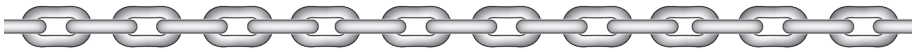


OVERVIEW



Although women in prison comprise nearly 7% of the U.S. prison population, their numbers are increasing more rapidly than those of their male counterparts: between 1990 and 2000, the number of women in prison rose 108%, from 44,065 to 93,234. The male prison population grew only 77% during that same time period.⁴ As of June 30, 2009, there were 114,979 women behind bars.⁵

Many of these women defy commonly held stereotypes of prisoners as violent and predatory males:

- ▷ Women of color are overrepresented in the prison system:
The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that one in every 300 Black women, one in every 704 Latina women, and one in every 1,099 white women have been to prison. The incarceration rate for Black women was 3.7 times the rate of white women. The rate for Latinas was 1.5 times more than that of white women.⁶
- ▷ This overrepresentation is caused, in large part, by racial profiling, not by an increase in crime among low-income African Americans and Latinos: policing policies have disproportionately targeted inner-city African-American and Latino neighborhoods. Within the past decade, many police departments have increased the use of “stop and frisk” tactics, in which regular patrol or special

Resistance Behind Bars

tactical officers stop and question those they perceive as acting suspiciously and often pat down the person for weapons. These tactics often disproportionately target people of color. An April 2005 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that African Americans and Latinos are three times as likely as whites to be searched, arrested, threatened or subdued with force when stopped by the police.⁷

- ▷ Class also impacts the likelihood of going to prison: only 40% of all incarcerated women had been employed full-time before incarceration. Of those, most had held low-paying jobs: a study of women under supervision (prison, jail, parole or probation) found that 2/3 had never held a job that paid more than \$6.50 per hour.⁸ Approximately 37% earned less than \$600 per month.⁹
- ▷ Approximately 30% had been receiving public assistance before being arrested.¹⁰
- ▷ Only 40% had obtained their GED or high school diploma before arrest.¹¹
- ▷ At least 65% report being mothers to children under the age of 18.¹²
- ▷ The majority of women in prison are convicted of nonviolent crimes, mostly property and drug offenses.¹³ In 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that nearly 65% of women in state prisons are incarcerated for drug, property or public order offenses.¹⁴
- ▷ Unlike men's substance abuse, women's substance abuse is often tied into their past histories of trauma and abuse. (More than half of the women in state prisons and local jails report having been physically and/or sexually abused in the past).¹⁵ The Bureau of Justice found that women were three times more likely than men to have been physically or sexually abused prior to incarceration.¹⁶

Overview

- ▷ In 1973, New York State passed the Rockefeller Drug Laws, which required a sentence of 15 years to life for anyone convicted of selling two ounces or possessing four ounces of a narcotic, regardless of circumstances or prior history.¹⁷ That year, only 400 women were imprisoned in New York State. As of January 1, 2001, there were 3,133. Over 50% had been convicted of a drug offense and 20% were convicted solely of possession.¹⁸ Other states passed similar laws, causing the number of women imprisoned nationwide for drug offenses to rise 888% from 1986 to 1996.¹⁹
- ▷ Unequal sentencing laws also play a role: Although crack and powder cocaine have the same active ingredient, crack is marketed in less expensive quantities and in lower-income communities. Until August 3, 2010, a person convicted of possessing 5 g of crack received a mandatory five-year sentence, the same penalty as a person possessing 500 g of cocaine. In 2010, the sentencing disparity was changed from 100:1 to 18:1.²⁰

Prison scholars and activists have noted this dramatic increase, writing books and organizing conferences and symposia to examine the causes, conditions and consequences of female incarceration. However, ways in which incarcerated women have individually and collectively challenged these conditions have largely been omitted from the discourse.

