other incarcerated women, they faced continued vulnerability if the infidelity and violence did not end, regardless of the HIV risk.

The incarcerated collaborators unflinchingly named the pervasive vulnerability in their lives. Midway through the workshops, the outside researchers asked the incarcerated researchers to respond to the following statement from their emerging analysis: “Women put themselves at risk in relationships with men who disrespect their bodies and sexual health.” One woman answered, “I have. I was one of these women.” Another explained the intermingling of her own and her partner’s well-being: “My current relationship is beautiful except that my partner is an

IV [intravenous] drug user. I feel he disrespects my body every time he disrespects his.” Overall, one incarcerated researcher explained,

Women can be so vulnerable at times [that] they become naive. So in order to feel that they’re a “good” woman to their man, they do things and allow things to prove their love, even if it means hurting themselves.

Their own and others’ drug use and addiction, as well as sexist gender norms and other social influences, leave incarcerated women vulnerable to self-abnegation and pain.

One response to this vulnerability is *exchange sex*—engaging in sexual behaviors in order to secure needed resources. Many incarcerated researchers reported in interviews, surveys, and discussions that they had sex with men in exchange for money, food, clothing, and drugs. Some women identified as prostitutes, but even those who did not identify as sex workers asserted that sex always involved some sort of exchange. One incarcerated researcher explained the extent of her self-determination:

I believe in the practice of safe sex. I often (always) keep condoms in my purse....No to sex for drugs. I’d buy my own (if I choose to use them) drink, weed, etc. I believe in *no free sex*. If they’re a stranger, they must pay money. If it’s a boyfriend (my own), I wouldn’t always charge him, but he’d still end up paying for every thing I want.

This account suggests much more agency than conventional narratives of exploitation and risk allow. Sexual pleasure and intimacy may be absent from this description of a sexual life, but the account does depict a woman who exacts what she needs using one of the few resources available to her.

The instrumentalism and agency evident in this woman’s response was unusual, however. Most incarcerated researchers indicated that they felt little choice in these exchanges. They stated that poverty, hunger, addiction, and desperation too often led them to make unsafe sexual choices in order to prevail in an unsafe world. One incarcerated researcher stated frankly, “To get a quick fix or a meal, even an outfit to wear, can make you do things and not think about it until it’s too late.” A second woman questioned whether she and other incarcerated women had any choice but to engage in risky sexual behavior, given the conditions of their lives: “When women are in the street life, they choose whatever—anything that’s needed to survive—over safe sex. If given a choice, I think safe sex would be their priority.” Their comments suggest that in the intermingling of vulnerability and sexual

behaviors, incarcerated women have only tenuous claims to judgment and agency in their sexual decision making.

Sexuality thus emerged in the RISE workshops as a site of commodification, exploitation, survival, pleasure, and power. Learning from and with one another, incarcerated and outside researchers are developing a complex understanding of sexual identities, behaviors, and desires at the crux of jailed women’s experiences. Trisha Whittier’s story, from a peer-to-peer interview, is but one example:

I had given up prostitution and drugs to be with this guy, and I didn’t go over there high. I liked him, and he was with another girl when I got there....I’m still in the same relationship, and he doesn’t cheat on me anymore. And if he does, he’s excellent [at] hiding it. Because I’ve followed him around. I’ve had disguises on; I’ve chased him to and from work. And he didn’t know I was behind him....We stopped using condoms, so that if I found [any] condoms in the house I’d know he was fucking around.

In Trisha’s story, condom use, deception, trust, and sacrifice have become entangled. In her efforts to secure her partner’s fidelity, condoms have become contraband. Any sexuality educator hoping to support Trisha’s efforts to remain safe will have to recognize the many dangers she faces in her sexual life—not only HIV infection but also betrayal and loss.

Trisha’s comments are not atypical. Despite participants’ significant understanding of HIV transmission, many frequently engaged in sexually risky behavior with male partners, particularly with primary male partners with whom they are reluctant to insist on condom use and other safer-sex strategies. These relationships are not only sources of risk but also sites of pleasure and intimacy. As women seek trust and love in their relationships with primary sexual partners, even in the midst of violence and betrayal, they claim a scarce source of pleasure in their lives.

