



LEGAL EMPOWERMENT ACROSS BORDERS

A Toolkit for Building
Power and Care With
Women Impacted by
Incarceration



“

The fact that the program moved from technical/ analytical work to deeply personal and vulnerable sharing built so much community and trust. I never guessed we’d be writing and reading love letters to ourselves, getting so emotional, expressing so much care toward one another. I think that happens when you put leaders in a room together because we are strong people constantly showing up for others - we need soft places to lean on and open up, and that aspect of this convening was beautiful and needed. We related to one another on that level, along with our organizing work: the necessity of hope, our political value of centering the most marginalized and impacted communities, our believe in self-determination and building power (not rescuing, charity, etc.) and very specific connections like Brazil modeling its new prison off of US facilities, which was rightfully named as a colonial dynamic.

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PARTICIPANT AT LE ACROSS BORDERS CONVENING | PANAMA, JUNE 2025

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I. BRIEF SUMMARY

From December 2024 to October 2025, the Legal Empowerment Fund convened a powerful network of grassroots, women-led, and justice-centered practitioners from Brazil, Mexico, and the United States who use legal empowerment to advance the rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, girls, and their families. The Legal Empowerment Across Borders project convened twelve organizations—many led by formerly incarcerated women—who were provided unrestricted funds and came together virtually and in-person to share how they use legal empowerment to decarcerate their communities and build networks rooted in care and well-being.

Through one-on-one sessions with each grantee, three virtual sessions with all partner organizations, and a weeklong gathering co-designed and co-facilitated by grantee partners, participants exchanged legal empowerment strategies across borders and called for solidarity that transcends prison walls.

The collective coalesced around eight strategies:



The findings from the year-long collaboration are reflected in this toolkit and make visible the transformative possibilities that come from shifting power, knowledge, and resources to directly affected communities so they can know, use and shape the law. The toolkit is organized in six parts: the first section provides brief context on the devastating state of incarceration of women globally, followed by a grounding on legal empowerment and the power of this approach to catalyze systemic change from the inside out. Section three offers a profile of the 12 organizations selected to engage in the project, and section four outlines the eight legal empowerment strategies used by network practitioners to advance decarceration and build communities of care. These interconnected strategies strengthen community power, expand access to justice, and challenge the structural conditions that criminalize women, girls, LGBTQ+ people, and their families. The toolkit then highlights impacts secured from the organizations through the use of legal empowerment and underlines the power of cross-border exchange, trauma-informed practice, and grassroots legal empowerment. The toolkit closes with a call for increased visibility and resourcing of justice organizations that engage in legal empowerment, particularly those led by women impacted by the criminal legal system.

II. CONTEXT AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Across the world, women are being incarcerated at alarming rates. Since 2000, the global number of women and girls in prison has grown by nearly 60%, almost three times faster than the rate of men.¹ Today, more than 740,000 women are incarcerated worldwide, with the United States accounting for nearly 30% of this total, despite only having 4% of the world's women and girls living in the country.² Most women are imprisoned for low-level or poverty-related offenses—such as small-scale drug possession, shoplifting, or sex work—often tied to economic insecurity and systemic inequality.

This rise in incarceration is rooted in deep social and structural injustices. Many women behind bars are survivors of domestic and sexual violence, have limited access to education or employment, and face untreated mental health challenges. Once incarcerated, they endure unsafe and dehumanizing conditions—research shows that more than half experience physical or sexual violence while incarcerated.

Upon release, the barriers continue: women are often denied voting rights, excluded from the formal labor market, unable to secure stable housing, and stigmatized by society and at times, their families. With inadequate access to housing, childcare, and employment, many struggle to rebuild their lives—perpetuating cycles of poverty, incarceration and trauma that extends across generations.³

Legal empowerment offers a paradigm shift. The approach democratizes law by uniting the power of law and organizing to ensure individuals and their communities have the tools to understand, use, shape, and transform the systems that govern their lives. Legal empowerment is grounded in the principle that everyone has the right to meaningfully participate in their fight for justice and centers the knowledge, voices, and leadership of impacted communities to build inclusive, accountable, and resilient justice ecosystems. This global movement has deep roots in struggles for liberation around the world—from the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa to people's tribunals in the Philippines—and as evidenced by this network, serves as a powerful tool when wielded by women impacted by the carceral system.

The Legal Empowerment Across Borders project shows that when incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women have the legal tools and resources to dismantle barriers, real transformation is possible. Women are able to assert their rights during and after incarceration, sustain family and community networks of care, advance economic mobility, and work towards decarcerating communities from the inside out. Investing in legal empowerment organizations led by formerly incarcerated women is not only a strategy for decarceration, it also strengthens networks of care and solidarity that restore dignity, safety, and belonging. Through legal empowerment, these leaders are decarcerating from within, dismantling harmful systems, and building pathways to freedom, healing, and collective care.

¹ World Prison Brief, World Female Imprisonment List, (October 2022)
https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_female_imprisonment_list_5th_edition.pdf

² Prison Policy Initiative, States of Women's Incarceration: The Global Context 2025, (September 2025)
https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/women/2025.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ Id.

Partner Organizations

Throughout the project period, a remarkable coalition of representatives from the twelve grassroots justice, women-led organizations built community and shared insight and learning from their work.



