

# Trans Prisoners Info Sheet #3

Solidarity /  
Things You Can Do



**Bent Bars Project**

December 2020



*The Bent Bars Project is a letter-writing and solidarity project for LGBTQ+ prisoners in Britain. We provide direct support to LGBTQ+ prisoners, build community across prison walls, and raise public awareness about LGBTQ+ prison issues. We are a small, completely volunteer-run organisation which has been running since 2009.*

Bent Bars Project  
PO Box 66754  
London  
WC1A 9BF

[www.bentbarsproject.org](http://www.bentbarsproject.org)

## Introduction

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The purpose of this information sheet is to outline things you can do to support trans people in prison. This information sheet is one of three and we encourage you to read all of them.

Because of the high levels of discrimination, inequality and social exclusion that trans people face in prison, providing direct community support is an essential means of showing solidarity. Such support can improve people's chances of survival while inside prison and when they get released. It is also important to act to address the underlying issues that contribute to the imprisonment of trans people as well as the wider forms of discrimination that trans people face.

Transphobia, like other forms of oppression, operates between the individual, cultural and structural levels. This can make it hard to know how to act in solidarity and overwhelming to know where to start. Because of this, people acting in solidarity often get overwhelmed and ask "what can I do?" hoping that in asking an easy question there will be an easy answer. But the truth is solidarity is never a simple path. Below are some actions and strategies you can consider to show solidarity in different ways and at different levels.

## A note on terms

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The Bent Bars project recognises that people use a diversity of terms to refer to themselves and their sexual and/or gender identities. We also recognise these terms are often context specific and can change.

For the purposes of this document, we use LGBTQ+ as a broad umbrella term to encompass this range of identities. When we refer specifically to 'trans' rather than LGBTQ+ we are highlighting the specific experiences of people who identify or express gender differently from what is traditionally associated with the gender or sex they were assigned at birth - such as people who are transgender, non-binary, or otherwise gender non-conforming.

For a more detailed breakdown of terminology see this helpful [glossary](#) by Julia Serano.

## Actions at an individual level:

Trans people often face a lot of individualised transphobia which can range from not having their identity respected, to being asked lots of well-intentioned but intrusive or exhausting questions, to direct harassment and discrimination. This is especially true for trans prisoners. Below are some actions to address individual level transphobia.

### 1. Respect trans and non-binary people's identities.

This means supporting people to self-determine and freely express their gender identity. It also means using and respecting people's [pronouns](#). This may seem like a small thing, but it is a simple yet important way of showing respect.

It is particularly important to respect prisoners' identities, because prisoners are often subject to increased levels of scrutiny, judgement and disbelief about their identities.

Respecting people's identities also means recognising that there are diverse experiences, perspectives and identities within trans communities.

### 2. Learn more about trans and non-binary issues in the criminal justice system.

You can read about trans prisoner experiences in the [Bent Bars Newsletter](#), which is written by and for LGBTQ+ prisoners and is published on our website.

Other resources include:

- Sarah Jane Baker's book, [Transgender Behind Prison Walls](#), or this [short interview](#) with Sarah Jane.
- [Captive Genders](#), edited by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith.
- Black & Pink's prisoner survey [Coming Out of Concrete Closets](#).
- The Irish Penal Reform Trust report [Out on the Inside](#).
- [Queering Prison Abolition, Now?](#) an essay by Eric A. Stanley, Dean Spade and Queer (In)Justice.
- [Life In Flight From Every Prison](#), a discussion between We Will Rise, Joshua Allen, Tourmaline and Dean Spade;
- [Female Keep Separate](#), a zine by anonymous;
- Laverne Cox's documentary [Free CeCe](#) about CeCe McDonald, or see [Cece in discussion with Tourmaline and Dean Spade](#);
- Joshua Allen's talk, [A World Without Cages](#).

### 3. Develop bystander intervention skills.

Over policing of trans people isn't just enacted by the police, but also by security guards, door people and other people on the street. Moments of harassment and discrimination often happen so quickly that people don't know how to respond, or are fearful of intervening. One way you can show active solidarity with trans people experiencing overt forms of transphobia is to build up your knowledge and confidence in intervening when you see a trans person being harassed or attacked. Groups such as [hollaback!](#) offer resources and trainings on responding as a bystander.

### 4. Build relationships with trans people in prison and people coming out of prison.

Building relationships of care, friendship and support with people in prison and people coming out of prison is a vital way to build community and help people to get what they need. There are very limited resources available to trans people leaving prisons and more active peer support is needed. You can contact projects like Bent Bars or the [Prisoner Solidarity Network](#) and [SOAS Detainee Support](#) support trans people in prison, psychiatric facilities and detention. You can also support organisations that provide broader forms of mutual aid and support for LGBTQ+ people outside prison, like [QueerCare](#) or the [Outside Project](#).

