

Transformation

Vol. 12 Issue 3
Summer 1997

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INSIDE

**Special Issue:
Focus on Women
in Prison**

Domestic Violence
— page 3

HIV/AIDS Training
— page 5

MIWATCH
— page 7

Wishlist
— page 9

Booknotes
— page 10

PART I

An Overview of the Women's Project Work: Women in Prison

Judy Matsuoka

Our society is moving toward incarcerating greater numbers of its citizens than ever before. The numbers of Americans in prison has doubled in the last decade. Nursing homes continue to warehouse people with disabilities against their will and talk about reopening orphanages is again in vogue. As prisons house the least-valued people in our society, it is here where we see tremendous violence and exploitation in the name of criminal justice.

It is in our prison work where the Women's Project's mission statement is most clearly demonstrated: Our goal is social change... We work for all women and against all forms of discrimination and oppression.

Women in prison represent the fastest growing population in prison. Since 1980, the number of women imprisoned in the U.S. has tripled. This is partly due to the worsening of economic conditions for poor women and also due to the increase in arrest rates and length of sentences due to the "war on drugs." Mandatory minimum sentencing and the lowering of the ages that children are tried as adults has added to the growth spurt.

The majority are in prison for

property crimes such as check forgery, illegal credit card use and theft. These crimes should more aptly be called poverty crimes as 80% of incarcerated women reported incomes of less than \$2,000 per year in the year before their arrest and 92% reported incomes of less than \$10,000. Given our society is classist, it is not surprising that sentences differ by income. If a poor woman is caught with 5 grams or \$29 worth of crack as a first-time nonviolent offense, it is a mandatory 5 year sentence. If a wealthy woman is caught with 500 grams or \$8,000 worth of cocaine, she can get probation, because a prison sentence is not mandatory.

Of the women convicted of violent crimes, the majority were convicted for defending themselves or their children from domestic violence. Women commit only 14% of all homicides, but the majority of those homicides involve the husband, ex-husband or boyfriend. Given that our society is sexist and racist, it is not surprising that the average prison terms are twice as long for killing husbands as for killing wives, and African American women are twice as likely to be convicted of killing their abusive hus-

(continued on page 2)

Women in Prison Overview

bands than are white women. In fact, the majority of women (54%) incarcerated in U.S. prisons are women of color. African American women, on the average, receive longer jail time and higher fines than do white women for the same crimes.

The majority of women (75%) are mothers of dependent children and six percent are pregnant when entering prison. Forty-one percent of the women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse which means that their children are likely to have observed the abuse or been abused themselves. On a national level, the number of children separated from their incarcerated mothers is approximately half a million, causing damage that will be felt for generations to come. These children are 40 to 60 times more likely to become incarcerated themselves. The violence done to these children is so great that in 1993 Congress authorized the National Institute of Corrections to fund mother/children care facilities as an alternative to incarceration to mothers convicted of non-violent crimes. Congress authorized the allocation of \$8 million dollars a year for these facilities; by 1997 not a single dollar has been spent by the National Institute of Corrections for this purpose, thus ensuring a supply of prisoners for the future.

And why is a steady supply of prisoners needed? The U.S. is experiencing a 35% annual growth in the number of privately owned and operated prisons.

These corporate prisons employ prisoners who will produce \$1 billion dollars of goods and services this year. Since prisoners are exempt from minimum wage laws

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and occupational safety standards, do not receive benefits and cannot organize, corporations find U.S. prisons an attractive alternative to Third World labor—and an attractive alternative to creating free world jobs that will pay good wages and provide benefits. Today we see prisoners sewing jeans, assembling computer components, and taking phone orders and reservations for major corporations such as JC Penney's and Microsoft. Increasingly we see a world in which some are rich and free and others are poor and incarcerated.

