

Women Prisoners not Provided with Adequate Health Care

A new report concludes that prisoners in England, particularly women, are not provided adequate mental health care, prompting a number of inmates to inflict harm upon themselves.

The study, which was conducted this year by the Prison Service Safer Custody Group (PSSCG), covered eight men's and two women's prisons. It found that female inmates were nearly 18 times as likely as their male counterparts to inflict self-harm. This means one out of three women in prison harms herself as a way of coping with distress and pain. There have also been cases of mental breakdowns.

The study highlighted as well a high level of mental illness among women prisoners, a number of whom were driven to kill themselves. Within the first six months of 2003 alone, 10 women in prisons across Britain committed suicide. Last year, there were nine fatal suicides.

Legislators Propose Virginity Tests and Forced Sterilisation

Two legislators in Jamaica have proposed that school girls undergo virginity tests and recommended forced sterilisation for young women with three or more children to reduce unwanted pregnancies.

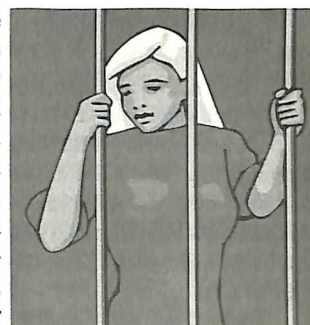
Legislator Sharon Hay-Webster suggested sterilisation at a parliamentary session, arguing that the breakdown of family values in Jamaica has led to an increase in teenage pregnancy and welfare burdens.

For Carolyn Gomes, the director of a local human rights group, this plan of action is a "step backward." The bill "tramples on people's rights and fails to address underlying problems in society. Public education is what's needed, not this."

Almost half of households in Jamaica are headed by single women. According to a 1993 survey by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, 74 percent of all births were unplanned.

Source: <<http://www.feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=7977>>

Previous research by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) validates this new study. A 2001 research found that two-thirds of women in prisons were suffering from at least one neurotic disorder. The study also indicated a high rate of severe mental illness among female prisoners, with most suffering either schizophrenia or delusional disorders.



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The PSSCG report urged magistrates and judges to consider alternative penalties for vulnerable women, and explore sending them to correctional facilities with a less volatile environment, instead of to prisons.

Source: "Women Prisoners Driven to Self-harm Claims Report," 16 July 2003, <http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_800205.html>

Widows Face Dangerous Tradition

A major U.S. newspaper recently investigated a custom involving widows in Kenya believed to be a factor in spreading HIV/AIDS. According to *The Washington Post*, Kenyan widows must be "cleansed" by the village "cleanser," one of hundreds of thousands of men who sleep with widows and unmarried women who lost a parent or child to get rid of evil spirits. According to the *Post*, "cleansers" are spreading HIV at high rates in the villages, where on average, one in every three people is infected with the virus.

"Cleansers" can be found in the rural areas of other African countries—Uganda, Tanzania, Congo, Senegal, and Nigeria. The tradition holds that a woman who loses her husband is "unholy" and should be cleansed to be able to attend funerals and/or remarry. Women's groups in Kenya such as Standing Idle Does Not Pay have worked to rid their villages of these "cleansers."

Source: <<http://www.feminist.org/news/newsbyte/uswirestory.asp?id=8004>>