

OLOC Confronting Sexism Session October 17, 2023

Sexual Assault of Incarcerated Women is epidemic in US prison systems.

Ruth Debra: Volunteers for the California Coalition for Women Prisoners; writing warriors letters to prison. 190,000 people in prison in the United States and 40% are lesbians and bisexual, a few transgendered. There are more women in jails than prisons – they have less money for bail, homelessness, economic situations, and crimes are different, not violent crimes such as property theft and low-level drug offenses. Life is so horrible for women prisoners; average California wage in prison for women is 8 to 37 cents an hour and 55% of that is for restitution (about 10 to 65 cents an hour in New York); if menstruating they only get 5 tampons a month or split that number by cell, so how can they afford more? The women are under constant pressure for sex mostly by the male wardens – rape and sexual assault that they get away with and no it, no recourse for them; 22 women were raped in the Dublin California prison – they tried to sue but there was retaliation such as deportation; the men watch them shower, go to the toilet, undress in rooms privately; there is the promise of food for sex. This is just like child abuse – no consent which is over them daily; power over and as said mostly men with maybe an odd women warden; this also intersects homophobia and racism particularly Black, lesbian, and bisexuals. Ruth attends meetings where 2/3 of the women have formerly been incarcerated. When they are released and if they have been there 20-40 years, they get no social security or Medicare even though they worked in the prison. Women are the fastest growing population in the prison system; even if they have not been charged, they sit in jail because they cannot afford the bail.

80% of the women incarcerated are mothers – what about their children; 3% area pregnant and give birth in shackles – unimaginable; but they still have hope and are strong. Ruth is an abolitionist – get rid of prisons and women’s prisons first; the male guards harass, grope, pat frisks, searches. Many of the women who got into trouble have been abused (family, etc.) before so they are retraumatized, repeatedly abused – don’t fight because there is no way to fight with constant guard threats – solitary confinement, one woman was in solitary confinement for 17 years. The food is awful – no requirements to provide a healthy diet, there is a commissary if you have money. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. The United Nations has human rights grievance procedures – unlikely in the United States. There are some men who are accused and convicted of rape or abuse and maybe they get 5 years but when they get out of prison, they get out and get their pay and retirement money.

Comments/Statements:

- What is the average sentencing time for women?
It is shorter than men but 90% of the crimes are because of men; income and equality issues.
- What is causing the increase in the population of women in jail?
Does not know, maybe economics... salaries are not going up, so it is probably shoplifting like taking baby formula.
- Tell us the nature of your correspondence, the focus?
Information from the prisoners is that it is really bad, no medical care, request to advocate for medical care to be readily available. In some states the women have to pay for medical care, and they are talking about depression – no treatment for depression; mental health care is needed.
- This is a dilemma – what do we do with violent offenders if you close the prisons, have an alternative?

There is not a huge number of violent offenders; there are punitive models but have to deal with racism and sexism regarding any redemption.

- Have former prisoners said what they would have rather had than prison? They would like education. Some of the prisons have education but it is poorly funded and hard to get.
- Excellent information. There are two books – one is a white woman who was in prison on drug related charges and was the basis for the show “Orange is the New Black.” The other is about Angela Davis who advocated to get rid of the prison system; talked about drugs in the Black community; some Black men jumped on the bandwagon for harsher sentences for drugs.
- In Denmark there are group homes for men to improve their lives, there are restrictions but no fences. Now, in the United States south, women are being put in jail regarding abortion – just don’t have a chance in this society.
- Another book, *Just Mercy* by Brian Stevenson – get people off death row; redemption is a possibility for human beings alive and not put to death. Life without parole is death by incarceration – sentences given to women which is still murder. The criminalization of victims – battered women who kill their abusers – sometimes they are released, sometimes released after advocacy from life in prison.
- A relationship between social services and getting out of prison and getting together as a family. Misogyny – men can be in contact with children, but women cannot.
- There is acute vulnerability to organize anything like men do; one prisoner advocating peace was stripped searched and felt powerlessness and terror; visceral realization in the hands of the right-wing community people; underscores how power over and use of force – politics of our lives as women; vulnerable to the whole abusive power system.
- Almost raped by a copy – what it feels like every day for women; in women there is powerlessness.
- In a college social studies class half of the students were prison guards and half were prisoners. The prisoners could not get water, go to the toilet – power over by mostly men.
- Women prisoners do not have access to solutions because of retaliations.
- Reality is that guards have total control over prisoners; but not much interaction between the two that she experienced; prisoners have their own society/hierarchy and not one is going to help the lowest run of women; separated the prisoners from the guards through video which dehumanizes the prisoner; they were a guard in a Kansas City jail. Anyone who was arrested, no matter what their crime was, they were put all together. There were women guards. If a prisoner was convicted of a bad crime they would go to the penitentiary; they had a good relationship with the women prisoners. Isolation is total dehumanization and is awful.
- Capital punishment is state sponsored murder.
- Dehumanization is evil and ignorance of the costs done to women, children, future generations. This has a multi-generational impact.
- In Tuscany, they have an island prison and guards have to apply to work there because it is a nice model of a prison system.

