

THE WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP EVALUATION REPORT

women's
fellowship

Written by: Zuri Tau and Tamika Lewis
Social Insights Research

Submitted to:
Community Change:



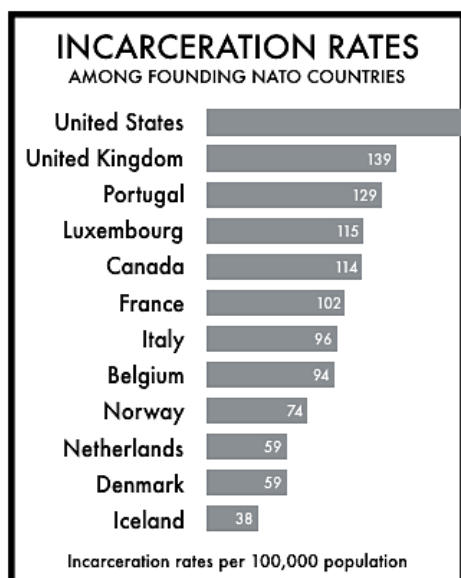
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THE MOMENT

For the last 10 years, more foundations and non-profits have begun to recognize the power of following the leadership of those most impacted by social injustice. Formerly incarcerated people and those harmed by the prison industrial complex are in the best position to reimagine the justice system and heal communities.

Researchers at the Center for Institutional and Social Change and Columbia Law School found that leaders with convictions innovate at the intersection of communities and systems that do not usually interact, and that they bring a history of commitment and the ability to travel across backgrounds and cultures to catalyze social change [1]. More than ever, their work is essential. The impact of incarceration on our populous is alarming. The United States jails people at mind boggling rates (see chart below), and while recent reforms have reduced the total number of people in state prisons since 2009, almost all of the decrease has been among men [2]. Meanwhile, women have become the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population.

The Women's Fellowship was the brainchild of a group of impacted women who gathered with Community Change visionaries Charlene Sinclair, Aida Cuadrado Bozzo, Trish Adobea Tchume and allies Nia Wilson and Nijmie Dzurinko. They envisioned a program that would go beyond a traditional fellowship or leadership development program and engage with fellows in the arenas of the mind, body, and spirit.



**THIS IS SOMETHING THAT WE MUST DO,
THAT'S NEEDED,
AND THERE'S VALUE
THAT'S ADDED TO OUR
MOVEMENT BUILDING.**

- TAMMY

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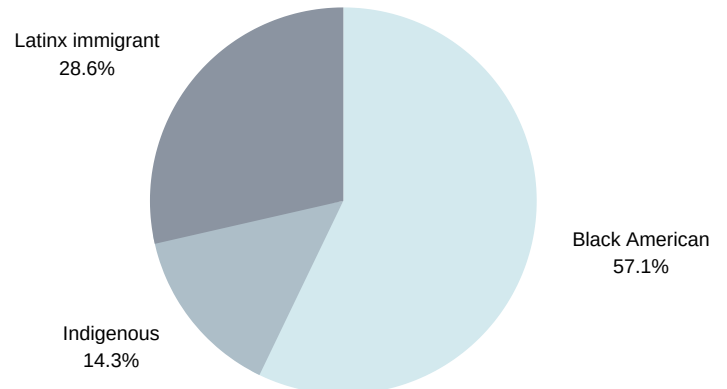
THE WOMEN

AS A WOMAN, I AM FULL OF EMOTION AND EMOTION IS WHAT MOVES THIS WORLD AND THE FACT THAT YOU ARE ABLE TO HIGHLIGHT WOMEN AND THEIR EMOTIONS AND THEIR MOVEMENTS, IT'S THE MOST SACRED THING YOU COULD POSSIBLY DO. IT'S THE MOST HONORABLE THING.

- JONEL

The fellows were multi-generational women of color, indigenous, Black, and latinx immigrants. They reside in eight states, with the majority coming from the East Coast. There were two fellows who did not complete the program from Oregon and Georgia. All the fellows were directly impacted by the incarceration of loved ones or their own incarceration experience. They are all engaged in organizing work, either at the tribal, local, state, or federal level.