This omission is not new. In the early 1970s, recognizing that prisoners were one of the most marginalized and voiceless populations in America, activists expanded their interests to include those of prisoners and their rights: new, critical analyses of prisons emerged, prisoners' rights organizations and unions were created, and new communications among prisoners, academics and community activists were established.²¹ Activist academics also brought university courses inside prisons.²² However, the focus largely remained on men and their issues.

Women prisoners' voices and concerns were overlooked not only by outside activists but also the politicized male inmates who benefited from the developing prisoner rights movement. While male prisoners

Resistance Behind Bars

gained political consciousness and enjoyed support from outside groups and individuals, these same groups and individuals ignored the female prison population with the exceptions of a few well-known political prisoners such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur.

Although female incarceration has increased drastically during the past few decades, prevalent ideas of prisoners remain masculine: the term “prisoner” continues to conjure the image of a young, black man convicted of violent crimes such as rape or murder. Politicians seeking votes and media seeking sales play on this representation, whipping the public into hysteria to get tougher on crime and build more prisons. Obviously the public perception of the violent black male felon overlooks the growing number of women imprisoned under the various mandatory sentencing laws passed within the past few decades.²³ Because women do not fit this stereotype, the public, the politicians and the media often choose to overlook them rather than grapple with the seeming paradoxes inherent in women prisoners, who, by virtue of their incarceration, have somehow defied the societal norm of femininity.²⁴ Such neglect leads to the definition of prison issues as masculine and male-dominated, dismissing prison issues that are distinctly feminine (e.g., the scarcity of sanitary hygiene products, the lack of medical care specifically for women, especially prenatal care, and threats of sexual abuse by guards) and thus any actions that women take to address and overcome these concerns.

Today there is a renewal of interest in prisons and prisoner issues, with a growing body of literature examining female incarceration. However, the new literature largely ignores what the women themselves do to change or protest these circumstances, thus reinforcing the belief that incarcerated women do not organize. Karlene Faith, coordinator of the 1970s Santa Cruz Women’s Prison Project, does not bring up examples of women’s collective resistance until the second half of her book *Unruly Women*. In *In the Mix: Struggle and Survival in a Women’s Prison*, Barbara Owen includes no instances of prisoner organizing despite the fact that her chosen prison, the Central California Women’s Facility, had housed Charisse Shumate and many other women who organized to change

Overview

the facility's appalling health care; their actions resulted in the *Shumate v. Wilson* class-action lawsuit which charged that the abysmal medical care amounted to cruel and unusual punishment.²⁵ More recently, Julia Sudbury's *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender and the Prison-Industrial Complex* recognized incarcerated women's agency and organizing in other countries, but failed to acknowledge efforts within U.S. prisons. The absence of these tales perpetuates the assumption that women imprisoned in the United States are not actively fighting to challenge or change these conditions.

There have been only two books about organizing among incarcerated women: Juanita Diaz-Cotto's *Gender, Ethnicity and the State* (1996) and the collectively written *Breaking the Walls of Silence: AIDS and Women in a New York State Maximum-Security Prison* (1998). Both focus on women's activism in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's maximum-security prison for women. In *Gender, Ethnicity and the State*, Diaz-Cotto details organizing strategies among Latina prisoners between 1970 and 1987. *Breaking the Silence* follows the creation of the AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE) program. Written by many of the women involved in ACE, the book documents the organization's history and shares its curriculum with others seeking to create similar programs in other prisons. However, because many of its writers were still imprisoned at Bedford Hills and because they wanted to avoid jeopardizing the program, it does not frame the formation and continued existence of ACE as an act of collective resistance against existing prison conditions.

Since then, no other book-length work has focused on incarcerated women's activism and resistance.

