Victoria Law
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In July 2011, women at California's Valley State Prison launched a hunger strike in solidarity with prisoners on a four-week hunger strike at Pelican Bay State Prison and also to protest their own Secure Housing Unit (an extreme solitary confinement unit).

Upon hearing about the hunger strike, a woman incarcerated in another state, and who had been in solitary confinement for 942 days, launched a one-day hunger strike, stating, "I'll refuse my trays tomorrow in solidarity with long-term solitary confinement hostages everywhere and for the girls held in the outer buildings that don't have air-conditioning or enough electrical sockets to plug in their personal fans and are stuck in rooms with 4" x 12" windows that provide no air. It's a heat index of 110 degrees today."

Women prisoners have always resisted. In 1835, New York State opened its first prison for women. The environment was so terrible that the women rioted, attacking and tearing the clothes off the prison matron and physically chasing away other officials with wooden food tubs. When imprisoned in male penitentiaries and work camps, women often refused to obey the rules. When states began housing them in separate facilities in the 1800s, they protested substandard conditions, sometimes violently, as the New York prison officials learned.

Women's actions, however, are often overlooked by prisoner rights activists and advocates, leading to both the mistaken belief that women do not organize and to a lack of outside attention and support for their actions.

The number of women in federal and state prisons has increased twenty-fold in the last 40 years, from 5,600 in 1970 to 114,979 by the mid-2009. What caused this explosion in women's incarceration?

From President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 "War on Crime," to numerous state "Three Strikes" laws mandating life in prison without the possibility of parole for a third conviction, to Ronald Reagan launching the current "War on Drugs," expanding both policing and imprisonment, prison populations began to swell. (It was not until 1985 that crack began to rapidly spread through and destroy poor black urban neighborhoods.)

In 1986, Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act with mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. The legislation led to

a huge expansion in the number of people incarcerated for drug offenses, from 16,340 in 1986 to 58,260 by the end of 1994.

The act also allowed police and prosecutors to arrest and charge spouses and partners with conspiracy if they took a phone message or signed for a package. Lacking knowledge about drug transactions, spouses and partners are unable to plea-bargain by trading information for a lesser charge. Between 1986 and 1996, the number of women in federal prisons for drug law violations increased 421 percent.

Women of color are disproportionately impacted by these policies. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics show that one of every 100 Black women, one of every 404 Latinas, and one of every 1,099 white women are in prison. Racial profiling, not an increase in crime among people of color, accounts for much of this overrepresentation.

Policing policies disproportionately target 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 officers stop, question, and pat down those they perceive as acting suspiciously, often people of color.

In addition, alternatives to incarceration are less likely to be offered to people of color. A California study showed that two-thirds of drug treatment slots went to whites despite the fact that 70 percent of people with drug sentences were African-American.

Class is also a strong indicator of which women end up in prison. Only 40 percent of all incarcerated women were employed full time before incarceration. Of those, most held low-paying jobs. A study of women under supervision (prison, jail, parole, or probation) found that two-thirds had never held a job that paid more than $6.50 per hour. Approximately 30 percent had been receiving public assistance before being arrested.

The 1996 so-called welfare reform disqualified those with drug felonies and probation or parole violations. Between 1996 and 1999, more than 96,000 women were subject to the welfare ban because of past drug convictions.

The use of prisons to control women is not new As late as the early twentieth century, women were often arrested and imprisoned for defying gender norms: being drunk, engaging in pre- and extra-

- PARTICIPATE IN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS that include the participation and leadership of currently and/or formerly incarcerated women.

marital sex, contracting a venereal disease, or keeping "bad company." In contrast, men were neither arrested nor penalized for the same behaviors.

Women were often given longer, if not indeterminate, sentences than men convicted of the same offense. In 1913, Pennsylvania passed the Muncy Act, requiring that all women convicted of an offense punishable by more than one year be given an indeterminate sentence.

Under this Act, women were also not eligible for parole as early as men. In 1966, the state's Superior Court ruled that the Act's sentencing disparity did not violate women's constitutional rights, stating that women and men's "inherent physical and psychological differences justified differential treatment. Therefore, it was deemed reasonable for women to receive longer sentences, especially because they supposedly received more effective rehabilitation while incarcerated."