Associação de Familiares e Amigos de Presos de Rondônia
(AFAPARO)



California Coalition for Women Prisoners
(CCWP)



Centro de Atención a la Mujer Trabajadora de Chihuahua
(CAMT)



Centro de Estudios y Acción por la Justicia
(CEA Justicia Social)



Defying Legal Gravity
(DLG)



Homegirlz del Corazón
(Homegirlz)



Interculturalidad, Salud y Derechos, Asociación Civil
(INSADE)



Jailhouse Lawyer Initiative
(JLI)



Assessoria Popular Maria Felipa
(Maria Felipa)



Resistance, Involvement, Solidarity, and Empowerment Collective
(RISE)



THEMIS Gênero Justiça e Direitos Humanos
(THEMIS)



Women Who Never Give Up
(WWNG-Up)

These organizations adopt a strong feminist lens to their work, and engage in a range of activities and programs that center the leadership of those directly impacted and build collective power. An overview of the organizations, their goals and values, and examples of their legal empowerment work can be found in the appendix.

III. KEY STRATEGIES

Across the cohort, organizations deploy a set of interlocking strategies that strengthen community power, expand access to justice, and challenge the structural conditions that criminalize women, girls, LGBTQ+ people, and their families. These strategies operate at multiple levels—individual, relational, community, and systemic—reflecting the lived realities of those most affected by incarceration and state violence. Together, they demonstrate how legal empowerment is not a single intervention but an ecosystem of practices that make the law usable, restore agency, and build pathways toward safety and liberation. **The eight identified strategies are:**



The following section outlines the core strategies used across the cohort, highlighting how each approach contributes to durable legal, social, and political change. Each strategy includes examples from the organizations.



LEGAL EDUCATION AS EMPOWERMENT

When legal education is seen as a pathway towards empowerment, it ensures that people can leverage legal systems to meet their needs and protect their rights. Rooted in popular education principles, this approach translates legal concepts into accessible and practical strategies for self-advocacy and collective action. Legal education as empowerment helps people recognize injustice, navigate legal systems, and build confidence in their ability to claim rights and challenge harmful practices.

By grounding learning in lived experience, legal empowerment education strengthens community leadership and supports systemic change. Programs that use this strategy emphasize peer learning, critical consciousness, translation of legal concepts into everyday language, and the belief that legal knowledge belongs to the people.

Examples

Homegirlz teaches young people how the juvenile and criminal legal systems work, translating complex procedures into tools for youth to meet their needs. This education builds confidence and reduces fear of legal institutions by making rights tangible and usable.

JLI co-creates legal education resources with law students, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated jailhouse lawyers, and attorneys, ensuring materials reflect real barriers and lived experience. Modules combine rights education with social, emotional and peace-building skills to ensure that education is rooted in the practice of law in prison.

DLG teaches first-year law school content in accessible formats that translate dense legal doctrine into practical tools for everyday life. This allows system-impacted youth to recognize legal issues as they arise and intervene with confidence.

THEMIS trains Popular Legal Promoters who return to their communities to share legal knowledge and accompany women facing violence. These trainings transform legal information into collective tools for safety and resistance.

Maria Felipa uses its “Wholesome Justice” methodology to translate legal concepts like torture and due process into language that resonates with women’s lived experience, building both legal literacy and emotional capacity.

CEA Justicia Social trains formerly incarcerated people and family members in practical legal navigation and rights-based advocacy through the Community School of Justice, emphasizing peer expertise.

INSADE trains women to understand anti-discrimination laws, political rights, and labor protections so they can confront barriers linked to criminal records, including real-time action such as recovering identification.



CREATING COLLABORATION WITH LAWYERS

This strategy builds equitable partnerships between community advocates and lawyers. Rather than acting as gatekeepers, lawyers become collaborators who support community-led decision-making and advocacy. These partnerships aim to transform traditional hierarchies that often marginalize directly impacted people within legal systems. By shifting power toward communities, this strategy helps legal processes become more responsive, accountable, and grounded in lived experience. Collaboration opens new avenues for both legal professionals and impacted communities to challenge systemic inequities.

Examples

RISE positions lawyers as supporters rather than decision-makers, with families co-designing legal strategies through participatory defense meetings.

THEMIS trains legal professionals—including judges and prosecutors—to recognize institutional discrimination and adopt feminist, intersectional frameworks.

CAMT equips families to understand and guide legal processes, allowing them to ask informed questions and participate as confident advocates.

CEA Justicia Social trains participants on their rights, focusing on technical, advocacy and organizational capacities allowing communities to have more informed collaboration with legal professionals, and shifting power towards affected communities.

WWNG-UP collaborates with lawyers to advance legislation and build their capacity to partner with community leaders on equitable justice reforms.

Maria Felipa works closely with lawyers, psychologists, and legal institutions to translate rights into practice and reshape how lawyers engage with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women.





WORKING ACROSS THE PRISON WALL

Working across the prison wall strengthens communication, leadership, and collaboration between incarcerated and non-incarcerated advocates. This strategy ensures that those living inside prisons shape agendas, campaigns, and educational tools that impact their lives. It also helps sustain relationships, collective learning, and coordinated action despite institutional barriers.

By building inside–outside bridges, organizations create opportunities for incarcerated people to exercise agency, share expertise, and participate in movement building to demand a just future across prison walls.

Examples

CCWP uses correspondence and visits to ensure incarcerated members lead campaigns, inform legal advocacy, and guide organizational priorities. One example is the Spitfire Speakers Bureau and The Fire Inside newsletters which facilitate communication channels for inside voices to shape public narratives and international solidarity. CCWP also hires inside advocates to lead their projects, including the through the Prison Resentencing Fellowship.

