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Women in Prison

A conversation between Chris Ryder-Tchaikovsky and Jill Box-Grainger

Jill: How was the idea for Women in Prison born?

Chris: Six months ago I heard that yet another woman had died in Holloway. I didn't know who it was. I was working on the Violence Against Women working party at the GLC Womens Committee and, quickly without thinking, I thought it would be a good idea for both Islington Womens Committee and the GLC Womens Committee to write to the Governor of Holloway to ask her for a visit. I thought better of that because if they got a visit it would be the normal visit: they'd only see what they wanted them to see. Valerie Wise, Chair of the Womens Committee, and Hilary Crowhurst, the head of the Womens Committee Support Unit asked for a report on prisons and what the problems were as I saw them — which I prepared. They then started talking about the need for a campaign group and I thought we should start a referral, research and campaign group specifically for women in prison, because they seemed so under-represented and so under-helped.

So it started from the GLC Womens Committee in a way? And how did you draw other people in?

It just happened, really. Other women were interested. I came by, calling on women working in the field, for instance Alcoholics Recovery Project (ARP) and the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP); through contacts and academics, Victoria Greenwood and Fiona Mclean¹ were particularly helpful, and other women generally interested in the prison issue. Not only through the campaigning field but also through the academic field I came to hear of other people and it sort of escalated. We're not a big group. There's only six of us and there are three ex-prisoners and three non-ex-prisoners and that's the balance that we want to keep. We don't ever want more non-ex-prisoners than ex-prisoners. I think that's important. If it was possible we'd like to have it all ex-prisoners but I think it's also quite a good thing to have the balance. Lennie Spear I came to through contact with friends at Holloway; through Lennie I came to Bernie who I found was making the programme²; and there are other ex-con friends of mine that I've spoken with — one of them who's coming here this morning.³

So the six women are the actual working core?

Well, so far there's really a working core of four because Bernie has been involved with a programme for community groups but we're hoping that we can draw Bernie in later — well, I think she's been drawn in already! — mainly it's been a couple of non-ex-prisoner women and myself. But of course we haven't got a bean yet. We got a £50 donation which was great and that was a start. What we've done is to get campaign leaflets, headed paper which is important if we're going to try and raise funds. And when we hear about the grant⁴ we can open our office, our referral centre and drop-in centre and we should get going properly.

Do you envisage W.I.P. being an entirely all women group?

Oh, absolutely — no question about it. Unless we need a Management Committee, which I hope we don't. But if we don't get the GLC grant we've got to think about fund-raising, think about charitable status, which we don't want. But then we might be approaching men with the understanding that they are completely silent, amorphous people who are only there for the prestige of being there. I approached Longford but I'd rather it was all women and hopefully Harriet Harman and Jo Richardson could become our people.

For those people for whom it's not automatically obvious why W.I.P. should be women only, why do you think its practically important that it should be so? I know it's a drag but in this case it won't be entirely apparent to some readers of the Abolitionist. Sorry!

Speaking personally, I can't work with men. It's as simple as that. I can't work with male, delicate egos. I believe that women relate in a very different way to women, and I believe they relate in a very different way if men are even present. So that's one reason. The other reason I think that there are specific disparities between men and women in prison, and women have been overlooked. Support from men? It's a personal thing. I just prefer working with women. The women I know prefer working with women and I think a women only working environment is the best working environment. I actually get very irritated with men knocking separatism. If men don't understand why we want to be separatist there's something wrong with the men. I mean, for hundreds of years they've had their own separate groups which have been closed to women. Now women just feel the same way. We want our space and we want to relate to each other without men present, because of the differences they bring to the group.

So what do you think this means for your relationships with other groups in the field of penal reform, particularly WIP's relationship with PROP?