The fellows work in various sectors including government, non-profit, and some run their own organizations. All of the fellows identify as women; five are mothers and two are grandmothers. The youngest fellow is 25; the oldest is 57.



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THE FELLOWSHIP

There are fewer than 40 short to long-term fellowships nationwide for people who have experienced incarceration. These programs focus on individuals at various stages. Existing fellowship programs for leaders with convictions generally fall into three broad categories: Participant Training, Internship/Apprenticeship, and Employment. Community Change's Women's Fellowship is compelling for several reasons:

- 1) an exclusive focus on women of color;
- 2) the provision of financial resources to the fellows that are not earmarked for a project or specific uses;
- 3) the scope of curriculum components (leadership development, somatics practice & healing support); and
- 4) transformative organizing models

Instead of developing a program and then inserting the women into it, Aida Cuadrado Bozzo and Tufara Waller Muhammed developed the program design and structure in response to the desires vocalized by the group before the fellowship was launched. The fellowship taught organizing skills and competencies, as needed, for the various levels of experience the women possessed. Politicized somatics practice was a key component within the retreat spaces and the participants also had access to a practitioner in-between sessions. Politicized somatics is "a practice-able theory of change that can move us toward individual, community, and collective liberation through working to embody transformation. Somatics with a social analysis understands the need for deep personal transformation, aligned with liberatory collective practices, connected to transformative systemic change" [3].

Transformative organizing principles were also foundational to the fellowship training. A transformative organizing approach emphasizes long-term vision, self-awareness, naming and addressing oppression that is replicated in our strategies, and the healing of personal suffering [4].

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THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was conducted by Zuri Tau and Tamika Lewis of Social Insights Research. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine to what extent the program outcomes were met or unmet, to assess the impact of the program on the fellows' lives and provide lessons learned for the broader field. The evaluation components were informed by decolonizing research methodology [5].

Working from this model, the participants were asked to approve and review the proposed data collection processes before they became a part of the evaluation methodology. As a result, participation was high, the evaluation team identified valuable learnings and the process became an opportunity for participants to better understand themselves and their journey through the fellowship.

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth one-on-one interviews (75% participation) and photovoice, a participatory research method (100% participation). Interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using coding and analysis software.

The evaluation findings will be discussed in remaining report sections: Program Outcomes (p 5), Why the Program Worked (p 9) and Areas for Improvement (p 12).

**I REALLY LOVE THE PHOTO VOICE
THING THAT WE DID. I WANT TO
INCORPORATE THAT IN MY PROJECTS**
- JESSICA



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

“I am more grounded, in-rhythm and centered in myself. I feel more certain I am in the right place to play my role and help create a collective impact that looks like us. I am closer to healing long-concealed wounds that will break chains so I can show up fully as myself.”

There were three categories of program outcomes:
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, BASE-BUILDING AND RESOURCING LEADERS.

The **leadership development outcomes** included 1) holding two in-person gatherings; 2) designing a methodology and curriculum informed by transformational organizing; and 3) creating and sharing curriculum and toolkits to build power and engage in transformational movement building.

- **These outcomes were met.** Three in-person retreats (Georgia, Florida, D.C.) were held over nine months. These retreats provided space for political education, relationship building, somatic practice, and training in the transformative organizing curriculum developed by Aida Cuadrado Bozzo and Trish Tchume. The curriculum and resources used in the program, as well as those identified through the women's organizations, were made available to all participants.

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Base building outcomes included 1) developing capacity-building plans to support the participants' organizations; 2) establishing networked institutional relationships; and 3) developing a digital platform for relationship building.

- **These outcomes were met.** The leadership team worked with the women over six months to develop individualized leadership plans that included organizational objectives. The fellowship experience also facilitated connections between the participants' organizations. A digital platform was developed to provide easy access to resources and a hub where updates and participant activities were shared. However, the budget limited how fully that site could be built out. The leadership team asked participants to opt-in to a closed Whatsapp group using their smartphones to share updates, give ongoing support and build relationships.

