

WOMEN PRISONERS

SOURCE: "Ramparts", June, 1971, "Women in Prison" by Kiti Burkhart.

Women's jails include one federal, 28 state prisons and 24 facilities for women which are under the control of the wardens of the male prisons in the state. There are about 10,000 women in prison in the U.S. This is out of a total of about 400,000 prisoners. One woman is arrested for every seven men but men prisoners outnumber women 30 to 1.

Judges will often recommend probation rather than prison for women. A study by the American Association of University Women found that Bail is higher and sentences longer for black women than for white. An exception to this rule is in the case of prostitution where white women are given stiffer sentences.

Most women commit crimes that are really social problems. Over 50% are charged with offenses like disorderly conduct and drunkenness. Prostitution, larceny, forgery, and shoplifting are offenses committed by addicted women to support their habits. If a woman commits murder or manslaughter, the victim is usually a husband or lover.

Most women's jails have no educational or recreational facilities. The excuse for this is lack of money and staff. Many of the jails have no black or Latin staff. Most of the guards are middle-aged women without training. Latin women are not allowed to speak Spanish, have Spanish books, or write or receive letters in Spanish.

Women's prisons can be as brutal as men's. Women can be locked in the hole for a variety of trivial offenses including being late and wearing dirty clothes. The state prison at Muncy, Pa. has a hole which has no bed and where the prisoners receive one meal every 24 hours. Since there are generally no work or study programs, the women spend their days cleaning and scrubbing. The women are regarded and treated as "girls".

Eighty per cent of women prisoners have children. The women often do not know where their children are or what kind of care they are getting. Many women prisoners come from poor families and therefore, even if their families are willing to care for the children, they may be judged as "unsuitable" by the courts. Children born in prison are placed in foster homes if the family does not "qualify" to care for them. The court has absolute authority in this matter. Often, great pressure is put on women to give their children up for adoption.

Women's jails do not even bother with the pretense of "rehabilitation" which is the supposed rationale of men's prisons. The condition of women's jails is another indication of the status of women, particularly poor and Third World women.