Conclusions

Women’s paths to unsafe sexual choices are inflected with race, gender, and economic inequalities. Sexuality educators and researchers must recognize and respect those paths if we are to respond effectively to the vulnerability in women’s lives. Thinking differently about sexuality education is at the core of this project in San Francisco County Jail. We believe that incarcerated women of color are experts on their own lives and that traditional HIV prevention too often misses opportunities to engage with

women, particularly oppressed women who have been discriminated against based on their race, sexuality, gender, and economic status. We recognize the potential of alternative modes of knowledge production and acquisition as new sources of HIV prevention (Gómez, Hernández, & Faigeles, 1999). We embrace a basic insight of Freire (1986), that individual and community empowerment is possible when people come together to learn and teach one another about challenges and solutions to their concerns.

Before RISE, women incarcerated in CJ8 did not have regular access to workshops that insisted on the importance of sexuality to their overall well-being. Women in CJ8 routinely attend HIV prevention classes, but facilitators rarely addressed issues of sexual pleasure, relationships, and power. In this project, we explored the roles that desire and attraction play in sexual decision making and the value women's bodies may have as resources when exchanging sex for food, money, drugs, or more. We examined the complicated histories of betrayal and violence that informed many incarcerated women's ability to imagine their sexual futures and we insisted that women's sexual bodies and sexual selves might be integral to their coming to empowerment and activism. Rather than implementing a disease-prevention strategy, we prioritized learning about the contexts of these women's lives, their survival strategies, and the conditions that compelled their decision making (Schwalbe, 2001).

In this project, researchers committed themselves to (a) empowering incarcerated women to make healthy choices about their reproductive and overall health and (b) increasing awareness of the societal pressures and inequalities that serve as barriers to potential change. To meet such a commitment, sexuality educators and researchers had to begin a new dialogue with new partners. We embraced sexuality education as an opportunity to discuss desire and healthy relationships and to explore the compulsory heterosexuality, sexual and physical abuse, and poverty that inform the sexual lives of incarcerated women of color. We also insisted that incarcerated women have greater power to determine the course and quality of their time in the workshops than in other moments of their incarceration or in conventional research and educational settings. Each RISE session represented an opportunity for all co-researchers to contribute to ongoing training, data collection, and analysis. Critics of PAR are justifiably concerned about unequal power relationships, competing priorities, and (under)privileged positionalities. As a research team, RISE's incarcerated and outside co-researchers seek meaningful collaboration and shared

success, knowledge, and opportunity while remaining mindful of the structural constraints that threaten to undermine our collaboration.

The term *HIV education* invokes particular curricular expectations: discussions of bodily fluids that can transmit HIV, barriers known to be effective in the prevention of HIV, and the importance of knowing whether you and your sexual partners are HIV positive or HIV negative. In the past 2 decades, HIV concerns have framed sexuality education for adult women and men. The HIV epidemic has focused issues of sexuality on outcomes of disease prevention. In our project, incarcerated women of color in San Francisco County Jail experienced an alternative form of HIV prevention, one that emphasized a comprehensive approach to health, especially sexual health.

Although limiting the acquisition of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases is a necessary component of our work, it is not the defining concept in our project. For Kathleen and Isela, who are experienced HIV educators and testers, reframing HIV education as a broader opportunity for sexuality education has required a shift in training and understanding. The tension can be profound between, on the one hand, offering learners traditional HIV information and, on the other, working with learners to explore HIV in the context of contingencies and inequalities. When learners ask fact-specific questions about HIV, educators may easily get stuck in a rut of disease questions and answers. Also, learners may have an expectation of what it means to be in an HIV workshop. Moving beyond these conventional pedagogies is crucial to a new commitment to sexuality education with and for incarcerated women. Social policy must commit to supporting alternative interventions that have the potential to prevent HIV, empower participants, and offer an alternative setting in which to carry out this mission.

Our research takes seriously the need to be mindfully inclusive of participants and to capitalize on their expertise. Participatory, critical sexuality education promises incarcerated women a way of knowing their bodies and sexuality beyond reductive statements of risk and bodily fluid exchange and an expectation that they bear primary responsibility for HIV prevention in their sexual relationships. We enter the second year of this project with two lessons sharply clear. First, incarcerated women have a right to knowledge, desires, curiosities, and support in their sexual lives. Second, sexuality educators and researchers must offer incarcerated women a chance to consume, produce, and share knowledge that not only is accurate but also validates their experience as sexual

beings and not just as the objects of violence, pain, and disease.

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