

March 2009
The magazine for women offenders and ex-offenders

**WOMEN
IN
PRISON**

SPECIAL
ISSUE

Your creativity
Inside: Art, poetry, lyrics and
creative writing by our readers

Plus » Bodies and beauty » Confessing to murder » X Factor » Mother's day

Women In Prison is 25!

by Laurel Townhead

Women in Prison (WIP) is celebrating 25 years of supporting and campaigning for women offenders and ex-offenders. WIP was started by former prisoner Chris Tchaikovsky in 1983 to campaign for radical changes in the criminal justice system. Chris said: "Taking the most hurt people out of society and punishing them in order to teach them how to live within society is at best futile. Whatever else a prisoner knows, she knows everything there is to know about punishment



The late Chris Tchaikovsky, founder of Women in Prison

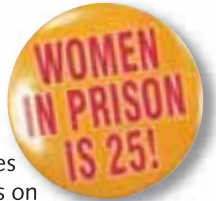
because that is exactly what she has grown up with. Whether it is childhood sexual abuse, indifference, neglect; punishment is most familiar to her".

You could ask what there is to celebrate after 25 years, which have seen the women's prison population rise from 1,390 to over 4,450. But it is worth celebrating that WIP is still going - no small achievement for an organisation that started out with determination, a £50 donation and not much more. It is also worth celebrating the battles that have been won - for individual women and for the women's prison population. In these 25 years, WIP staff have provided information, advice and support to thousands of women in prison and on release.

WIP's projects have helped women to get out and stay out of prison. The Holloway Remand Scheme - set up by WIP in 1994 - provided community-based alternatives to custody which meant some women taking part did not get prison sentences. The 2008 evaluation of WIP's 'Moving On Moving Out' project providing support to women leaving prison found that their known re-offending rate was 4% compared to an average re-offending rate of 37% of women leaving prison.

Some of WIP's original campaign aims have been achieved. Medical services for prisoners are now within the control of the NHS. WIP have been pointing out for many years that women in prison have different needs from men in prison. More than half of women in prison report having experienced domestic

violence or sexual abuse, and most are mothers. These and other issues affect how prison impacts on women; for example, women in prison have higher rates of self-harm than men in prison. Finally the government has heard this and Maria Eagle, ministerial champion for women in the criminal justice system, said last year: "The criminal justice system must take account of the fact that the needs of women offenders are often different from those of men." So not only is WIP still going, WIP works!



In these 25 years, WIP staff have provided information, advice and support to thousands of women in prison and on release.



But it is true that there are still too many women being sent to prison and support for women in prison and on release are still not good enough. With this in mind, WIP decided that the best way to mark their anniversary is to do what they have always done and keep on demanding better treatment for women in prison. Their new campaigns will be based on the list of 25 things women in prison and in the community told them they most wanted to change about prison. WIP will be sending this list to politicians to make sure that they see what changes should be made according to the people who have experienced it.

It is a shame that these problems are not resolved after 25 years of campaigning, but WIP is still needed and as long as women are put in prison, WIP will be there providing support and leading campaigns.

Laurel Townhead is Policy and Campaigns Manager - Women In Prison

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Baroness Helena Kennedy QC

Celebrating 25 years

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC was invited to speak at the 25th Anniversary celebration of Women In Prison on February 26th. A lot has happened, but not enough has changed she told guests

Baroness Kennedy's talk captured the celebration, remembrance, anger and sadness with which WIP marked its anniversary. Celebration that the organisation is still there to fight for women in prison and that two further organisations – Women in Secure Hospitals (WISH) and Hibiscus – grew from the shared learning amongst the women who started and supported WIP. Remembrance of the legacy of Chris Tchaikovsky, WIP's dedicated founder – both in what she achieved as director and in the continuance of WIP. Anger that the issues which WIP was set up to address are still present today. Sadness that our criminal justice system is still failing women. Baroness

Kennedy spoke of her female clients, in her early days as a barrister and still today, and women who survive the criminal justice system as the source of her commitment to human rights and determination to combat injustice. She noted that despite the government commissioning the Corston report on women in the criminal justice system, and having its recommendations for 2 years, too little has been done to implement them. The rise of the women's prison population and the failure to address it and effectively respond to the needs of women prisoners, Baroness Kennedy said, is perhaps the biggest failing of this government.



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From left to right: Prue Stevens - former Director WIP, Deborah Coles - Chairwoman WIP, Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, Olga Heaven MBE - Director Hibiscus

The demands of Women In Prison 25 years on

- **Leaving prison:** More support for women leaving prison. Many women are thrown out of prison without anywhere to live, with no job, only £46 in their pocket and no real means of survival. If they put you in a hostel and you are an addict, it is usually full of drugs and alcohol, so you have no chance of going straight. There is little or no support for you outside, so the government has just thrown all the money it cost to put you in prison down a hole, as those who are repeat offenders have little chance of surviving outside.
- **Work:** There should be more work-related courses such as work experience, where you can try a trade out while in prison, which will make it easier for you to find a job when you get out. Men have this option and we should too.
- **Self-harm:** Prisoners should get evening association on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. For self-harmers, this is a very stressful time and

- can become a nightmare. It gives prisoners too much time to think, which can lead to depression, self-harming and suicide.
- **Visits:** We should be allowed more visits.
- **Parole Board:** Paperwork for parole boards to be done on time, especially for lifers.
- **Tags:** More women to get tags and suspended sentences.
- **Housing:** Better housing advice for women coming out of prison
- **Lockdown:** Women are locked up for too long. As well as allocated "lock-up hours" women are locked up instead of having association or going to education, due to staff shortages.
- **Grandparents' day:** We need a grandparents' day for women with long sentences.
- **New prisoners:** More information for new prisoners. You are expected to understand the rules when you arrive for the first time!

- **Deaths:** More help for suicidal women inside, so that women do not kill themselves in prison.
- **Regimes:** Every prison should have the same regime, instead of different prisons having different rules.
- **Modern:** This prison is stuck in the dark ages compared to most of the other female prisons. It should be more modernised. More help and advice should be given to try and help women not re-offend.
- **Parole Board (again):** Why do we have to justify to the Parole Board why we should be released? Isn't the torture of actually completing the sentence enough?
- **First-timers:** I would like to help first-timers in prison. I know what it feels like when you come out. It is not easy to adjust to life on the outside.
- **Clothes:** I do not like being limited on the amount of clothes we are allowed.
- **Attitude:** Officers (not all, but some) should improve their attitude and the way they speak to prisoners. Fair enough we're all here for

- breaking the law but we don't deserve to be spoken to like dogs.
- **Family:** Put us in prisons nearer to our homes and family.
- **Fresh air:** If a prisoner is sick, why is her door locked all day? It is wrong because a sick person needs fresh air. Please can you change this rule?
- **Progress:** Women should be able to progress through the prison system as quickly as men. There are only two open women's prisons, not enough.
- **Education:** There should be more education courses for the girls to do, especially on remand.
- **Food:** Better food.
- **Wages:** Put prison wages up.
- **Success:** We need talks from successful ex-offenders, to let us know there are ways of doing well on the out.
- **Christmas:** I would like to have a Christmas party.

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