Literature about women in prison that has emerged in this decade articulates how the needs of incarcerated women differ from those of their male counterparts. It does not, however, examine how these differences either act as obstacles to collective organizing or change the ways in which women organize. It also ignores how these differences prevent outside recognition of female agency. Women in

Resistance Behind Bars

prison face different circumstances during their incarceration and thus have different priorities—and different ways of challenging their conditions—than incarcerated men.²⁶

Challenges in Organizing

Approximately half of all incarcerated women have suffered past physical or sexual abuse.²⁷ A 1999 study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that 57% of women entering state prison and 40% entering federal prison had been physically or sexually abused prior to incarceration. In contrast, only 6% of men entering state prison and 7% entering federal prison had suffered prior physical or sexual abuse.²⁸ Barrilee Bannister, a former prisoner in Oregon, pointed out, “A lot of women believe themselves to be helpless because of how they were raised, or perhaps because of childhood abuse. I see a lot of women with very low self-esteem and self-worth.” Prisons further erode low self-esteem: a woman at the Central California Women’s Facility stated, “It is easier for women to get bullied in here. If an officer raises his or her voice to you, some women are petrified. The fear from past abuse comes back and they are scared. Very scared.”²⁹ As a woman incarcerated in Illinois put it, “Do you think women who are conditioned to be subservient to their men (and the world) are going to come to prison and suddenly just grow a backbone ?”³⁰

Women prisoners also lack a commonly known history of resistance. While male prisoners can draw on the examples of George Jackson, the Attica uprising and other well-publicized cases of prisoner activism, incarcerated women remain unaware of precedents relevant to them. Virtually none know about the collective organizing that led to the 1974 August Rebellion at New York’s Bedford Hills Correctional Facility or the 1975 riot at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women.

Women who do challenge the system face extreme levels of administrative harassment. “Tricia,” a woman in the federal prison system, incurred the wrath of a guard when she attempted to help another woman who had been unfairly sent to the Special Housing Unit (or SHU, a punitive

Overview

form of segregation). Shortly after, the same guard sent Tricia to the SHU. She then searched her room to create a justification for her placement, throwing out many of her personal belongings, including photos of her children and other family members and items that Tricia had bought from the prison commissary. Although prison staff is not permitted to tamper with or destroy a prisoner's legal documents, the guard also threw away Tricia's papers for her appeal. The guard found files from the chapel that Tricia had been organizing for the chapel's sister. Although both the chaplain and the sister attested that they had authorized Tricia to take the documents, the prison administration refused to release her. After she had spent a month in SHU, the administration finally dropped the charges.³¹

Tricia's experience is not an anomaly. Solitary confinement—euphemistically called “Special Housing Unit” or “SHU,” “control units,” “administrative segregation” or even “therapeutic segregation,” depending on the prison—is increasingly used to isolate and punish prisoners who challenge their conditions of confinement. In the 1960s, with the rise of prisoner organizing, prison officials used segregation or “the hole” to separate politically active prisoners, jailhouse lawyers, nationalists, communists and those they deemed threatening to the daily operations of the prison. George Jackson, for example, spent much time in San Quentin's Adjustment Center for his organizing efforts.

Most female facilities have some form of “the hole.” At California's Valley State Prison for Women, the Special Housing Unit consists of eight-foot-by-six-foot cells with blacked-out windows where women are confined for 23 hours a day. Even in their cells, the women have no privacy—toilets are in full view of the cell door windows, guards can look through those windows at any time and male guards often watch the women in the showers. If the women complain, the guards turn off the water.³² The federal prison at Lexington, Kentucky, opened a control unit specifically for women political prisoners in 1986. It was built underground and painted entirely white. Women were prohibited from hanging anything on the white walls, causing them to begin hallucinating black spots and strings on the walls and floors. Their

Resistance Behind Bars

sole contact with prison staff came in the form of voices addressing them over loudspeakers. Although the unit was shut down in 1988 following an outside campaign and a court decision that determined their placement unconstitutional, the practice of solitary confinement continues today, with jailhouse lawyers and other incarcerated activists often targeted.³³ Often this threat of staff retaliation dissuades others from acting. One woman stated that the level of harassment is “so great that most of your fellow prisoners think that you must be crazy for even attempting to challenge the prison system wrong doings.”³⁴