The Women's Project has been engaged in prison work since

1989. Our goal of social change drives all of our prison work but the work is done at a variety of levels: empowering incarcerated individuals, changing institutional policies and systems, developing alternatives, and educating others. We use our newsletter as an educational tool to reach out to others committed to social justice. We work in coalitions to find alternatives to incarceration, to prevent the damage to families caused by a mother's incarceration and to change the prison policies which oppress women, poor people and people of color. Perhaps most radical is our work with individuals who are incarcerated—radical in this society because we believe these women and men are persons of worth who are capable of changing the conditions of their lives. We work in the prisons to empower incarcerated women and men by providing them with information about the causes and consequences of domestic violence and HIV/AIDS—information they are not receiving from any other source—to effect change in their lives and ultimately in the lives of their families and communities.

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This issue of *Transformation* will give an overview of our prison work in Arkansas and the Fall issue will introduce you to a recently initiated project and discuss some of the pressing political concerns about our nation's criminal justice system. ■

The Prison Project: Domestic Violence

Felicia Davidson

It is through the Prison Project that the Women's Project has been able to work within the Arkansas prison system to provide a weekly support group/class for incarcerated, battered women, train women to be HIV/AIDS educators, and provide transportation to children through the MIWATCH program to visit their mothers in prison. Recently we began a domestic violence class for incarcerated men and an HIV/AIDS informational class for men. These projects allow us to work directly with incarcerated women and men to empower them to effect change in their lives as well as giving us the opportunity to witness the prison system and its impact on prisoners.

Coalition Work

To effect change in the system, the Women's Project has long worked with community organizations on advocacy efforts. We were supporters of the formation of Second Genesis, a transitional facility for formerly incarcerated women, and worked with the pre-release program at the Women's Unit to provide a non-traditional jobs training program. The Project staff initiated the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee for Women in Prison and Their Children, an Arkansas-based coalition of organizations and individuals. The work of this committee resulted in

Parenting from Prison classes offered by the Parent Center, and is currently involved with lobbying for alternatives to incarceration for mothers convicted of non-violent offenses. Current members of the Ad Hoc Committee also include: Advocates and Relatives for Kids, Arkansas Cares, Black Community Developers, Second Genesis, and the Women's Project.

Domestic Violence Group for Women

In 1989, a weekly support group for battered women was started and in 1991, a class on domestic violence was instituted. These educational classes and support activities for women in prison who had been physically, sexually and emotionally abused have continued virtually uninterrupted. In general, the group included and continues to include personal sharing as well as informational presentations about the dynamics of battering (physical, emotional, economic and sexual abuse, threat and isolation).

Who are the women we see in prison? The profile that emerges in study after study is that of a young, single mother with few job skills, poor education and who lives below the poverty level. Seventy-five percent are between the ages of 25 and 34, 75% are mothers of dependent children, and 85% have experienced sexual

and physical abuse. Ninety percent have a drug or alcohol-related history. The majority of women are in prison for relatively minor offenses such as theft, fraud or forgery, which are typically referred to as property crimes. When women do engage in violent crimes, it is often against a male partner. Women are much more likely to kill a male partner in self-defense in response to the man's battering and threats and typically after an extended period of abuse—making it unlikely a woman will repeat a homicide.

Although no one knows exactly how many American women are in prison for killing an abusive husband or boyfriend, it is believed that 33% of women serving sentences for murder were convicted of killing a husband, ex-husband or boyfriend. Charles Patrick Ewing, a psychologist, states that, "This small but increasingly visible minority of battered women are in many cases doubly victimized: once by the men who have battered them and again by a system of criminal justice which holds them to an unrealistic standard of accountability."

In March, 1991, it hit home for me. I had a sister incarcerated for killing her abuser. She was loving, caring, honest and educated in all the things society expects of a person to "fit in." My sister got married in July, 1981, to what had seemed like a nice man. Six months or less into the marriage, we would see her with black eyes, scratches, bite marks, patches of hair pulled out, and so many more horrible things. She went to the

(continued on page 4)

police for help and got an order of protection. This did not stop her husband from coming and beating her, and after each arrest, the beatings got worse. My sister left the house after he tried to kill her and went to a battered women's shelter. She lost jobs because he would show up, talking loud and causing trouble. The

Women are much more likely to kill a male partner in self-defense in response to the man's battering and threats and typically after an extended period of abuse.

night she killed her abuser the police had arrested him only two hours earlier. They let him out and he went to their house where he beat her almost to death with a gun before she got the gun away from him and shot him.