I was very pleased to meet with Geoff Coggan at PROP, who made it very clear that it was long overdue that there was a women prisoners' group. There were also other things which impressed me — because a thing that does worry me is inter-necine competition and fights between groups — small groups working in the field. It seems actually counter-productive if you don't get on — and the thing that impressed me about PROP is that they have opened all their resources to us and have suggested lots of ways of getting information that they've got and have been very helpful. But that's how it should be. They should leave us alone to work in our field, give us what help they can but not expect to work alongside with us — as we don't expect to work alongside with them. It's also important for the women in prison that they know that it's just women on the outside working for them, and of course it's important that it is largely ex-prisoners that are bringing their experience of prison back to do something about it. Because one of the things with prisoners, it's constantly said — the mythology that prisoners don't give a damn for each other or give a damn for anything — and we're the living proof that that's not true. . . . In the reform field and the campaigning field women just have been completely overlooked and so if any men feel that we're cutting them out at this stage, well, it was up to them. To go back to PROP, they produced a book on deaths in prison⁵. I went to see PROP

1. Fiona Mclean is the General Services Officer of the GLC Women's Committee.

2. Bernie Shannon has just completed making a programme on the AS Unit at Holloway Prison for the BBC Community Access Programme.

3. Chris, a friend of Chris Ryder's arrived later to join the discussion.

4. W.I.P. have applied to the GLC Women's Committee for a grant for a referral, research and drop-in centre for their organisation. See later in this article.

5. Geoff Coggan and Martin Walker, *Frightened for my Life*, Fontana, 1982.

some two years ago and they completely overlooked the women who had died in prison. Well, the invisibility of women is something we're all very aware of and something I believe that we can only change through working as women ourselves.

Would you see W.I.F. as supporting PROP campaigns? Which, generally I suppose, have been more designed with men's prisons in mind?

Yes, there's a lot of across the board issues. The actual prison conditions, the actual sentencing patterns, (although women, as we know, are sentenced to longer sentences and more often than men) are that women get bail less often than men. Again, because of the stereotypical notion of women that they are the home-makers — a prerequisite for bail, there's the stable home-maker — she is in the dock (the stable homemaker) and obviously she hasn't got a stable home, so she can't get bail. That sort of anomaly is thrown up. Yes, of course we would campaign alongside PROP on prison issues but we don't want to take up specific campaigns. I think that's important to say. The main thrust of our campaign is to free prisons from the direct control of the Home Office and we don't want to be fudged from that. We want to open prisons up.

So in developing policy, that policy⁶ developed through consultation amongst the core six or did you get some ideas and feed that back out to people in the GLC Women's Committee, etc?

When I came out of prison in 1974 I thought these were the issues then. Then after more discussions, for example, the ambiguity of calling for standard medical services rather than calling for it to come under the NHS was something of a mistake on our part. But I think with discussions with Victoria Greenwood and amongst ourselves. For example, when I met with Longford — for the sake of a cardboard, amorphous figure for our management committee — he brought up the fact that life prisoners don't have a time, because there's no chronology on their sentence (because they're given 'life'), so they don't have a specific time when their sentence can be reviewed. Obviously, I didn't know about that before, so that's now gone into our campaign leaflet. I didn't know that FARE⁷ and ARP were campaigning for detoxification centres but not for drunkenness offenders to be removed from the Criminal Justice Act. That's very important and we could've made a terrible gaffe. So before we got that campaign leaflet together we of course consulted with as many people as possible. But as it's only as definitive as the people in the field that I've been talking and discussing with. And if drunkenness offenders — and I think this is a very important point — are freed from the suspicions of the Criminal Justice Act that actually means that the police on the street, the onus isn't on them to pick up drunk people which means that drunks will die on the street. So we have to keep them within the remit of the Criminal Justice Act but advocate detoxification centres. That's now obviously the campaign. The campaign is all of only three months old and everything is open to discussion and change. We're not inflexible. We couldn't be — we wouldn't want to be.

RACE

Two things about your list of demands. One of the main things I wanted to ask you about is that in this leaflet the issue of racism in prisons isn't raised. Is that an oversight, a deliberate omission, or are you not sure what policies should be pursued?

