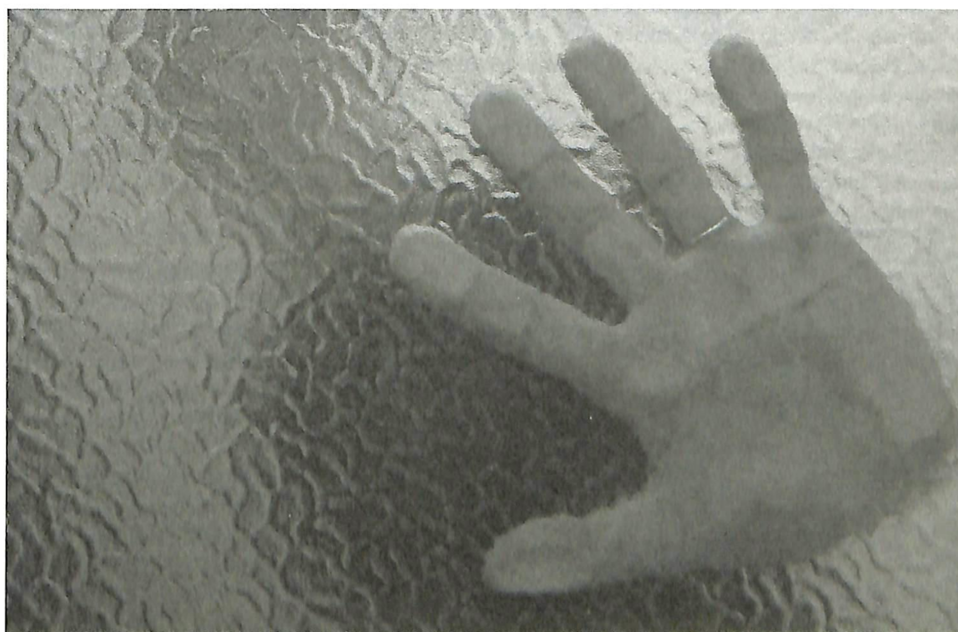
The Invisibility of Women Prisoners' Resistance

By Vikki Law

The following is an excerpt of a much longer, extensively foot-noted, pamphlet with the same title. It is the lead article of the latest issue of Turning the Tide: Journal of Anti-Racist Action, Research and Education, *Volume 16, Number 3, Fall 2003. This is a work in progress, available from Vikki Law, P.O. Box 20388, Tompkins Square Station, New York NY 10009.*

Women in prison are less than 6 percent of the total prison population, but their numbers are growing faster than men. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of women in prison more than doubled. Nearly one million women in the U.S. are now in some form of criminal justice system custody, prison, parole or probation. Women are struggling against the oppressive conditions they face. Yet, interest in the struggles of women prisoners against the prison-industrial complex remains much lower than in those of male prisoners. Even in the scant writing published about prisoner activism and resistance, women prisoners are nearly invisible.

This invisibility is not new. In the early 1970s, activists recognised that prisoners, one of the most marginalised populations, were struggling for their rights. In response, new critical analyses of prisons emerged, prisoners' rights organisations and unions were created, and there was communication among prisoners, academics and activists. Prisoner writings became required texts in university courses, and some universities began offering courses inside prisons. But, as activist and researcher Karlene Faith discovered in a 1970 survey of male convicts at Soledad (California), "Female prisoners were as invisible to them as to the general public." Faith argues this overlooking of women prisoners occurred because they were fewer in number, "not as politicised as the men, and did not engage in the kind of protest action that aroused media attention."



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Women's concerns at the time, if recognised at all by prisoners' rights movements, were dismissed as personal, self-centred and apolitical. Similarly, the protest actions that women prisoners engaged in were ignored by outside movements, which chose to focus on the better-known names of male prisoners. Thus, while male prisoners gained political consciousness and enjoyed support from outside groups, many women in prison were neglected by the same organisations. With the exception of a few well-known political prisoners like Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, the movement overlooked the female prison population.