Once behind bars, women have protested and challenged their conditions. In 1975, prisoners at the California Institution for Women, in Corona, protested the cancellation of family holiday visits and holiday packages. They gathered in the yard, broke windows, made noise and burned Christmas trees in a "solidarity" bonfire.

"The important thing was that it was not especially political in its roots — simply a classic example of a fed-up-population," recalled Sin Soracco, one of the riot's many participants. "The result, however, was very political: everyone had lots of time while we were locked down, in between bitching about the one hardboiled egg a day, to consider the idea of prison/punishment/conditions/rationale."

Despite the lockdown, the women circulated a document on which everyone wrote down their suggestions for demands. The document became the women's own Ten Points, demanding improved health care, food, education, maternity care and family visits, as well as an end to the arbitrary methods of penalizing women for infractions, the use of solitary confinement, brutal sentencing, overcrowding, and staff sadism.

Women's resistance is not always as visible as rioting. More than half the women in state prisons and local jails report having been physically and/or sexually abused while incarcerated. The

Bureau of Justice Statistics found that women were three times more likely than men to have been physically or sexually abused prior to incarceration.

Prison environment, with its male guards, lack of privacy, physical and verbal abuse, and fear, often perpetuates abuse. Despite these circumstances, women have connected with and supported each other in their efforts to overcome past trauma.

In the late 1980s, women serving life sentences in Marysville, Ohio, formed a support group called Looking Inward for Excellence (LIFE). Members realized that many had been,sentenced to life imprisonment for killing their abusers. At a time when abuse and battering were not widely recognized in either the courtrooms or outside society, they began working around issues of domestic violence.

LIFE members reached out to other survivors, helping them overcome denial and encouraging them to apply for clemency. Their efforts led to 18 additional women applying for clemency. In the end, 25 women were granted clemency.

The actions of LIFE inspired women at the California Institution for Women to organize a similar clemency drive. Members of Convicted Women Against Abuse (CWAA), a prisoner-initiated support group for battered women, wrote a letter to then-Governor Pete Wilson asking him to consider commuting their sentences and inviting him to one of their weekly meetings so he could understand how they had ended up in prison.

Wilson declined the invitation, but the letter drew the attention of lawyers and advocates who helped the women draft arguments and gather evidence for clemency petitions. The governor granted clemency to three, denied it to seven, and made no decision on 24 of the petitions.

In both Ohio and California, battered women's efforts not only strengthened and expanded the clemency processes, but also raised public awareness about abuse. Even those not granted clemency became empowered to speak out about their experiences instead of continuing to live in shame.

CWAA members continue to meet and share current news regarding domestic violence, homicide cases, court rulings, and their own experiences with the justice system. They discuss possible legal

strategies, media stories about women who fight back, and journalists with a focus on domestic violence.

The advocates and lawyers who originally helped women with their petitions formed the California Coalition for Battered Women in Prison to continue organizing and educating the public. More than 15 years later, the group, now part of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, continues to advocate for the release of women imprisoned for self-defense. Within the past 12 years, the group has helped free 35 additional women.

Although the dramatic increase in women's incarceration has led to increased attention, many continue to believe that women do not resist or organize. Remembering these past revolts not only counters the belief that women passively accept injustice, but also opens the door to both recognizing the less visible forms of resistance within women's prisons and working to support their struggles.

Incarcerated women and their advocates have suggestions on how activists and organizers on the outside can support their resistance behind bars:

- MAKE CONTACT WITH WOMEN IN PRISON. As a woman incarcerated in Florida noted, "Visits, phone calls, and letter writing are essential. Only with a firm foundation, a strong foundation, can we together be able to build a greater movement."
- SPEAK OUT OR WRITE ABOUT PRISON ISSUES, especially when they intersect with issues that are considered "non-prison" issues.
    - SEND LITERATURE AND NEWS FROM THE OUTSIDE.
- PEER EDUCATION GROUPS NEED UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION on health issues and treatments! They also need outside people who are willing to provide services not available (but much needed) within the prison.
- FOR THOSE CONNECTED TO UNIVERSITIES or other educational institutions: look into setting up a women's studies course or other program within a women's prison that helps articulate and challenge the dominant ways of thinking and the power structure.