When we wrote that leaflet we had no figures. We didn't know how many ethnic minority women are in prison. We now know that 34% of prisoners in Holloway are ethnic minority women and something over 40% across the country. Now those figures haven't been verified and I also worry about divisions — particularly in the women's movement. I also worry very much about fragmentation which is that women are united as, I believe, because we are a gender class — which is something that I've been arguing at the GLC Women's Committee for a long time. That we are a gender class and

Women In Prison campaigning for:

1. Alternatives to custodial sentences.
2. Public accountability of British prisons.
3. Suspension of the Official Secrets Act restrictions on the British penal system.
4. Abolition of censorship.
5. Non-discriminatory sentencing practices for women.
6. Medical services for prisoners brought under the control of the National Health Service.
7. Improved child-care facilities in prisons.
8. Frequent visits for families in suitable surroundings.
9. Improved living conditions for women in prison.
10. A mandatory income entitlement to meet the basic needs of women prisoners.
11. Dismantling of the punitive disciplinary structure and an increase in welfare, educational and training schemes in prisons.
12. Introduction of external recruitment and a review of the existing methods of recruitment and training of prison discipline staff.
13. Unrestricted access to the Board of Visitors to include representatives from community and women's organisations; unrestricted access for the Board to all penal establishments.
14. Replacement of the parole system with the introduction of half remission on all sentences.
15. Non-discretionary right to call witnesses and full legal representation for women at Visiting (internal) Court proceedings.
16. Women, after serving seven years of a life sentence, to have access to a sentence review panel.
17. Alternatives to the processing of drunkenness offenders through the criminal justice system.
18. Access to Home Office information on internal enquiries regarding the deaths and mistreatment of women in prison.
19. Preparation of a case against violations of human rights within the British penal system.

that we are discriminated against because of our gender. And I'm very worried of the divide and rule tactics of all governments and all ideologies as well. That you are more discriminated against if you are a black woman, that you are more discriminated against if you are a lesbian, and you are more discriminated against, and I believe most discriminated against, if you are a woman with a disability.

To take the specific group and campaign around that specific group — I have doubts about. And so you can say, I suppose, that it's a deliberate oversight. I also think that to look at racial minorities, as I say, within gender wholes, is a very difficult question and I want to give it a lot more thought. So that's the reason. The counter-productivity of women dividing themselves up into feminist women, non-feminist women, black women, Zionist women, Palestinian women. I actually think that we're not learning anything if we do that. As Woolf said, as women we have no country, and then we go on and get in the women's liberation newsletter endless arguments and rows about patriarchal power groupings in the world. I believe they're nothing to do with women. So what I should say is that women should unite as one gender, women should look at it and perceive it as one gender. But I may need to think that through.

6. See the demands of the WIP campaign above.

7. Federation of Alcoholic Rehabilitation Establishments.

WOMEN ONLY MEET AT HOLLOWAY PRISON, PARKHURST ROAD, LONDON N7, from 6.00 to 7.00pm on the FIRST DAY OF EVERY MONTH. PLEASE COME AND SHOW OUR SOLIDARITY WITH THE WOMEN IN HOLLOWAY.

I'd like to ask about the demand regarding the 'non discriminatory sentencing principles for women'. The reason why I ask you about it is that on one of the prisons programmes that came up recently a woman was interviewed who said that some women only got two years instead of six years because the Judge said it was basically because she was a woman. She said [the interviewee] that some feminist groups were demanding equal sentences. I wanted to know if that's what this demand in your leaflet means?

Again, it's very difficult. Because we wouldn't say that women should have equal sentences with men because we don't believe that women should be getting anything like the appalling sentences they're getting. It's a bit like the children in prison issue. It's very tricky and needs lots of debate I think. We can't really be calling for equal sentencing because we don't really believe in sentencing. At the same time, women are discriminated against. It's like all comparisons are odious, you can't actually compare men and women as I've said, at the bottom of the bucket with each other and say that this is worse because of that. So I hope that although I am personally separatist I'm not separatist to the extent that I would say men have to be given more sentences or women have to be given less sentences to bring them into line with men. I think that's invidious, I think that's rubbish. But again, it needs more debate. As I said, that campaigning leaflet was brought together in less than a couple of months and I would like it to be produced and I would like discussion around it if possible. Of course, we could go wrong. We're completely fallible.

So what you mean by non-discriminatory sentencing is not that sentences should be upped to the equivalent of men's, where they fall below for reasons of gender - rather, what you're trying to do is to stop women being treated worse?