Suggested Activism:

- Coalition for Women Prisoners Abuse: help with funds for then they get released because in California, the women only get up to \$200 so starting over is really hard, employment issues are extra hard and if there is family to support.
- “*The Bail Project*” which is online if you want to help.
- Research what your State does regarding women in prison.

- In Minnesota – people donate books.
- What laws are there in your state that affect women's prisons?
- Contact lawmakers
- There is a law to prevent prison rape, but it is not enforced; need to advocate for enforcement.
- Tour your local jail; jails feed into the prisons. Ask if you can bring supplies for the women.
- Everybody could do a little to help – example: could send \$10-15 to a woman prisoner for tampons or pads.
- Also, can help in the area regarding bail. There is a Northwest Fund in Seattle that loans or gives money to those who cannot afford bail.
- There are enough projects around to work with; work with lawyers around the country; Southern Poverty Law Center's "Innocence Project" to get them out of prison.

Article Shared by Ruth Debra:

Women at California federal prison say prosecution of warden hasn't stopped sexual abuse

Real Time News; Mansa Musa; Oct. 23, 2023

A recent investigation into sexual abuse at a women's federal prison in Dublin, California, brought down several guards and the prison's former warden, Ray J. Garcia. But a new lawsuit from eight women now alleges that the investigation has not stopped the culture of sexual abuse. Erin Neff of the [California Coalition for Women's Prisoners](#) joins *Rattling the Bars* to discuss the new lawsuit and the underlying culture of sexual abuse found throughout US prisons.

The following is a rushed transcript and may contain errors. A proofread version will be made available as soon as possible.

Mansa Musa: Welcome to this edition of *Rattling the Bars*. Do you know who Joan Little was? Joan Little was charged with the 1974 murder of Clarence Alligood, a White prison guard at Beaufort County Jail in Washington, North Carolina, who attempted to rape Little before she could escape. Little was the first woman in United States history to be acquitted using the defense that she used deadly force to resist sexual assault. Recently, eight female prisoners, dubbed the Rape Club by prisoners and correctional staff alike, found a lawsuit against the Federal Bureau of Prison arguing that sexual abuse and exploitation have not stopped in Dublin FCI, despite the prosecution of former warden and several former officers. The lawsuit filed in Oakland by attorneys representing prison and the advocacy group California Coalition for Women Prisoners also named the current warden and 12 former and current guards. It alleged the Bureau of Prison and staff at Dublin Facility didn't do enough to prevent sexual abuse going back to 1990. An Associated Press investigation last year found a culture of abuse and coverups that persisted for years at the prison. What does the #MeToo movement garnering public attention mean in terms of obtaining justice and relief for incarcerated women? Here to talk about the current state of Dublin FCI and related issues is Erin Neff, who is a legal advocate with California Coalition for Women Prisoners.

Erin Neff: I work with California Coalition for Women Prisoners. We are a grassroots organization that has been active in the California prisons for the last 28 years. We began at Chowchilla with the CDCR giving support to a woman named Charisse Shumate, who was advocating for the lack of medical care. Since then, she actually did not survive her illness, but she began a movement with us, with people on the outside to create advocacy relationships. We have been working mostly with the CDCR system in the women's prison system, and we are currently in the last few years working at FCI Dublin.