I also survived an abusive relationship—for the record, with a man who had been with me when I answered the late night calls from my sister, took me to pick her up, held her hands on many nights, put ice on her bruises, and gave her money to go away from her abuser. It seemed that when my sister went to prison, he started to make me feel guilty for helping my mother with my sister's children. He played mind games:

(continued on page 5)

Domestic Violence/Battered Women Group: Reflections by Women at Tucker

"...Domestic violence is being abused throughout your life in childhood, marriage or relationship. I was abused in many relationships and didn't realize I was being abused. But now I realize where I went wrong to cause me to accept the abuse I was taking throughout my life."
Aurelia Barnes

"To me, this class is the place I found out that I can live a different life with an absence of abuse in any form....This class has become a haven in only two sessions. I feel that if and when I want to share my story or opinions, I can without the fear that I will be judged, or that my "business" will be broadcast all over the compound."

Lou Gentry

"I feel like since I've been going to the Domestic Violence classes that it has helped me become a stronger person. I no longer feel like I have to depend on anyone, except myself, and no matter what we have, we shouldn't stay in an abusive relationship. I now have a perspective on life. And I now can talk about how I was treated without feeling ashamed and embarrassed, because I know I am not alone."

M. Walker

"What I have gotten from this class is that I have been able to forgive myself and learn how other people have been through the same thing that I have, but I can truly honestly say that I will do better for myself and understand why some

things happened the way they did. I realize that after all that I have been through, I don't have to go through the same stuff that I have been through because I know that I don't have to deal with that. I can walk away and not go back."

Mary Cooper

"I come from a very dysfunctional and alcoholic, drug filled childhood. I have come to understand that although I myself have never been violent, or a drug or alcohol user, as a result of my childhood I have lived my life with low self-esteem, self unworthiness, and guilt which led me into a 12-year marriage with an abusive alcoholic. ...I searched for a reason for my behavior which has caused me to write checks, to do self-destructive things to myself, to stay in trouble, to come here to Tucker, and to cause hurt to myself, my family, and my children. Carrying around all this guilt and low self worth throughout my childhood and past marriage had caused me to accept beatings and mental abuse and given me the feeling that I'd done something to deserve it. But until I was willing to accept that I had a problem, search for a cause and a direction, I could not find a solution to change. I also learned no matter how much self destruction we may do, once we are accepting and willing to change, let go and let God, that these are the tools to rebuild a strong foundation for our future."

**Chamaine Youngblood
Cousatte**

"You care more for them than for me." He threatened to leave if I didn't stop going to visit them. He started to use isolation to control me: took the phones to work with him, and took the keys to both cars. To intimidate me, he would burn my clothes. It never occurred to me that I was being abused because we were not fight-

We empower women by giving them the information and support to know that domestic violence is never deserved.

ing—yet. The fighting came when he found out that I had extra keys made and bought more phones. For a long time I didn't tell anyone because I was ashamed and felt like it was my fault because the fighting wouldn't have started if I hadn't gotten more keys and phones.

Today I know the difference and through the Women's Project work with the domestic violence group at Tucker, we empower women by giving them the information and support to know that domestic violence is never deserved. It is in these classes and support activities that we work for social change, a just and violence-free world—one woman at a time. ■

The Prison Project: HIV/AIDS Peer Training

Felicia Davidson

IV drug use by a woman or her sex partner, having multiple sex partners, being in an abusive relationship where the woman has little control over her sex life, and lack of information about AIDS and safer sex put women at increased risk for HIV infection and AIDS. Women, especially women of color, are the fastest growing group of people being diagnosed with HIV infection or AIDS in Arkansas.

The women incarcerated in Arkansas, like women nationwide, tend to be young and poorly educated. Many have alcohol or drug addiction which put them at increased risk for HIV infection. And many come from communities where there has been limited access to health information. Prison then becomes an important time for women to gain access to information that can result in changed behaviors to reduce their risk for HIV infection as well as skills to pass on the information to others in their communities.