WWNG-UP uplifts and protects jailhouse lawyers while connecting them to policy, legal, and community platforms on the outside.

JLI builds national networks linking jailhouse lawyers (incarcerated legal workers) with outside educators, lawyers, and community organizers, creating structured inside–outside collaboration.

Maria Felipa maintains long-term legal and emotional relationships with women inside prisons, allowing strategies to reflect real-time conditions such as abuse, reentry barriers, or legal risks.

AFAPARO conducts formal inspections and human rights monitoring inside prisons, documenting abuses and connecting incarcerated women to advocates and international institutions.

Homegirlz builds relationships with youth and insiders inside detention contexts, ensuring continuity of care and advocacy during incarceration and reentry.



CONVENING AND MOVEMENT BUILDING

Convening brings people together across identities, geographies, and roles to share strategies, build solidarity, and develop collective demands. This strategy strengthens movements by fostering relationships, aligning goals, and surfacing shared challenges and solutions. Convenings range from formal learning cohorts to community gatherings and cross-border exchanges.

Movement building expands the reach and impact of individual organizations by connecting their work to a larger ecosystem of change. It ensures that local victories contribute to broader shifts in laws, practices, and social norms.

Examples

CCWP builds statewide and international solidarity through campaigns, newsletters, the Drop Life Without Parole (Drop LWOP) effort, and global abolitionist collaboration.

WWNG-UP convenes coalitions of families, faith groups, formerly incarcerated leaders, and policymakers to educate and advocate collectively.

DLG organizes youth leadership cohorts that foster identity, legal confidence, and long-term political engagement.

CEA Justica Social brings families and formerly incarcerated people together for shared learning and strategy development through the Community School of Justice.

CAMT uses storytelling circles, community gatherings, and caregiver convenings to surface shared needs and build a unified voice.

Maria Felipa organizes gatherings that integrate legal learning with care, recreation, and political education, making movement spaces accessible for women with caregiving responsibilities.

THEMIS convenes feminist legal and community actors to build interdisciplinary and cross-sector coalitions around gender justice.





ADDRESSING AND HEALING TRAUMA

This strategy recognizes both the personal and structural trauma caused by criminalization, incarceration, and state violence. Healing practices create space for people to process experiences of harm, build resilience, and reclaim agency. Trauma-informed approaches acknowledge the emotional and psychological impacts of injustice while supporting pathways toward restoration.

Addressing trauma also strengthens movements by sustaining leaders and reducing burnout. It reframes healing as a political practice necessary for long-term resistance and community well-being.

Examples

Homegirlz uses trauma-informed practices that help young women transform grief, violence, and survival into collective power and self-understanding.

JLI's Feminist Circles for incarcerated women jailhouse lawyers integrate emotional safety, healing, and shared vulnerability as part of legal empowerment.

RISE leads restorative and transformative justice circles that contextualize trauma as a structural, not individual, experience of oppression.

INSADE incorporates harm reduction and self-care strategies into reintegration work, addressing violence, stigma, and substance use directly.





CENTERING CARE

Centering care asserts that well-being is not secondary to justice work—care is a political strategy in itself. By treating people as whole beings, care-based strategies cultivate trust, strengthen participation, and sustain movements over time.

Care can include mutual aid, flexible programming, culturally relevant healing, and everyday acts of solidarity. Centering care challenges systems of criminalization that rely on isolation, deprivation, and punishment.

Examples

Homegirlz treats care as foundational to justice work, offering reentry accompaniment, emotional support, and trauma-informed guidance.

JLI embeds healing justice and mutual support into its Feminist Circles, making care foundational to supporting women’s leadership and liberation.

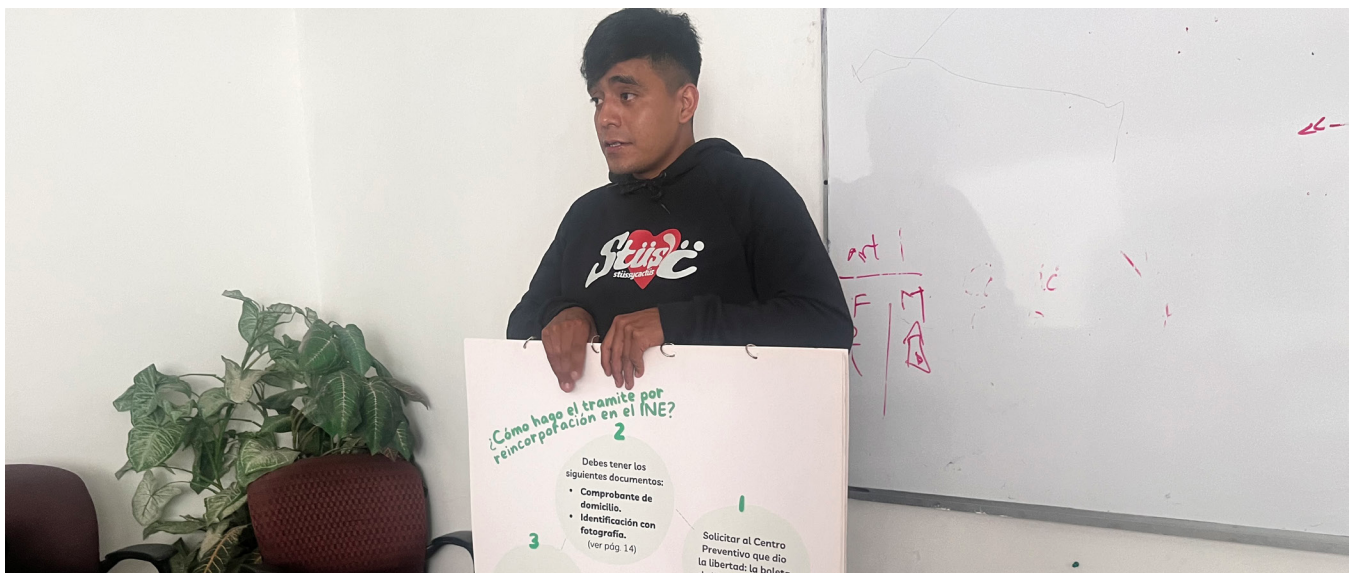
CCWP prioritizes paying people for their labor inside, recognizing that justice work is only sustainable when people are able to meet their physical and economic needs.