Mansa Musa: Now recently, an article came out or information came out about the current state of Dublin Prison in Oakland, California, or in the Bay Area, as it relates to female prisoners being abused, sexually abused. We know that in the federal prison system they have what's known as PREA, Prison Reform Enforcement Rape Act, I think that's what it stands for, but the concept of PREA is that anyone under the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prison, anyone under any state or local facility that has an issue about being sexually abused or sexually assaulted by either inmates or staff, they have this mechanism where they can immediately contact someone, had a person allegedly done something to them removed from the institution and have the person that's making the allegation removed from the institution, and then an investigation going on, and in the interim of that, until that is resolved, these people are never put in the place together. But now, come to find out that in California, in Dublin in particular, in terms of this particular incident, it's known that this is far more reaching than just in Dublin Prison, this is a ... I think I read somewhere that says it's the culture of the prison system. Talk about Dublin first, let's talk about that and what's going on as far as the lawsuit and how this came about, and if you can give historical context to it, if you have one.

Erin Neff: So PREA is the Prison Rape Elimination Act, and that should generally give a person who is experiencing sexual harassment or abuse a way to confidentially report this abuse, and that appropriate action and investigation will be taken against this person who is doing the abuse. In the case of Dublin, just to give it a historical context, 30 years ago there was a horrific incident of abuse of many people, and there was a big case and a big settlement, and it is heartbreaking to see that 30 years later the same thing is happening. What it exposes is a culture of turning a blind eye to this abuse, there's cooperation, there's coverup, there is very difficult to report, let alone confidentially report. So in recent times, what you're seeing are people being abused who are undocumented. So first of all, they are being targeted because the staff knows that they are people who are going to be deported. So there is an exposure there. They are threatened that if they say anything they'll be deported, so these people are people who've been here maybe their entire lives, all of their family's here. So the possibility that they will be deported, and I'm sure this staff lets them think that they have some sort of power as to whether they can stay or go, so there's that. They're being retaliated against by being put in isolation, they are getting strip searched, it goes on and on. They're being deprived of medical care, of mental healthcare. These people have really suffered tremendous abuse, and on top of this abuse they're being punished again by not getting the medication that they were once taking. That is a very common scenario where their medication that helped them survive in this place of incarceration, they're not getting medical care, they're not getting counseling. In some cases, reports where they'll get minimal counseling, but it's with a man who is part of the staff, they do not feel safe at all. Their commissary is getting limited, harassment in the middle of the night. It goes on and on and on. While this has been exposed, Warden Garcia was found guilty and sentenced to 70 months for his abuse, this ongoing abuse. There was a chaplain, multiple correctional officers, the counselors who were cooperating and giving information to those who were abusing and they're giving people away to target people who are more vulnerable, those for example who were undocumented. So you're seeing people transferred out of state if they do report, so they're getting transferred away from their families and their communities. It goes on and on and on.

Mansa Musa: We're not talking about Orange is the New Black, we're not talking about some HBO theoretical or theatrical rendition of what an ideal prison would look like in America. We're actually talking about real live human beings. But talk about the lawsuit, so now we've reached critical mass to the point where we have a lawsuit, talk about the lawsuit and in talking about the lawsuit, has an injunction been leveled against the institution to cease and desist? How are you able to get coverage for these women? Because as I said earlier, as you outlined, that type of fear permeates the population. When you're in the prison, and I've been in prison myself, I did 48 years, when you're in the prison environment and you don't have no control whatsoever to begin with, but the isolation really makes you feel like you don't have no rights, and whatever's going to go on with you that day or that period in time, either you're going to accept it or you're going to die trying to defend yourself. But at any rate, you're going to be subjected to some harsh, cruel, brutal treatment, or mistreatment. Talk about the lawsuit, if an injunction is in effect, and how do these women get coverage where they can get a sense of security?

