



The Women in Prison Project

In recent years, the number of women behind bars has increased dramatically around the world. Yet little is known about the causes, conditions, and consequences of women's incarceration. To address this knowledge gap, in 2017, the [Vance Center's Human Rights and Access to Justice Program](#) launched a project to promote global collaboration on improving conditions of women's imprisonment. The **Women in Prison Project** ("the Project") convenes women prisoners' rights advocates from across the globe to 1) share information about conditions of women's incarceration in their respective countries or regions; and 2) build capacity for improved monitoring and reporting of conditions in women's prisons. Examples of initiatives under the Project include:

- Convening in Bogota, Colombia, the first international [conference](#) of women prisoners' rights advocates. The Vance Center, in partnership with Penal Reform International, brought together 49 advocates from 23 countries, including nine formerly incarcerated women. Out of this conference was created the first-ever global network of advocates for women prisoners: the **Women in Prison Network**. Connected via an online platform, the Network includes 55 individual advocates and 37 organizations from a total of 22 countries representing every continent. It is a safe space for advocates to share information and best practices, seek collaborations, and build capacity for improved monitoring and reporting of conditions in women's prisons worldwide.
- Conducting a [pilot research study on women's incarceration in Sierra Leone](#). The project, which the Vance Center implemented jointly with the NGO AdvocAid of Sierra Leone, assesses the causes and consequences of women's imprisonment in the country. Moreover, it serves as a blueprint for similar research that other organizations can conduct in their respective countries. Following the study, the Vance Center and AdvocAid facilitated a series of [training workshops](#) for police officers in Sierra Leone and jointly submitted a contribution to Sierra Leone's May 2021 Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The [submission](#) focused on human rights concerns with regards to women in prison in Sierra Leone, with a focus on issues such as prison conditions, unfair police practices, arbitrary arrests, petty offences, violence against women, and the death penalty. Advocates in Sierra Leone used data from the research in advocacy that led to the country abolishing the death penalty.
- The [report "Women in Prison: Africa Regional Initiative"](#), developed in collaboration with NGOs and law firms in Nigeria, The Gambia, Malawi, Kenya, and Tanzania and launched at a panel discussion at the Africa NGO Forum preceding the African Commission's ordinary session in Banjul, The Gambia in the Fall of 2019. The report surveys what is currently

known about women's incarceration in these five African countries, both in law and practice. It provides a detailed analysis of these countries' compliance with domestic, regional, and international standards on women's incarceration.

- Mobilizing the Women in Prison Network and conducting [research](#) on government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in detention centers for women in the Global South. The research focused on six key areas: healthcare, prison protocols and rules, children in prison with their mothers, rehabilitation and release, the criminal justice system, and prison staff and covered 17 Global South countries. Based on the assessment, the Network submitted [open letters](#) to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights urging states to ensure that COVID-19 responses consider the unique needs of women in prison.
- Submitting and presenting a [Written Opinion](#) to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights addressing the request from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for an Advisory Opinion related to "Differentiated Approaches to Persons Deprived of Liberty". In the Written Opinion, the Vance Center and the Women in Prison Network analyzed best practices adopted by some States in relation to women in prison who are pregnant, postpartum, or lactating, as well as girls and boys who live with their mothers in detention. The analysis also includes how such States have interpreted the rights to equality and to live free from all forms of discrimination within the prison context.
- The Vance Center and four members of the Women in Prison Network presented a [written submission](#) to the Independent Expert on the human rights of older women, including: 1) a general overview of the experiences of older women in prison; 2) information on the growing numbers of older women in prison and the lack of adequate and suitable prison facilities and services to meet the specific needs of older women, including specific healthcare services; and 3) analysis of the societal discrimination leading older women to come into conflict with the law, and the exacerbating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these issues. The Independent Expert referenced this submission in her [thematic report](#).
- The National Endowment for Democracy [awarded](#) the Vance Center's Human Rights Program a grant for two years to support a strategic litigation initiative as part of the Women in Prison Project to improve laws and policies in the Latin American and Caribbean region protecting women in prison. The Vance Center will engage with Inter-American and United Nations human rights mechanisms through litigation and advocacy to clarify states' obligation to enact laws and policies that take into account the unique pathways and consequences of the incarceration of women and therefore better protect women's rights under international and regional human rights frameworks. The Vance Center will undertake the project in collaboration with the Women in Prison Network.