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INSIDE

The Criminalization of Youth

Suzanne Pharr

- U.S. children are five times more likely to be killed than those in the rest of the industrialized world.
- Youth in the U.S. are twice as likely to commit suicide as their counter-parts in industrialized countries; suicide rates have quadrupled among children under 15.
- U.S. youth are 12 times more likely to die by gunfire than those in other industrialized countries; guns are the primary cause of homicides among children. *(1997 Centers for Disease Control report)*
- Twenty-three percent of all crime victims, almost one in four, are juveniles.
- Of the nearly 150,000 rape victims in 1992, one out of five was under 18.
- Homicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds.
- Between 1984 and 1991, the juvenile homicide rate almost tripled.
- One out of five young Americans will have committed a serious violent offense by age 18.
- African-American and Hispanic males have the highest rates of violent crime victimization, with African-Americans between the ages of 16-19 having a higher rate than any other age or ethnic group. *(1992 Department of Justice report)*
- 95,000 youths were incarcerated in the U.S. in 1994, an increase of 20% since 1980. *(Center for the Future of Children)*
- For every two youth (ages 0-19) murdered in 1994, one youth committed suicide.
- From 1992 through 1995, 41 states passed laws making it easier for juveniles to be tried as adults.
- In 1996, the one-day count of youth under age 18 held in adult jails was 8,100. *(National Center for Juvenile Justice, 1998)*
- In Arkansas it costs between $40,000 and $60,000 a year to house a youth in the Youth Services Division. *(Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 12/4/98)*
- The U.S. is now building more prisons than universities. *(Justice Policy Institute, 1997)*

Whatever are we to make of this distressing list of facts and figures? At the very least, I believe we can agree that something has gone very wrong in a country where, for the first time in history, children in non-war environments are killing children, children are increasingly committing suicide, and children are primary targets of a consumer culture. In response to the crisis in the lives of young people, this country has made an all-out effort to create more laws to restrain youth from congregating with their peers in public spaces and from being able to move about freely (curfews), to move youth through the criminal justice system as

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adults, and to regard their actions as criminally suspect if they are youth of color. Through massive anti-taxation efforts, which have often pitted older people against the young, funding for services to support families, schools, childcare, healthcare, recreation, and basic human needs such as food, clothing and housing have been cut drastically.

I believe our young are suffering because there is little infrastructure to support them and their families, because large numbers of them are no longer essential to the economy, because this society has contradictory attitudes toward youth, and because they, as a group, do not have power to defend themselves from the onslaughts against them–that is, they are unable to amass large sums of money, to be independent of adults, and to vote to make political change.

First, let's take a look at society's contradictory attitudes toward youth. Over the past 20 years, youth and adults have become increasingly alienated from one another. As a symptom of this alienation, adults today tend to have unrealistic, unfair and contradictory images of youth.

Here are some examples of the contradictions:

• Americans romanticize the young. Youth is considered the time of innocence, of simplicity, of good bodies and good times. As baby boomers grow older, many long to be associated with youth, to be young themselves.

• Romanticizing youth and longing to be young supports a commodified youth culture. The idea of innocence, good bodies, and rebelliousness is used to sell goods, targeted both to youth and to older people. Though characterized as innocent, youth are constantly eroticized and sexualized by advertising and the media. Youth culture is essential to today's consumerism.

• While extolling the innocence of youth that needs protection, our society has taken away the services and entitlements that support families. The majority of people on welfare are children; over 20% of all children live in poverty. Physical and sexual violence against children within families of all classes is rampant. An observer could easily assume that our culture hates children.

For the first time in history, children in non-war environments are killing children, children are increasingly considering suicide, and children are primary targets of a consumer culture.

• Youth are also seen as predators, members of gangs, mass murderers, thieves, out of control–as enemies of society who should be restrained, controlled, tried as adults in criminal courts, and locked up.

Though there has always been adult control of the lives of youth and along with it, oppression, there is now a dramatic change in the attitudes of adults toward young people. This change centers around the idea of young people as sexualized marketing targets and simultaneously—for poor youth especially—as violent predators. Youth are now faced with prejudice against themselves.