Lending to the silence around incarcerated women’s resistance, those who do agitate or organize may also hesitate to write about their experiences. Barrilee Bannister in Oregon, Dawn Amos in Colorado, and a California prisoner who wished to remain anonymous have also stated that they are reluctant to write about certain aspects and instances because their letters can be read by prison officials. When Barrilee Bannister attempted to mail a drawing depicting a guard walking away from a prisoner who had obviously been sexually assaulted, the mailroom confiscated it. Bannister received a misconduct report. In the following three months, she was removed from the prison’s minimum-security section, placed in medium-security and barred from attending a transition program for which she had previously been approved. She received two additional misconduct reports, one for allegedly making threats against another staff member during a phone conversation and the other for not saving receipts for items she had purchased between 1995 and 1999, years before the prison had been built.³⁵ Bannister’s case, too, is not an anomaly. When “Tricia” attempted to use the Bureau of Prison’s new e-mail system to describe certain conditions, prison authorities intercepted her e-mails, then closed her e-mail account. She was also threatened with placement in the SHU.³⁶

Women also fear that speaking out or organizing will jeopardize their chances of an earlier release. “Often, you’ll hear ‘I would do something about it, but I come up for review in ____.’ There is a prevalent fear that writing grievances, etc., directly has a negative effect on parole,” wrote Dawn Reiser, a woman incarcerated in Texas.

Overview

Such fears are not always unfounded. “Having a major misconduct ticket could prevent an inmate from being eligible for a [parole] hearing and could mean she spends another year in prison,” stated Deborah LaBelle, an attorney representing Michigan prisoners in a class-action lawsuit against the Michigan Department of Corrections.³⁷

In 2001, the day after she testified against guards in a sexual abuse case, Michigan prisoner Robin McArdle received a misconduct ticket for not being on her bunk during count time. The officer who issued the ticket had testified in that same case on the guards’ side.

McArdle, who had remained ticket-free during her first eight years in prison, received five misconduct tickets after testifying. These tickets extended her stay in prison by a week.³⁸

Similarly, staff members at the Central California Women’s Facility warned Marcia Bunney, a plaintiff in the *Shumate v. Wilson* lawsuit, that continuing her legal activities would cost her any chance of obtaining a parole date. “I have been told that I will never leave prison if I continue to fight the system,” she wrote.³⁹

Invisibility of Organizing

Women both inside and out are often perceived as passive. This perception leads to the dismissal of the fact that women can and do contribute to struggles for change. Just as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s downplayed the role of women in favor of highlighting male spokesmen and leaders, the prisoners’ rights movement has focused and continues to focus on men to speak for the masses. “Something about women who protest bothers many people,” observed Lois Landis, a prisoner at Taycheedah Correctional Institution in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.⁴⁰ Additionally, incarcerated women who raise their voices face an additional burden: they have already defied societal norms by transgressing both laws and acceptable notions of feminine behavior and morality.

Resistance Behind Bars

While prisons have always been a form of social control, they have also been used to control women's actions and freedom. The early 20th century saw the proliferation of reformatories for women. Women were sent to the reformatory for defying societally approved gender roles: being drunk, engaging in pre- and extramarital sex, contracting a venereal disease, or keeping bad company.⁴¹ These women were seen as even worse than the men who committed the most heinous crimes and, until the advent of the reformatory, were seen as incorrigible.