Each month women are paroled out into the free world and new women take their place at the Women's Unit at Tucker prison. Many women arrive with concern about their health status, with myths about how HIV is contracted, and with fears about people with HIV and AIDS. Many

women at the Women's Unit have not had access to AIDS information, basic facts about reproduction and sexuality, or opportunities to talk about their bodies and sex.

Given these realities and with the belief that women should have the information to have control over their own bodies, the Women's Project initiated a peer-led training program which focuses on HIV, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive health. We worked with prison residents to develop a project manual entitled *HIV, AIDS and Reproductive Health: A Peer Trainer's Guide* for use in the program and for distribution to programs around the country.

Seventy-five women incarcerated at the Women's Unit have participated in the four 19-hour sessions to become certified in the Centers for Disease Control course for HIV serologic test counseling and partner notification techniques. Prisoners trained through this program act as resource people for their peers in prison as well as being able to return to their homes, communities, schools, churches and workplaces with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver HIV/AIDS information and resources.

Additionally, bi-monthly 2-hour training sessions provide

(continued on page 6)

any woman with the opportunity to learn, without threat of stigma, basic information about HIV/AIDS, high risk behaviors and

Many women at the Women's Unit have not had access to AIDS information, basic facts about reproduction and sexuality, or opportunities to talk about their bodies and sex.

HIV prevention. These prisoner-led sessions are taken seriously by the other incarcerated women who feel that their peers really know about life back out on the street.

These 2-hour training sessions are now being given to the men incarcerated at Tucker. Many of the men are incarcerated at Tucker only until they can be transferred to another facility. This gives the Women's Project the opportunity to give these men information about HIV/AIDS with the hopes that they will incorporate the knowledge into their own lives and share it with their peers. ■

What I Learned from the Battered Women's Group/HIV Training

Shirley Danner

Of all the problems our country is plagued with these days, perhaps domestic violence and HIV/AIDS are two of the most outstanding and especially relevant to the prison population.

Some of the facts I've learned since these topics have been taught at the Tucker Women's Unit:

- Over 1 million women seek help yearly for injuries caused by battering.
- At least 6 million women are battered yearly by husbands or boyfriends; 4,000 are actually killed.
- Children are traumatized by seeing this battering and many grow up to repeat the behavior.
- Batterers have certain characteristics and battered women have certain traits.
- Since 1983, 2,205 cases of AIDS have been reported in Arkansas. Half have died.
- The fastest growing population of people infected with HIV are female and heterosexual. It is not a gay person's disease.
- AIDS has killed 6.4 million worldwide.
- 22.6 million are HIV infected worldwide.

Although AIDS and domestic violence may not appear to

have much in common, both are evidenced in the incarcerated population. Women especially are more often victims of violence, sometimes beginning in childhood. This can be a never ending cycle, leading to dysfunction in the home, low self-esteem, mental illness, prison or death. Likewise AIDS is playing a larger role in the lives of the incarcerated. Drug addiction is spiraling upward and has a direct link to HIV/AIDS? How? Drug addiction can cause a person to lower moral standards, take risks, engage in very dangerous behaviors that spread diseases, cause others harm and lead to disaster for all involved.

The key is education. How can a person fight something of which they are ignorant? The Domestic Violence/Battered Women's group held each week at the Women's Unit enables those involved to learn, share and finally grow into healthier persons emotionally, thus returning to families as better persons, wives, mothers, sisters and daughters.

People everywhere should have the knowledge offered here. But at least some women will leave here and help educate others, thereby no longer being a part of the problem but a portion of the solution in our society.

Women in Prison MIWATCH

MIWATCH: Ministries to Incarcerated Women and Their Children

Freddie Nixon

Since 1990, the Women's Project and the United Methodist Women of the Little Rock and North Arkansas Conferences have sponsored the MIWATCH program. At the heart of the program is the desire to keep mothers and their children united in order to stem the tide of children becoming incarcerated.

National statistics show 75% of women prisoners have children and 50% are the sole supporters of their family. In Arkansas, at any time there are 14,000 children whose mothers are in prison. In August, 1990, in a survey of 288 women at Tucker, 43 women reported that they were unable to see their children on a regular basis because of the lack of transportation for their children. The population at the Women's Unit has grown to 568 in 1997, with another 144 women incarcerated at the Central Arkansas Community Punishment Center, which only increases the number of incarcerated women unable to see their children.