Yes that's right. Again, it's very difficult. It's like the children in prison issue - it's very difficult to get a conclusion because you're actually within the framework and looking for alternatives to custody. You're actually saying that within that framework we would advocate something else relating to sentences. So you're in that framework but within that you're actually advocating other things. I actually find that very difficult by bringing that leaflet together - really difficult. Specific discrimination, for example, when women are remanded in custody for medical reports because women must be 'disturbed' if they commit crimes; whereas for men, criminality is 'normal' behaviour. This clearly is discrimination on grounds of gender and doesn't involve us in the more thorny issue of sentences - that sort of thing...

I want to ask you about the future of Women in Prison and one of the things was whether one of your demands for alternatives to custody for women would involve you actually practically setting up projects in the future?

Well, at this stage because we're so small and because that's too much to even think about, it's just campaigning. But it's more than that. It hinges as well on the referral centre which is a referral and drop-in centre for women coming from prison and borstal but mainly and also - and I think most importantly (and I think PROP has actually achieved this) - is to link up with what is going on in prisons now. I think that's an important thing and that's why we're visiting prisons and getting into prisons and we'd like to get our leaflets into prisons - only not yet. But the drop-in centre in practical terms, although we're non-reformist - and I think that's very important to say, because, as I said to you earlier and I'll say it again, we're not going to put sticking plasters over anything the Home Office does and certainly not with Home Office money either - if women came from prison to the drop-in centre that will open up the channels between the outside

and the inside - that is absolutely crucial. The campaigns, as I see it, begin with Harriet Harman or/and Jo Richardson having questions tabled in the House, which I know NACRO do already but very specific questions, particularly on the deaths of women in prisons. To hopefully get the referral centre as near to Holloway as we can so we can oversee that prison and so that we can be there and be seen to be there and oversee them. Mainly the campaign is to get prisons away from the Home Secretary. How best to do that, I don't know. Take the Home Secretary to the European Court, through publicity, through people understanding what it means to have autonomous states within boroughs, and what total control by the Home Office actually means to people's lives. That sort of education programme, knowledge programme so that people realise how wrong that in 1983 over 45,000 people are subjected to control in every detail of their lives. That's where it will start - opening the office and getting the referral/drop-in centre. That's why we've been meeting with women in housing, women in ARP, women in Rights of Women (ROW), women in ECP, for legal, housing, social security advice. At least it will be somewhere for women to come to when they're released and to have a cup of coffee with ex-cons sitting there to welcome them back out - because it's always such a rotten time and there's nothing there. There'll be a place for them to come to: that's of course why we wanted two women workers, because we want to keep it going from the release time in the morning right through and hopefully get a team of women - if anybody's interested in this - to actually meet women coming from prison to meet them as they come out. A very difficult job because you'd have to build up an actual network - but it's something we'd really like to do.

Lastly, one of the big moves at the moment is for anyone who gets involved with offenders in some way is to also provide a campaigning lobby or some practical support on behalf of victims as well. Although the British Crime Survey⁹ suggested that women aren't as frequent victims of crime as is often made out, but there's also all the hidden victimisation.¹⁰ Is a 'concern' for victims, particularly victims of crime, to be any part of your work?

Well, there is the Victim Support Schemes. There's also other supportive groups like Prisoners Wives and Families and Prisoner Wives. And the term victims, I feel very strongly that the victims are the people in prison as well. Of course there are victims from their crimes and there are people on the outside who will empathise and identify with these people via Victim Support Schemes. We want to talk about the women who have died in prison and have been the real victims. They've been murdered by prison. The term victim is ambiguous. I mean, who's the victim? Written on the wall of Holloway at the moment is 'Prison is the Crime' which I think is true. I've been saying all along to contextualise crime - not justify but to contextualise crime - and my experience of prisons and prisoners is that almost all are the victims. It's as simple as that and there are other schemes for victims of crime. And incidentally, we don't like the word 'offender'. I don't know who created or who made it but it has shifted the whole onus onto people offending against others and I would suggest that a lot of people in prison, the vast majority, have been offended against, not offended. So we want the term dropped. We certainly shall never use it...

8. WIP have applied to the GLC Womens Committee to fund two workers for their proposed referral and drop-in centre.

9. The British Crime Survey is a study of victimisation in England and Wales. HMSO, 1983.

10. 'Hidden victimisation' such as 'wife battering' which is invariably not treated as a criminal act.

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