



Prisons and Prisoners

by Tina Gianoulis

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Because homophobia is the norm in most societies, queers have a unique relationship to the penal system. First, since homosexuality is still illegal in many places, gay men and (less frequently) lesbians may find themselves imprisoned for no other crime than being "caught" expressing their sexual identity.

Second, however, even where homosexuality is not against the law, or laws against homosexuality not routinely enforced, the stigma attached to homosexuality may leave many queers in a shadowy position, with ambiguous attitudes toward law and its enforcement.

Moreover, societal disapproval can itself lead to crime, because it generates prejudice, discrimination, fear, and self-loathing, which in turn can lead to alcohol and drug use, unemployment, and poverty.

Queers in Prison

Once in prison, queers become part of a harsh, gender-segregated subculture, in which even non-gays frequently participate in homosexual relationships, either by choice or by force.

Despite the prevalence of homosexual activity, however, homophobia is nevertheless rampant within prison society, and queers in jail are frequently victimized both by their fellow inmates and by the prison system itself, including indifferent or predatory guards and inequitable regulations. This abuse creates a kind of vicious cycle where demoralized gay men and lesbians are almost twice as likely as straight inmates to re-offend and return to prison.

Although gay male, lesbian, and transgendered prisoners share many of the same experiences of subjugation and oppression in prison, each group is affected in its own particular way as well.

Gay men, often perceived in heteronormative society as weak and womanish, may find themselves at the lower end of the prison hierarchy. In recent decades, gay prisoners have been segregated in dismal "queen's tanks," separate jail facilities where they are vulnerable to rape and abuse by other prisoners and guards. In 1997 sixteen openly gay inmates were killed in a Jamaican jail when other inmates rioted and stormed their segregated cellblock.

In male prisons, rape and other violence between inmates is an accepted fact of life that prison officials often do little to prevent. Prison activists have brought the issue into the public eye, and in 2003, Congress passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act, but violent behavior continues. Though over 1500 rapes were reported under the act in 2004, most were never prosecuted.

In 2005, the ACLU brought suit against the Texas Department of Criminal Justice on behalf of a gay inmate named Roderick Keith Johnson. Johnson claimed that he had been forced into literal sexual slavery while serving time in a Texas prison. When he complained to prison officials, Johnson testified that he was told to "get a boyfriend for protection." Though Johnson did not win his suit, the ACLU managed to get him

transferred to a different prison and publicized the issue of violence against gay inmates.

The lack of availability of condoms in most prisons exacerbates the threat of contracting AIDS for prisoners who participate in sexual activity.

Even in enlightened countries, members of sexual minorities are frequently treated inequitably in such matters as visits from partners and friends, correspondence rights, availability of gay magazines and newsletters, and access to gay-friendly spiritual counseling, such as that provided by the Metropolitan Community Church.

One breakthrough came when a Canadian Court of Appeal ruled that the refusal to allow a gay male prisoner conjugal visits with his partner violated the nation's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The ruling was an important chapter in the legal struggle that led to the ultimate ruling that expanded the legal definition of spouse and legalized same-sex marriage in Canada.

No analogous ruling in the United States has established the rights of gay and lesbian prisoners to conjugal visits with their partners, with the possible exception of the handful of states that permit same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships.

Although the United States imprisons a larger percentage of its population than any other Western country, protecting the rights of prisoners--especially, queer prisoners--is not a high priority for its government or its voters, at least in part because prisoners in U.S. jails tend disproportionately to be poor, uneducated, and from ethnic and racial minorities.

Social scientists have estimated the proportion of lesbian inmates in women's prisons at anywhere from 25 to 60 percent.

In 1937, Freudian psychologist Samuel Kahn became one of the first experts to acknowledge sexual relationships among female prison inmates in his book *The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual*. Decades later, famous anthropologist Margaret Mead also studied the phenomenon, theorizing that lesbian relationships in prison were merely a substitute for heterosexual relationships, made necessary by the unavailability of men.

However, some modern theorists have begun to consider less socially rigid explanations, such as the possibility that, removed from the society of men, women begin to learn to love and appreciate each other. Indeed, though many women return to heterosexuality once released from prison, they frequently form tight couples and family units to support them during their incarceration.

Transgender people face special challenges in gender-segregated prisons. In male prisons, male-to-female transgenders are especially vulnerable to rape and violence, while prison officials are often ignorant and unsympathetic about their needs.

In 2001, a transgendered woman named Synthia Kavanaugh filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission stating that she had been denied hormone therapy and sex change surgery by the Canadian prison system. Kavanaugh won her case, received her surgery, and was transferred to a women's prison. The commission also directed the prison system to create new guidelines for meeting the needs of transgendered inmates.

Resources

There are many organizations devoted to helping offenders, both within prison and after they are released.