If one defines oppression (such as racism or sexism) as institutional power plus prejudice, one would have to argue that, today, youth are oppressed. They have no institutional power, and prejudice against them as a group permeates the culture. If one looks at the common elements of oppression, they all apply to the treatment of youth: they lack social and economic equality; they are stereotyped, demonized, and dehumanized; they experience isolation and tokenization, self-blame, societal blame, and internalized oppression; their sense of powerlessness leads to horizontal hostility, as evidenced in youth killing other youth. Overall, they are controlled by violence (often from birth onward) and by lack of economic access and independence.

In a power analysis, we usually examine the idea of power over, looking at how one group of people has power over another and attempts to control them. Adults maintain consistent power over youth, limiting their access to money, mobility, association, information, medication, reproductive choice and the uses of their bodies for sexual pleasure. Information in the classroom, on the

internet, or in libraries is restricted, for example, and youth are left to gain from hearsay some of the most important information they need. And, as we all know, people without power seek power and survival where they can.

One place where youth can seek personal power is through sexual expression, whether or not condoned by adults, with or without condoms or the pill, in positive or destructive relationships. It is not surprising that youth sometimes find themselves in sexual trouble—unwanted pregnancies, STDs, etc.—since they are not allowed access to the complete information they need. Another place of power is through personal and gang violence. A gun, which can be easily obtained by youth, gives a great sense of personal power, as does the collective energy of gangs. Gangs also provide what families often do not: dynamic relationships, discipline, purpose, a sense of belonging.

Because they cannot vote, youth have no voice in preventing the creation of the public policies that harm them; they, for example, have been unable to vote on the anti-tax initiatives that have cut and restricted public funding of schools, libraries, social services, etc. Nor were they able to depose the politicians who worked to eliminate welfare and to leave them impoverished, or those who have systematically eliminated civil rights and liberties. They cannot mobilize very easily to oppose the lobby of the National Rifle Association and to bring an end to the easy access to the guns which are killing them daily. They cannot vote to throw out of office all those politicians who work daily to cut back or eliminate every program that supports the well-being of families and children.

Beyond the fact that over one-fifth of our children are living in poverty, they are also affected economically by a so-called "boom" economy that does not need most of them for any jobs other than unskilled and low-paid labor. For the hundreds of thousands who cannot afford the escalating cost of higher education, the future is in the fast-food, tourist, or service industries, performing whatever jobs cannot be done by robots. US jobs have been exported, downsized, and set back. In the first 11 months of 1998, there were 575,000 layoffs, and by year's end they broke the old record of 615,00 layoffs set in 1993. (Challenger, Gray & Christmas) There are fewer and fewer jobs—with benefits and a living wage—for young people entering the job market. Few can hope to do as well as their parents did economically both in income and also in such ways as owning their own homes or having retirement pensions.

The future is bleak for youth, and the number of teenagers is likely to increase by 20% over the next 15 years. What is to be done with all of these youth? Sadly, the current answer seems to be that if they cannot get the education and the jobs to make them consumers, then we must make more laws to control them and build more prisons to warehouse them. If there are no jobs in the free world economy, we put them in private prisons which provide cheap, enslaved labor to corporations.

However, we could take a different approach here. At the heart of it is fair and just taxation that is used to provide for human needs–and this means making corporations, as well as individuals, pay their fair share. To save our children, we have to establish a human rights agenda that provides education, liveable-wage jobs, safety, healthcare, food, clothing and shelter in a fair and equitable way that demands an end to racism, sexism, and all the oppressions that stand in the way of justice. This agenda will cost money, but no more money than is currently in circulation paying for military hardware, give-aways to corporations, possessions and play-toys and stocks and bonds for the wealthy–and of course, for building and maintaining the criminal justice system and prisons.

It will call for a shift in our values and in our sense of our responsibility for one another in community. It will require, for instance, that we believe enough in our children to provide prenatal care, pre-school and after-school programs, abundant funding for education, free or affordable healthcare, access to information, recreation, job training and opportunities to earn a living wage. It will require more than preaching morality and threatening punishment to create the families who nurture and sustain children; it will take a society that genuinely believes in families and children—and puts its money where its mouth is.

For years Jesse Jackson has said that it is far, far less costly to educate a child than to imprison one. We have yet to take this to heart. In our treatment of our young, we face the measurement of ourselves as a humane and moral society. As of today, we are failing to measure up; tomorrow, we have the opportunity to bring about the changes that allow young people to live full and healthy lives with a future they can look forward to with hope. ■

Women in Prison: the Concrete Realities

Amy Edgington

What do we know about prisons in this country today? We know that one in four African American males stands a chance of going to prison in his lifetime, due to the unequal enforcement of justice. We know that it costs far more to incarcerate people than it does to give them decent education, housing, healthcare and jobs. We know that America is building more prisons and incarcerating a larger segment of its population than any other industrialized nation. We know that more and more prisons are being run by private corporations and that prison labor is often being used to produce goods and services for sale by other corporations. But when we picture prisons we don't usually think of the fastest growing segment of the prison population—women.