The reformatory challenged the notion that "fallen women" were irredeemable. As its name indicates, its mission was to "reform" its wards—that is, to re instill ladylike behavior, good moral character, and perfect domestic skills. Reformatories existed only for women; no such institutions existed for men, who remained unpenalized when they engaged in the same actions.⁴²

Although the reformatory—and the ideas behind it—died by the mid 1930s, the moral condemnation of women sentenced to prison continues to influence public perception and policies. In 1994, a warden of an unnamed state prison for women summed up the prevailing attitude towards women prisoners:

Poor men stick somebody up or sell drugs. To me, as strange as this may sound coming from a warden, that is understandable. I can see how you would make that choice. Women degrade themselves. Selling themselves, you should hear some of the stuff they do. There is no sense of self-respect, of dignity . . . There is something wrong on the inside that makes an individual take up those kinds of behavior and choices.⁴³

Women who challenge or resist their conditions of confinement continue to defy proscribed gender roles, often leading to further disdain and dismissal. By protesting, they are further refusing to conform to society's expectation that they will passively accept the conditions of their punishment and refrain from stepping out of their prescribed gender roles again. "Women who protest are looked down upon, while

Overview

male prisoners who protest are considered heroes by other inmates,” stated Lois Landis.⁴⁴

Researchers, scholars and activists often do not search for acts of defiance among the growing female prison population, often assuming that the silence around women prisoners’ agency and activism signifies passive acceptance. “[W]omen inmates themselves have called very little attention to their own situations,” wrote Virginia High Brislin in her research on incarcerated mothers during the 1980s. “They are hardly ever involved in violent encounters with officials (i.e. riots), nor do they initiate litigation as often as do males in prison.”⁴⁵

Statements such as these reinforce the invisibility of resistance among women prisoners. They also overlook the instances in which women **do** riot and initiate litigation.

In the 1970s, Carol Crooks, a prisoner at the maximum-security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, initiated a lawsuit against the prison, its warden and several staff members. She claimed that the prison’s practice of placing women in segregation without a hearing and refusal to provide 24-hour notice of charges violated their constitutional rights. On July 2, 1974, a court agreed with Crooks, issuing a preliminary injunction, prohibiting the prison from placing women in segregation without 24-hour notice and a hearing of these charges.⁴⁶

The next month five male guards beat Crooks and placed her in segregation. Her fellow prisoners protested by holding seven staff members hostage for two and a half hours. Male state troopers and (male) guards from men’s prisons were called to suppress the uprising, resulting in 25 women being injured and 24 women being transferred to Matteawan Complex for the Criminally Insane without the required commitment hearings.⁴⁷ Only a long struggle and a lawsuit won their return to Bedford Hills. Because it lasted only two and a half hours and because no one was killed, the story was relegated to

Resistance Behind Bars

a paragraph buried in the back pages of the *New York Times*. Thus, although it occurred at a time when prison issues were still a hot topic for many on the left, the “August Rebellion” remains overlooked by those seeking information on prisoner protests and disruptions.

Similarly, women in a California prison held a “Christmas riot” in 1975: protesting the cancellation of family holiday visits and holiday packages, prisoners gathered in the yard, broke windows, made noise and burned Christmas trees in a “solidarity” bonfire.⁴⁸ However, because the impetus for the “riot” was women’s lack of access to family during the holidays, an ostensibly “feminine” (and thus less important and less glamorous) concern, and because no one had threatened violence, this act of disruption is even more easily overlooked by those researching prison disturbances.

Women have also disrupted prison life in more recent years: on August 13, 1992, 90 women at the federal prison in Lexington, Kentucky, refused to leave the yard for the prison’s afternoon count to protest a lieutenant’s assault of a black prisoner the night before. “We sang Bob Marley’s ‘Stand Up for Your Rights,’ and chanted ‘Stop Police Brutality,’ ‘We Want Justice,’ ‘Let Them Out of Seg,’ and ‘Figueroa (the lieutenant) Must Go,’” recalled Laura Whitehorn, a political prisoner and participant in the stand-out. “While we demonstrated, we heard shouts of support from the windows of the housing units, and at least two ‘all available officers’ codes to different units—meaning that the women who had returned to the units for count were doing some kind of support actions too.”