Resourcing leaders outcomes included 1) funding for each participant and 2) an evaluation research framework to document and monitor the project.

- **These outcomes were met.** Fellows received a monthly stipend that was only contingent on remaining in the fellowship. They were not required to produce a deliverable or submit financial records. The evaluation was conducted by Social Insights Research, whose principal was present at initial development meetings in 2018 and was hired to provide research support.

MEANING-MAKING SESSION

The fellows decided to hold a meaning-making call with Community Change staff to share the arc of healing, power, and transformation they experienced in the fellowship. They prepared an agenda over several weeks and facilitated the meeting in March at the final retreat. Jonel opened the presentation with a traditional Akwesasne greeting and shared the elements of a condolence/edge of the woods ceremony she experienced when returning home from prison [6]. She shared how meaningful it was to be picked for the program as an indigenous woman who is often overlooked in these initiatives. The fellows, Dolfinette, Pamela, Julie, Jessica, Tamara, Noemi, and Tanya introduced themselves using the "I AM poem". The poem is used as an icebreaker and as a way to bring meaningful parts of one's identity into the room. The poem is structured by the statements: "I am a descendent of...I am the smell of...I am from...I know...I dream..."

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Afterwards, the Community Change staff participated in groups of two and learned new things about their co-workers. They were deeply moved by the meeting, the room echoed with applause again and again. A written reflection after the meeting revealed that they were inspired to "imagine a new way for humans to live together in the world, a world where re-harming tactics are not the way to produce the world we want" [7].

PHOTOVOICE PROCESS

Photovoice is a qualitative community participatory research method focused on amplifying participant perspectives. The method combines photography with verbal processing and seeks to promote self-advocacy through storytelling and meaning-making. The process provides the opportunity for participants to bring awareness to hidden or overlooked issues within themselves and their communities and to document and reflect their reality.

As mentioned previously, the evaluators proposed this method to the group and they chose to engage in the process. Over a period of 4 weeks, participants took and submitted photographs that were related to four themes listed below:

I. Who are you & your people?

Take photos that represent you, your community, & your people:

- Who are you?
- What gives you strength or empowers you?
- What community do you represent (location , area, etc.); the places you work in, and the people you organize for and with?

II. What Issues are important to you?

Take photos that represent the issues that drive and inspire you to be a community leader/organizer:

- What are the aspects of your life that impact you and your community the most?
- What issues inspire you to fight for social change?

III. How have you transformed?

Take photos that represent your transformation during your time in the Women's Fellowship:

- How has the Women's Fellowship impacted and supported your transformation and growth as an individual and community leader?
- How have you been able to transform, impact and engage with your community?

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IV. The Future:

Take photos that represent your hope or aspiration for the future and that represent the Women's fellowship vision & mission:

- How will you know you've made an impact?
- What does/can success look like?
- What is possible when we win?

The evaluators printed the pictures and facilitated the photovoice process at the final retreat (See report cover for a picture of the outcome). Overall, the fellows were excited to share their histories. They shared vulnerable stories about the loss of children while being shackled to prison beds, memories of their cherished loved ones, and difficulties they endured because they were labeled undocumented or as a felon by society. They spoke about their attempts to break cycles of policing, generational trauma, and death by incarceration, shared moments of laughter and memories of triumphs. They affirmed each other when they expressed how proud they are of themselves for overcoming numerous barriers as well as the irony of standing on capital hill, in their fullest dignity, introducing bills, taking names, and demanding justice for the women who were still behind bars. Fellows attributed the following changes to their program experience:

- The fellowship helped them to understand that **restorative justice was possible**, and to shift their focus on families who were also serving time.
- Gatherings and their time together helped to **build relationships**.
- The program encouraged them to speak out, step more fully into their blackness, step into making demands, and **lead large-action or policy changes** during their time together.
- **Give up their old ideas** that they had to be perfect all the time.
- The program supported them in **shifting their attention to include issues that impact both Black & Women of color**, encouraging them reconnect with the elderly to learn stories to step into their truth and power.
- The women's gathering helped them to **transform their negative thoughts**, have the ability to **feel safe together**, and not judge.
- **Debunking the myth** workshop helped to expand **their understanding of systems of oppression**.

