I started my internship at Justice Now without knowing much about the organization and with no experience in prison abolition work. In ten weeks, not only did I get deeply involved in Justice Now’s work, I also learned an incredible amount about myself, the challenges and complexities of doing radical political work, and made progress in figuring out what I want to do in the future. Justice Now is a prison abolition organization that works closely with people inside prison. They mainly work with people in the two biggest women’s prisons in the world, CCWF (Central California Women’s Facility) and VSPW (Valley State Prison for Women) in Chowchilla, CA. Currently, the organization divides its work in the three areas of Campaign, Human Rights and Direct Services. The work I was assigned for the summer was mostly human rights and campaign/fundraising related.

Justice Now collaborates closely with people inside to write their human rights reports. I found this an exciting challenge to traditional human rights reports that are based on a much more hierarchal relationship between its writers and subjects. I was in the team that trained people inside CCWF and VSPW as human rights documenters to gather information for the reports. The trainings included a basic introduction to human rights and how to interview people who had experienced human rights abuses. I sent out letters to all Justice Now documenters discussing a specific human rights report we were working on with blank surveys to distribute among people inside. From the surveys that we received, we identified people that we wanted to interview for our report. I conducted
three of these interviews. I also did background research for the section of the report that will outline the historical context of current sterilization abuse in women’s prisons.

For the campaign team, I met with Justice Now board members inside prison to update them on our current projects and receive feedback. We discussed possible op-ed pieces and other potential media-related projects. I was responsible for gathering information on a new “gender responsive” prison in California. I contacted the director of the program and arranged for a visit to the facility. I was also coordinating regular meetings among interns and staff of color. By the end of the summer, the interns of color produced a letter that articulated our belief in the organization’s need to actively recruit people of color. We did not think that Justice Now was doing enough to challenge the white supremacist structures supporting the prison industrial complex. In our letter, we stated why we think it is important for Justice Now to reflect its abolitionist values in daily practice and be much more intentional in its recruitment strategies.

Two aspects of the internship that embodied what I valued most about my experience at Justice Now are the weekly political education workshops, and of course, the prison visits. During the mandatory political education workshops, all interns regularly came together to discuss the significance and impact of our work. We were assigned readings each week analyzing different aspects of the prison industrial complex and the prison abolition movement. In our discussions, we grappled with important questions about our own political values, Justice Now’s accountability to the people most affected by the prison industrial complex, and our role and responsibility as a radical social justice organization. The workshop facilitators encouraged us to think deeply and
critically about the work that we were doing. We had some intensely personal discussions that explored the complexities of our work.

Interns went on prison visits every other week. While I did not work as extensively with individual people inside prison as interns who were doing direct service work, I still got the opportunity to meet some incredible people inside who deeply affected my understanding of social justice work. In general, staff and interns at Justice Now shared a commitment to collaborate with people inside prison as closely as possible. The prison visits powerfully anchored the organization’s vision of social change and abolition in real people’s experiences. While the visits solidified my belief in prison abolition, they also often made me feel hopeless. It was discouraging to see how deeply unjust and powerful the legal system is. The scale of what we were trying to achieve seemed impossible at times.

My internship at Justice Now coincided with a difficult time in the organization’s life. This colored the interns’ experience of the summer in important ways. About two weeks before the end of the summer internship, we learned about the extent of Justice Now’s financial troubles. The staff shared their plan to launch an intense fundraising campaign. Most of us were stunned with the news and disappointed at being involved so late in our internship. I felt especially useless, as I had assumed my other work was more important and had not been focusing on a fundraising project that was assigned to me. At that point, I felt that anything I would be able to get done before I had to leave would be insignificant considering the organization’s needs.

Many of the interns had started to critique some important aspects of the organization and were discussing things that could be better at Justice Now. This
transitional period at Justice Now created a space where we could voice our ideas about structural changes within the organization. Interns were concerned with the gap between the organization’s political values and the way it is run. In our political education workshops we had talked about accountability and transparency within the organization. Some of us felt that despite Justice Now’s stated desire to have a collaborative relationship with people in prison, not enough effort was being put in fostering that relationship. As a result, we had a hierarchal relationship with people inside prison in many aspects of our work that we needed to address. This critique called for revisions in everyday things like the language of our human rights training materials, to fundamental changes in the structure of the organization to make decision-making more transparent.

Another important discussion that we had this summer was about leadership in the prison abolition movement. We had emotional discussions about race and privilege and how that shapes our place in the organization and movement. The interns of color wrote a letter to the organization about the importance of embodying abolitionist values. We believe that by being lazy in its recruiting practices, Justice Now was exclusively made up of people with a certain degree of privilege. As a result, the organization was perpetuating the same social structures that support the prison industrial complex. I was lucky to be part of an intern group of exceptional individuals. I learned from their critique of the organization and their vision of social justice. Their dedication and desire to take a deliberate stand against reinforcing unjust structures and challenging hierarchies within the organization was truly inspiring.

The most difficult part of the internship was dealing with my own insecurities about my abilities and never having enough time. The amount that I wanted to learn and
do felt overwhelming. The work was emotionally exhausting. Working in a prison abolition organization that directly works with people inside prison is a painful place to be. Again and again, the realization hit me that none of my work this summer will change the fact that the people I met on my visits, talked to over the phone, or got letters from are in prison. The more I learned about people being locked up for ridiculously long periods of time for meaningless definitions of “crime”, or heard from people facing blatant human rights violations inside prison, I felt angrier and more helpless.

I was also constantly reflecting on the politics of my own life. From my relationships with people in the organization and more concretely from the political education workshops, I was realizing the importance of connecting on a personal level with the people I was working with. For the first time, I was with other people who were talking seriously about movement building and discussing concrete strategies. I started to see how inextricable building personal relationships is in maintaining a radical political movement. In Bangladesh and the US, my political values had always alienated me from most people I have been surrounded by. This is probably why I was so drawn to the concept of movement building and found myself craving that experience of solidarity. However, I still had a hard time articulating my feelings and thoughts and could not really be as open and honest as I would have liked to be with people I only met a few weeks ago. This was an intensely frustrating experience. It was painful but necessary to come up against my own limits in order to learn about myself and decide what directions I want to take.

The internship definitely shaped my plans for the future. While I always knew I wanted to do social justice work in Bangladesh, and eventually planned on moving back,
it is much more urgent to me now. I want to be involved in radical anti-oppression work in Bangladesh. To start with, I want to create a space for discussion and self-reflection. I have seriously been thinking about setting up regular study circles to start getting involved in important conversations about social justice in Bangladesh.

This summer internship shifted my understanding of social justice work by emphasizing the importance of *how* that work is done. My experience at Justice Now presented concrete questions about the responsibilities and challenges of social justice movements. Most importantly, the internship gave me the opportunity to see the potential in radical political work. This was an incredible summer and I want to thank the RRASC program again for making this experience possible.