



AMERICAN FRIENDS
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"Break the Cycle"
Mass Incarceration of Women, Bodies, Families and Communities
May 18 & 19, 2004
By Bonnie Kerness

I've been working with the American Friends Service Committee in Newark as a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners for almost 30 years. The relationship between women living in poverty, women on welfare and women being incarcerated is indisputable. There are currently over 950,000 women either in prisons or living under other forms of social control such as parole or probation in the United States. This number does not include the number of women in jails, or juvenile or immigrations detention centers. Since 1980 the number of women entering prisons in the US has risen almost 400%, double the rate of men. Women of color are imprisoned at rates between ten and thirty-five times greater than rates of white women in fifteen states. New York is one of those states. None of this is about the rise in crime. Nearly a quarter of these women are mentally ill, with untold numbers being infected with AIDS. 40% held no jobs prior to imprisonment; two thirds of them are women of color and 60% of them are mothers of an estimated 1.3 million children. The average age of the women is 29 and 58% haven't finished high school. Without any fanfare, the "war on drugs" in this country has become a war on women and children which has clearly contributed to the explosion in both the women's and youth detention prison populations.

I'd like to share 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 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 clear 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 my clothes off.

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 the

rolled on my stomach and cuffed on my wrists with leg irons on my ankle. 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.

These past years have been full of hundreds of calls and complaints of an increasingly disturbing nature from prisoners and their families throughout the United States. The proportion of those complaints coming from women has risen, with women describing conditions of confinement which are torture. They suffer from sexual abuse by staff, with one woman saying, "I am tired of being gynaecologically examined every time I'm searched." Another prisoner put it, "That was not part of my sentence, to...perform oral sex with officers." In one current NJ case, the woman who filed charges of rape was kept in solitary confinement from the day she filed her complaint. This woman held semen in her mouth, spitting it into a plastic bag when she returned to her cell.

Women have reported the inappropriate use of restraints on pregnant and sick prisoners. The reports of giving birth while being handcuffed and shackled are horrible, including one woman whose 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, about 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, and from a woman who unsuccessfully begged staff for months to allow her to see a doctor. This particular woman was finally diagnosed with cancer, in enormous pain, with no pain medication. She died nine months after the diagnosis. I am currently dealing with a young woman with breast cancer at a prison in New Jersey where every agonizing stage of her medical care from chemotherapy to radiation has been achieved only by a war of calls and letters on her behalf.

Couple this with the lack of treatment for substance abuse, lack of counseling services, concerns about the inappropriate use of psychotropic medications, inappropriate use of restraints and you have an increasingly clear picture of what life is like for our sisters in prison. Add the use of prison labor and the picture of the prison system continues to unfold. If you call to find out about NJ Tourism, you are very likely talking to a female prisoner - one who is working for 23 cents an hour with no vacations, union or any way to address working conditions.

One great concern on behalf of our sisters is the increased use of isolation that women in prison are enduring. We've received letters from isolation units all over the country, with one woman Wisconsin describing being "housed in cells with no windows. The toilet, shower and everything else is in this one room. I eat, sleep, shower in this cell, only showering on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. We go outside in a cage similar to the size of this cell for one hour on Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. Every time we come out of our cells, we are shackled. If we see a doctor, the nurse and an officer is in the room. It is very embarrassing to have an officer pull down your pants and underwear for your pap smear.

One woman in New Jersey describes being held in isolation for over three years without charges. She says, I just day there day after day, week after week, month after month. No once was I taken out of my isolation cell. I was not allowed a pen or pencil, library, television or church. I was prevented from making telephone calls. Worst of all, there was nothing for me to see. My view consisted of brick walls; barbwire and a tiny etch of the sky that I could see with only one eye because the sliver of a window was so small.

Each of the women who wrote felt they were being kept in isolation because they were each active in protesting conditions, sexual brutality and other mistreatment. The authorities went to far as to charge one women with gang activities. Most of the women also felt that the placements were race based.

I don't think that we can talk about women without talking about the children that are coming out of the detention facilities, many of whom are children of prisoners. I have the opportunity to work with young people of African and Latino decent who tell me that the police feel like an occupation army as if the inner cities were militarized zones. They speak about the school system being the feeder to filter young bodies of color into youth detention, jails and adult prisons where those bodies are suddenly worth a fortune. 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 economic and political policy.

Many of the prisoners and family members with whom I work believe that the youngster of color who the country labels worthless to the economy suddenly generates 30 thousand dollars a year once trapped in the criminal justice system. 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 food and medical vendors – all with one thing in common – a pay check earned because this country insists on keeping so many of its citizens in cages in human warehouses. The criminalization of poverty is a lucrative business with a large and growing middle class of all nationalities being paid a lot of money for containing mostly poor people in cages in human warehouses. Not unlike the era of chattel slavery, there is a class of people dependent on bodies of color as a source for income.

The American Friends Service Committee became so concerned about juvenile detention issues that we conducted a listening project with some youngsters from our New Directions Youth Project in Newark, NJ. These youngsters expressed so much fear of retaliation that they would not allow us to use their names. I want to share with you some of the voices of the young sisters who testified in the pamphlet called "Our Children's House".