The women were handcuffed and taken to segregation. The next day, 12 were transferred to the new women’s high-security unit at Marianna, Florida. Others were sent to FCI-Dublin in California. That afternoon, a smaller group of women repeated the stand-out, refusing to leave the yard for the four o’clock count. That night, other women protested by setting small fires in various housing units.⁴⁹

In 1995, following rebellions at Talladega, Allenwood and other federal men’s prisons, the federal women’s prison in Dublin, California was

Overview

placed under lockdown. Although there had been no disturbances at that particular prison, FCI Dublin remained under lockdown all weekend and women were forced to go to work that Monday under lockdown conditions. To voice their protest, women began staying away from meals and, that night, set simultaneous trashcan fires in all of the units. Approximately 70 women were sent to administrative segregation and charged with arson and “engaging in a group demonstration.”⁵⁰

By ignoring instances such as these, Brislin and others researching and writing about women prisoners’ issues reinforce the idea that women do not organize, thus discouraging further research.

While Karlene Faith acknowledges that women have participated in resistance actions, she states that, in the 1970s, incarcerated women “were not as politicized as the men [prisoners], and they did not engage in the kinds of protest actions that aroused media attention.” Her assertion dismisses the fact that women **did** engage in similar types of protest actions, which often garnered some media attention.⁵¹ For instance, between 1969 and 1973, there were four “disturbances” at the women’s prison in Milledgeville, Georgia.⁵² In 1975, women at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women held a sit-down demonstration to demand better medical care, improved counseling services and the closing of the prison laundry. When prison guards attempted to end the protest by herding the women into the gymnasium and beating them, the women fought back, using volleyball net poles, chunks of concrete and hoe handles to drive the guards out of the prison.⁵³ Over 100 guards from other prisons were summoned to quell the rebellion.⁵⁴ The demonstration also garnered media coverage from radical alternative news sources such as *off our backs* as well as mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times*.

Instead of claiming that women in prison did not engage in riots and protest actions that captured media attention, scholars and researchers should examine why these acts of organizing fail to attract the same critical and scholarly attention as that given to similar male actions.

Resistance Behind Bars

Juanita Diaz-Cotto, one of the few scholars to study women prisoners' activism, argues that books written in the past decade often "highlight the role played by women's prison family groups and kinship networks, almost to the complete exclusion of other types of prisoner organization."⁵⁵ The emphasis on prison families not only substitutes for research about resistance but also reinforces the stereotype that women's sole concern is to maintain their traditional gender roles.⁵⁶ Past research on women prisoners has overwhelmingly favored details of prison family and kinship networks over the more painstaking task of searching out and documenting the less visible instances of resistance. This becomes a self-perpetuating cycle: by highlighting the various family and kinship networks to the exclusion of other forms of organization, scholars have given the impression that this is the only form of organizing within women's prisons, not only silencing the voice of women prisoner activists but also paving the way for others to do the same.

Resistance

Despite fears of administrative reprisals and a lack of outside support, women in prison have found ways to individually and collectively challenge, resist and organize around their conditions of confinement. These ways are often not recognized by outside researchers and are sometimes belittled by other women in prison: "Women prisoners are notorious for complaining amongst themselves or for writing paper complaints to the administration," wrote Lois Landis, a Wisconsin prisoner, who dismissed such actions as "useless in getting changes within the prison system."⁵⁷ While the processes of both verbally complaining and filing grievances may have little effect in changing the conditions of confinement, the fact that women not only utilize them but are "notorious" for doing so indicates that women do not passively accept their circumstances, but attempt to change them in any way possible.

Women's resistance often lacks the glamour and excitement of the prison riots and work strikes for which male prisoners are known.