## Actions at a cultural level

Transphobia in the UK is pervasive across cultural spheres: media, political commentary, sports and public life. It is enacted by individuals as well as by organisations, institutions and services. It can range from a default exclusion of trans people because of lack of awareness to explicit exclusion and hostility. Below are some strategies to address transphobia at a cultural level.

### 5. Challenge transphobic social media and news reporting.

Trans issues are increasingly discussed in the media, but often selectively and in sensationalist forms. Actively looking for media on trans issues can be a good way of monitoring how these issues are covered. It is also important to pay attention to what issues are not covered. For example, are attacks against trans people ignored or downplayed? Are transphobic policies being brought in quietly under the radar? Whose voices are most often heard and whose voices are absent?

Write to the media when they have inaccurate, misleading and disrespectful reporting. Challenge reports that demonise and pathologise trans people. It is important to challenge inaccurate and misleading claims, particularly as transphobic media doesn't just impact people outside of prison, but can also influence perceptions of trans people inside prison, and amplify discrimination and harassment.

Question rhetoric that suggests that women's rights and trans rights are in conflict. You can

often tell when these questions are aimed at causing harm to trans people by looking at what solutions are offered. Transphobic questioning will usually posit that these rights are in conflict and suggest that trans inclusion is a backdoor to harm against women. They will only provide a solution to non-trans women's safety, while never offering suggestions on how to keep trans women (or other trans and gender non-conforming people) safe.

## **6. Use power where you have it.**

Solidarity isn't all about grand gestures. More often than not it's about recognising your own power and acting from where you are to support others. In the case of transphobia this could be, for example, advocating for gender neutral toilets in your workplace; removing gender specific clothes rack signage in the shop you work in; asking people to add pronouns into their zoom name during organising meetings; talking to other service staff about avoiding using gendered language (like "sir" or "ladies") with strangers, or supporting trans patients or students in your care.

## **7. Advocate in services you interact with: homelessness, domestic violence, healthcare, crisis shelters, etc.**

Raise questions with staff, volunteers and professionals that you encounter about how trans people are supported in their services. Don't just ask when trans people are present - ask these questions regularly. Lack of forethought is one of the biggest barriers to trans safety and can lead to compounding institutional harms.

## **8. Support organisations that advocate for trans people, particularly groups that address issues of criminalisation, state violence and social abandonment.**

Volunteer your time, donate money and give social media shout outs to groups doing trans activism and solidarity work. Support trans inclusive women's organisations and groups. [Send books to prisoners](#). Support campaigns that improve trans wellbeing, including better health care, housing, employment. We encourage you to prioritise groups that focus on mutual-aid and direct support, rather than organisations using a charity model.

# **Actions at a structural level**

Transphobia exists at the individual and cultural levels because of broader social structures, rules and institutions that reinforce and police binary gender norms. Structural transphobia is a part of wider systems of oppression that exist to maintain inequality among different social groups and determine the distribution of life chances and capacity to survive.

Trans liberation is about more than individual trans people; it is about broader issues of social justice, bodily autonomy, informed consent, distribution of resources and life chances.

## 9. Get involved in campaigns and initiatives that reduce the use of prisons and policing.

Support strategies and campaigns that address the root causes of violence and that respond to harm with transformative justice, healing and community accountability. There are lots of great resources online such as [TransformHarm.org](https://transformharm.org) and [Abolitionist Futures](https://abolitionistfutures.org). Support campaigns that stop prison expansion, call for defunding the police and efforts to increase affordable housing, health and social supports. Check out [our website](#) for the latest campaigns.

## 10. Build solidarity across struggles and ask: what about trans people?

Trans prison issues are linked to other struggles such as housing, health care, homelessness, education, disability and environmental justice. In whatever campaigning or social justice work you might be involved in, consider how trans issues can be addressed and connected within those struggles.

For example, if you do work on sexual violence, abortion, policing, mental health, poverty, militarism or immigration detention, ask: How are trans issues addressed within that work? How might the ways people are active around these issues impact trans people or limit trans people's access to vital supports?

Consider the impacts for trans people who are most likely to face exclusion, poverty, racism, ableism and criminalisation. Build strategies that support and empower trans lives and trans communities.

## For further information

[Trans Prisoners Info Sheet #1: Issues faces by Trans, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming People in Prison](#)

[Trans Prisoners Info Sheet #2: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

All infosheets are available on our website: [www.bentbarsproject.org](http://www.bentbarsproject.org).



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