

**“Women 2 Women” – An HIV/AIDS Prevention Curriculum
for U.S. Women Incarcerated for Drug Problems
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According to the U.S. Dept. of Justice, 181,179 women were incarcerated in federal, state, and local correctional institutions at the end of 2003 — 2 ½ times the number in 1990. Women still account for only 9.2% of the total inmate population. The increase in the incarcerated women is directly related to drug enforcement policies that have expanded arrests and extended sentences, even for minor violations.

- 80% of women prisoners are convicted of non-violent drug or property offenses (often drug-related).
- only 18% are incarcerated for violent crimes.
- According to advocates, many of those who are serving sentences for violent crimes are women who fought back at their batterers.
- 2/3rds of incarcerated women are mothers of minor children.
- 6% are pregnant when they are sent to prison.
- many have experienced sexual or physical abuse prior to incarceration.

HIV/AIDS: Early in the epidemic, HIV/AIDS was diagnosed for relatively few women and female adolescents (referred to as women hereafter). Today, women account for more than one-quarter of all new HIV/AIDS diagnoses, with steep and rising increases among African American women and Latinas. Women with histories of substance abuse, trauma (e.g., violence, incest), those who are partners of injection drug users, have multiple partners or are sex workers – among other factors – frequently have a poor self-image, self-esteem and self-efficacy. They are among the women at greatest risk of contracting and transmitting the HIV virus.

HIV infection among incarcerated women in the United States is a hidden epidemic. **3.5% of incarcerated women are infected with the HIV virus compared to 0.1% in the general female population.** Women of color are disproportionately affected by HIV infection. The over-representation of African American women and Latinas among incarcerated women magnifies the impact of HIV infection in prisons. For example, in Texas (a state that is second only to California in the number of women incarcerated), 22.8% of HIV-positive incarcerated women were White, 72.4% were Black, and 4.8% were Hispanic.

A 2005 study confirmed that HIV transmission does occur in prisons available (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]). It is recommended that prison authorities consider making condoms available in all prisons. Successful condom availability programs have been implemented in statewide prison systems in Mississippi, Vermont, in the District of Columbia, and in county jails in Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. There is no evidence from these programs that condoms have been used as a weapon, pose major threat to security or that availability has led to increased sexual activity among inmates. This public health intervention has also been endorsed by leading HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) prevention experts like the American Public Health Association and the World Health Organization.

Dr. Lorinda Arella, a psychologist, and I, a social anthropologist, wrote this curriculum for women who are incarcerated in a small women’s prison a North Eastern state in the U.S... Although the inmates who have and will participate in this Women to Women (W2W) Project may know about HIV/AIDS, they may not be doing enough to protect themselves from getting HIV. The W2W Project is a training program for women inmates that will offer participants the knowledge, skills, and hope to increase their pride to actively protect themselves from becoming infected with the HIV virus—both inside and outside prison. Volunteers at a faith based organization are currently using this curriculum to train inmates at the women’s prison.

This curriculum was written with the understanding that the particular prison in which it is being used is a unique and experimental approach to reducing recidivism of women incarcerated for drug or addiction related offenses, i.e., to help women to succeed in a 6-month drug treatment program during the latter phase of their

incarceration and to increase and support their capabilities to stay free of drugs and other criminal activity when they are released. We have, further, assumed that this prison is a drug-free environment and that use of drugs by prisoners is non-existent or rare. This curriculum takes for granted that upon release, many, if not most, of the women will continue to confront situations in which family members, partners, friends, and neighbors use drugs. In this regard, the knowledge and strategies gained from these training sessions about reducing risk, avoiding risky people and locations, using coping/assertiveness skills, and strengthening relationships with non-drug using supportive people will cumulatively assist women to respond in a healthier and self-protective way to these dangerous situations.

W2W is an adaptation of the SISTA PROJECT (CDC-funded and approved) which was developed to prevent HIV/AIDS among African-American women. W2W is not specific to a sexual orientation or ethnic/cultural group. It, however, focuses especially on HIV/AIDS-related issues for incarcerated women who have a history of alcohol and other drug use and trauma. The W2W Project consists of 6 once-a-week, two-hour sessions. These sessions build on one another and have been developed to encourage group participation in an open and stimulating environment. The sessions include:

1. Voices From Within (Women's Pride)
2. Taking Care of Myself (Women's Health)
3. HIV Education (Protecting Yourself Against HIV Infection)
4. HIV/AIDS Risk and Substance Abuse
5. Coping with Relationships and Other Triggers
6. Life Choices—a review of the key concepts and skills using a game approach, concluding with a graduation party and a Certificate of Accomplishment for each participant in recognition of her achievement in completing the W2W Project.

Songs, poems, motto that is spoken at the beginning and end of each session, and interactive activities have been included in this curriculum to engage inmates in the project. A focus group was held with the women inmates who participated in this training program. They, unanimously, stated that they learned from the project. Many requested more information about broader women's health issues; and they recommended that it be used in other women's prisons to help them to take good care of themselves. One inmate sent her participant's manual to her partner so that "he can learn to protect himself and me when I get out."

The only thing that The W2W Project asked from each participant is respect and support in helping herself and her peers to protect themselves when they have sex.

The W2W project motto:

**WOMEN ARE STRONG
WOMEN ARE WISE
WOMEN WILL PROTECT & SURVIVE**