Erin Neff: So CCWP is the organizational plaintiff for this case against the BOP, along with many individuals. Currently, where it stands is we are waiting for a response from the BOP, it's currently a bit in what feels like a stalling stage on their part, before the trial will be granted. So we are waiting on that. In the meantime, anyone who is part of this lawsuit is also currently incarcerated, some people have been released, but many are still incarcerated at Dublin or transferred. People that I am visiting are talking about being treated as less than human. Last week I sat across from someone who is being denied her medical care, her mental healthcare, she feels completely forgotten, she feels completely

hopeless, she's been subjected to isolation. This is a real person with children, she speaks to her children and her children are so worried about her because of her feeling of hopelessness. She's already paying for her debt to society, she's doing her time, and on top of that she is being treated as less than human. This isn't a TV show, these are real people. The effect on that individual, the effect on their families, their children, it's not isolated to that one person. So the hopelessness is very hard to fight against. What we try to do is educate them and inform them of what we are doing on the outside, and that they are not forgotten. They did recently say that they saw us when we filed the lawsuit, and we had a demonstration out in front of the courthouse in Oakland, and that was extremely empowering for them to know that people are active and that we are fighting.

Mansa Musa: Like you said, this is not no TV show, this is not no, "Wait, go back, act like you're distraught. Wait, go back, put more emotion." No, this is real life. Speaking on the outside, and this is just my perspective, and we're talking about California and we're talking about the Bay Area, but we're also talking about a state where if these women were in Paramount Studio, if these women were in some major corporation, if these women were in anywhere in society being subjected to this, the #MeToo movement, the feminist movement, every ambulance-chasing lawyer would be outraged, would be in uproar, would be identifying the warden, the corporate leader and trying to get charges against him, trying to get him locked up, trying to get their money, a lien on their moneys. Do you feel like that it's a disconnect between these movements and women that are incarcerated? If so, why? If you can talk about that.

Erin Neff: Well, yes, there's a huge disconnect, even in the Bay Area people are not aware that this is going on. Unfortunately, what you see in the prisons, everyone knows, is we see Brown people, Black people and poor people, people who are already vulnerable, people who have suffered a tremendous abuse, and a blind eye is turned to these people. This is a capitalist society where we value people who are seemingly of value, and it's a very, very tragic view even in California, where we are the most liberal state. We see people turning away from this, it's incredibly painful to see that truth. People don't want to see that, they don't want to know that is happening in California. If you see someone on the outside, not to minimize the tragedy of that recent expedition to go see the Titanic, these millionaires, billionaires spent a ton of money and very tragically they died in this accident. You see an outpouring of interest and focus on this. Why are these people who are incarcerated of less human value?

Mansa Musa: Right. Let's give a context to people that are incarcerated, because according to the judicial system and according to criminal law, we have what we call crime and punishment. A person's charged with a crime, the punishment they get is the amount of time they are to serve, not how they serve their time, the amount of time. If I do robbery, if I rob somebody and robbery incurs 10 years, the crime is I committed a robbery, the punishment is 10 years. The punishment is not, "I'm sentencing you to 10 years to go be raped, sodomized, brutalized, terrorized, and then released." The punishment is that I'm going to be sent to an institution, the next phase in my sentencing process is and the narrative is that I'll be sentenced to an institution that's going to provide me with the means and the mechanism to make the adjustment for my ultimate return to society. Not where I'll be subjected to, as a female, more importantly than anything else, be subjected to coming into an institution and the way the prisons are, this is the prison culture in terms of how we look at people that are incarcerated, we know the institutions they will be going to, we know the way the institutions are run, we know what goes on in these institutions, probably even get there. They say, "Oh, yeah. You're going to Dublin." The first thing I know is, "Okay, I know that this is the way ..." There's real abuse like this here, women are being ... I've got to be on the lookout for this, I've got to be on the lookout for that. Automatically what happens is once I get into this environment, I'm automatically on the defense

because I recognize that the abuse about the environment proceeded itself. But talk about the women, and you talked about earlier about how some of the clients that you deal with are really being depressed, and rightly so. But talk about how we're able to get them to hold on and have faith and be more spirited about the fact that, not only this too is going to pass, but the people that are responsible are going to be held accountable. That's a fact. We know that based on y'all organization and y'all organizing. But talk about how you are able to get them to hold on and recognize that they're not wrong for wanting to be human, they're not wrong for expressing their desire for their humanity. The people that are wrong are the people that are abusing them, that's being given the authority to abuse them.

