



**Testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice**

**Hearing: Sexual Assault in U.S. Prisons: Two Decades After the Prison Rape
Elimination Act**

**Kelsey Bolar
Director of IW Features
Independent Women's Forum**

**Washington, D.C.
September 25, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Booker, Ranking Member Cotton, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to appear today. My name is Kelsey Bolar, and I am the director of IW Features, the storytelling platform at Independent Women's Forum. Every day, we work to amplify real voices and authentic stories to explain how public policy impacts Americans and their loved ones. By sharing these stories, IW Features seeks to positively influence public policy and foster more civil, compassionate, and productive debates.

Some of the most devastating stories we have covered at IW Features are those of women who have been harassed, assaulted, and raped in prison as a direct result of policies that allow male inmates to transfer into women's prisons. While every story of sexual harassment and assault is tragic and deserving of attention, what's different about these stories is that every single one of them could have been easily prevented by keeping biological men out of women's prisons.

In hopes that we can urgently address the inhuman punishment of women in custody who are forced to live with men, today I will share with you four of the stories that we've collected as part of our ongoing documentary series, "Cruel and Unusual Punishment: The Male Takeover of Women's Prisons."

- **Alissa Kamholz**, a female inmate who had to share a cell with a male who was affiliated with the gang members who sexually abused her as a young girl.
- **Jane Doe**, a female inmate who, three days after moving into the same prison cell with a 6'2", 200-lb. male, was raped by him in the shower.

- **Channel Johnson**, a female inmate who was sexually manipulated by a male with whom she shared a cell and a bunk bed.
- **Cathleen Quinn**, a female inmate who recently lost her parole date after objecting to California’s SB 132 and reporting that a male was repeatedly peeping on her while she used the bathroom.

Allowing male offenders to reside in women’s prisons is dangerous and unfair. Put simply, it’s cruel and unusual punishment. Policies such as California’s SB 132, which “allows incarcerated transgender, non-binary and intersex people to request to be housed and searched in a manner consistent with their gender identity,”¹ prioritize the interests of men over the safety and well-being of women. They invite biological men who claim to identify as women into women’s prisons, forcing female inmates with histories of trauma and domestic abuse to share their most private and intimate spaces with men—many of whom are violent, sexual predators serving time for heinous crimes. As a result, incarcerated women are suffering well-documented physical and psychological damage. This abuse of women must end.

The four women I will introduce you to today have suffered greatly, yet have been brave enough to share their stories with IW Features so that others are spared and these harmful policies can be stopped. Their stories stand as a testament to why biological sex matters, especially in institutional settings.

Alissa Kamholz

I’d first like to introduce you to **Alissa Kamholz**,² a female inmate sentenced to 39 years to life under California’s three-strikes law.

When Alissa’s mother got remarried to a member of the notorious Hells Angels motorcycle gang, she “gave” Alissa, who was at the time a young child, to him as a wedding present.

For 10 years, Alissa suffered continuous abuse from her stepfather and his biker gang, which was known for assaulting and gang-raping strangers, their members’ girlfriends, and even their own family members. Her perpetrators, she said, were long-haired white men.

Alissa had already spent over two decades at Central California’s Women’s Facility (CCWF), which she called her “safe place” from her years of abuse. That was, until

¹ “Senate Bill 132 FAQs,” California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Accessed September 24, 2024. <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/prea/sb-132-faqs/>.

² “Alissa’s Story | ‘Our Sentence Wasn’t To Be Abused,’ Says Female Rape Victim Forced to Live Behind Bars With a Man,” IW Features, April 15, 2024. <https://www.iwfeatures.com/alissas-story/>.

November 2023, when the state placed a long-haired, white male inmate in Alissa's room.

Alissa said she soon came to discover that her new cellmate was not only from the same small town as she was, but he also frequented the very clubhouse where she was routinely abused.

"There's a 97% chance that [he was] there in the building or even the room while I was being raped," Alissa said.

Being housed with a man who had such intimate ties to her abusers was the hardest situation Alissa ever experienced.

"I feel like even being sentenced to prison was easier than having to deal with that," she said.

Prior to this incident, Alissa already suffered from PTSD, which caused nightmares to come and go. Now being housed with a man who had such intimate ties to her abusers, her nightmares got worse. Alissa couldn't sleep, she didn't want to take a shower, or even use the bathroom.

"It was a very, very difficult situation for me," she said. "Our sentence wasn't to be abused."

After three weeks of living with this man, Alissa's roommates claimed he exposed himself to them while she was at work.

She described the fallout of that incident as "isolating," as she found organizations that traditionally stand for the rights of female inmates now working against them—in favor of men.

"We were supposed to be ... rehabilitated," she said. "Everybody's turned their back on us."