At the close of the photovoice process, the women created a poem in response to three prompts: Who I was, Who I transformed into and who I will become. Below is an excerpt from the "Who I transformed into" section:

I TRANSFORMED INTO

I transformed into someone who is able to build relationships, stand in my blackness, make demands, build power, and learn to trust. My transformation led me to know my worth and have a deeper understanding of myself. I transformed the idea that my situation was just mine into a resistance and a deep knowing that **change was worth the fight.**

My transformation led me to **walk in my truth** and grow the belief that my community could be healed through atonement. I transformed how I grow and move in the world and I am still a work in progress, and now I focus on being honest about the things I need to work on and dealing with what's happening within me.

My transformation has led me to release and remove my mask of perfection. I transformed into someone who is more confident and has the ability to be myself. My transformation helped me to sit with who I am, my connection, what I am capable of, and have to offer. **I am ready for more transformation.**

I have transformed from a 10 to 100; I have advanced my leadership skills and my ability to implement my visionary innovations. My transformation has helped me to elevate the levels of my personal growth through trusting relationships and discovering my own personal happiness. I have transformed the way **I fight for the rights and dignity of women on every level.**

My transformation has inspired me to show up for every woman I left behind the walls, **I am not free until we all are free.** My transformation led me to experience my vision coming live and making space for incarcerated women, to experience higher levels of joy. I have transformed into someone who is no longer self-conscious, scared, and shy. My transformation led me to become confident, to lead meanings, and present. **I have transformed into brightness and light.**



WHY THE PROGRAM WORKED

“ You can always get structure, but those moments, you can't always get those moments. And if you don't handle those moments properly, it can make or break somebody. It can either allow them to blossom and flourish like I did, or it could break them and keep them stuck in that same place. ”
- Dolfinette

THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS WERE KEY TO THE PROGRAM'S SUCCESS:
FACILITATION FLEXIBILITY; A HEALING ORIENTATION; AND A CULTURE OF SAFETY & TRUST MEDIATED BY VULNERABILITY.

The participants felt that flexible program implementation brought tremendous value to their experience. The facilitation team spent time preparing a *wireframe** of program activities weeks before each meeting, however their priority was to respond to what was happening in the room. Instead of maintaining a strict schedule or pushing to get through content, they refused to overlook teachable moments that emerged in the retreats. Underlying this practice was an understanding of the women's relationship with time, as they explained in their meaning-making session, while they were incarcerated, their time was not their own. This practice of slowing down to be present was lauded by the women as necessary and directly related to the program's effectiveness.

The fellowship was developed with a healing justice imperative. Holiday Simmons was brought on to support the staff and the women with somatic

*A wireframe is a tool developed by Viveka Chen for planning session content, facilitation, & timing.

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coaching and therapy in-person and in between sessions that included healing practices such as centering, breathing and traditional cognitive behavioral tools such as boundary-setting, to work through stress and difficulty. The women described Holiday's work as personally and professionally transformative.

The fellows also brought cultural practices that were used as healing tools throughout the gatherings, including indigenous traditions such as smudging (burning sage and dispersing smoke around the body) and welcoming rituals. In addition to these practices, the fellows agreed to group-defined commitments including: safety, validation trust, accountability and affirmation. The emotional risk-taking of a few members served as a catalyst for deep sharing and openness among group members that persisted throughout the program. They used their commitments to create the environment in which they felt confident to critique patriarchy, capitalism, and the myth of white supremacy and how those systems showed up within themselves.