DLG incorporates food, transportation, and mutual aid directly into its programs, reducing participation barriers.

Maria Felipa builds nurturing legal empowerment spaces with play, community meals, and childcare-attentive structures.

AFAPARO supports women’s basic needs such as housing, transportation, food, and safety as part of its advocacy and organizing.

INSADE’s “Made in Freedom” model includes harm reduction, self-care, and community support as core elements of reintegration.





ADVOCATING FOR AND IMPLEMENTING NEW LAWS

This strategy focuses on changing laws, policies, and institutional practices, and ensures that systemic wins are implemented effectively in communities. Advocacy efforts are grounded in the lived experiences of impacted people, who identify legal gaps and co-design solutions. This helps ensure that policy work does not remain abstract but produces real, material change.

Implementation is central to this strategy: communities monitor state compliance, evaluate the impact of new laws, and push for accountability when reforms fall short. The goal is not only new legislation, but meaningful shifts in justice outcomes.

Examples

WWNG-UP drives major statewide reforms—including voting rights restoration and the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act—and monitors implementation.

AFAPARO brings cases of systemic violence, torture, and overcriminalization to UN bodies and national human rights authorities to seek accountability for harms.

INSADE advocates for eliminating criminal record requirements for employment and political participation, while ensuring actual enforcement.

CCWP uses strategic litigation, including class actions, to expose systemic abuses and drive structural change in prison conditions.

Maria Felipa conducts legislative advocacy to push for a new amendment that would provide housing for people released from prison.

THEMIS advances feminist legal reform through national and international strategic litigation and legal education for institutional actors.





FAMILY-CENTERED ADVOCACY

Family-centered advocacy recognizes that families—especially women caregivers—are essential leaders in justice efforts. This strategy supports families not just as supporters of incarcerated loved ones, but as core organizers who understand the system’s impact on daily life. It honors the emotional, financial, and caretaking labor families carry and positions that labor as political.

Through this approach, families build shared knowledge, develop leadership skills, and articulate collective demands that reflect their experiences. Family-based strategies strengthen community resilience and help sustain long-term advocacy.

Examples

CCWP builds leadership among families of incarcerated people and supports them through organizing, mutual aid, and education.

RISE organizes mothers, partners, and children into core leadership roles in legal defense and movement-building work.

AFAPARO develops networks of families advocating for incarcerated women and supporting reentry through employment, education, and safety.

CAMT forms long-term caregiver networks that inform demands and advocacy strategies.

CEA Justice Social engages families as co-learners and co-organizers in legal empowerment through the Community School of Justice.



IV. IMPACTS

Across the cohort, legal empowerment is not an abstract concept—it is something people practice daily to protect their families, challenge violence, and bring their loved ones home. The organizations in this network entered the convening already carrying powerful histories of community leadership, decarceration work, and systems change. Their impact before the convening is what made meaningful cross-border exchange possible, and it continues to shape what this network is building together.



In U.S. prisons, **Jailhouse Lawyer Initiative** has helped turn isolation into legal power. Through jailhouse lawyer–led training and community paralegal modules, JLI has distributed legal education materials to more than 1,200 incarcerated people across the country, enabling people inside to file grievances, prepare legal motions, and advocate for themselves and others. These inside legal workers do not just learn the law—they use it to protect their peers from abuse and to navigate complex legal systems from within confinement.



In California, **CCWP**'s Resentencing Fellowship similarly centers incarcerated women as legal actors. Two women inside prison are employed as fellows to help others prepare resentencing petitions under new reforms, transforming people once locked out of the courts into leaders who guide others toward freedom.

DEFYING
LEGAL
GRAVITY



For young people and families facing criminalization, legal education has shifted who holds decision-making power. **Defying Legal Gravity**'s law school–level training for system-impacted youth has produced measurable results: 70 percent of participants show improved understanding of legal concepts, and half later apply that knowledge to real legal problems affecting their lives. **Homegirlz** takes this further by working inside juvenile facilities and in the community, helping young women understand probation, court processes, and their rights, while providing trauma-informed advocacy that diverts youth from incarceration. Together, these models replace fear and confusion with clarity and confidence—allowing young people to confront the system with knowledge instead of silence.