"I was 12 when I went to the youth house. I saw them pepper spray this girl one time. She beat up a boy. They threw the boy in the hole and took all his clothes from him. He had to sleep naked. It was so cold in there. He was screaming".

"They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting one time. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn't breathe. We kept telling them that she had asthma, but they wouldn't listen".

"The male guards had sex with the females. Guards bring in weed and cigarettes for the kids. I remember one bringing a girl he was having sex with cigarettes".

"I left out of there with a nasty rash. I had just turned 12 and I was the youngest one in there. They lock the younger kids in their room and they can't go to rec with the other kids. Before I left, there was a boy who was 11 and he had to stay in that cell all day. He cried all the time".

On Mother's Day of this year in Elizabeth, NJ, 17 year old Eddie Sinclair Jr. hung himself in the juvenile detention facility. Eddie had previously stolen a bicycle and had forgotten an appointment with his parole officer the day before. The police picked him up and placed him in isolation in the juvenile facility. It is no surprise that Eddie's Mom is Latina and his Dad of African decent. Eddie's is perhaps the loudest voice of all.

Each and every one of the practices that the women and children have testified about, are in violation of dozens of international Treaties and Covenants that the US has signed. These practices violate the United Nations Convention Against Torture, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a dozen other international and regional laws and standards. In other words, the US violates international law every day.

If you are a person of an oppressed nationality in this country, and you are poor, should you get arrested which is a likely occurrence, bail will be set so high you become an economic hostage. You will be defended by a public defender who has a case load so vast you cannot be a priority. You will certainly not get a trial by a jury of your peers. You will serve a sentence which is 30 per cent longer than a Caucasian would receive for the same crime. If you have seen the same

thing happen to your mother, your aunts, your cousins – if you look around at the broader picture of what is happening to those of your nationality, it is not hard to conclude that an economic and physical genocide is being committed.

The UN definition of genocide is a) the killing of members of a racial or religious group b) the causing of serious bodily harm to members of a particular group c) deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction d) imposing measure intended to prevent births within a group and e) forcibly transferring children of that group to another group.

If we use this definition, it isn't hard to see how the mass imprisonment that is occurring fits that definition. Coupled with data on high infant mortality, early death of the elderly, lack of the same medical treatment, opportunities and education that is afforded to whites, and the realization becomes even more compelling.

Oppression is a condition common to all of us who are without the power to make the decisions that govern the political, economic and social life of this country. We are victims of an ideology of inhumanity on which this country was built. If we dig deeper into these practices, 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.

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 governs so much our lives. Every part of the criminal justice system falls most heavily on the poor and people of color, including the fact that slavery is guaranteed in the United States by the 13th amendment of the Constitution. Although prison labor is not our focus today, involuntary prison slavery is real.

There are many things we can do to push for social change. We need to link with more coalitions of diversity on mutual interests. In November I participated in a forum on reparations and much of the discussion was of US domestic policies on the poor and people of color, the same things we are talking about this weekend. We need to educate ourselves on international law and prod our human rights lawyers to engage the UN Covenants in US courts. Although international law isn't recognized in civil courts yet, we are seeing immigration courts giving consideration. 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. Free women need to form monitoring and advocacy alliances with women in prison. Many years ago, a Vietnamese sister noted that, "When women become massively political, the revolution will have moved to a new level.

I've been part of the struggle against oppression in this country for the past 40 years. I have seen the horror and havoc that US policies can create in people's lives. I have spent time with people who have endured torture in US prisons. I have treated hundreds of ex-prisoners who have returned to our communities with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress, many of them women. I have worked with United States political prisoners and their families for decades. I am haunted by what I am seeing in US prisons and my soul is shaken by what I read in my daily mail.

We must stop violations of human rights, particularly those of women and children. We must alter the 13th amendment. We have to place a moratorium on prison construction and change the racial and economic profiling of arrest and sentencing practices. We need to decriminalize poverty, mental illness and in some cases, lesbianism. We must eliminate solitary confinement, torture and the use of devices of torture. We must support a vigorous monitoring of the police, court and prison systems with a citizen review process. We need to ensure voting rights for prisoners and ex-prisoners and enhanced use of international law. We need to redirect the dollars going into prisons that belong in our communities. We need to be investing in fully funded education from preschool to public schools and universities. Our children must be a community priority.

The Service Committee has always recognized the existence and continued expansion of the penal system as a profound spiritual crisis and, as a faith based organization, it is our job to address it as such. It is a crisis that allows children to be demonized. It is a crisis that legitimizes torture, isolation, and abuse of power. It is a crisis that extends beyond prisons themselves into school and judicial systems, to parole, probation and law enforcement. I know that each day I send a child to bed hungry is violence. That wealth concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of man is violence, that the denial of dignity based on race or class is violence.

Conferences like this are so important because they encourage the kind of lifetime commitment that social change requires from us. I hope that each of us here continues to expand the empowerment work begun at this conference. Empowerment is not only what we can give to ourselves; it is also how much we can contribute to the greater good outside ourselves. There really is nothing more powerful than a determined woman. This is a good day to make a difference.

Thank you.