The incarceration of their mothers is highly traumatic for the children and often results in a lack of contact with their mothers and the move from one home to another. Children often respond with poor school performance

and inappropriate behavior, resulting for some in their own incarceration. For many children with mothers in prison, months, even years pass with no physical contact with their mothers. The reasons for this are numerous, but often involve the inability of



the children's primary caretaker to bring them to the prison.

MIWATCH remedies this problem by pairing children, living in Arkansas who are unable to visit their mothers, with volunteers in the child's community who will transport them on a monthly basis to the Women's Unit at Tucker Prison or the Central Arkansas Community Punishment Center in Little Rock. During an average year, 65 chil-

dren are given transportation by MIWATCH volunteers to visit their mothers.

MIWATCH has also held two retreats for children and their caretakers. The retreats brought together youth, their caretakers, formerly incarcerated women and community resource people for a day of information and resource sharing. Currently, MIWATCH participates in the Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Prison and their Children, advocating for alternatives to incarceration for women convicted of violent crimes. The committee has given presentations to community groups to bring awareness of the needs and issues of incarcerated women, their children and the families providing care.

Additionally, the women in local church units provide personal hygiene items (soap, shampoo, etc.) for the incarcerated women as the prison or the Community Punishment Center requires residents to purchase these items, thus penalizing poor women and women without family support. In 1996, over 15,000 personal hygiene items were donated. The chaplains of each facility distributes the items to women in need.

As we look forward to 1998, we are faced with the challenges that the new privately operated women's prison will bring. The new 600-bed prison, one of two being built near Newport in northern Arkansas, will be operated by the Wackenhut Correction Corporation of Palm Beach Gardens,

(continued on page 8)

Fla. Upon completion, it is planned that the Women's Unit will be moved there from Pine Bluff in central Arkansas. This move will significantly increase the distance that some children

The incarceration of their mothers is highly traumatic for the children and often results in a lack of contact with their mothers and a move from one home to another.

will have to travel in order to visit their mothers and may decrease the opportunity for visits. It will also mean that the MIWATCH program operated by the Women's Project will have to negotiate with the operators of this for-profit prison in order to continue our work with the women incarcerated in the Women's Unit or find other ways to fulfill our commitment to mothers in prison.

Freddie Nixon is the Coordinator of the MIWATCH Program and is a board member of the Women's Project. ■

From A MIWATCH Volunteer

Debbie and Bill Thomas

I travel with two young children, ages three and four, from Fort Smith to Tucker. It's about a three and a half hour drive. The first time the prison came into view, the young boy cried out, "There's my Mom's house." I felt sick to my stomach but then I came to learn he had said the truth, this was his mother's house. He taught my eyes to see in a different light. The children are now five and six and when I come for our journey, I'm greeted with hugs and kisses, for this day is a real treat for them.

I also teach a High School-age class at church and usually have one of my teenagers with me as a helper. They truly are a big help. They read and color with the children. We have donuts for breakfast and we stop along the way to play at a park and on the way home McDonald's is a must. I have learned to make their day a special day ...'cause you see, we're on our way to Mom's house.

Congratulations

**Dana Shook
1997 Volunteer of the Year**

The MIWATCH Volunteers were presented the Evangeline K. Brown Award at the Women's Project Annual Open House, June 13, 1997

Women in Prison Wishlist

A big thank-you to those who have helped the work of the Women's Project by donating office supplies and equipment. These tax deductible gifts facilitate our work while reducing our operating expenses. To support our prison work, we have a continuing need for:

Supplies for Domestic Violence and HIV/AIDS Classes

- photocopier paper (white)
- black pens
- folders (2 pocket)
- manila file folders
- 8-1/2 x 11 inch writing pads
- double density 3.5 inch diskettes
- 1" 3-ring binders