In Mexico, legal empowerment has been paired with healing and dignity. **CEA Justicia Social**'s first Community School of Justice brought together 35 people—90 percent of whom reported surviving torture—to transform lived experience into collective legal analysis and advocacy. Rather than being isolated victims of abuse, participants became co-learners and strategists capable of naming violations, organizing for change, and supporting one another. **CAMT** works inside women's prisons to ensure incarcerated women can track and intervene in their own criminal cases, while also advancing policy reforms—including a new law allowing incarcerated mothers to leave prison on specific days to visit their children. These interventions show how legal empowerment can simultaneously change daily life inside prison and reshape the laws that govern it.



In Brazil, women and families have built powerful systems of self-defense against state violence. **AFAPARO**'s statewide assemblies have created networks of families who document abuses, participate in anti-torture mechanisms, and collectively intervene when violations occur. This has made invisible violence visible, forcing accountability in places long ignored by the state. **THEMIS**, working at the national level, has trained Popular Legal Promoters—incarcerated and community-based women who return to their neighborhoods with legal knowledge, accompaniment skills, and the confidence to challenge discrimination and violence. **Maria Felipa** complements this by providing feminist legal and psychosocial support that helps women secure documents, reunite with family, and survive reentry with dignity. These organizations ensure that women do not leave prison alone—they leave with rights, relationships, and political voice.



IV. IMPACTS



In New Orleans and New Jersey, families have become legal actors in their own right. **RISE Collective**'s participatory defense model brings mothers, partners, and children into the heart of legal strategy, allowing families to generate mitigation materials, prepare court support, and shape defense narratives. **WWNG-UP** mobilizes court-watching and grassroots advocacy to hold judges accountable and push statewide reform, including the passage of the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act and the restoration of voting rights. In California, **CCWP**'s advocacy led to the passage of legislation ensuring reparations for incarcerated people who were sterilized without their knowledge or against their will. These efforts demonstrate how community-led legal action can alter both individual cases and entire policy landscapes.



Finally, reintegration is treated not as an afterthought but as a continuation of justice. **INSADE**'s Hecho en Libertad model supports women leaving prison to build businesses protected from discrimination; 80 percent of participants go on to create their own enterprises, and no cases of recidivism have been recorded among program participants. **JLI**'s Feminist Circles, **RISE**'s healing spaces, and **Homegirlz**'s trauma-informed mentoring ensure that legal empowerment is not only about filing motions or changing laws—it is about restoring agency, safety, and belonging after criminalization.

The convening was built on this foundation: communities that already knew how to use the law, care for one another, and organize for freedom. The convening did not create this power—it brought it into relationships across borders, strengthening the work that was already transforming lives.

V. POWER OF CROSS-BORDER EXCHANGE

The convening made clear that justice work is shaped as much by how we come together as by what we do, and that best practices emerged for both building strategy and building the relationships and values that sustain it. For some participants, it was their first time leaving their home country. For others, it was their first time being in a room full of people who understood their experiences—because they had lived versions of the same struggles themselves. Despite different languages and legal systems, participants immediately recognized shared experiences of injustice, stigma, and exclusion. That recognition created a powerful foundation for trust, learning, and collective purpose.

Shared Language, Shared Effort

The convening was held with interpretation in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, making language access a central part of the experience. The process of pausing, waiting, and repeating became part of how participants learned to listen to one another. People downloaded Google Translate for informal conversations and kept finding ways to make sure no one was left out. Furthermore, the shared exchanges were fused with art, poetry, song and dance - pathways to connection beyond language. These small acts of care and attentiveness built trust from the start and reinforced the sense that everyone belonged in the room.

Collective Strategy Across Borders

Sessions were organized around eight key strategies for legal empowerment and co-designed and co-facilitated by network participants. Together, they explored how grassroots legal empowerment, trauma-informed practice, and transnational solidarity can confront systems of oppression that operate across borders. Participants shared approaches that could be adapted in their own contexts, including participatory defense, community-run legal education schools, prison-based learning, and litigation and legislative advocacy to advance decarceration—especially for women. They also emphasized the urgent need to support children and caregivers of incarcerated women through community networks grounded in care.

This exchange sparked concrete cross-border collaboration. CEA Justicia Social is now holding its second Community School in a university setting, inspired by the collaboration between the JLI and the Bernstein Institute for Human Rights. Members from the CEA Justicia School are planning to visit New York to learn more about the JLI/Bernstein Institute model as they begin to involve universities in their legal empowerment efforts. After CCWP



learned about CAMT and CEA Justicia's holistic approach to supporting incarcerated women, CCWP reached out to see whether they could support CCWP members who have been deported to Mexico. This has resulted in a cross-border network of support, care, and legal empowerment.

Deepening Analysis and Legal Empowerment

Participants described the convening as an intentional and deeply impactful space for sharpening how they understand and use the law as a tool for community power. Because mass incarceration, racialized violence, and punitive state control operate across borders, participants emphasized that international grassroots collaboration is not only necessary—it is a way to more clearly see how law functions both as a system of harm and as a site of possibility. Learning across contexts allowed participants to identify shared patterns of criminalization while also gaining new analytical tools for how legal systems can be navigated, contested, and transformed by directly impacted people.

As one participant shared,

“This felt like a very intentional grouping of people/organizations and conversations. It exceeded my expectations and was deeply impactful. The systems we are fighting have always crossed and controlled borders; to me international grassroots work is one of the most urgent arenas for us right now. Learning across contexts illuminates alignment and common struggles but also gives us more perspective to understand our distinct geopolitical areas.”

