

Love and liberty for all behind bars

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LGBTQ+ in a masculine environment

The Constitution guarantees the right to privacy and freedom of expression. These rights do also apply in prison, and there they are of particular importance to LGBTQ+ people. Inmates may be deprived of their liberty, but they should not be deprived of the freedom not to conform!

Male prisons are a hypermasculine environment. Facing such an environment can be extremely hard for those whose identity does not conform to the narrow standards expected in the prison population. It is common for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people, and for those who are gender nonconforming, to hide their identity in order to avoid becoming victims of harassment, exclusion or degradation. Personally, I had to be moved twice because I was harassed due to my sexual identity. By moving me the Norwegian Correctional Service defined me as the problem, not the offender.

The lack of LGBTQ+-knowledge

There seems to be a serious lack of training and documentation on how to handle LGBTQ+ people. Apart from a very clinical and non-committal instruction on where to place trans-people, there are no written policies, unlike in many other European countries, who have identified LGBTQ+ people as a vulnerable inmate group. In Norwegian prisons no information is made available to give guidance on how to handle being different in prison, and the staff is poorly trained.

The prison I am in, Eidsberg, has a few LGBTQ+ employees, and the employees are generally friendly and open-minded. I was elected inmate representative and was able to talk to and counsel other gay inmates. This also gave me a communication channel to the prison management. In my experience, the employees would be able to provide a good environment for LGBTQ+ people if the Regulations relating to the Execution of Sentences (Straffgjennomføringsloven) allowed for it.

The need for policy reform

LGBTQ+-friendly policies need to be implemented for all aspects of prison life, starting with restrictions on the use of body searches. The current regulations relating to the Execution of Sentences allows for strip searches. This process requires the inmate to remove all their clothing. Such inspections are unpleasant for all inmates, but they can qualify as inhuman or degrading treatment when certain LGBTQ+-people are subjected to them.

The right to love behind bars

When people live closely together, romantic relationships can form. However, most prisons explicitly forbid sexual relationships between inmates. They claim this is to avoid coercive sex and rape. This suggests that the Norwegian Correctional Service does not believe that gay sex can be consensual, or that it in some form has to be morally wrong. In addition, condoms and lubricants are available during visits, but they are forbidden inside the prison. This practice is putting inmates in danger of HIV infection and other diseases.

I believe it is a human right to be able to engage in consensual relationships, both platonic and sexual ones. That the Norwegian Correctional Service cannot differentiate between gay people making love and rape is disheartening. People will have sex in prison, and the current policies forces that sex to be unsafe.

I want to thank Jussbuss for the opportunity to speak out, and for their tireless efforts to inform and represent inmates about their legal rights.