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Women in Prison

Lecture at St. Elizabeth College
By Bonnie Kerness - March 6, 2000

**When Justice
Lets Us Down**

I have been working with the American Friends Service Committee as a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners in the United States for the past 23 years. I'd like to share with you some of the voices of the women in prison that I hear during my day.

From New Jersey, "We are forced to sleep on the floor in the middle of the winter with bad backs and aching bodies, cold air still blowing from the vents no matter what the temperature was outside. At two o'clock in the morning they wake you up and tell you to clean the room. They go through your personal belongings and then put them in the trash...."

From Texas, "The guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of five male guards. Then they carried me to a cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off. They left me there in that cell with that pepper spray in my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that. I just didn't want to take off my clothes off."

From Arizona, "The only thing you get in isolation is a peanut butter sandwich in the morning, a cheese sandwich in the afternoon and for supper, another peanut butter sandwich. If you want a drink here, you have to drink toilet water..."

From Missouri, "When I refused to move into a double cell, they came into my cell and dragged me out and threw me on my back. I was beaten about my face and head. One of the guards stuck his finger in my eye deliberately. I was then rolled on my stomach and cuffed on my wrists with leg irons on my ankles..... I was made to walk a thousand feet with the leg irons. Then they put me in a device called a restraint chair. When they put you in this chair, your hands are cuffed behind your back

and tucked under your buttocks. They stripped me naked.... and kept me there over 9 hours until I fouled myself on my hands, which were tucked underneath me through a hole in the chair."

I could go on and on. By 1999, there were about 150,000 women in jails and prisons in the United States. About 60% of those women are mothers. Most are imprisoned for non-violent crimes, largely in violation of the drug laws. Women tend to commit survival crimes to earn money, feed a drug dependent life, or escape brutalizing physical conditions and relationships. The number of women in prison in this country is about 10 times the number of women incarcerated in all the Western European countries together. It goes without saying that most of the women in US prisons are women of color, with black women being imprisoned more than eight times the rate of imprisonment for white women, and Latin women being imprisoned nearly four times the rate of white women. According to a recent US Department of Justice study, almost 40% of the white female state prisoners age 24 or younger were identified as mentally ill. Twenty percent of the black females and 22% of the Latin females in state prisons were mentally ill. Without any fanfare, the "war on drugs" has become a war on women and it has clearly contributed to the explosion in the women's prison population in this country. Over a third of women serving time for drug offenses in the nation's prisons are serving time solely for possession.

These past years for me have been full of hundreds and hundreds of calls and complaints of an increasingly disturbing

nature from prisoners and members of their families throughout the United States. The proportion of those complaints coming from women in prison has increased dramatically. Women are describing conditions of confinement which are stomach wrenching. Certainly women in correctional institutions are suffering from sexual abuse by staff, or as one woman put, "I am tired of being gynaecologically examined every time I'm searched." They complain about rape, sexual misconduct by guards and fondling. As one New York prisoner put it, "That was not part of my sentence, to..... perform oral sex with officers." When women report such things to authorities, we then get reports of harassment and retaliation from the same guards that they were filing complaints against.

Women are also reporting inappropriate use of restraints on pregnant and sick prisoners. The reports of giving birth while being handcuffed and shackled are horrible, including one report from a woman who's baby was coming at the same time the guard who had shackled her legs was on a break somewhere else in the hospital.

Other abuses include medical care which is often so callous that it is life-threatening. We have received reports about a woman who died of pancreatic disease that went undiagnosed, about a mentally ill woman who was confined naked in a filthy cell where she ingested her own bodily waste, a woman who suffered burns over 54% of her body and gradually lost mobility when she was denied the special bandages which would keep her skin from tightening, from a woman who

unsuccessfully begged staff for months to allow her to see a doctor and was finally diagnosed with cancer. Though in enormous pain, she was given no pain medication. She died nine months after the diagnosis.

Couple all of this with the increased use of extended isolation, lack of treatment for substances abuse, lack of counseling services, concerns about the inappropriate use of psychotropic medications and you have an increasingly clear picture of the prison system that continues to unfold. If you call to make a reservation at a Marriott Hotel, you are very likely talking to a female prisoner- one who is working for perhaps \$1.00 an hour, with no vacations, union, or any way to address working conditions. Perhaps most of all is that there are far fewer advocates focused on women in prison than the men. Part of the reason for this is that the women themselves don't reach out for help. Women are used to being the helpers, not the helped.