Another reflected,

“I took about 30 pages of notes of lessons I've learned through the exchanges here. Fundamentally, I am critical of the law as a tool of colonialism, racial capitalism and the prison-industrial complex. But the convening gave me so many angles and lenses for a nuanced understanding of how people are weaponizing law for liberatory purposes.”

Participants left with sharpened analytical frameworks and renewed commitment to legal empowerment grounded in collective leadership. Hearing how peer organizations use legal education, participatory defense, strategic litigation, and community organizing allowed participants to more clearly articulate their own theories of change—connecting everyday legal work to broader struggles for liberation. This deepened analysis reinforced that legal empowerment is not just about technical knowledge, but about building alliances across impacted people, families, and lawyers to shift power inside and beyond legal systems.

As one participant noted,

“We had the opportunity to develop an analytical perspective on our work by listening to the work of other organizations and learning about the unique stories of each person who participated in the event. I’m reflecting on how important this alliance between people deprived of liberty, their families, and lawyers is, and that the work that truly moves toward systemic change is the work that is developed jointly.”

Trauma, Connection, and Collective Care

Across sessions, participants highlighted the importance of trauma-informed practice and expressed interest in adapting peer models for their own communities. Many spoke about translating training programs into new local contexts, co-developing cross-national legal curricula, and testing participatory advocacy strategies locally. The convening broadened and deepened their understanding of legal empowerment—not only as technical legal work, but as the cultivation of trust, collective leadership, and non-competitive values that sustain movements over time.

A Growing Transnational Network

Despite different legal systems, participants saw clearly that their struggles are interconnected. They discussed how mass incarceration—shaped by gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class—produces remarkably similar harms across borders. Many emphasized the importance of confronting these shared conditions collectively.



V. POWER OF CROSS-BORDER EXCHANGE

Above all, participants expressed a strong desire to remain connected and to build a durable transnational network. They envisioned regular meetings, shared platforms for communication and resources, cross-border trainings and fellowships, thematic working groups, and ongoing exchange of tools and curricula. These connections, they shared, help reduce isolation and strengthen collective resolve.

As one partner said,

“Even with different justice systems in different countries, we can still see a similar negative impact of bureaucratization, widespread prejudice, and a lack of empathy for the reality of ordinary people. I feel this because we are all struggling against systems to hold our impacted people, as people who are impacted as well, we are all connected.”

The convening reinforced that cross-border exchange is not just a space for learning—it is a driver of collective action. As one participant reflected,

“We are not alone—and unity is strength. Together, we can move our work forward.”



VI. LOOKING FORWARD—APPLYING LEGAL EMPOWERMENT ACROSS NEW SPACES

The Legal Empowerment Across Borders project demonstrates that legal empowerment is not a single program, but a flexible set of practices that organizations can integrate into their work to strengthen community power, improve legal outcomes, and support people most affected by incarceration. Across diverse legal systems and political contexts, one lesson emerged clearly: when legal strategies are grounded in lived experience, rights education, and trauma-informed practice, they become far more effective. Organizations working in prisons, reentry, violence prevention, youth advocacy, or family support can meaningfully expand their impact by embedding these approaches into their existing models.

The strategies documented in this toolkit are field-tested by organizations led by women and directly impacted communities. They include participatory defense, community-based legal education, inside–outside collaboration, family-centered advocacy, and reintegration models that combine legal, economic, and healing-centered supports. These approaches have already improved case outcomes, reduced re-incarceration, strengthened family stability, and expanded access to justice for people who are often excluded from legal systems. Organizations considering adopting legal empowerment practices do not need to start from scratch—they can draw from the methods, curricula, and organizing models developed across this network and adapt them to their own contexts.

Participants also emphasized that legal empowerment grows stronger when organizations do not work in isolation. They envisioned an ongoing ecosystem of shared learning that includes regular cross-organizational meetings, virtual classrooms, document libraries, peer exchanges, and thematic working groups. These structures allow organizations to test new approaches, share lessons learned, and avoid duplicating efforts. For organizations new to legal empowerment, this networked model offers both technical guidance and a community of practice that can support implementation and growth.

For organizations seeking to deepen their impact with women in prison, families, and returning community members, the path forward is clear: adopt and adapt the strategies that have already proven effective, invest in leadership from directly impacted people, and build relationships across borders and sectors. By joining this growing community of practice, organizations can not only strengthen their own programs but also contribute to a collective movement that is redefining how justice, care, and freedom are built from the ground up.

APPENDIX—PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



Associação de Familiares e Amigos de Presos de Rondônia (AFAPARO) **Brazil**

Associação de Familiares e Amigos de Presos de Rondônia (AFAPARO) is a grassroots organization founded in 2019 by women with incarcerated loved ones in Porto Velho, Brazil. It is now led by Cristina Silva dos Santos, an Indigenous mother whose son was imprisoned. Its mission is to unite families—who are disproportionately women—to confront the racist and classist violence of the criminal justice system in Rondônia, Brazil and to create a space where family members and survivors of imprisonment can organize collectively. AFAPARO’s values center dignity, anti-racism, community self-defense, and the belief that families are rights-holders whose knowledge and experience must lead change.

In practice, AFAPARO holds regular thematic meetings across the state of Rodonia to educate families about their rights, help them understand state obligations, and collectively strategize responses to abuses. Members participate in prison monitoring bodies, document torture and other violations, and submit reports to human rights institutions. The organization also supports women leaving prison to access employment, economic opportunities, psychological support, and reconnect with family members after release. Through these efforts, AFAPARO builds the power and political capacity of families to stand up to state violence and to advocate for humane conditions and decarceration.



