

Why we should care about what happens behind bars



Photo credit: Joanne Olivier.

In his 1990s hit, *Usisi Rose*, acclaimed musician and former inmate Freddie Gwala laments the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in prison, singing, “*Ejele bokwenz’ usisi Rose*”.

Gwala’s depiction of prison life is echoed in a 2007 survey by the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS), which found that nearly half of all surveyed inmates reported that sexual abuse happens “sometimes”, “often”, or “very often”. Whilst anyone can be raped in prison, some people are targeted more often than others. Inmates who are at an especially high risk are those who are young, small in stature, or committed a non-violent crime; first-time prisoners are also vulnerable, including those that are poor and lack visitations from family or friends. Prisoners who are gay, bisexual, or transgender — or those who are perceived to be so — are preyed upon with depressing frequency. The extreme danger facing this population is largely due to the hypermasculine and homophobic attitudes that are prevalent among inmates and staff members alike. When these views are allowed to flourish, anyone who fails to live up to the dominant stereotypical male behavior is unsafe.

Whether committed in the home, in the community, or in prison, rape is a serious crime that has devastating health consequences for its victims. Besides the debilitating shame, anger, anxiety, and depression that this abuse can cause, many survivors contract deadly sexually transmitted diseases from their rapes, such as HIV.

Prisons themselves can be a barrier to healing from sexual violence. Incarcerated survivors have little control over their environment, like the level of noise and light, not to mention the crowds of people, which can be triggering. Survivors are unable to move about freely, may have no privacy, and may even be forced to see regularly — or even live with — their perpetrator, while the people they trust the most are outside the prison walls, and often difficult for them to reach.

Because of society's belief that men should be strong and be able to protect themselves, most male survivors are less likely to seek help or may feel that it is somehow their fault that they were raped. Tragically, due to toxic notions of masculinity — both inside, and outside prison — many male survivors of prisoner rape not only feel traumatised, but also feel that they have lost their manhood. Without access to support services, either in the community or behind bars, some survivors commit suicide.

Generally, life behind bars, and exposure to sexual violence in particular, even if one is not directly involved, entrenches destructive notions of masculinity, sex, and power that, along with trauma and ill-health, are fed back into society on prisoners' release.

Clearly, what happens in prison has a profound impact on all of us. Yet too often, the lives of prisoners are invisible to us. On any given day, close to 160 000 people are incarcerated in the country's 243 correctional facilities, and approximately 360 000 people are released from prison annually.

With 360 000 people released from prison every year, what ever is done to stop HIV, promote gender equality, and entrench a culture of human rights in our communities will not succeed if prisoners are left behind.

Fortunately, prisoner rape is not an inevitable part of prison life. Facilities with committed leaders and staff, good policies, and sound practices can keep people safe and support survivors.

When Freddie Gwala sang about the problem of sexual violence in prison, there was not a plan to deal with this problem — but today, there is. In a major victory for prisoners' rights, the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) approved the Policy to Address Sexual Abuse of Inmates in DCS Facilities (Sexual Abuse Policy) in 2013. This policy gives DCS officials the tools to prevent, detect, respond to, and document the sexual abuse of inmates. It is encouraging that DCS has finally made a commitment to meaningfully implement this policy

in all its facilities. This is a major breakthrough; not only for the benefit of inmates, but for their families — and for all of us; because if inmates are not our neighbours, they are likely our friends and family.

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Just Detention International-South Africa (JDI-SA) is a health and human rights organisation that seeks to end sexual abuse in all forms of detention.