The Atlantic

The Particular Challenges of Guarding Women Prisoners

Bisera Habibija, a lieutenant at a state corrections facility in Utah, talks about how she's seen the inmate population change over the last decade.

Rich Pedroncelli / AP

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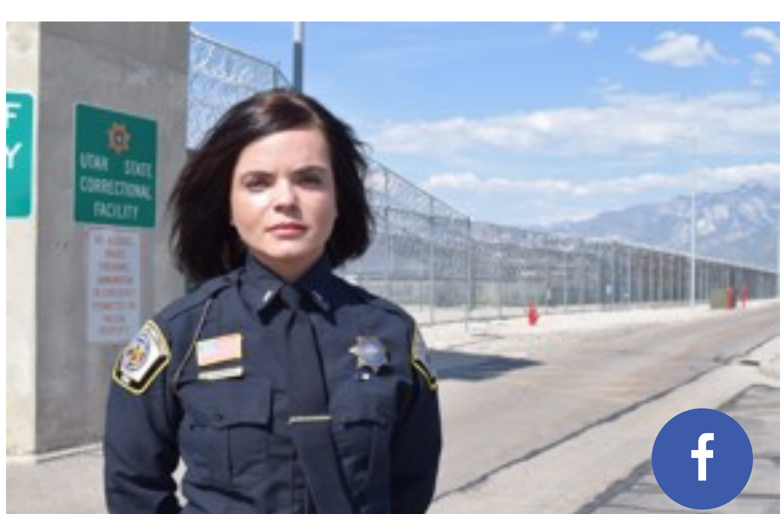
Television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Oz* frequently depict prison officers as rule-breakers much like the inmates themselves, engaging in inappropriate relationships with prisoners or smuggling drugs inside. But they also depict the challenges of these jobs: maintaining order among an incarcerated and troubled population, dealing with the ups and downs of prisoners' emotional well-being, and managing facilities in disrepair and people in need with very limited resources. Those challenges can vary greatly from prison to prison, and there is in particular a significant difference between men's and women's facilities.

The vast majority of people—93 percent— in the prison system are men. While women only make up a small part of the overall prison population, they are the fastest-growing group of inmates. Female prison-population growth has outpaced that of men by more than 50 percent since 1980. Women in prison are considerably more likely to have been diagnosed with a mental-health disorder, to have a substance abuse problem, to receive inadequate health care, or to report experiencing abuse before entering prison. Many have young children that they've lost custody of due to their prison sentences.

I spoke with Bisera Habibija, a lieutenant at Timpanogos Women's Correctional Facility just outside of Salt Lake City, about what she's experienced during her 10-year career in the Utah corrections system, the differences in working in men's and women's prisons, and how she maintains strict boundaries with inmates that have been in her prisons for as long as she has been working. The interview that follows has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Adrienne Green: How did you get the job you have now?



Bisera Habibija, a lieutenant at a women's prison in Utah (Utah State Prison)

Bisera Habibija: When I got my associate's degree in criminal justice, we came on a tour of this prison. I was just looking for stability in a job and a benefits package. Here I am, 10 years later. I started in the mental-health unit, which involved working with males and females, and then I spent about five years on the male side of the prison. Within the last year, I started working [only] with the female inmates.

Green: How is working with the female prison population different than the male population?

Habibija: Working with the female population is more straining mentally. [The prisoners] on the male side were more violent, whereas the females are more emotional. For instance, if you give a man a direct order, he'll just say okay and go do it. If you give a female a direct order, she'll ask why, how much time she has to do it, and why does she has to do it.

Green: Were you trained to interact with the female prisoners differently than male prisoners?

Habibija: The department provides us with gender-responsive trainings, but for the most part, we try to treat males and females the same way—which is just with respect and authority.

The majority of our female population comes from abusive homes, which helps us understand why they act the way they do. The majority are here for drug-related charges, but we have murderers and rapists as well. [The training] helps us understand why they even resorted to drugs in the first place. We learn how to interact with trauma patients and how to diffuse a situation verbally. That's all we have at the end of the day. We do carry pepper spray, but our number one resource is our mouths.

Green: What is your relationship with the inmates like?

Habibija: My number one job is to make sure that my staff and the inmates are safe. Relationship wise, it's strictly professional. I don't allow them to know anything personal about my staff or me. They're constantly asking if you're married or have kids, which they can use against you. I've been in situations where an inmate has threatened to kill my whole family and my friends. You don't want them to know that you have any associations in the outside world; you only want them to know the correctional officer side of you.

"An inmate has threatened to kill my whole family and my friends."

Green: Is your relationship different with the inmates who have been in the prison for as long as you've worked there?

Habibija: I started working here when I was 23. There have been inmates that I've gone to high school with that have come to this prison, and they're still here. We've grown up together, to put it that way. It's still a professional relationship, but you build a rapport with them. You still never trust them, but you have the mutual respect for one another because we have known each other for 10 years and we see each other everyday.

Green: What is a normal work shift in the prison like?

