

Inmates as Breadwinners

By Zelda DT Soriano

Most Filipino women inmates, records show, are breadwinners and mothers. Inside prison walls, they do not lose their motherly instincts. Perhaps the biggest burden that women convicts face is the daily anxiety about who will take care of their children.

Most Filipino women sentenced to prison commit crimes out of poverty. And they violate the law to feed their children and meet daily household needs.

Poverty is the major reason why women are detained at the Correctional Institution for Women (CIW) and various jails nationwide. The latest records show that of the CIW's 659 inmates, 359 (52 percent) were convicted of crimes against property while the rest were sentenced for other crimes (against persons or in connection with prohibited drugs).

The pattern is also the same for majority of the 2,011 women inmates in the other city and municipal jails in Metro Manila.

CIW head Rachel Ruelo, a lawyer, believes that women are generally law-abiding but are forced to commit crimes as "accessories." Many CIW inmates, Ruelo told *Women in Action*, are middle-class, educated and working mothers. They are either married (although some are separated) or widowed, and with children. All were breadwinners before they were jailed.

Abject poverty, including the pressure of food security for

their families, pushed them to the edge. The CIW chief singles out the economic crisis that pushes women to the wall and reduces them to becoming criminals.

Heartaches

Women detainees who are mothers are especially vulnerable to emotional and financial strains. Fanny Garduque, CIW's lone social welfare officer, noted a common problem of the inmates: who will take care of their children while they spend years behind bars, who will support them financially, who will guide them as they grow up.

Unfortunately, the CIW has neither the funds nor the mechanisms to help the inmates with this problem. Garduque sometimes shells out her own money to facilitate the inmates' visit to their families. "I am also a mother...I can relate to their heartaches," she says.

For that matter, the lack of funds is the reason why CIW is jam-packed. The facility was designed to accommodate only 250 inmates, but now houses nearly 700 women. Inmates are cramped into corridors that serve as bedrooms. There is a water shortage and the daily food budget is a measly P30 per head.

Jail Rape

One problem breeds another. Jail congestion accounts for a number of other problems, including sexual molestation of women inmates.

Per the government's own admission, some local jails do not have separate cells for

women and that these are guarded usually by male officers.

A recent survey of the 552 female inmates found in 18 jails in Metro Manila and Southern Tagalog revealed that at least 22 or 4 percent were sexually harassed. Seven of these inmates suffered rape. (The figure could be much higher, women groups believe, are sexual abuse behind bars is severely unreported or trivialized because of the biases against the victims themselves.)

The survey also established that sexual molestation usually occurs during investigation or in the early days of detention. Some of the forms of sexual harassment experienced were touching, embracing, kissing, lewd jokes, sexual innuendo, offensive language, malicious display of private parts by the guards, and attempted or actual rape. The abuse often takes place in the investigation room, in the office, on the way to a court hearing, and outside or inside jail. More than half of the victims were sexually harassed not only once but many times—often by the same person. Even visiting female relatives were not spared.

Defenceless

Women inmates most vulnerable to sexual abuse were of ages 17 to 26. Those with attractive features and feminine ways are the prime targets of male lust.

Many victims are poor, have not been visited by relatives and were apparently defenceless. In some cases, the women were induced to trade

sex for longer out-prison leaves, the removal of their handcuffs, faster court litigation, or such items as soap and better food. In other cases, prostituted women inmates ended up practicing the trade while at the rehabilitation centres. Congestion, where women inmates share the same cell with male inmates, fans undesired and unplanned intimacy.

The survey cited other factors behind the phenomenon of sexual abuse inside jails and rehabilitation centres: the absence of a law that punishes sexual harassment against women detainees, lax regulations, lack of complaint mechanisms, illegal drugs and inadequate support for basic needs.

Weighed down by the harsh prison milieu, lack of defence mechanisms and continued harassment, women inmates unconsciously internalize their own oppression. Their belief that their incarceration is a sign of moral decay and that they are bad and despicable contributes to their own victimization.

The low self-esteem and oppression are baggage the women inmates inevitably bring with them when they leave prison. They may be free but they find themselves chained inside a bigger prison of poverty and insecurity. The vicious cycle of destitution and crime takes another turn.

"The problem here is that correctional institutions are not really correctional. They are more centres of penology and isolation," Ruelo said.