

News Service 193/98
AI INDEX: AMR 51/72/98
6 October 1998

USA

New reports of children and women abused in correctional institutions

Findings from Amnesty International Research trip

The findings of a two-week research trip by Amnesty International in the USA show that the abuse of women prisoners in particular – as highlighted in the report released today – is still continuing in many states the US.

The investigation team heard from current and former women prisoners, their lawyers and relatives and prison staff about their treatment in prison including:

- women shackled during labor
- male prison officers assaulting women prisoners, touching their genitals during searches, and leering at women while they dressed or showered
- inadequate medical care

The team also heard further reports of abuse in a juvenile detention center in Maine, which have led in the past week to calls for an independent investigation into the allegations.

The researchers – who visited Maine, Michigan, Illinois and California between 19 September and 2 October – found that many prisoners or prison staff were afraid to complain because of intimidation or retaliation.

“The message we heard over and over again was that if they complain, they suffer for it,” said researcher Jo Szwarc. Many of the people interviewed asked that their names be kept confidential for this reason.

Details of the investigation team’s findings are:

Michigan

The researchers spoke by telephone with two women in prison who described the appalling experience of being pregnant while incarcerated. Both of them were taken to hospital in a belly chain and handcuffs when they were in labor in 1994 and 1996; one of them also had her legs shackled together. Her restraints were removed just before she gave birth, at the request of the doctor and after the guard who constantly attended her obtained permission from the prison. The other woman was handcuffed to the hospital bed until the doctor asked for the restraints to be removed, just before she gave birth. Both women were cuffed to their beds shortly after giving birth.

Both of the women told the researchers that despite the fact that the US Justice Department investigated sexual abuse of prisoners in Michigan, and started legal action against the state, women inmates in Michigan are still sexually abused by correctional officers. They said that guards sexually assaulted women, watched them in the showers or when dressing, and touched their breasts and genitals during pat searches. The women also reported inadequate and inappropriate medical attention.

Amnesty International's researchers also spoke with two guards from a women's prison, who supported the inmate's complaints. The guards said there was a pattern of sexual abuse of women prisoners, with women intimidated or punished if they complained.

Amnesty International's report cites an investigation into Michigan's women's prisons by the US Justice Department, which found that inmates who complain suffer intimidation and retaliation. The inmates and guards interviewed by the researchers said that reprisals continue and that both inmates and staff have been threatened and victimized.

One guard said she was harassed after she complained about the abuse meted out by other guards and was savagely beaten and slashed by an unknown person within the prison, in an area that is out of bounds to prisoners. Deborah LaBelle, a Michigan lawyer, has recently filed suit to seek the protection of the courts for inmates who have complained about incidents at the prison.

Illinois

In Chicago, the researchers met with three women who had been imprisoned at the Dwight Correctional Center. They spoke of the same kinds of concerns affecting women in prison –sexual abuse, inadequate medical attention for physical and mental health problems, the cruel use of restraints on pregnant and sick women and reprisals against people who dare to complain.

One woman, who was released on parole this year, said that she had been shackled to her bed for the entire time that she was undergoing surgery in hospital, even while unconscious under full anesthetic and despite the fact that she was constantly attended by an armed guard. She said: "When you go to prison all your rights have been taken away. You are given horseshit and you have to swallow it."

Another woman told Amnesty International that earlier this year a guard broke a female inmate's jaw and the victim was immediately transferred to another facility. She said that prison staff then turned off the prisoners' telephone system so no one could report the incident to the outside world. "We were in 'the Twilight Zone'," she said.

California

The researchers visited California to prepare for a future investigative visit to Valley State Prison for Women at Chowchilla -- part of the largest women's prison complex in the world.

Both inmates and a former staff member contacted Amnesty International earlier this year complaining of sexual and physical abuse, intimidation and poor medical attention.

In the letter from the inmates, they said that "we are in need of adequate medical care, that we don't like to be pawed by male correctional officers under the pretense of being pat searched, which is really being stroked and caress searched". They also stated that complaints about abuse or harassment by prison guards are routinely denied – "the appeal is sent back to you unanswered, but the harassment will continue".

The letter from a former Valley State Prison staff member describes sexual, legal and other abuse in the prison, and concludes with the view that the prison is run in an "illegal, harsh and thug like manner".

During the recent visit to California, the investigation team met with lawyers representing women in California's state prisons, prison visitors, and a psychiatrist. The researchers also attended a conference about prison issues – Critical Resistance Conference – where they talked to many people who had been imprisoned.

The complaints about Valley State Prison for Women relate mainly to the prison's "Special Housing Unit" where inmates are locked in their cells for 23 hours a day without work or education. Amnesty International's report expresses considerable concern about such facilities, which are proliferating throughout the USA within prisons and sometimes as prisons in their own right – the so-called "supermaximum" facilities.

A California psychiatrist who has investigated these prisons told Amnesty International that the harsh conditions can induce psychosis and visitors to the facility described women "losing their minds" because of their treatment. A lawyer reported that one woman had her stay in the Unit constantly extended because she covered a slot in her cell door when using the toilet, in breach of the rules. The repeated punishment of her desire for a little privacy had broken her, and now on occasion she stands naked and shouts for attention.

Maine

In its report, Amnesty International calls for a review of the use of restraint chairs in prisons and jails, based on extensive evidence of its abuse. The use of the restraint chair – and other forms of restraints – in cruel, inhuman or degrading ways was one of the issues investigated by the team in Maine.

The researchers investigated reports of these and other violations against children at the Maine Youth Center in South Portland. Amnesty International had already informed the Maine authorities that it had received complaints including the cruel use of restraints, unnecessary and excessive force by staff and placing children in solitary confinement for extended periods, and had urged the Governor to establish an independent investigation. In response, Amnesty International had been told that its information was inaccurate and out of date so it decided to investigate further.

A researcher interviewed staff, parents of children currently in the Youth Center, and children who had recently been released from the facility. They confirmed that there were continuing grounds for concern about the treatment of children. Disturbingly, some parents insisted on anonymity because they said staff had warned them against complaining. Staff who spoke to Amnesty International also did so on a confidential basis, afraid of repercussions.

In the last week, Amnesty International's concerns about abuses at the Center were dramatically supported by the revelation of a recent memorandum by a staff member that documented children being placed in the restraint chair for as long as 17 hours. Maine legislators publicly called for an independent inquiry and several days ago the state Department of Corrections announced that it would ask an external body to review its disciplinary procedures.

*Source: Amnesty International, International Secretariat,
1 Easton Street, WC1X 8DJ, London, United Kingdom*