The End of Welfare as We Knew It

No one liked welfare as it existed, but thanks to cruel, short-sighted reform, women now usually face the end of welfare benefits after two years, often with inadequate job training, childcare and transportation. In addition, the demand for entry-level jobs will far out-strip the supply. Existing jobs frequently provide no benefits, and the wages are too low for a woman to pay out-of-pocket for adequate healthcare, childcare, food, shelter, utilities and clothing. As bad as welfare was, a woman trying to support children with a minimum wage job is often worse off.

On TV we hear rosy stories about the extraordinary (and lucky) individuals who "make it." But many more women–and their children–will be forced to turn to illegal activities to make ends meet. Hot checks, forgeries, prostitution, shoplifting, burglary, and drug-dealing are fairly certain routes to eventual incarceration. Women who cannot find jobs that adequately support their families will more and more often find themselves separated from their children and involuntarily employed in the corporate workforce behind bars.

The inequalities that exist outside of prison continue behind locked doors... Poor women serve the hardest time.

The trend toward economically driven incarceration for women has been in place for more than a decade. Up into the early 1980s the most typical sentence for an incarcerated woman in Arkansas was for second-degree murder. Most had killed their batterers, often after years or even decades of abuse. In the wake of Reaganomics, convictions for property crimes became the most common. In this decade, the war on drugs has made illegal-substance convictions almost as frequent. We may see a new rise in convictions for violent crimes as women become more involved in the drug trade, and more women may wind up killing their batterers as the economic barriers to leaving abusive relationships continue to grow.

Telling It Like It Is

These are the cold facts, but do we have a concrete picture of what doing time means for a woman in Arkansas? I know that I didn't before I went into the Women's Unit in Pine Bluff in the late 1980s to speak to the Domestic Violence Awareness group. As I talked with the prisoners and with Women's Project staff who have worked there for years, my eyes were opened.

I felt completely at ease with the women I met inside and thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with them. As a formerly battered woman, I could readily see how I might have wound up beside them, if I had had only slightly fewer resources or lucky breaks. Yet their lives as prisoners are very different from mine. In many ways it is an experience, like battering, that only those who go through it can understand completely. Those of us on the outside can only begin to comprehend if we ask questions and listen to the answers.

For this article, Felicia Davidson, who does HIV/AIDS education and Domestic Violence education in the prisons, asked the women currently incarcerated in Newport in the new prison run for profit by Wackenhut Corporation to share some of their day-to-day reality with *Transformation* readers.

Intake

When a woman goes through intake, she is issued the standard uniform she must wear, and if her hair is long, it is cut to shoulder length. Only sneakers are allowed; women who need orthopedic-type shoes find it very difficult to obtain permission for them, even if they must work long hours on their feet. Women receive three pairs of socks, three bras, and three pairs of underpants from the State. This underwear is not necessarily new. Even though these shoddy garments quickly become ragged from frequent washing, it may be months before a woman will be issued replacements. Each woman receives one roll of toilet paper once a week. Once a month she gets a small tube of toothpaste and twenty-four sanitary pads. Twice a month she receives a small bar of hand soap. The women have learned not to send anything but their uniforms to the laundry; other items disappear. If a woman wants to stay clean, she will have to stretch each bar of soap to wash herself and her underwear. Additional toiletries and underwear are available at a high price from the commissary. Toiletries are collected by United Methodist Women to be distributed to women who cannot otherwise afford to purchase things that most of us would consider essential, such as deodorant and shampoo. Women who apply for these "indigent supplies" are often humiliated by the staff.

The inequalities that exist outside of prison continue behind locked doors; women who have access to money from the outside do not have the same experience as women who have nothing. Poor women serve the hardest time in prison and, since economics is tied to race in our country, women of color usually serve harder time than most white women do. Many also complain of racist treatment from guards and of favoritism towards white prisoners.

The Days Pass

However, no one is having fun. Consider the typical day at Newport. The women must get up, dress, make their beds by 5:15 am and be lined up for the head count in the hallway by 5:25. No talking is allowed in the hallway. After count, the women collect their breakfast trays, which have been sitting out for as much as an hour, long enough to become thoroughly cold and unappetizing.