According to Juanita Diaz-Cotto, one of the few scholars to study women prisoners' activism, the silence around women prisoners' resistance from outside prisoner rights and service groups stems from a reluctance to support activism within women's prisons. The new literature on women in prison, which focuses on the causes, conditions and effects of incarceration, does not delve into what the women themselves do to change or protest these circumstances. For example, Karlene Faith, the coordinator of the 1970s Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, the first higher education programme for women in prison, cites virtually no examples of women's individual or collective acts of resistance in her book *Unruly Women*. Even *The Celling of America,* edited by the imprisoned (male) editors of *Prison Legal News*, which in-

cludes articles on prisoner organising, omits instances of female resistance. This reflects a continued lack of outside recognition for women prisoners who act as their own agents for social change. The lack of public attention, even from male prisoner activists, outside prisoner rights groups, or the organised women's movement leads to a vicious cycle, undercutting—rather than supporting—the resistance that does emerge. Invisibility tends to discount not only women's resistance, but the validity of the issues and forms of oppression they are resisting. It assumes and thereby reinforces women's alleged passivity in the face of oppressive conditions.

Reality of Women Prisoners' Resistance

But women prisoners' individual and collective resistance does exist, and takes as many forms as the oppression they face, including some of the most demonstrative forms that have drawn media attention to men's prisons. For example, on 28 August 1974, women prisoners at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York protested the beating of a woman inmate by taking seven staff members hostage. The "August Rebellion" was put down after 2-1/2 hours by male state troopers and male guards called in from men's prisons. Twenty-five women were injured, and 24 were transferred to Mattawan Complex for the Criminally Insane without the required commitment hearings. The story was relegated to a paragraph in the back pages of the *New York Times*. Perhaps because it was women, because nobody was killed and no staff were injured, the August Rebellion was seen as less important and dramatic than the Attica Rebellion of 1971 [the takeover by 1,300 inmates of the Attica Prison facility in New York when forty guards where held hostage]. The women at Bedford Hills did not have the opportunity during or after the incident to contact media, big-name supporters or politicians, as the men at Attica did. Thus, the August Rebellion was easily overlooked by those researching prisoner protests.

Similarly, women at a California prison held a "Christmas riot" in 1975. Protesting the cancellation of family holiday visits and holiday packages, women gathered in the yard, broke windows, made noise, and burned Christmas trees in a "solidarity" bonfire. Even more recently, following the 1995 rebellions at Talladega (Alabama), Allenwood (Pennsylvania) and other federal male prisons in response to a refusal to reform racist sentencing rules, the women's Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) at Dublin, California was placed under lockdown. Although no disturbances had occurred, FCI Dublin remained under lockdown all weekend and women were forced to go to work on Monday under lockdown conditions. To articulate their protest, women began staying away from meals, and that night, set trash-can fires in all the units. Approximately 70 women were sent to administrative segregation and charged with arson and "engaging in a group demonstration." Yet because nobody had threatened violence, these acts of disruption were even more easily overlooked.

What are the forms of oppression that women prisoners in particular face? What methods of resistance have they adopted? What obstacles, in addition to invisibility, must they overcome?

Medical Care

One pressing issue for women prisoners is poor or nonexistent medical care. The majority of lawsuits filed by or on behalf of women in prison are for inadequate medical services. While all prisoners suffer from poor medical care, prison administrations often ignore, neglect or mistreat the particular health care needs of women prisoners. According to a 1990 study by the American Correctional Association, 6 percent of women entering prison were pregnant. Even prison wardens agree that several of the particular needs of pregnant women "have yet to be dealt with at any of the institutions." These include adequate resources to deal with false labour, miscarriage, premature birth; lack of maternity clothing; requirement of belly chains for pregnant women being transported to the hospital; and the lack of a separate area for mother and baby. Pregnant women don't receive proper diets, exercise or education in breathing and birthing techniques.

Shackling a labouring mother "compromises the ability to manipulate her legs into the proper position for necessary treatment. The mother and baby's health could be compromised if there were complications during delivery such as haemorrhage or decrease in foetal heart tones," notes Dr. Patricia Garcia, an OB/GYN at Northwestern University's Prentice Women's Hospital. Yet, despite these dangers, women continue to be shackled in the name of security. In an interview with Amnesty International, one woman in Chicago described giving birth while imprisoned. Her legs were shackled together during labour, and when she was ready to give birth, "The doctor called, but ... no one could unlock the shackles. My baby was coming but I couldn't open my legs."