Habibija: I'm a lieutenant, so when I show up to work, I check in with the officers that work in my building. We'll spend about half an hour or so talking about the energy of the building, any tensions or problems, fights that we've heard about, or contraband that we've got to look for. We've got inmate informants that will tell us things. I have four sergeants and 16 officers that I oversee. With the female population, there are more mental crises if their kids have been taken away or their family gave them bad news, such as a death in the family. I spend a big part of my day just talking to the inmates and explaining to them that whatever might be going on is not the end of the world.

Green: How have you seen the prisons you worked in change over the 10 years of your career?

Habibija: The older population, or the population that was there when I got here, are much more respectful than the new inmates. The newer inmates have something to prove, especially the gang population. They have to find their place in prison. We have everyone from gangs, to murderers, to the white-collar criminals. They'll be much more disrespectful to show the officers and to the other inmates to show that they won't conform or follow our orders.

There are 40-year-old inmates that are done playing the game, so they are respectful. But then, you've got a 20-year-old that still has a whole life ahead of him or her and not thinking straight. I've experienced fights, stabbings, hangings, and inmates overdosing on drugs. We've seen it all, experienced it all. It gets hectic. The department has also provided us with tools that we can use to handle riot situations or any kind of crisis that's presented to us. When it's over, it brings that staff closer because we just went through something traumatic and dangerous together.

Green: What do you think is the biggest misconception about your job?

Habibija: The biggest misconception is that there's a lot of corruption and that we take advantage of the inmates—which is not the case. Everybody sees us as the bad guys, or the bullies. I'm not saying that there aren't any bad apples in our profession, but there are bad apples in every profession. Most of us are there to help [the inmates] out, to help them get out of the prison and never come back.

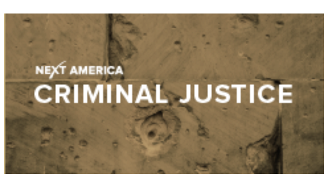
"Society has turned their backs on these people, and they've given them to us. We are their last resort."

Green: How does that make you feel when people think all corrections officers are abusive or corrupt?

Habibija: I let everybody be entitled to his or her own opinion; I know what we do. Of course, it offends me and makes me defensive. I also understand why they think that way, because the majority of people's ideas of prison come from TV shows and movies. We'll help [inmates], and if we can't, we'll leave them alone. We have a job to do—to make them do things that are good for them, like programming and education if they don't have a high school diploma or college degree.

Green: You mentioned that you provide education and programming. How does it feel when those efforts to reform someone don't work out?

Habibija: Society has turned their backs on these people, and they've given them to us. We are their last resort. Especially in the female population, a lot of them have lost their kids, their families, and even the court systems have given up hope and locked them up.



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Unfortunately, the ratio in my building is 140 inmates to 2 officers per shift. Of course we can't reach everybody. All you can do, at the end of the day, is just shake your head because some people can't comprehend that there is a better life out there for them.

The sad thing is we don't have the resources to constantly push somebody. We provide everything for the ones that want it. For the ones that don't want it and don't want to change on their own, there's nothing we can do. We've had several inmates that are constantly coming and going. It's like a revolving door. We can't reach everybody, and we never will. There's always going to be the ones that live and die inside these walls.

Green: What do you think are the most challenging and rewarding parts of your job?

Habibija: The most challenging part of my job is mentally being able to handle all the offenders. Every single one of them has a problem, and they feel like their problem is the only one that needs to be addressed immediately. Outside of work, I don't go and advertise where I work. We're not favored out there right now. It makes you not trust anybody, and you're always on the lookout because you've seen the evils in our world. You think twice about where you go and what you do outside of work. Will there be inmates there or parolees that you don't want to run into? The majority of the times, the only people we do hang out with are the other correctional officers.

The most rewarding part of my job is seeing my staff succeed, and then also seeing the inmates succeed too. There are a small number of inmates that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; they end up in prison, do their time, and then they leave and never come back. Every once in awhile, you do run into them on the street and they'll come up to you and shake your hand and say thank you for being good to them. Of course, you always get nervous when you run into them because you never know who is holding a grudge. At one time or another, you probably had to discipline them.

Green: You're a Bosnian refugee. Did that experience factor into your decision to go into criminal justice?

Habibija: My mom, brother, and I left Bosnia in 1995, which was during the war. We were refugees in Germany for about five years before we came here. When the war was over, officially over on paper, all the refugees had to go back and we really had no home to go back to. America took us in. The violence that we saw hasn't influenced me to do this job, but the injustice did. I experienced it first hand, and I can change it here.

Green: What motivates you to stay in your career in corrections?

Habibija: The optimist in me will say that it's to make Salt Lake City a better place, because all these people will be my neighbors one day. They will be out there among my family. Or, to keep the bad ones inside the wall because I would rather deal with them inside these walls than have my family or friends deal with them outside. While I have them inside the prison, if I can make them just a little bit better, so when they do get out they're not a danger to society, then I've done my job.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ADRIENNE GREEN is an assistant editor at *The Atlantic*.