Lock down means more prisoners can be controlled by fewer guards with less training.

Women who have jobs then report to them. Most work in the kitchens that serve the men's and women's units or mop the unit's floors or they mow the grounds or hoe down the weeds in the ditches. A few (almost always white women) have clerical jobs. Some women who have sentences that are long enough (but not too long) are allowed to attend classes for a GED or Vo-tech training. Women serving life have no educational privileges.

Some women may do hard labor for 12 or more hours a day, especially when an inspection is coming up and the staff want the place to be spotless inside and out. But more complain of having absolutely nothing to do; there are about 625 women in the unit and only about 75 jobs. Women who have no jobs or classes pass their time by listening to the radio, if they are fortunate enough to own one. They can check out one book at a time from the prison library, or they can buy books directly from a publisher, if they can afford to. If they are not locked down, prisoners can watch TV–the great American pacifier–from 10 a.m. till lights out at 10:30 p.m. The women might spend time gazing longingly at the five pictures of loved ones they are allowed to have. They may write or read staff-censored letters.

Most of the women are idle and bored most of the time. The women say that they are often "locked down" three, four or more days a week. All the women of one wing will be locked in their cells at the same time. They are only allowed out of their cells to collect meals and for one hour of exercise. Often the excuse for the lock down is an infraction of rules by one individual. But the real reason it happens so frequently is that high employee turnover leaves the prison chronically understaffed. Lock down means more prisoners can be controlled by fewer guards with less training. In a for-profit prison, maximizing control while minimizing costs equals higher profits. Newport does not yet have any corporate contracts using prison labor to produce goods or services, but profit still runs the show.

Human Rights Violations

In one respect the women in Newport are more fortunate than many women in prison in the U.S. It appears that male guards are not conducting strip searches on women prisoners, although sometimes men have

been watching women when they shower. In prisons, where male guards have nearly total control over female prisoners, sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse are inevitable. However, we did not ask the women at Newport to tell us specifics about this aspect of their lives, because women who report such things in prison are considered "snitches" and suffer brutal retaliation. Prisons attempt to operate as closed societies, above the scrutiny and judgement of outsiders. Hopefully, that may change: the United Nations, Amnesty International, and other human rights groups are currently investigating the sexual mistreatment of female inmates in U.S. prisons.

Nearly all the women who helped us with this article feel their human rights are being violated. In addition to the frequent lock downs, women cite the inconsistent arbitrary rules, which change from guard to guard and from day to day. Besides the threat of lock down, infractions of the rules mean getting "written up" and losing such privileges as a job, vocational training, visits with your children. It can also mean the loss of "good time" which would mean earlier release. Many women feel that they are written up based purely on a guard's personal animosity or racist prejudice. A woman who voices objection to unfair treatment or abuse will instantly be written up. Women are written up for showing any strong emotion whatsoever: loud laughter, crying, hugging or touching. Although battering has been a part of most female prisoners' lives, many used to come to the Domestic Violence group simply to have an opportunity to joke and laugh or cry and hug one another–to be themselves for one hour a week. Many women housed in the previous units in Pine Bluff and Tucker looked forward to attending chapel as a source of solace and emotional release. There is no chapel in Newport.

Inadequate medical and dental care is a consistent complaint. The women say that in some cases preventable deaths have been the result.

Inmates with serious medical conditions are not receiving special diets their doctors prescribe. Older inmates and those with disabilities have an especially hard time. Many women also worry about unsanitary conditions in the kitchens.

When asked how they are treated by the guards most women say: "like a dog," "worse than an animal," "like a piece of trash," "sub-human." Such treatment makes them feel: "worthless," "like a child," "crazy," "as big as an ant." Some say that the guards may praise them one day and humiliate them the next. On the other hand a very few say that the guards treat them well and make them feel safe, an indication that prison is indeed not the same experience for all women inside, and that favoritism is a reality. Unfair, unequal, and inconsistent treatment are undoubtedly tolerated by prison authorities as a further means of achieving control. By pitting prisoners against one another they deflect anger away from themselves. Through inconsistency they keep women hoping and competing for crumbs of approval. By exaggerating and exploiting racial and economic inequalities they keep prisoners divided and easier to control.

