

## We're Behind Bars—But Our Issues Are Not

Typically, she's a woman of colour. In the United States, she is eight times more likely to be an African American. In Australia, another English-speaking country, the possibility of incarceration increases if she is an indigenous woman or if she comes from a non-English speaking background. When she first comes in, she's twenty-three to twenty-four years old. The median age is around thirty-five—much older than it used to be—because women stay inside much longer. The two usual crimes she's involved: (1) drugs, because she happens to share a home with drug dealers and is almost invariably considered a conspirator; and (2) violence—usually domestic violence. Statistics indicate that around 80 percent come from abusive relationships. A large number of them are mothers.

This is the profile of today's women prisoners.

The percentage of women that make up of the prison population in most countries has never been higher. This is true of the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and the Philippines. In recent years, the rate of increase in the populations of women prisoners has ranged from 19 percent to 150 percent. Is the marked increase due to simple population expansion? Is it that more women now have become more violent? And if so, is it also not because violence—personalised, socialised and institutionalised—has seeped via an osmotic process into the constitutions of women so that they are now more inclined toward crimes and criminal behaviour?

The issues that women in prison confront are many and complex. Poor and non-existent medical care is one. Given that a considerable percentage of women who are in prison are in their reproductive age, this is a serious concern. Mental health care is also another area requiring immediate attention because of the isolation that women in detention are subjected to. And because a big percentage of them are mothers, separation from their children makes it doubly hard to cope. Sexual abuse of women is yet another pressing issue. (We hear too many stories of this nature that one wonders why this has not been considered one key aspect of work on the issue of violence against women so far.)

Also, we need to examine the grounds for detention. Around the world, there seems to be increased willingness to put women behind bars. Why so?

Partly because of the policy changes within the criminal justice systems, especially around drug-related offences. In the Philippines, in many Latin American countries, and in the U.S., women are incarcerated for drug-related cases. In some instances, unjustly, because they become "conspirators" for being the partners, daughters or sisters of drug peddlers, small- or big-time, or because, out of despair or necessity, they become couriers for traffickers. Mandatory sentences have increased the likelihood of both women and

men being imprisoned. But also because of poverty, more women have been forced to engage in drug-dealing just to be able to provide for their family.

Research also indicates that a lot of women have been convicted for the murder or manslaughter of husbands or boyfriends who were abusive. In Nepal, it's a different angle altogether. Because of that country's punitive approach to abortion, 96 percent of the women still in prison in 2003 have been charged with infanticide though a closer examination of their case histories reveals that many of the women suffered from miscarriages, stillbirths or induced abortions. On the other hand, some states put women in jail because they believe that this is their way of ensuring that women do not go wayward. In Malaysia for example, young women and girls are sometimes detained "to protect" them from prostitution and moral danger.

One question that encouraged *Women in Action* to focus on women in prison has to do with the invisibility of female prisoners. As writer Vikki Law points out, women detainees are as invisible to the male inmates as they are to the general public. She believes that this may be because they are fewer in number (compared with men) and are not as politicised as the men, not engaging in the kind of dramatic prison protests that have attracted media attention. Women's concerns, if recognised at all by prisoners' rights movements, have been dismissed as personal, self-centred and apolitical—especially when they are "women-specific," that is, issues related to their reproductive roles as mothers and wives, or to their health, including their special needs when they are pregnant, lactating, or when they have their menstruation. The indifference to their issues is not essentially different from the reaction to women and gender by some women and men in other social movements.

At present, women in detention must rely on the sympathy and support from the outside to draw attention to their concerns. Debbie Kilroy, a former detainee and another contributor, touches on the reluctance of women detainees to seek support from their communities outside because too many times in the past, they proved to be as judgmental as the State penal system.

As in previous issues, the theme selected raises more questions than answers. What are the forms of oppression that women prisoners face? What methods of resistance have they adopted? What obstacles, in addition to invisibility, must they overcome? What is the proper role of a prison institution—to penalise? reform? Are the issues of women prisoners in the South distinct from those in the North? But then, to stimulate discussion, more than to provide the answers, is what *Women in Action* is about.

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