Pregnancy isn't the only specifically female concern ignored by prison officials. Prevention, screening, diagnosis, care, pain alleviation and rehabilitation for breast cancer are virtually non-existent in prisons. In 1998, a study at an unnamed southern prison found that 70 percent of women who should have had mammograms had not been tested.

Health care in general is often inadequate or life-threatening. In February 2000, Michelle Greer, an inmate at the Taycheedah Correctional Institution in Wisconsin, suffered an asthma attack and asked to go to the Health Services unit. The nurse in charge didn't check her file; he simply told the guard to have her use her inhaler (which wasn't

functional). Greer's second request to go the HS unit was also ignored. After another half-hour, she was told to walk to HS but collapsed en route. The first nurse arrived without the medical emergency box or oxygen. A second nurse came with the needed box, but still without oxygen. Forty-five minutes after her collapse, Greer died.

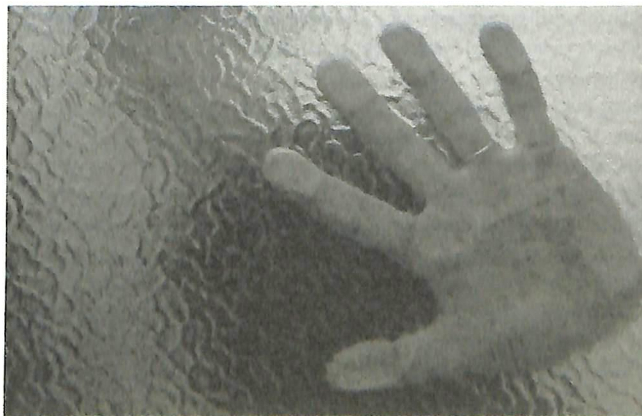
Women have been active about trying to change these conditions of medical neglect. The most successful and well-known prisoner-initiated project around health care is the AIDS Counseling and Education Project (ACE) at Bedford Hills. AIDS is the leading cause of death among prisoners, five to 10 times more prevalent than in outside society. In 1999, New York State found that the rate of HIV infection among women entering prison was nearly twice as high as their male counterparts. In 1987, women at the maximum security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, motivated by watching their friends die and the social ostracism and fear of people with AIDS, started ACE. While the prison superintendent gave the group permission for the project, ACE faced staff harassment and administrative interference. Because both Kathy Boudin and Judith Clark, alleged members of the Weather Underground [an organisation that waged a low-level war against the U.S. government in the 1970s, bombing the Capitol building, breaking a comrade out of prison, and evading one of the largest manhunts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in history], were in the group, it was constantly monitored, sometimes prevented from meeting, and sometimes prohibited from giving educational presentations. Outside educators from Montefiore Hospital were banned from the prison for suggesting that the ban be lifted on dental dams and condoms. Despite the setbacks, ACE managed to implement and continue their programme and won a US$250,000 grant from the AIDS Institute. They also wrote and published a book detailing the group's history and its positive impact on women with AIDS. Other women political prisoners have also focused on the AIDS crisis behind bars. Marilyn Buck, for example, started an AIDS education and prevention programme in California.

Women prisoners have also worked individually and without administrative approval to improve health care. In October 2000, women from Valley State Prison for Women in California testified about inadequate health care at legislative hearings. Until her recent death, Charisse Shumate worked with fellow prisoners of the Central California Women's Facility afflicted with sickle cell anaemia to understand the disease and its treatments. She was the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit for compassionate release for prisoners with less than a year to live. Unfortunately, she herself died in custody after Governor Gray Davis refused to release her. Women who had worked with her continue their efforts to educate women prisoners and hold the authorities accountable.

Children

Separation from children is another major issue for women prisoners. In 1998, more than a quarter-million children under 18 had a mother behind bars. When a 1990 survey asked women prisoners to "name the most important person in your life," 52 percent identified their children. Yet incarcerated mothers, many of whom were heads of the household, are left on their own to maintain contact with and custody of their kids. Women prisoners are viewed as being incapable of being "good mothers." The view of the imprisoned mother as unfit and unworthy has legitimated negative policies by prison and social service authorities. A 1978 directive of the New York Department of Social Services said it could refuse imprisoned parents visits with children placed in foster care. In 1997, the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act was adopted, reducing the time within which the parental rights of children in foster care could be terminated. Once a prisoner's parental rights are terminated, they have no legal relationship with their children and are not permitted to have contact with them.