According to the ACLU, 92% of all women in California prisons have been "battered and abused" in their lifetimes.³ Nationwide, an estimated 86% of women in jail are sexual violence survivors.⁴ As Ranking Member Cory Booker has aptly described it,

³ "Facts about the Over-Incarceration of Women in the United States," ACLU, 2007.

<https://www.aclu.org/documents/facts-about-over-incarceration-women-united-states>.

⁴ "86 percent of women in jail are sexual-violence survivors," National PREA Resource Center, 2017.

<https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/resource/86-percent-women-jail-are-sexual-violence-survivors>

there is a “survivor-of-sexual-trauma to prisoner pipeline.”⁵ Forcing female victims of abuse to share intimate spaces with biological men leaves them in a constant state of hypervigilance. Nobody can heal or rehabilitate under these circumstances. For inmates like Alissa, it triggers PTSD and a constant state of fear.

Alissa is eligible for parole in 2032. When asked why she would speak out against SB 132 and jeopardize her ability to qualify for parole, Alissa said, “I am not scared to speak out because there’s nothing worse that you can do to me.”

Jane Doe

I’d next like to share the story of a woman I will call **Jane Doe** who, after bravely sharing her horrific story with our team, decided she did not want to go public using her name. While I will keep her anonymous, I would be happy to confidentially share more information with this committee and would note there is now active litigation involving the male inmate named in this case.

In January 2024, Jane was serving a short sentence at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) for breaking into an ex-boyfriend's house through an open-lock front door. She wanted to talk with him and get her belongings.

Though she was convicted of burglary, as she described it, “I’m guilty of wanting to be loved. That’s definitely what I’m guilty of.”

Before this incident, Jane had never been incarcerated. She described prison as a total culture shock.

While incarcerated, Jane ended up sharing a bunk bed with Tremaine Carroll, a biological male who identifies as a woman and who was the public face of a campaign to support California’s SB 132.⁶ On her second day of living with him, Carroll allegedly came on to Jane, a proposition that she rejected. The following day, Carroll allegedly attacked Jane in the shower and raped her.⁷

Following the assault, Carroll, a 51-year-old, 6'2" fully intact man, accused Jane, who stands just over 5 feet tall, of a PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act) allegation. This

⁵ “Inside the Legislative Fight for the Rights of Incarcerated Women,” Slate, 2017. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/07/kamala-harris-and-cory-booker-push-new-legislation-for-the-rights-of-incarcerated-women.html>.

⁶ “3rd-strike 'trans' rape suspect prompts rebellion against CA law after attack in women's prison,” Fox News, June 3, 2024. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/third-strike-trans-rape-suspect-prompts-rebellion-against-ca-law-after-attack-womens-prison>.

⁷ Ibid.

resulted in prison staff forcibly moving Jane, who was just raped, into administrative segregation and strip-searching her. She was barred from contacting her family and put in isolation.

After the assault, Jane told us she could only take a shower once every three days because the shower is so traumatizing for her. She has panic attacks daily and said she has to take medication to quell her violent nightmares. While she was terrified to tell her story and ultimately changed her mind about going public using her name, she told us she wanted to be the last female inmate raped as a result of policies like California's SB 132.

Sadly, that wasn't the case. Within 24 hours of raping Jane Doe, Tremaine Carroll was credibly accused of raping another victim.⁸

Carroll is now facing three criminal charges, including two felony counts of forcible rape and one count of dissuading a witness from testifying.⁹ While Carroll is denying these charges, his case is moving to trial. Carroll, formerly the face of California's push to allow men into women's prisons, was transferred out of Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) to Kern Valley State Prison, an all-male prison.¹⁰

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) was passed unanimously by both houses of Congress in 2003. The aim was to create zero tolerance for prison rape.¹¹ By allowing men to self-identify as women and transfer to women's prisons, we are not just tolerating rape, but enabling it.

Though Jane will hopefully be released from prison soon and find some semblance of justice through the legal system, her life will never be the same after suffering this horrific assault.

Channel Johnson

I'd now like you to meet **Channel Johnson**. In 2022, staff at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) placed male inmate Jonathan Robertson in Channel's cell.

⁸ "WoLF Attends Preliminary Hearing for People v. Tremaine Carroll," WoLF, July 9, 2024. <https://womensliberationfront.org/news/wolf-attends-preliminary-hearing-for-people-v-tremaine-carroll>.

⁹ CDCR California Incarcerated Records and Information Search (CIRIS), "Tremaine Carroll." CA.gov. <https://ciris.mt.cdcr.ca.gov/details?cdcrNumber=H73384>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Responding to Sexual Abuse of Inmates in Custody: Addressing the Needs of Men, Women, and Gender Nonconforming Populations," National PREA Resource Center, April 2014. https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/content/adult_quick_sheet_-_2-27-2014_for_bja_review.pdf.