The Name of the Game

Clearly the name of the game is control. Many aspects of prison life bear an uncanny resemblance to a battering relationship. One inmate, when asked to describe a typical day inside, replied: "Like being in a marriage with someone who's mad at you all the time." Kerry Lobel, the founder of our prison program, remarked to me years ago, that battered women frequently make the best adjustment to prison. They are already used to having every aspect of their lives controlled, to the constant but unpredictable threat of punishment under rules that change on a whim.

Every effort is made to isolate incarcerated women from anyone on the outside who may care about them. Visitation is very limited and often denied as punishment. Families and friends of prisoners are treated like suspected criminals themselves. Not only is mail read and censored, prisoners' families may have the mail they send returned if it contains disapproved items, such as a child's drawing or a bookmark with a Bible quotation. Prisoners' mail must be destroyed or sent home after 90 days. The inmate telephone system is inexplicably "down" for days at a time, frequently on holidays. Women may register only two new numbers for calls per year.

The Products of Wackenhut

Most women in prison are not hardened violent people. They are people who made bad choices in circumstances that only offered them poor choices or none at all. Yet women often receive harsher sentences and have more difficulty getting parole than men who face the same charges. On some level, the "justice" system seems to expect bad behavior from men–boys will be boys–but "bad girls" get the book thrown at them. Nevertheless, most incarcerated women will return to the community. Doing time in Wackenhut's prison at Newport only seems likely to send a woman back to us with greatly reduced economic resources,

stigmatized in the eyes of her community and potential employers, estranged from her family, unused to making any decisions for herself, and well-trained to be a good battered wife. Is a GED or Vo-tech training enough to offset these handicaps? Why should Wackenhut care? Why should the staff be more humane or offer true rehabilitation? Recidivism means job security and happy stockholders.

Why Should We Care?

Conditions in Newport are not as bad as they are in many American prisons, and certainly there are much worse prisons elsewhere in the world. However, the countries with worse systems are not making any serious attempt at democratic government. And this is why we have to care: the epidemic of incarceration and the worsening treatment of all prisoners–men, women and juveniles–are symptomatic of the growing failure of democracy in America.

When we as a society decide that increasing the wealth of the upper 10% is more important than lifting families out of poverty, then democracy is in danger. When we can see the drug use of Bill Clinton and Governor George Bush as youthful excess, but rush to lock up inner-city kids of color who get caught with the same substances, equality becomes a cynical joke. When we decide to tolerate the incarceration of a large segment of our population for the crime of being poor, then liberty is in peril. No one I know feels safer because more jails have been built; most feel more frightened than ever. We speak of criminals as "hardened," but as a people we are becoming morally hardened to the plight of those less advantaged than ourselves. Empathy is an endangered emotion, while fear, blame and self-righteousness thrive. Democracy will continue to decline as relations between generations, races and economic classes grow ever more adversarial.

Thirty years ago, Arkansas was disgraced by revelations of corruption, torture and even murder in its prison system, which was one of only a few run at a profit by the state at that time. Now, for-profit prison systems are common and respectable commercial ventures around the nation; there is little outcry about the enormous potential for abuse or about the moral contradictions of using involuntary prison labor–slave labor–to enrich corporations in a so-called democracy. Our acceptance of corporate involvement in prisons goes along with the growing involvement of corporations in every aspect of our civic lives–public schools, universities, mass media, campaign financing and legislative lobbying. "Government" has become a bad word in the mouths of corporate-owned politicians and journalists, yet we are quietly turning the functions of government over to corporations, which have no commitment to the common good and little accountability to citizens.

What We Can Do

Little attention is paid to complaints from prisoners and their families; other voices need to be raised. However, facts and figures only motivate us to work for change if we can connect them to our own lives. With our low rates of savings and our high rates of debt, most working Americans are only two or three missed paychecks from homelessness. If we can imagine the possibility of being locked up for writing bad checks, being locked down 23 hours a day, trying to get by on one roll of toilet paper a week and 24 Kotex a month, wearing ragged underwear and having to beg for deodorant and shampoo, we might find the outrage we need to make our opinions heard on prison issues.

We can write to the UN and Amnesty International and ask them to continue their investigations. We can write the Arkansas Department of Corrections and Wackenhut and tell them we want an end to unnecessary lock downs, better supplies and better health care, humane treatment, meaningful rehabilitation, drug treatment and education, including college courses available to all prisoners. Will that be expensive? You bet it will. Prison should not be cheap, let alone profitable. If we want to save money, we should find ways to drastically reduce the number of people we lock up.