Erin Neff: That's right, yes. It's an excellent point. The punishment is the time you do, and your time in prison is supposed to include opportunities for rehabilitation. That is another thing that people are allowed to do programming, and this programming can include AA, NA, ways to improve yourself, codependency. This is another form of retaliation in that they deprive you of getting to take those classes and be in groups and in community. So you are being doubly punished. What we try to do, we have in-person visiting where we are trying to meet as many people as possible and let them know that we are here. We have a writing relationship with them, they have access to email where we start being in contact as much as possible. We use this as an opportunity to find out what is going on inside. Now, no email or phone calls are confidential, so it's not a guarantee that we can exchange real information. We have also a newsletter called the Fire Inside that CCWP has been publishing for 28 years. We have three issues a year. We're send those to people in CDCR as well as the FCI Dublin, it's in Spanish and in English. We solicit information and content and poetry and stories from them to get their stories out, so that they are heard. Last week in my visit I shared the newsletter with many people, and it was great because it's also in Spanish, and I think it was- Tragically, they are so moved because they are not used to having people acknowledge their existence and their suffering. So the fact that that is happening and we are giving them voice, we want to know what's going on, we really want them to know that their stories are incredibly important and they are not suffering alone. Sometimes the only thing that we can do is write a letter and say, "We are here. How is your day going?" That can make a huge difference. But things like the lawsuit are incredibly important. A demonstration in front of the courthouse when the case gets filed, these things are incredibly important because it does get inside.

Mansa Musa: We want people to recognize that we're talking about human beings, first of all, we're talking about people, human beings, but more importantly we're talking about women. The fact that in this society we deal with chauvinists, sexists, racists, bigoted society, capitalist society, the fact that these things exist seems to overshadow what we're talking about when we're talking about people that were sentenced to serve time, the judge did not say when sentencing them, "I'm sentencing you to 10 years in Dublin Federal Correctional Institution to be raped, sodomized and brutalized, dehumanized, and hopefully by the time that you return to society you'll be a shell of a woman." No, the judge sentenced these people, sentenced these women to a term of imprisonment and to be rehabilitated.

Erin Neff: Most of the time women end up in prison, have been system impacted, or they have been abused or trafficked, and end up in these situations where they're getting abused even more. The California Coalition for Women Prisoners, we have an advocacy program where we join people on the outside who are interested in reaching this population and doing advocacy and learning from the ground up. We are a grassroots organization, you can look at WomenPrisoners.org and send us an email and we will get you connected. We have orientations and trainings, and bimonthly meetings to support you in this work. It is a really big community of amazing, amazing organizers and people with

tremendous heart to recognize that this problem, while isolated to what's happening inside of a building, inside of a prison, is impacting all of our lives. Our communities are being impacted, your neighbor is being impacted. Whether you feel it directly or not, it is. WomenPrisoners.org. The women at the FCI Dublin would love to be in touch with you.

Mansa Musa: We see an event where the person threw their hat up in the air, and when he threw his hat up in the air it was a moment where everybody came around and supported. This is that kind of time. This is a throw-your-hat-up-in-the-air moment for women incarcerated throughout the United States of America, more so importantly in Dublin. Nobody has the right to violate your body. Nobody has the right, because you're serving a sentence, to come in and say, "Because you're serving time, or because you're considered an illegal alien, or because you're a woman that I have a right to subject you to the most dehumanizing, inhumane treatment, only because I got the authority. I got the right to rape you. I got the right to sodomize you. I got the right to deny you your medication. I got the right to deny you food. I got the right." No, you do not have the right. The right is not given to you. The right that you have is to ensure that I'm in a safe environment, and when you subject women to this cruel and unusual punishment, you're going to be held accountable. We see this taking place now by the work that Erin and the sisters and brothers in California are doing. You're not going to get this information on ABC or CBS or NBC News. You're not going to get this information from someone from the White House getting on a platform saying, "Yes, we find it's problematic that women are being raped in prison and women are being sodomized in prison, and that we're paying money for this to make sure that they do it with impunity." No, you'll only get this information from the Real News and Rattling the Bars, and we ask that you look at this report. We ask that you investigate what's going on in the prison system, and particularly in California. We ask that you take a stand. If you believe that raping people, sodomizing people and abusing people are a good thing to do because they were convicted of a crime, then weigh in on that. But understand this here, if they come for me in the morning, they'll come for you at night. So you're not immune to it, you will be subjected to the same harsh treatment when it goes unchecked.