Channel wasn't just sharing her small room with Jonathan—the two also shared a bunk bed.

Channel told IW Features that when prison staff were around, Johnson would “act like a female.” But as soon as the door shut, he would switch back to acting male.

Channel was open to living with a male identifying as a woman and said “everything was fine” until Jonathan “rubbed his hard penis against me.”

After that, Channel said she started having sexual intercourse with Jonathan for two and a half months. Jonathan learned that Channel was sentenced to prison for life and was sad that she never got to have kids. Channel said Jonathan then began manipulating her into continuing to have a sexual relationship with him under the pretense that he could get her pregnant.

According to Channel, Jonathan never told her that he was on medication that suppressed his sperm count. When she found out, Channel felt betrayed and manipulated.

“It's easy for a woman that is a heterosexual to be manipulated if they are in the presence of a man and they're saying, ‘Oh, I can get you pregnant,’ ... and then you believe them, and then you start a relationship, and then [the relationship] turn[s] fatal,” she said.

The forced integration of male prisoners into the female population makes even meaningful consent questionable. It has also led to situations where women have become unwilling participants in sexual misconduct. Most cells at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), for example, house eight people, so if two people have sex, whether it's consensual or not, the entire room is forced to see, hear, and smell it.

Almost every woman's story in prison starts with an abusive relationship of some kind. Putting these women directly back into the nexus of their crimes robs them of the opportunity to rehabilitate and heal. Every single woman is affected by these situations. You do not have to be penetrated to be violated. Having all of your senses bombarded with consensual or non-consensual sex is volatile. Having to watch another woman be battered and beaten is resulting in mass symptoms of complex PTSD. We are reaching a point where we are now complicit in irreparable psychological damage to this vulnerable, forgotten sector of women.

As Channel said, “Our rights are being violated on every level that there is.”

Cathleen Quinn

I'd like to close with the story of **Cathleen Quinn**,¹² a current inmate at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) who lost her parole after objecting to California's SB 132 and reporting that a male repeatedly peeped on her while she used the bathroom.

In January 2022, Cathleen was using the restroom, naked from the waist down, when she noticed a person walking up to the frosted glass on the door, standing there. Seated on the toilet, Cathleen told the person who she recognized as Eva Reeves, a male convicted of murder (formerly known as Michael "Oso" Contrares), to go away.¹³ But he remained outside the door.

Cathleen said she told her friend she found the situation "really disturbing" but ultimately decided to brush it off, hoping it was a one-time incident. It wasn't. Less than a month later, Reeves allegedly did it again, this time lingering even longer.

Concerned about the privacy and safety of female inmates, on February 5, Cathleen filed a grievance with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) against SB 132. As she explained, "The only reason I filed this grievance was because I believe that SB 132 is bad policy. I believe that preoperative men should not be housed with women here with their genitalia still attached. I disagree with it. And I just want it noted that because of the situation that has happened to me twice now, I feel very uncomfortable, and I think that this policy is bad."

Cathleen intentionally chose not to file a PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act) allegation since she wasn't alleging sexual assault—and she knew that doing so could open her up to administrative segregation and lengthy investigations that could have impacted her ability to qualify for parole. However, Cathleen felt violated by Reeves and thought, in case the situation ever escalated, she wanted the two incidents of him peeping on her in a vulnerable position documented.

On March 30, the parole board found Cathleen suitable for parole, following a 150-day review period where she must remain free of disciplinary write-ups.

¹² "Cathleen's Story | Female Inmate Loses Parole After Objecting to Transgender Prison Policy," IW Features, September 25, 2024. <https://www.iwfeatures.com/cathleens-story-female-inmate-loses-parole-after-objecting-to-transgender-prison-policy/>.

¹³ Richard Valdemar, "Florence 13: The Other Transnational Gang," Police Magazine, December 13, 2010. <https://www.policemag.com/blogs/gangs/blog/15318051/florence-13-the-other-transnational-gang/>.

But just a few months later in June, the prison issued a write-up to Cathleen, asserting that her grievances regarding the male peeping incidents earlier in the year were “false reports of criminal conduct” and harassment of the perpetrator based on “transgender status.”

Even though the write-up hadn't yet been adjudicated, the state vacated Cathleen's parole grant. Despite being later found “not guilty” of the allegations detailed in the report, Cathleen's opportunity for parole was gone.

Cathleen had served nearly 20 years and was only three weeks away from being released on parole. By that point, her family had already made arrangements for her to come home. Because she reported this man's repeated behaviors and told the prison that she did not feel safe living with men, Cathleen now must wait another five years in prison.