California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) **United States of America**

The California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) is an abolitionist grassroots organization founded in 1995 after incarcerated women exposed severe medical abuse in California prisons. Its mission is to challenge institutional violence against women, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people, and its values center racial justice, gender justice, and the leadership of people inside prisons. CCWP envisions a world where community well-being, education, and opportunities replace punishment and confinement.

CCWP’s core work is a decades-long prison visiting and correspondence program that gathers firsthand accounts from incarcerated people, supports individuals in addressing abuse, and guides the organization’s campaigns. CCWP organizes against medical neglect, staff sexual abuse, and extreme sentencing, and publishes *The Fire Inside*, a newsletter written with incarcerated contributors. Its Resentencing Fellowship trains incarcerated women serving life or long sentences to support others in preparing petitions under recent sentencing reforms. Through a legal empowerment approach that blends organizing, litigation, policy advocacy, and leadership development, CCWP works toward decarceration and community-led justice.



Centro de Atención a la Mujer Trabajadora de Chihuahua (CAMT) Mexico

Centro de Atención a la Mujer Trabajadora de Chihuahua (CAMT) is a feminist organization founded in 1991 that defends the human rights of women in Chihuahua. Over the past twelve years, CAMT has focused on women deprived of liberty and their families, working from an intersectional and culturally rooted perspective. Its mission is to advance women's rights through advocacy, legal education, accompaniment, and public dissemination, with a vision of a Mexico in which women exercise their rights with equality and justice.

CAMT implements legal empowerment through workshops, rights education, and accompaniment for women in prison in Chihuahua, Mexico - supporting them in understanding and asserting their rights within the criminal process. The organization offers psychosocial programming, including camps for children of incarcerated women, and collaborates with public defenders to improve access to legal tools. CAMT strengthens knowledge of human rights, builds organizational and leadership capacity for incarcerated women, and advocates for legislative and public-policy reforms that reduce discrimination and improve conditions of confinement.



Centro de Estudios y Acción por la Justicia (CEA Justicia Social) Mexico

CEA Justicia Social is a Mexican organization dedicated to defending human rights, expanding access to social justice, and reducing violence through feminist, non-punitive, and anti-prohibitionist approaches. Its mission is to support people and communities harmed by the criminal justice system by promoting participatory, trans-inclusive, community-based legal empowerment. The organization envisions a society where communities affected by state violence can meaningfully exercise their rights and live in inclusive and peaceful environments.

CEA Justicia Social works through research, advocacy, strategic legal accompaniment, and community education. Its Community Justice School, co-created with people who have recently left prison, trains directly impacted people in legal tools, political education, and strategies for self-advocacy. The organization also builds alliances with civil society, academia, and government institutions to challenge discriminatory practices and promote access to justice. Through strengthening technical, political, and organizational capacities, CEA Justice Social helps individuals defend their cases, engage in legislative advocacy, and participate in policy development rooted in lived experience.



Defying Legal Gravity (DLG)
United States of America

Defying Legal Gravity (DLG) is a New York–based nonprofit committed to democratizing access to legal knowledge. Its mission is to offer transformative legal education—modeled on the first-year law school curriculum—to young people and communities most affected by the legal system. The organization believes that legal literacy should not be reserved for law professionals but should be broadly accessible as a tool for equity, self-advocacy, and systemic change.

DLG delivers intensive 50-hour legal education workshops for formerly incarcerated young women, providing instruction in contracts, constitutional law, criminal law, and other foundational subjects through a critical race lens. Sessions are hosted at Fordham Law School and include meals, transportation, materials, and mentorship. The organization also collaborates with community partners to recruit participants and convenes intergenerational conferences where youth teach community members what they’ve learned. Its goal is for participants to leave with the tools to understand and use law and to build capacity for organizing within their own communities.



Homegirlz del Corazón (Homegirlz)
United States of America

Homegirlz del Corazón is helping lead community-building efforts meant to recreate systems that are equitable and inclusive through a trauma informed supportive lens. They provide opportunities for women and youth, who come from communities of color and who have been impacted by poverty, violence, addiction, gang involvement, and incarceration to heal and to be empowered.

Through rehabilitative groups in juvenile detention centers, one-on-one mentoring, and community-based reentry support, Homegirlz helps youth process trauma, complete probation, stay in school, and avoid re-arrest. The organization offers creative arts programming, leadership development workshops, and structured reintegration support. Homegirlz also engages in court advocacy, serving as credible messengers who contextualize youth behavior and argue for alternatives to incarceration. Its holistic approach promotes healing, reduces recidivism, and strengthens young people’s capacity to navigate legal and social systems.



Interculturalidad, Salud y Derechos, Asociación Civil (INSADE) **Mexico**

Interculturalidad, Salud y Derechos, Asociación Civil (INSADE), is a Mexican organization dedicated to building pathways for social reintegration and economic autonomy for people affected by criminalization. Its mission is founded on the belief that reintegration is a collective process requiring the removal of structural barriers such as discrimination, stigma, and lack of opportunity. INSADE's values emphasize inclusion, dignity, solidarity, and the leadership of people emerging from prison.

