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Georgia Lerner Is Keeping Women Out of Jail

By Taylor Schilling



(Allegra Lockstadt)

I first met Georgia Lerner, the [Women's Prison Association](#)'s executive director, three years ago in the beautiful but weathered townhouse in the East Village where the WPA has been doing its work since 1874. Not much has changed since they first moved in: staff desks sit beside marble fireplaces, and filing cabinets share walls with portraits of the founders, abolitionists Isaac T. Hopper and Abigail Hopper Gibbons. Georgia offered me her famous homemade cookies (a tradition for new visitors) and allowed me to pore over the many historic logbooks and journals in her office.

At the time, I wondered how this old, worn, somewhat scrappy organization was still in working order, never mind at the forefront of today's most pressing social crises, mass incarceration and criminal-justice reform. It's clear to me now that the WPA is still around because it is saying — and doing — something different.

Georgia will tell you that she's not all that interested in talking about making prison better. She notoriously ignores media inquiries about how women do their makeup behind bars or fashion shower shoes from maxi pads. She wants to talk about what might happen if we stop relying on our need to punish people and instead consider what drives a woman to commit a crime in the first place.

The vast majority of the WPA's clients come to the agency experiencing homelessness, mental illness, domestic violence, addiction, a lack of education, a long history of unemployment, untreated trauma, or any combination thereof. What if, Georgia will ask you, we considered those circumstances at the moment of a woman's arrest? What if she were diverted from jail and presented with mental-health services or parenting classes or job training? What if one person — or one agency — saw her as a person, not a case, and provided the resources she needed to save and strengthen the trace of stability she was clinging to? We discussed these issues, and others, over the phone recently.

Taylor Schilling: The WPA is 171 years old, which blows my mind. What were the goals of the organization when it was founded in 1845? Have they changed since then?

Georgia Lerner: In a lot of ways, our work is driven by the same goals it was back then. When the WPA started, it branched off from what's still known as the Correctional Association today. They monitor conditions for men and women in jails and prisons. The WPA group decided to focus on what was happening to women when they were inside, but to focus even more on helping women when they got out, so they wouldn't be limited forever by the fact they had been incarcerated. So they'd be able to support themselves legally. We still do that.

We also work with women to divert them from going into the criminal-justice system in the first place. We do a lot of work with families to help them function better, be stronger, so ultimately they

can avoid the criminal-justice system and other public systems that can be damaging.

TS: Part of what you guys do, that it looks like no one else does, is focus on evidence-based and gender-responsive interventions. Can you describe what those things mean and what they look like in practice?

GL: Today, we're lucky there's been quite a lot of research that helps us understand why men and women commit crimes. There are some shared reasons, like having what we call antisocial associates, friends who help you get into trouble. There's poverty, underemployment, poor education. Family dysfunction is actually a very big contributing factor for criminal behavior for men and for women.

But for women, there are additional factors. Women have also suffered trauma. They may have what we call parental stress, an overwhelming concern over whether they can be effective parents to their children. There are financial issues, emotional issues, mental illness that has not been treated, everything. Many of them have been victims of sexual abuse and have been pressured to keep it a secret. Insistence that they keep a secret makes the person who was victimized feel like there's something wrong with them. Sometimes the person who abuses them also offers them drugs to help them not feel the yucky way they're feeling.

TS: [JusticeHome](#) is your community-based or home-based alternative to incarceration. How does it work?

GL: When a woman is charged with a felony, we do a detailed profile and screening. That helps us understand what the reasons are that this particular woman is committing crimes. It often surprises judges, district attorneys, and defense attorneys that a woman with a drug charge very often does not have addiction or substance-abuse problems. Usually she has family dysfunction, unsafe housing, untreated trauma.

Then, instead of just sending a woman to jail and punishing her, we help her address the underlying reasons she's using drugs in the first place. Sometimes women stay at home, so our staff go into their homes and work with them in the community. A woman who needs to go to the doctor or go see a psychologist or psychiatrist for the first time will need support. I love using people's real lives as the classroom for them to develop the skills they need.

Over time, the underlying issues that led to her committing a crime, or being involved with people who are committing crimes, are treated and they go away. She's much less likely to get into trouble in the future. If we send a woman to jail, when she comes home she may be drug-free, but in jail they don't really have the ability to address her concerns about being a parent, or her trauma, or her issues in relationships.

This way, we address the reasons people are committing crimes so we can prevent future crimes and in the process stabilize families. Our program lets children avoid the trauma of their mother being taken away, and we can work with a mom and kids, in their own environment, to help the family function better. The effects are far more broad than just keeping a woman out of jail. It also costs a lot less.

TS: What, in your opinion, should be the focus of legislative reform?

GL: Prison and jail have to be a last resort. We need to shift our focus so most of the work we do is on the front end instead of just building more prisons. We do have to make sure prisons and jails are less inhumane, but we shouldn't necessarily try to turn our prisons into better mental-health hospitals and better schools. We should stop using them for that purpose.

We should enable people to use existing good schools and health providers and drug treatments that exist in the community. We should be trying to reduce crime. If somebody should be convicted of a crime, our response should have a result of reducing the likelihood that person is going to commit another crime. That, I think, would promote public safety.

TS: Every time I speak with you, I'm so intrigued and floored by your own power and your own strength to do what you do. How do you find that for yourself?

GL: I think being able to get through difficult times can come through surviving difficult things. I had a sister who was ill, and then, thank goodness, she got better, but that was the first bad thing that happened. My father died suddenly, my mother was killed in a shooting. Each time something happens you find a way to get back into your life and keep going. I've realized I can survive things.

TS: You're passing that on to other women, that the incredibly dark moments in life can be what leads to strength.

GL: At WPA, on a big scale, we believe that people should not be limited forever by their worst act. If we all were judged by the worst thing we ever did, I think many of us would not be where we are today. It's not fair we do that to anyone. I want women to stop doing it to themselves.

Change comes from building on strength, not from people telling us how bad we are.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Taylor Schilling is a Golden Globe– and Primetime Emmy–nominated actress best known for her role as Piper Chapman on the Netflix original comedy-drama series Orange Is the New Black.