Maintaining family ties, however, is not an issue addressed by many of the male prison activists. In 1998, more than two-thirds of all women prisoners had children under the age of 18; among them, only 25 percent said the children were living with their father. In contrast, 90 percent of male prisoners with children under 18 said their kids were living with their mothers. Even visitation is a problem, because of the distances involved. Imprisoned mothers have been forced to navigate the maze of family law and to work with prison administrations and foster care authorities, a path "less cinematic" than the work stoppages or hunger strikes traditionally used by male prisoners to challenge their conditions. One example of a programme created through such efforts is the Children's Center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. It is staffed by prisoners, administered by the Catholic Charities and funded by the State Department of Correctional Services. Prisoners, realising the need for supportive services for mothers, organised two parenting courses for the women at Bedford Hills, one on infancy and



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the other on "parenting through films," with each week devoted to a new subject on the growth and care of children. Prisoners organised a Foster Care Committee which, with outside support, won legislation that for the first time gave incarcerated parents the same rights and responsibilities as other parents with children in the foster care system, and the right to monthly visits if the prison is not too far. Nonetheless, prison authorities still use the threat of losing contact with their children to try to dissuade women from organising for change.

Sexual Abuse

A far greater problem for women prisoners than for men is the sexual aggression of male correctional officers. A 1996 study by Human Rights Watch found that sexual assault, abuse and rape of women prisoners by male guards was common, and that women who complained incurred write-ups, loss of "good time," or disciplinary segregation. A 1994 investigation by the U.S. justice department of two women's prisons in Michigan showed that "nearly every woman... reported various sexually aggressive acts of guards." Heather Wells, a prisoner at Washington Corrections Center for Women, proved her charge of rape against a guard by a paternity test of the child that resulted, but the guard was allowed to resign rather than face charges. Wells's baby was taken from her after it was born and placed in a foster home.

Unlike sexual predation in male prisons, the perpetrators in female facilities are usually those in a position of authority. This makes it impossible for women prisoners to form protective groups like their male counterparts. Guards hold the keys to their cells and are authorised to watch inmates, conduct full-body and strip searches, and enter their cells at any time. Thus the direct approach of the Angola Three [a campaign against the lockdown of three political prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary] or Men Against Sexism [a group that militantly opposed sexism, racism, homophobia and rape inside the walls of the Washington State Penitentiary] to protect weaker prisoners from prison rape don't work for women. However, women have spoken out to the media, sought legal assistance and in some cases, filed suit. Barrilee Bannister and several other women prisoners who were subjected to sexual abuse and forced to strip when they were moved out of Oregon to a private Corrections Corporation of America prison in Arizona were able to file a federal suit. They got a public apology, legal costs, and the promise of stricter rules against sexual abuse. In that case, the negative publicity the women were able to generate led to the dismissal or suspension of three dozen staffers.

Education

While women prisoners face issues not pertinent to male prisoners, they also share common issues. However, these similarities are often neglected. One issue often overlooked when defining the issues of women prisoners is education. Studies on the impact of education have traditionally focused on male prisoners. Despite this oversight, education is important to women prisoners as well. In the 1970s, participants in the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, the first to offer university courses in a women's prison, demonstrated their eagerness for higher education. When the project coordinator, then the programme, was banned, women prisoners organised a work strike, sit-in, and petition to protest the removal. In the 1980s, Oregon women prisoners organised a sit-down demonstration, and ten women were allowed to participate in college courses offered at the male Oregon State Prison. In 1996, women at Bedford Hills succeeded in implementing College Bound, a programme leading to a degree in sociology. Nearly one-third of the prisoners pay the equivalent of a month's wages to participate in the college or pre-college programme. Participation in the programme has transformed women's self-perception from passive objects and victims into active agents of both self- and social change. Most of these women came with past histories of academic failure: 43 percent had neither a high school diploma nor GED certificate. At Ohio Reformatory for Women, a woman who participated in a drug and alcohol treatment programme within the prison, proposed a book club "to instil the importance of education and joy of reading," and once her idea was approved, solicited donations from various books-

to-prisoners programmes. Thus, women find ways to further their education despite the lack of government funding.