INSADE's flagship model, Made in Freedom, supports women and other individuals recently released from prison through a structured program developed collaboratively with directly impacted communities. The model includes phases focused on life skills, empowerment, recognizing and resisting discrimination, and developing economic independence. Participants receive legal and psychosocial tools, business training, and ongoing accompaniment as they rebuild their lives. INSADE also supports the creation of peer support networks, including economic collectives and mentorship structures, allowing formerly incarcerated people to support one another's reintegration.



Jailhouse Lawyer Initiative (JLI) **United States of America**

The Jailhouse Lawyer Initiative, founded by formerly incarcerated jailhouse lawyer Jhody Polk, is a national project of the Legal Empowerment & Advocacy Hub (LEAH) and currently housed at the NYU Law's Bernstein Institute for Human Rights. Its mission is to support jailhouse lawyers - incarcerated people who work in prison law libraries to support themselves and others on legal cases - as community paralegals whose skills and leadership drive justice movements from both inside and outside prison. JLI views jailhouse lawyers as human-rights defenders and aims to increase their access to education, resources, community, and visibility.

JLI builds networks connecting incarcerated legal workers, law students, lawyers, and educational institutions. Its programs include legal empowerment courses co-taught with incarcerated people, the International Incarcerated Paralegals Congress, and Flashlights, a digital archive honoring jailhouse lawyer contributions. JLI also organizes Feminist Circles inside and outside prisons, creating healing spaces where women, trans, and non-binary jailhouse lawyers learn, teach, and build community grounded in trauma-informed practice. Through these efforts, JLI strengthens legal capacity, supports release advocacy, and advances a vision of community-driven abolition.



Assessoria Popular Maria Felipa (Maria Felipa)

Brazil

Assessoria Popular Maria Felipa (Maria Felipa) is a grassroots feminist legal collective in Belo Horizonte, Brazil dedicated to expanding freedoms for women—especially Black women—and LGBTQIA+ people. Initially founded to address the lack of legal defense for incarcerated women, the collective has grown into a broader project for feminist legal practice, community empowerment, and collective resistance to gendered and racialized state violence. Its mission includes challenging discriminatory structures in the criminal legal system and redefining the practice of law as a political and community-rooted tool.

Maria Felipa provides criminal defense, legal counseling, and documentation support to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, as well as assistance in securing employment and protection from violence. Its Esperanza García project engages women inside prisons in understanding their rights, naming their experiences of abuse, and building emotional and political strength to advocate for themselves. The collective also offers legal support to grassroots groups like AFAPARO, enabling community-led prison monitoring and advocacy. Through these interconnected efforts, Maria Felipa strengthens feminist legal empowerment and community-based resistance.



Resistance, Involvement, Solidarity, and Empowerment Collective (RISE)

United States of America

The Resistance, Involvement, Solidarity, and Empowerment Collective (RISE) is a Black, women-led, injustice-impacted organization in New Orleans working to build an empowered community of families affected by incarceration. Its mission is rooted in resistance, involvement, solidarity, and empowerment, and its leadership reflects the communities it serves: Black women, formerly incarcerated people, and individuals with direct family ties to imprisonment. RISE envisions communities where people harmed by the system can lead movements for justice grounded in healing and collective power.

RISE uses restorative and transformative justice circles to create spaces for healing, story-sharing, and mutual support among impacted families. The organization practices participatory defense, equipping families to engage actively in their loved ones' legal cases, shape defense strategies, and advocate collectively for freedom. It also provides trauma-responsive programming for formerly incarcerated women, political education on legal rights, and mutual aid for reentry needs. Through organizing, leadership development, and family-centered advocacy, RISE transforms people from isolated individuals navigating the system into a collective force for decarceration.



THEMIS Gênero Justiça e Direitos Humanos (THEMIS) Brazil

THEMIS Gênero Justiça e Direitos Humanos is one of Brazil's longest-standing feminist legal organizations, founded in 1993 to confront discrimination against women in the justice system. Its mission is to ensure that women can become protagonists of their own rights and live free from violence. Themis is grounded in intersectional feminist legal theory and sees the democratization of legal knowledge as essential to transforming institutions that perpetuate gender inequality.

THEMIS implements its mission through three pillars: training community women as Popular Legal Promoters, engaging legal practitioners to address discriminatory practices in courts and state institutions, and conducting strategic litigation and legal advisory work in support of feminist movements. Popular Legal Promoters educate other women on domestic, racial, and sexual violence and guide them in navigating justice systems. Through community-based assistance programs, legal-feminist workshops, and collaborations with grassroots groups, Themis helps women challenge rights violations and reshapes legal processes to reflect women's experiences and leadership.



Women Who Never Give Up (WWNG-Up) United States of America

Women Who Never Give Up (WWNG-Up) is a New Jersey organization dedicated to fighting mass incarceration and supporting incarcerated people and their families. Led by longtime advocate Gale Muhammad, the organization focuses on reducing prison sentences, improving prison conditions, and challenging racial disparities in the state's justice system. Its mission centers the leadership of directly impacted people—especially women, LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, elders, and people with disabilities.

WWNG-Up organizes educational forums, community meetings, and policy advocacy campaigns. The organization played key roles in passing reforms such as New Jersey's Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act, restoring voting rights to people with felony convictions on parole and probation, and advancing efforts to end solitary confinement. It also assists incarcerated women representing themselves in court by strengthening connections with jailhouse lawyers, improving access to legal resources inside prisons, and providing legal materials. Through court-watching, participatory defense, and rights education events, the organization mobilizes families and communities as catalysts for systemic change.



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