For the Library

- \$ to purchase resource books on HIV/AIDS and domestic violence
- bookshelf

For Meetings

- flip chart pads
- bold tipped markers

For MIWATCH Project

- personal hygiene products
- used books and magazines

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BOOKNOTES

Lynn Frost



**Books on
Prison in our
library:**

Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis, edited by Elihu Rosenblatt (South End Press). This book "explores the connections between imprisonment, racism, class domination, misogyny, and homophobia and offers us invaluable information and compelling arguments for placing prison issues on the agenda of every progressive organization."
...Angela Davis

Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the U.S. by Helen Prejean, C.S.J. (Random House). The author's indictment of capital punishment sensitively navigates the complex personal, ethical, and legal issues involved, balancing compassion for both the criminals and the people whose lives they destroy.

Cages of Steel: The Politics of Imprisonment in the U.S., edited by Ward Churchill & J.J. Vander Wall (Maisonneuve Press) collects the work of some 50

political prisoners and prisoner's rights activists to document a systematic program to isolate political prisoners and subject them to psychological experiments designed to destroy their revolutionary beliefs and breakdown their ability to organize political action with others.



New Books in the Library

Oral Tradition: Selected Poems Old & New by Jewelle Gomez (Firebrand Books) Taking their inspiration from the author's African American and Native American storytelling heritage, these are poems of finding home, making love, learning history. They tell the tales of women and satisfaction, regret, love, danger, death, and eternal life.

Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male & Female by Phyllis Burke (Anchor) deftly interweaves investigative journalism, personal stories, and cultural criticism. The author examines how gender differences emerge, how we are trained to inhabit them, and how the psychiatric profession has developed a diagnosis known as Gender Iden-

tity Disorder for children who exhibit "gender inappropriate" behavior.

Hunger's Table: Women, Food & Politics by Margaret Randall (Papier-Mache Press)

"The poems are about being alive in a world filled with injustice, with pain and misery, but one in which hope, ideals, love and responsibility exist in equal measure. From the heat of stove and anger, from the warmth of hearth and heart, comes this book as a generous feast for all." ...Paula Frosch, Small Press Magazine

Into the Forest by Jean Hegland (Bantam). Originally published by the feminist press, Calyx, this book has garnered wonderful reviews, calling it "stunning in its power" and comparing the writing to Margaret Atwood's and Doris Lessing's. The story is both inspiring and disturbing; a fantastic voyage to the near future, and a touching journey of two sisters searching for their place in the world, and with each other. "Highly recommended" (Lynn)



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Current Projects

• Women's Watchcare Network

The Women's Watchcare Network monitors and documents biased violence, whether it be from far right groups such as the KKK or militias, the religious right, or individual acts of violence against people because of their race, gender, class, age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion. We publish a yearly log of anecdotal evidence of this violence and use it to educate the general public, advocate with public officials to ensure civil rights protections and to work with communities to prevent violence.

• Prison Project

Through the Prison Project we provide support groups for battered women, train women to be HIV/AIDS educators, provide domestic violence education for incarcerated men, work with community organizations on advocacy for prisoners and work with United Methodist Women to provide transportation for children to visit their mothers (MIWATCH) and to provide toiletry items to women who cannot purchase them.

• Economic Justice Project

In our struggle for economic justice we work with low-income women to understand economic realities, to fight discrimination and to create employment opportunities.

• Social Justice Project

Through the Social Justice Project, we provide popular education about the oppressions, how they are linked, and develop strategies for dismantling them. We work with social change organizations to strengthen them, incubate new projects, and bring people together in Arkansas and the South to form progressive networks that support a progressive agenda that includes everyone. Through our African American Women's Institute for Social Justice, we create strategies for overcoming the barriers that hinder African American women's efforts toward power and self-determination.

• Publications and Events

Our publications and events include a newsletter, a lending library, resource manuals, statewide and regional conferences, and the production of women performers and writers. We also distribute **Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism** and **In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation**, by Suzanne Pharr.

Transformation is also available as an ASCII file and on audiotape.

Transformation

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Published four times a year by the Women's Project,
2224 Main Street,
Little Rock, Arkansas, 72206.
Phone: 501-372-5113

Letters to the editor are welcome.

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