The fellows began as colleagues but their bond grew with every interaction, difficult conversation, and intimate disclosure. One participant described their relationship with the group this way:

"I desired company that I didn't have to explain how people make mistakes. And not only that, I got to build these unreal, rich, invaluable relationships... it's a measurement of the quality of life I'm living. That's really what it is. I'm just living a better quality of life because I have their voices and I have the teachings that I needed. Because they were a very dynamic group. They were not afraid to have confrontation. And then not afraid to also pull each other back and address it. I remember several times, I was almost in shock because I never see my family do conflict resolution. I never see these things that people express how they really feel, knowing it might hurt the other person's feelings. And so I think for me, it helped.

Because my family is also dismantled and I know a lot of ours is but... I needed to see this family-sisterhood structure happen because I've been deprived of that due to lots of social injustices and all the other things, right? I just learned so much from them, just by them being them. And also being allowed to be myself.

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The women described the facilitators as skillful at balancing their leadership role with the ability to relate to participants in an open, non-hierarchical way, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of power imbalance. This approach was one element that contributed to the group's commitment. The complex dynamics required a high level of emotional maturity and facilitation skill to maintain group agreements and effective facilitation. The facilitation team prioritized group agreements and healing and wellness practices among themselves so they could provide support for the women.

She the people govern ourselves based on our liberation values. Womxn of color transformation communities through collective leadership, we're powerful womxn of color with equitable resources, growth and development to create sovereignty, liberation, education, safety and abolition.

- The Fellows' Mission Statement

All of these elements make up what the Women's Fellowship leadership and participants define as a "liberated zone": **a space where a group has created the conditions to bring their full selves and try on new ways of being together.** This methodology is supported in various literatures as a strategy for healing and liberation. Patricia Hill Collins describes these spaces as a necessary condition for overcoming oppression and "prime locations for resisting objectification as the other" [8]. Most of the Fellowship participants routinely face people's prejudices and miscalculations about them as "formerly incarcerated". And despite the high levels of skill and experience possessed by the women they still, at times, experience professional spaces from an outsider-within position. The Women's Fellowship gatherings were the antithesis of this condition. Trish, Aida, and Holiday approached the women as their equals. By acknowledging their unique contributions and personal histories, the women built the confidence to apply for more senior positions, advocate for (and win) radical legislation [9], take on more leadership in their organizations and create boundaries in their lives that supported their thriving.



AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

“*We really, really had to prove that this is something that's needed... like knowing that this space exists is dependent on whether we fail or not, you know? And for me, there will always be room for failure.*”

Despite feeling a sense of safety within the liberated zone, the participants felt an underlying pressure to protect that space, in nuanced ways which had varying consequences.

First, the development of trust via vulnerability unintentionally led to an insularity that contradicted the deeper purpose of a liberated zone. Transformative organizing principles emphasize the need for internal healing that translates into external growth and connection. Because the healing space created an environment for deep connections and many of the women shared they "never experienced anything like this before," it needed to be balanced with clear messaging on how to recreate liberated zones for others as well as mechanisms for keeping the zone boundaries somewhat porous, so that allies would be easily integrated into the space. This oversight led to difficulty upon the entry of a new facilitator, which provided a hard lesson for the group.

Despite these difficulties, from a trauma informed approach, the attachments developed through the fellowship were healthy and served as a vehicle for healing and growth, especially for those participants whose communities or families failed to provide those bonds throughout their lives.

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Secondly, the participants were unnecessarily positioned to protect the space due to perceived lack of institutional commitment. They noticed that the program didn't seem like a high priority within the larger organization and felt that the investment into their lives and work had to be protected and defended. That message was reinforced by a lack of involvement by Community Change executive leadership and the lack of clarity about program replication beyond their cohort. This environment of generalized unease placed the women in a position that could have been interpreted as a challenge to their worthiness and dignity. A participant reflected:

"So it's like you were a beneficiary of the program, but then you also had to be an advocate of it at the same time, before you even got to complete it and judge it for yourself."

Innovative programs serving marginalized groups require support from all levels of leadership to combat the tendency for these initiatives to get overlooked in favor of programs that serve a more palatable population or are perceived as less risky. Asking women of color to show and prove before they are trusted with resources or space to create is an ingrained institutional pattern that limits the capacity and creativity of our movements as a whole.

