

Women in Prison

Supporting and
campaigning for
women affected
by the criminal
justice system

Women in Prison: The early years

Women in Prison (WIP) was founded in 1983. An ex-prisoner, Chris Tchaikovsky gathered together a group of women who were worried about the numbers of disturbed and minor offenders held in Holloway Prison, London, and concerned, too, about the standards of safety and care maintained in the prison. But, in 1983 there were already plenty of organizations in the UK, which claimed to campaign for better conditions for all prisoners, though only one of them, Radical Alternatives To Prison, had seriously campaigned against the rebuilding of Holloway Prison in the early 1970s. WIP therefore based its case for a new and distinct campaigning group especially for women on the following claims:

- women's imprisonment is different to men's, and the special and distinct pains of women's imprisonment have been ignored by writers, campaigners and prison administrators
- women in prison suffer from discriminatory practices that result in their receiving fewer education, work and leisure opportunities than male prisoners serving comparable sentences
- women prisoners suffer from discriminatory practices by prison officers – e.g. they are subjected to closer supervision and more punishments than male prisoners
- women in prison do not receive adequate medical care for gynaecological conditions and their special needs during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause are often not catered-for mothers in prison do not receive adequate support and counselling in relation to their children outside prison
- because there are relatively few of them, women in custody in Britain are more likely than men to be held in prisons a long way from their homes
- some women are sent to prison because magistrates and judges see them as unwomanly women rather than as serious criminals

WIP's early campaigns focused on:

- increasing the public awareness of the harsh regimes characteristic of the women's prisons
- the plight of women held in extremely close confinement or under brutally harsh disciplinary regimes e.g. the inmates of Durham Prison H-Wing;
- the difficulties facing women upon their release from prison.

In those early years WIP pursued its aims via a number of strategies including: demonstrating outside Holloway against the deaths of women in prison; producing a book *Criminal Women* based on the autobiographies of 4 ex-prisoners; innumerable briefings

for journalists, students, MPs, and other campaigning groups; media interviews, public lectures, political lobbying and provision of information and support to women coming out of prison. The campaigning work came first, and was seen as the organisation's primary task. Later the pastoral work was developed and from then on the organisation was put on a somewhat more stable financial footing as grants were obtained from local government, commercial and other sources.

From the outset, WIP was very aware of the disproportionate numbers of women prisoners from ethnic minority groups, and the need for liaison with organizations catering for black and foreign women in prison. Additionally, WIP joined with a variety of other penal reform organizations to campaign against the all-pervasive secrecy, non-accountability to the public, censorship, and other undemocratic practices that have characterised the British prison system from the nineteenth century onwards. Around the same time, two specialist organisations catering for two of the most neglected groups of incarcerated women were founded: Hibiscus, founded by Olga Heaven for foreign national women prisoners; and WISH, for Women In Special Hospitals, founded by Prue Stevenson.

The early years were tough. When Chris Tchaikovsky founded the campaigning group Women in Prison (WIP) in 1983, she was determined to give voice to the pains, indignities and special needs of female prisoners. Against all the odds, therefore, and without any official backing, she established Women in Prison as the foremost campaigning group for women prisoners in England and Wales. Despite the fact that the organisation was always under-funded and, in the early years, run by short-term volunteers who were constantly moving on to paid work, Chris never despaired, never became cynical, and consistently adhered to her belief that the needs of prisoners had to be paramount in all WIP's reforming strategies and demands.

Chris Tchaikovsky died in 2002, but today WIP continues to struggle for justice for women in trouble with the law, and, in a much more punitive climate than existed when the organisation was founded in 1983, remains the only national organisation devoted solely to campaigning for a much better deal for women in the courts, in the prisons and upon their release from prison.

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