Governor Huckabee, in an uncharacteristic, giddy moment of humanity, said recently that we should consider making drug treatment available to non-violent drug offenders instead of locking them up. Please write and praise him for this idea, encourage him to follow through, then write our legislators and tell them you want them to fund drug treatment.

We can also take every opportunity to oppose the construction of new prisons and the use of prison labor for profit-making ventures. We can let our government know that only the kind of security that would result from racial and economic justice will make us feel safe. We can object to the high price of prosperity for a few and the costs of government bail-outs and other welfare for corporations. We can begin to question the role corporations play in our civic lives and the resulting decline in democratic government. We have a lot of protesting and persuading to do, but as the African American poet-warrior Audre Lorde said, our silence will not protect us. ■

Women and HIV/AIDS Project: Past, Present and Future

Felicia Davidson

In the late1980s, when HIV/AIDS began to reach epidemic proportions in Arkansas, it became clear that certain populations were being ignored by the Health Department and even by local organizations whose purpose was HIV/AIDS outreach. Among these neglected groups were women of color, rural women, teenagers, prisoners and prostitutes. The Women's Project has been heavily involved in reaching out to these groups with training, information and materials to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

History of the Women and HIV/AIDS Project

• The Women's Project organized a 19-hour CDC certified HIV counselors training course for female inmates at the Arkansas Department of Correction Women's Unit. From 1990-1997, 168 participants have been trained to be peer counselors.

• Since November 1991, the Women's Project has organized prison-led workshops in which female inmates who completed the CDC course have led two sessions per month on HIV/AIDS, sexuality, female reproduction, and forms of high risk behaviors. Over 550 women incarcerated at the Department of Correction Women's Unit have completed the training.

• In 1991-1992, Women's Project staff and prison residents developed a project manual entitled HIV/AIDS and Reproductive Health: A Peer Trainers Guide. This guide has been distributed to over 600 organizations interested in starting prison-based programs.

• Since 1992, the staff of the Women's Project has presented yearly preventative education programs on HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases to students at Philander Smith College, an historically black college, and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Over 350 students have attended these sessions.

Very little information is presented to women by prison systems regarding HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and health departments have been slow with funds for prevention education.

• In 1993 and 1994, Women's Project staff provided preventative education on HIV/AIDS and other STD's and information on reproductive health to students at Pulaski Heights Jr. High School and Horace Mann Magnet School.

• In 1993, the Women's Project sponsored a 19-hour training for African-American women to be certified HIV counselors through the Centers for Disease Control. Eleven women completed the training and they have provided HIV/AIDS preventive education to 250 people, including African American lesbians and gay men, young people and prostitutes.

• In 1995, Women's Project staff established seven HIV/AIDS information centers in rural communities in the Arkansas delta region. Five are still in operation.

• The Women's Project was one of the first organizers of Dining Out for Life, a yearly special event to raise money to support local organizations who provide services or information on HIV/AIDS. We have participated in the annual planning and program of the Arkansas commemoration of World AIDS Day to raise public awareness of HIV and AIDS.

• Since 1998, Women's Project staff has presented weekly sessions on HIV/AIDS, safer sex, and sexuality to over 300 women at the Pulaski County Detention Center Women's Unit, and monthly HIV/AIDS prevention sessions to the recovery community (Second Genesis & Wolfe House) and to the men at the Ar-

kansas Department of Correction in Tucker and Wrightsville.

- In 1999, Women's Project staff presented HIV/AIDS training to foster parents and children in the Department of Human Services program. By late April, 25 children and 30 parents had received the training.
- In August 1999, The Women's project co-operated with Brothas and Sistas to present 20 hours of peer counselor and leadership training to rural and urban youth. Nine young people completed the training and went back to their communities to teach other teens what they learned about HIV/AIDS and other STD's.

Our HIV/AIDS Outreach to Women in Prison

According to the Special Report on HIV in Prisons and Jails (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997) prison and jail inmates are at greater risk of being HIV positive and contracting AIDS because of their comparatively high rates of drug abuse. The incidence of AIDS is six times higher for prisoners than the general population. The rate of death because of AIDS is about three times higher in the prison population than in the total U.S. population. Most women HIV positive women in prison will eventually return to their communities, potentially infecting others.