Each and everyone of the practices that I've talked about, that the women have testified about, are in violation of dozens of international treaties and covenants that the United States has signed with the United Nations. This country violates the United Nations Convention Against Torture, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and a dozen other international and regional laws and standards.

There is no way to look into any aspect of prison or the wider criminal justice system in the US without being slapped in the face with the racism and white supremacy that prisoners of color endure. Prisons are currently one of the largest growth industries in the United States today. The Prison Industrial Complex now houses more than 2 million in state and federal prisons. That number is not reflective of children's facilities, immigration detention centers, or municipal lock downs. Can you imagine how many children are affected by this?

If we dig deeper into the US practices that I've talked about, the political function they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts, the prison system, and the death penalty all serve as social control mechanisms. The economic function they serve is equally as chilling. Many people with whom I work believe that prisons are a form of neo-slavery. I believe that in the US criminal justice system, the politics of the police, the politics of the courts, the politics of the prison system, and the politics of the death penalty are a manifestation of the racism and classism which seems to govern so much of the lives of all of us in the US. Every part of the criminal just system falls most heavily on people of color, including the fact that slavery is still permitted in prisons by the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution. Although prison labor is not our focus today, involuntary prison slavery is real.

I work with a youth project in Newark, and the young people tell me that the police feel like an occupation army, as if inner cities were militarized zones. They feel that the courts are used as a feeder system to filter young blacks and Latinos into

prisons where those bodies are suddenly worth a fortune. I've heard people say that the criminal justice system doesn't work. I've come to believe exactly the opposite- that it works perfectly as a matter of both economic and political policy. I don't believe that it is an accident that people who are perceived as economic liabilities have suddenly been turned into a major economic asset- for the young male or female of color who is worth nothing to the county's economy suddenly generates between 30 and 60 thousand dollars a year once trapped in the criminal justice system. Nor do I believe that it's an accident that the technological revolution has been accompanied by the largest explosion of building prisons in the history of the world. The expansion of prisons, parole, probation, the court, and police systems has resulted in an enormous bureaucracy which has been a boon to everyone from architects, plumbers and electricians to good a medical vendors- all with one thing in common- a pay check earned by keeping human beings in cages. The criminal justice system costs multi-billions of dollars which means there are a lot of people being paid a lot of money for containing mostly folks of color in cages in human warehouses. The criminalization of poverty is a lucrative business and it seems that we've replaced the social safety net with a dragnet. I doubt that this would be tolerated if we were talking about white folks or rich folks.

The women in prisons are mostly poor and working class people who need jobs, education and often, drug treatment. Clearly, this country needs to use imprisonment as a last resort for many kinds of non-violent offenses. Prison issues

are class issues, and until prisoner activists and outside organizers begin opposition on a more serious level, neither prison administrators nor the US government have to respond to our complaints. We need to find ways to reach into women's prisons, just as we are going to have to find ways to further our own social and political consciousness and activism.

The crippling of our poor, young men and women of color in our prisons is expanding in unconscionable ways, and none of this is about the rate of crime. It is about capitalism, and it is about racism. It is about fighting the poison that drips from the American culture, which to me is a culture of greed, a culture of no values, and a culture which fears the joy of diversity.

I'm not sure what fields each of you may end up in. For myself, I have been part of the struggle against oppression in this country for the past 35 years. I have seen the horror and havoc that US policies can create in people's lives. I have never seen anything like what I am seeing now in US prisons. What is going on in the name of us all needs to be looked at very carefully. I think that whites have to consciously wash off the racism that infects us daily in a society where we are privileged in relation to peoples of color. I think people of color have to become specifically involved in fighting the bottom line expression of racism and oppression that the prison system represents.

Prejudice rarely survives experience. I hope that one of the

things borne of such studies that you are doing now is a far more critical look at yourselves, your families, and your society. In a genuinely multi-cultural society, the current criminal justice system would not be tolerated.

I'd like to open for some dialogue now. Thank you.