While IW Features is working hard to expose and raise awareness about the devastating effects of policies that allow males to reside in women's prisons, this story demonstrates why it's impossible to know anything close to the full scope of what's happened. For some female inmates, speaking out is a matter of freedom or more time behind bars. No American should be faced with this choice, and the retribution Cathleen faced after objecting to a policy that enabled a male to peep at her in a vulnerable position is an injustice.

Conclusion

These are only four of many stories that we've collected and told as part of our ongoing documentary series, “Cruel and Unusual Punishment.” IW Features is a small team with limited resources, but since embarking on this project, we now have female inmates and whistleblowers coming forward regularly asking for help.

There are more stories from incarcerated women and whistleblowers than our team can tell. Certainly, there are more stories than I was able to share with you today, including the brave incarcerated women challenging the constitutionality of SB 132 in California,¹⁴ represented by the Women's Liberation Front.¹⁵ But I'd like to reiterate, every single story that's been documented has one thing in common: It never would have happened if women's prisons were truly female-only.

¹⁴ “WoLF Files New Complaint in Landmark Case to Get Men out of California Women's Prisons,” WoLF, July 20, 2024. <https://womensliberationfront.org/news/wolf-files-new-complaint-in-landmark-case-to-get-men-out-of-california-womens-prisons>.

¹⁵ Women's Liberation Front. <https://womensliberationfront.org/>.

Because of these policies, we now find ourselves in a situation similar to the one prior to the passing of the Prison Rape Elimination Act.¹⁶ I regret that today, I'm unable to give you an exact number of female inmates who've been victimized as a result of policies that allow men into women's prisons. There is a clear fear amongst women to report these incidents and speak out. The need for more data is obvious. But we shouldn't wait for data to dictate what the stories that we have collected already make clear: Policies that grant inmates placement based on their self-declared gender identity subject women to complex trauma and put them in serious danger. Already, they have caused demonstrable harm and stand as a clear and cruel violation of women's most basic constitutional and civil rights.

Before closing, I would like to take a moment to thank this committee for its recent decision to oppose President Joe Biden's judicial nominee Sarah Netburn. Netburn went against the Bureau of Prisons recommendation and allowed a male convicted of child molestation of a 9-year-old boy,¹⁷ rape of a 17-year-old girl,¹⁸ and distributing pornography of adults raping children,¹⁹ to be housed in a federal women's prison because the male "identified" as a woman.

When this committee decided to block this nomination, former inmate Amie Ichikawa, who has dedicated her life to helping incarcerated women through her organization Women II Women,²⁰ told me that for the first time, female inmates went to sleep feeling heard, feeling seen, and feeling hope that there are lawmakers who are not just willing to listen to them, but who are willing to fight for them. Opposing Netburn's nomination was a meaningful step towards protecting our forgotten female inmates. But so much more must be done.

Those of us with the privilege of having a platform or a position of power are called on to be a voice for those who are unable to speak for themselves. This includes the incarcerated. For so long, female inmates thought they were voiceless in this fight. They thought that nobody cared as they were being forced to share their bunk beds, their showers, their toilets, and other private, intimate living spaces with biological men. This committee signaled a change—that these women are not forgotten.

¹⁶ "Prison Rape Elimination Act," National PREA Resource Center, September 23, 2024. <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/about/prison-rape-elimination-act>.

¹⁷ NETBURN, S. (2022). REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION. In UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK [JSS vs. W.S. PLILER]. <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.nysd.511268/gov.uscourts.nysd.511268.74.0.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Biden Judicial Nominee Sent Trans Male Rapist to Female Prison, Arguing Safety Concerns Were Overblown. Now, Sources Say He is Exposing Himself to Inmates," The Washington Free Beacon, July 10, 2024. <https://freebeacon.com/courts/biden-judicial-nominee-sent-trans-male-rapist-to-female-prison-arguing-safety-concerns-were-overblown-now-sources-say-he-is-exposing-himself-to-inmates/>.

²⁰ Woman II Woman. <https://www.womaniiwoman.org/>.

Until all female inmates are protected, Independent Women's Forum will continue advocating for them and telling their stories so that *all* Americans understand the inhumanity of forcing a female inmate to climb into her bunk bed at night with a male above her. When she goes to sleep, her prison cell door is locked behind her. Locking women who have been victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse into rooms with convicted male rapists, pedophiles, and murderers is the very definition of cruel and unusual punishment.

This is not a Left or Right issue. It is a human issue. Incarcerated women need and deserve female-only spaces. Anything less is a violation of their dignity and most basic human rights.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for allowing me to be a voice for so many women who, for so long, were unable to speak for themselves.