

NEWS & CULTURE | OPINION



Once sentenced to more than 24 years in federal prison, Pradia now fights against mandatory minimum sentences.

## Why I Still Fight for Drug Law Reform

Some 12,000 prisoners convicted of low-level crack cocaine offenses—many of whom are African-American—may have their sentences reduced because of new drug sentencing reforms. Activist **Kamba Smith Pradia** tells ESSENCE why she's determined to help other incarcerated women come home AS TOLD TO DONNA M. OWENS

I'm glad that after more than 20 years there have been some changes to the sentencing laws, but I'm not satisfied. The new law establishes an 18:1 ratio for crack and powder cocaine offenses, and I still feel the ratio should be 1:1.

When Congress created the crack cocaine sentencing law in 1986, it set very low quantities of drugs to trigger manda-

tory minimum sentences. Possessing five grams of crack—about the weight of two sugar packets—would automatically get you five years. However, a defendant who had powder cocaine had to have 500 grams to receive the same sentence. The law was unfair and unreasonable.

I was sentenced under crack cocaine laws and received 294 months in prison for

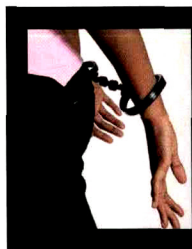
a crime I didn't commit. Even the prosecutors confirmed I had never handled, sold or used any of the drugs involved in my ex-boyfriend's drug ring. While I was incarcerated I met many other Black women who were in for first-time, nonviolent drug offenses. Two friends have already done 18 years each. Both received life sentences.

It breaks my heart knowing there are other women still in prison, with similar stories to mine and who have family members hurting because of their absence. It's time for them to come home.

Since 2000, when President Clinton commuted my sentence, it's estimated that more than 5,000 people have gone to federal prison each year for a crack cocaine offense. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, the agency that establishes sentencing policies for federal courts, most often those being sentenced "perform low-level trafficking functions, wield little decision-making authority and have limited responsibility."

After I was released I used to have nightmares. I couldn't believe that it was just a handful of us who were let out. I felt a sense of survivor's guilt. Immediately I started working with organizations like the Drug Policy Alliance, pushing for better policies and sentencing reform. But I saw that change wouldn't happen right away.

I've testified before Congress, written editorials and addressed the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, always with the intent of bringing attention to this issue that disproportionately impacts the African-American community. Once I walked away from prison I knew that the miracle of freedom I received wasn't so that I could disappear. I must continue to push for fair and sensible drug policy and sentencing. My journey is far from over. □



### HOW CAN YOU HELP?

**BLACK WOMEN ARE NEARLY FIVE TIMES MORE LIKELY THAN WHITE WOMEN TO BE SENT TO PRISON FOR A DRUG VIOLATION. HERE ARE WAYS TO GET INVOLVED IN NATIONWIDE DRUG LAW REFORM:**

**DRUG POLICY ALLIANCE** It works to repeal mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenses; [drugpolicy.org](http://drugpolicy.org) or 212-613-8020.

**THE SENTENCING PROJECT** This research and advocacy organization helped pass the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010; [sentencingproject.org](http://sentencingproject.org) or 202-628-0871.

**FAMILIES AGAINST MANDATORY MINIMUMS** The nonprofit, nonpartisan group pushes Congress and state legislatures for further sentencing reform; [fam.org](http://fam.org) or 202-822-6700. —D.M.O.