Overview

Some actions, such as introducing new methods of teaching literacy, can be seen as working with the prison system. A cursory dismissal of such actions overlooks the fact that seemingly non-threatening ideas are still met with suspicion and refusal by prison administrations. As Kathy Boudin, a former prisoner at Bedford Hills, pointed out, “I, like many other prisoners, wanted to be productive and to do something meaningful with my time in prison . . . Yet prison administrators usually limit the amount of responsibility and independence a prisoner can have.”⁵⁸ The premise of prisons lies in obedience and control. Prisoner-generated programs, projects and groups challenge that premise. Conservative prison administrations do not allow any such initiatives on the part of their prisoners; even more liberal prison administrators, such as Elaine Lord, the former warden at Bedford Hills, remain suspicious, if not hostile, to the educational and group work of their prisoners and make every effort to suppress such initiatives. Incarcerated women have observed that lack of literacy plays a large role in women’s lack of protest and resistance. Amos noted that most of the women around her “are very illiterate, they don’t even have education to take a pre-GED test, let alone read a law book or even a newsletter about other prisoners and what they have been subjected to. They can hardly comprehend the rules that we have to live under let alone a way of comprehending a way to stand up for their rights.”⁵⁹ “Elsie,” a former prisoner in Illinois, agrees: “I know illiteracy is one of the hindrances to pursuing any relief. We need to educate women about how to write grievances and we need to have available people to help the illiterate and the mentally/emotionally ill prepare grievances regarding their rights.”⁶⁰ Thus, a seemingly innocuous act, such as encouraging literacy and critical thinking among fellow prisoners, may lead to greater resistance and more widespread agitation against prison injustices.

Other actions are more gender-specific, focusing on issues that, until recently, were not recognized by prisoner rights activists. More than half of all prisoners have left minor children behind. However, maintaining relationships with their children is an obstacle faced more often by women than men. Ninety percent of the time, when a father

Resistance Behind Bars

is imprisoned, his children are cared for by their biological mother. Conversely when a mother goes to prison her children are more likely to be in the care of a grandparent, another non-parent relative or have no one to care for them. An incarcerated mother's children are five times more likely to enter the foster care system, thus increasing her chances of losing legal custody.⁶¹ In addition, because they are fewer in number, women's prisons tend to be located farther from the urban areas where they had lived before their arrests. This distance often makes visits from children more difficult and infrequent. Incarcerated women have worked with prison administrations and outside groups, often churches and other religious institutions and individuals, to maintain contact and legal custody of their children. These actions are often overlooked by prisoner rights activists and scholars both because they are not visibly dramatic, and because the issue of mothers and children is often perceived as less pressing by those accustomed to dealing with male prisoner issues.

Actions such as organizing transportation for prisoners' children, assisting others with their legal work and visiting women in the intensive care unit disrupt prison realities, sometimes leading to more far-reaching change, such as the formation of AIDS counseling and education programs and support groups for domestic violence survivors.

Resistance Behind Bars will highlight issues confronting women in prison, including inadequate medical care, sexual abuse, separation from children, and the lack of educational and work opportunities. It will also show the ways in which the women themselves individually and collectively challenge these conditions. It will explore tactics traditionally employed by male prisoners, such as lawsuits and disruptions, and strategies that women have devised to challenge gender-specific injustices such as maintaining contact and custody of their children and combating sexual abuse.

In 1995, prisoner rights activist and scholar Nancy Kurshan, in her history of female imprisonment, provided a one-page overview of women's resistance from the Civil War until the 1970s. She acknowledged

Overview

that this one page was not enough: “One topic that has not been adequately researched is the rebellion of women in prison. It is only with great difficulty that any information was found. We do not believe that is because resistance does not occur, but because those in charge of documenting history have a stake in burying herstory. Such a herstory would challenge the patriarchal ideology that insists that women are, by nature, passive and docile.”⁶²

Resistance Behind Bars expands herstory, challenging readers to reconceptualize and reframe what is commonly thought of as resistance and emphasizing the voices and actions of the women fighting for change. *Resistance* will hopefully spark further discussion and research into incarcerated women’s organizing as well as galvanize outside support for their struggles.