From 1991 to 1995 the number of male inmates infected with HIV in state prisons increased 28 percent while the number of female inmates infected increased at a much faster rate, 88 percent. Recent studies show that female inmates, inmates age 25 or younger, and African American and Hispanic inmates are at greatest risk for HIV infection. Injection drug use, other illicit drug use, unprotected sex, and tattooing are all risk behaviors for HIV. As longer drug sentences increase the likelihood of jailhouse transmission, there are severe cutbacks in education programs generally, combined with longstanding bans on condoms and bleach to clean needles. These conditions cripple attempts to confront the central crisis of prison AIDS epidemic: discrimination, lack of prevention and inconsistent, often negligent, care (HIV InSite, May 17, 1997).

We will continue to provide information, support and resources to women incarcerated in the Pulaski County Detentioin Center and the Arkansas Department of Correction's Women's Unit.

Very little information is presented to women by prison systems regarding HIV/AIDS and other STDs, and health departments have been slow with funds for prevention education. Prior to entering prison, the majority have not had access to information about HIV and AIDS, basic reproduction and sexuality, opportunities to talk about their bodies and sex, let alone coping with being HIV positive. The lack of knowledge about HIV and AIDS is reflected in the myths and misconceptions that are expressed through inmates' fears about sharing close living quarters with other women upon entering prison. This contributes to the discrimination against and isolation of women who are HIV positive.

The training the Women's Project has been providing at the Arkansas Department of Correction Women's Unit helps dispel the myths and fears surrounding HIV, AIDS and other STDs. In developing the training sessions we felt that it was necessary to devise a program which would cultivate the leadership of the female inmates. Research has shown that peer education programs are an effective and promising way to address problems of HIV/AIDS. According to an August 1998 report, inmate infection rates dropped from 13.9 percent in 1995 to 10.7 percent in 1997 in New York State's prison population, which has extensive peer-education programs. But only 13 percent of state and federal institutions have such peer-led HIV programs (Esther Kaplan, "Organizing Inside," POZ, November 1998).

The Women's Project initiated a peer-led training program, which focuses on HIV, AIDS, STDs, sexuality, and reproductive health. Since 1990, 168 women incarcerated at the Arkansas Department of Correction Women's Unit have been certified to become peer counselors. They hold semi-monthly

workshops at the Women's Unit for 15-25 incarcerated women participants.

We are uncertain about the HIV status of women who participate in the classes we provide at the Arkansas Department of Correction Women's Unit. Although some women talk with Women's Project staff or peer counselors in confidence about their HIV positive status, most inmates are unwilling to be open about being HIV positive. They must be very careful about sharing this information because of the very real fear of being ostracized, humiliated or physically attacked. For this reason we hold regularly scheduled classes to provide an easy opportunity for all women to attend without the threat of stigma.

We plan to look for ways to increase participation of women who are HIV positive in order to give them a more active voice in identifying their concerns and priorities.

Our Goals for Future HIV/AIDS Outreach

In the future we will continue to provide information, support and resources to women incarcerated in the Pulaski County Detention Center and the Arkansas Department of Correction Women's Unit. Meanwhile, we will work in coalition locally and nationally to affect policies regarding women in prison and to raise community awareness about prison issues

Because we want to give HIV positive women a more active voice in identifying their concerns and priorities, we will attempt to increase their participation and leadership of in this program. We will give information and examples of how the voices of HIV positive incarcerated women have made a difference in other successful programs. We will ask HIV positive women for their help in finding ways to make it less threatening for them to be heard in a prison context of fear, homophobia, discrimination and isolation. Through confidential interviews with formerly incarcerated HIV positive women regarding their experiences we hope to gather suggestions for programming and potential contacts within the prison population. This should enable us to offer increased opportunities for participation and leadership. We will continue to strengthen our ties with previously incarcerated women through contacts with "chem-free houses" and other recovery community organizations; their insights will help us develop new strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention education for incarcerated women.

Empowerment is especially important to the people participating in our HIV/AIDS Project, since they have often experienced little control over their lives.

Beyond our prison work, we will continue to emphasize outreach to the HIV/AIDS community as part of the Women's Project's community organizing through the Neighbor to Neighbor Project. We want to provide leadership training for HIV positive women and increase their participation and leadership in the work of the Women's Project. Because we recognize the special devastation caused by HIV/AIDS in the Black community we want to provide additional training for African American women who then spread that information to other African American women in urban and rural areas. We hope to speak to more students and youth groups, to distribute our HIV/AIDS peer-training manual and safer-sex kits. We would like to bring more teens and young adults on board as peer counselors.