Prison Labour

Even with the explosion of critical literature about the prison-industrial complex in the mid-1990s, academics and activists overlooked women prisoners' labour. When asked, women prisoners say that there are very few job opportunities available to them. Also, they believe that male prisoners have access to better jobs and better pay. One of the common complaints is that women prisoners are restricted to gender-stereotyped jobs such as cooking, cleaning, clerking or teaching. In Oregon, where Ballot Measure 17 [the state's US$22 million prison work programme known for its line of blue jeans] mandates that all prisoners work, male prisoners have access to jobs that provide them with skills such as small-motor repair, welding, plumbing and computer programming, as well as the private clothing manufacturer Prison Blues. The women, on the other hand, get jobs in the kitchen or as orderlies that pay no more than US$84 a month.

Commissary prices do not reflect these low wages. In 2002, authorities at the women's section of the prison in Canon City, Colorado, lowered the pay from 63 cents a day, claiming they were over the budget. Yet tampons cost US$3.60 and must be saved for even by those earning the highest wages. Note that these women are better off than the majority who cannot get work. At Scott Correctional Institution in Michigan, there is a four-year wait for assignments; there are only 15 jobs available for 96 women on one unit. Despite the lack of jobs, the parole board holds lack of employment against applicants. At Dwight Correctional Institute in Illinois, the average monthly pay is no more than US$20 for 40 hours a week of work. The women are paid piece-work rates for sewing and have often been injured rushing to make their quotas on the sewing machines.

Perhaps those organising around prison labour have neglected women prisoners because the women themselves do not list work as a priority issue. According to Juanita Diaz-Cotto, women's first priority is release from prison. Sexual abuse, inadequate medical care, education and separation from their children are more pressing. But women prisoners have protested around labour issues. In 1975, inmates at North Carolina Correctional Center for Women staged a five-day demonstration, citing "oppressive working atmospheres" as one concern.

Lawsuits and the Power of the Media

Women's struggles to change their conditions often lie in filing lawsuits rather than physically confronting prison officials. In 1995, women at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, California filed Shumate v. Wilson, a class action suit demanding immediate improvement in life-threatening medical care. In 1996, seven women in Michigan filed a suit on behalf of all women prisoners in the state charging the Department of Corrections with sexual assault and harassment, violations of privacy and physical threats and assaults. In 1998, six women in New York filed a class action suit against routine body searches by male guards. In Washington, "consensual sex" between women prisoners and prison employees is not outlawed, but front page news about such incidents led state legislators to propose a ban (still not enacted). The power of media became evident in 1999, when Geraldo Rivera's report on official sexual misconduct in prison was repeatedly cited during a House debate. In Wisconsin, a phone call from an anonymous prisoner to a woman reporter at the Milwaukee Sentinel about the asthma death of Michelle Greer led to an investigative report. It turned the story into a "minor sensation," and forced the state Department of Corrections to take action and the state Assembly to hold investigative hearings. The reporters eventually examined every prisoner death since 1984, prompting lawmakers to require better training for medical staff, improved medical record keeping and the creation of an independent panel of medical experts to review prison deaths. Perhaps because of the efficacy of lawsuits and the attendant publicity, those who file suits are often subject to administrative retaliation, or even worse, purposeful medical neglect.

Conclusion

Women prisoners must rely on sympathetic outside supporters to draw visibility to their issues. With the current hysteria about crime and punishment, combined with the marginalisation and ridicule of women prisoners' issues, this is no easy task for the relatively few outside groups with both the desire and resources to support women in prison. But women in prison do not passively accept their conditions. Women have struggled individually and collectively to improve their health care in prison, abolish sexual abuse, maintain contact with their children, and further their education. At Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, a new women's prison in Oregon, authorities promised a monthly "town meeting;" but the overwhelming and vocal response of the women, speaking out about their issues at the first, caused the administration to cancel plans for further meetings. As one woman prisoner wrote: "I anticipate repercussions for speaking out but I have to speak. The abused are silent, and the abuse goes on!"

The author gave a presentation with the same title at the "Break the Chains" prison abolition conference in Eugene, Oregon in August 2003, which was taped by ARA-LA for the LA Sound Posse and will be available as a CD and for broadcast on community radio. Please contact ARA-LA, P.O. Box 1055, Culver City, California 90232, Tel: (1-310) 495 0299, e-mail: <ara-la@antiracistaction> for more information about the CD.