However, many of these organizations are faith-based and blatantly condemnatory or discriminatory toward glbtq prisoners. Often their "ministry" to members of sexual minorities consists of little more than attempts to "convert" them to heterosexuality. Other prison reform organizations simply ignore the special problems of glbtq inmates.

Often having been radicalized by their own experiences in jail, some queer activists have created their own support networks to aid prisoners.

Beginning with the wave of political lesbian feminism in the 1970s, lesbians have spearheaded organizations to support women behind bars. A Seattle organization called Through the Looking Glass provided a free newsletter and other resources to women inmates and their children from 1976 through 1986.

The Out of Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners formed in 1986 in the San Francisco Bay Area to protest oppressive conditions in the Lexington Control Unit for Women, an underground facility in Kentucky. After an eighteen-month fight in coalition with other community prison activists, they succeeded in shutting down the unit. Out of Control continues to work to improve the conditions and secure the release of twenty-five women imprisoned for their political work and beliefs.

Texas prison activist Ray Hill is a gay man who spent time behind bars himself before founding one of the most long-lived prison support efforts in the U.S. Sentenced to twenty separate eight-year terms in prison for robbery, Hill studied the law and managed to reduce his time to one eight-year sentence. With time off for good behavior, Hill was out in less than five years, but he did not forget his time in jail, nor the issues of his fellow inmates.

In 1980, Hill started a weekly radio show dedicated to the support of prisoners and prison reform. The two-hour "Prison Show" continues its regular run on Houston's Pacifica Radio station KPFT FM, highlighting issues of concern to inmates and providing a way that those outside can communicate with friends and family who are locked up.

The late gay activist Stephen Donaldson, who founded Columbia University's gay student organization in 1969, was brutally gang raped in 1973 after being jailed for trespassing at the White House as part of a protest against the bombing of Cambodia. Donaldson's experience led him to join Stop Prisoner Rape, an advocacy group that seeks to end sexual violence committed against men, women, and youth in all forms of detention. The organization was founded in 1980 by Russell Dan Smith, another prison rape victim, but incorporated by Donaldson in 1994.

TRAns Prisoner Support (TRAPS) is a website founded by a British transgendered woman named Tiff whose own negative experiences with the penal system prompted her to extend help to other transgendered inmates. TRAPS contains links to help supporters work for improved conditions in prison and encourages pen pals to provide isolated prisoners much-needed contact with the outside world.

Prison Life in Popular Culture

Queers in prison have become staples of popular culture. Prison slang referring to sexual roles and sexual activity, especially among men, permeates mainstream society. Terms such as "kid," "punk," "stud," "jocker," and "turned out" refer to the sexual roles and identities assumed by male inmates.

Slang referring to lesbian prisoners is less well-known to the general public, but includes, in addition to the ubiquitous "butch" and "femme," such terms as "little boys," "stud broads," "bulldaggers," "fishes," and "flippers." The initials "LUP" stand for "Lesbian Until Parole." "JTO" stands for "Jailhouse Turnouts."

Moreover, images of prison rape and the sexual exploitation of prisoners--including that by the iconic "Big Mama" lesbian prison guard and the menacing cellmate--are deeply ingrained in the popular imagination,

fueled by numerous movies, novels, and pornography.

While gay male prisoners are often alternately depicted as sissies or punks and ultra-masculine predators, lesbian prisoners are routinely portrayed as sadistic and psychotic.

More subtle presentations of queers in prison have been presented in classics of gay literature such as Oscar Wilde's letter *De Profundis*, written in prison in 1897, and Jean Genet's novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1942), also written in prison.

Tellingly, it was a play that inspired the founding of an important prisoner-aid organization. John Herbert's searing drama of prison life in Canada, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1966), inspired the formation of the New York-based Fortune Society in 1967. Founded by the play's producer on Broadway, David Rothenberg, the Fortune Society works to improve prison conditions and protect the rights of prisoners.

Surprisingly sympathetic portraits of incarcerated lesbians and gay men have recently been featured on television. For example, the British television series *Bad Girls* features daily life within the walls of a women's prison--the fictitious HMP (Her Majesty's Prison) Larkhall, just outside London. Lesbians in the United Kingdom tune in regularly to watch the drama that unfolds among the several lesbian couples in the cast.

The intense prison drama *Oz* ran on HBO from 1997 through 2003. Popular with a large audience, *Oz* also takes place in a fictional prison, the Emerald City Unit of Oswald State Correctional Facility. Along with storylines that graphically reveal the violence and rape that are a part of male prison life, *Oz* also featured a gay inmate gang and poignant depictions of several gay relationships.

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TRAns Prisoner Support website. <http://www.anarcha.org/sallydarity/TransPrisonerSupport.html>

About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.