Other recommendations for improvement include:

- 1) Hiring a woman of color with convictions to serve on the facilitation team;
- 2) Better training on Slack and early communication around tools and mechanisms for maintaining connections outside of structured gatherings;
- 3) Access to more information on local issues and basic political education on criminal justice policy as needed for less experienced organizers.

CONCLUSION

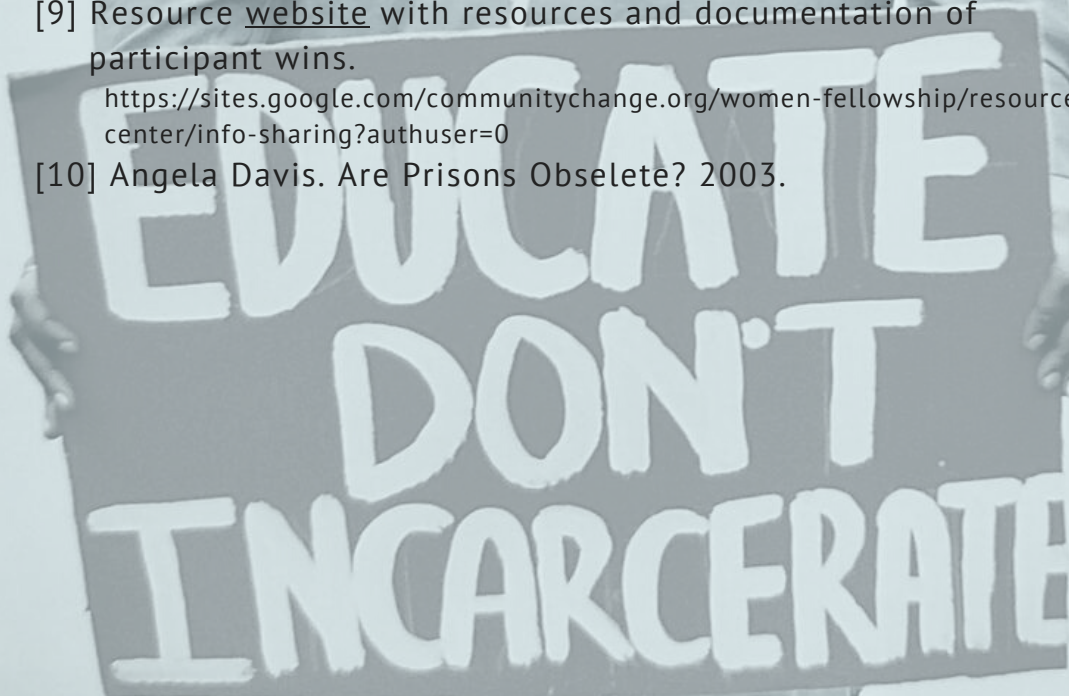
This evaluation examined the scope, content, program implementation and outcomes of the Women's Fellowship. The meaning-making session, photovoice process and in-depth interviews provided insight into the most effective aspects of the program as well as areas for improvement. Overall, the evaluation found that the program catalyzed significant changes for the participants, attributable to their experience in the fellowship over the past nine months.

Angela Davis wrote, “We think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the “evildoers”... Because of the persistent power of racism, “criminals” and “evildoers” are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color. The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.” [10]

The women in this fellowship are the thought leaders who challenge us to wrestle with the issues, policies, and prejudices that perpetuated the conditions for their traumatic experiences within the prison industrial complex. At the conclusion of the fellowship, Jonel proclaimed to the Community Change staff that this is honorable work. And indeed, the facts of this research bear out her conclusion.

REFERENCES

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- [8] Patricia Hill Collins. Black Feminist Thought, 2001.
- [9] Resource website with resources and documentation of participant wins.
<https://sites.google.com/communitychange.org/women-fellowship/resource-center/info-sharing?authuser=0>
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A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored jacket, is holding a large black sign with white text. The sign reads "EDUCATE DON'T INCARCERATE" in three lines. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the side. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.