How the HIV/AIDS Project Fits Within Mission of the Women's Project

The Mission Statement of the Women's Project states that our goal is the empowerment of individuals and communities oppressed by social and economic injustice to act on their own behalf. This is our goal with the Women and HIV/AIDS Project. We begin this task by addressing the needs of women with HIV/AIDS and those who are at risk through our prevention education and peer counseling training programs. We will make additional efforts to increase the participation of women with HIV/AIDS, although their HIV status may be known only to us, since they hesitate to identify themselves or draw attention to themselves. We will offer leader-

ship training for HIV positive women and women with AIDS, so that they may better articulate their needs and shape the direction of our work.

In order to do our work with a small staff, and to help others see the linkages among the oppressions women face, the Women's Project relies on coalition building. We work in coalition locally and nationally to affect policies regarding women with HIV/AIDS, in prison and out, and to raise community awareness about HIV/AIDS issues. We work in coalition with the Arkansas Progressive Network, the Arkansas Equality Network, the Southern Progressive Agenda, Economic Organizing Project, and the Prison Project, and we participate in the National AIDS Conference.

Our goal, in The Women and HIV/AIDS Project, as in all our work, is to empower the people we serve. They are the ones who can best identify and meet their own needs. Empowerment is especially important to the people participating in our HIV/AIDS Project, since they have often experienced little control over their lives. We believe that control over one's life begins with control over one's body. Health information and the tools to protect one's health are the first place to seize that control. Perhaps this is why women who receive HIV/AIDS training often tell us that it has had such a strong impact on their self-esteem and their outlook on life. This is especially true for incarcerated women who experience almost total dis-empowerment. We are proud to make HIV/AIDS outreach a continuing part of our work. ■

BOOKNOTES Lynn Frost

New Books in the Women's Project Library

Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It by Terry Kupers, M.D. (Jossey-Bass) "...reveals the disturbing realities of prisons and jails as places of coerced refuge for poor and mentally disordered people...and shows us how to contest the racism and criminalization of poverty that have helped to produce these dangerous dilemmas." ...Angela Davis

Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas, edited by Julia Hanigsberg & Sara Ruddick (Beacon Press). Why are mothers who collect welfare stigmatized for not working, while other mothers are vilified for working? What obligations do divorcing parents have to their children? What rights should a lesbian co-mother have if she and her partner separate? These and other important questions are explored by legal theorists, ethicists and religious thinkers in this timely reading.

Bruised Fruit, a novel by Anna Livia (Firebrand Books) is an astringently humorous, no-holds-barred story of a lesbian escapee from an abusive relationship, a dainty hermaphrodite with a Southern drawl, and a bisexual with a trust fund who inexorably, it seems, kills every man she sleeps with. These three, along with a tantalizing array of minor characters, are thrown together in San Francisco...and fate gathers them at the home of a feminist therapist.

The Intuitionist by Colson Whitehead (Anchor Books) It is a time of calamity in a major metropolitan city's Dept. of Elevator Inspectors, and Lila Mae Watson, the first black female elevator inspector is at the center of it. A dead-serious and seriously funny feat of the imagination, this novel is a brilliant debut by an exceptional young talent. In the tradition of Ralph Ellison, Colson Whitehead artfully crosses back and forth over racial, political, and aesthetic borders to create a work of stunning depth, soulfulness, and originality, starring one of the most lovable heroines of all time.

Flying Cups & Saucers: Gender Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, edited by Debbie Notkin & the Secret Feminist Cabal. In this book of stories you'll find explorations of gender that far outstrip the ones in the everyday news and the talk shows. And more new ways of looking at gender than you would think could fit into one book.

Don't miss the...

Holiday Open House

Join us for our annual

Holiday Open House

&

Silent Auction

on Friday, December 10th.

Renew old acquaintances and meet new friends over holiday refreshments at the Women's Project from 5:00 to 7:00 pm.

WISH LIST

For HIV Prevention Work

- 1" Binders
- 3x5 Index Cards
- Flipchart pads
- Markers, all colors

For Meetings

- Paper towels
- Toilet paper
- Liquid soap
- Coffee cups
- Bottled water

For General Office

- Packing tape
- Lined 8"x11" note pads
- File folders, letter size
- Photocopy paper, all colors
- Diskettes, high density

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