

Illuminating the Dark Side of Female Prisons

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Tragic stories of life inside female prisons set the tone for an evening of discussion on Tuesday (Oct. 26) that shed light on abuses endured by inmates both inside the system as well as after they are released. Tales of sexual assault and acquired drug addictions are part of the dark truth in a forthcoming title in the Voice of Witness book series.



Claire Kiefer (left), a 2003 Tulane alumna, sits alongside Robin Levi, an attorney and human rights director at Justice Now, during a panel discussion about their experiences interviewing incarcerated women for the Voice of Witness project. (Photo by Sally Asher)

“We felt that because women in prison face an enormous amount of obstacles, this book would be a way for us to shine light on the issues and give them an opportunity to tell their story,” said Robin Levi, a panelist at the event and human rights director at Justice Now, a law clinic that advocates for alternatives to policing and prisons. “In the last 32 years, the population of women in prison has grown substantially, but nothing has been done to change the way prisons work.”

Levi played a major role in the rehabilitation of Irma Rodriguez, an inmate-turned-narrator for [Voice of Witness](#). Rodriguez shared her story of an in-again, out-again relationship with the California prison system that spanned more than two decades.

“I lived a high-risk lifestyle by using drugs and engaging in prostitution, so when they told me I had HIV while in prison back in 1997 I believed them,” Rodriguez told the audience in the Lavin-Bernick Center's Kendall Cram Lecture Hall. She later found out it was a misdiagnosis.

When the new book on women in prison is complete in fall 2011 it will join others in the series, which has addressed experiences of people in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the lives of undocumented persons in America and displaced people of Sudan.

The panelists also included Claire Kiefer, a 2003 Tulane graduate who worked as an interviewer for Voice of Witness, and Kathy Zeitoun, whose husband Abdulrahman was unfairly jailed immediately after Katrina. The event was sponsored by the [Newcomb College Institute](#) and the [Tulane Reading Project](#), which this year featured the book *Zeitoun*, in which author Dave Eggers tells the Zeitouns' story.