



THE LAGOS EXPRESS

Black Women in the System

Much of the literature on female offenders, even when presenting a feminist perspective, concentrates on gender but maintains a colour blindness. Indeed having only developed over the last 15 years, there is the argument that feminist criminology needs more time. Female crime is dependent upon economic marginalisation and nowhere is this more apparent than among black offenders, namely women from the West African continent.

Black women are constrained not only by gender but also by the visibility of being black. Along with this goes the sub-cultural images of being a black woman. Some years ago I listened to a lecture given by a woman who had spent some time in prison and had written on the topic. She was asked about the relationship between women of different races in prison. She responded that white women found solidarity among their own groups and that they did not particularly like the Africans but generally thought that black women were able to look after themselves - the stereotypical image of the big strong aggressive 'mama'. Such images form part of the pitfalls of research on black women and white women's involvement in crime.

Can it be assumed that black women are more criminal just because they are 24% of our total female prison population? Most women in our prisons are there for offences of theft and fraud but

West African women are in prison predominantly for drug offences. These women are merely the 'donkeys' for the drug traffickers; they are used as exploited labour in the criminal economy. Their poverty is their entrapment. They borrow from moneylenders, are told that the debt will be wiped off if they carry a parcel, but their financial reward scarcely amounts to £1000. Poor and ignorant, they are told that they will be deported if caught, not knowing that this will only happen after spending years in prison.

Black women suffer two profound

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penalties as a result of criminalisation, the loss of identity and loss of status.

They are stigmatised by their own communities not only as women but also as criminals. Shame and depression are consequences of their isolation. A well known phrase to deny that ones' relation is in prison is 'she is back home on holiday'.

They lose status because they are seen by their community to have abused the state of motherhood. To many it does not matter whether a woman is the chief magistrate or has made it to parliament; without children she ranks lower than her sisters. Not providing for them because she is in prison adds up the same thing.

Nigerian women serving long prison

terms are lonely, isolated and some have limited contacts outside the walls. They spend upwards of 8 years in jail, in a country which they had little opportunity to see, only experiencing the journey of the 'Lagos Express' - Heathrow to Holloway. Moreover, as deportees there are confusing messages as to what they are entitled to, for example as far as clothing allowances are concerned. Assuming they do get an allowance, many of them face a common problem; British standard issue clothing does not fit and the prison clothing department appear not to be able to do anything about it.

A spokesperson for the Nigerian High Commission indicated (Guardian 6 November 1990) that they do not know which prisons their nationals were being held in. But what they have indicated is their willingness to give a further sentence of 5 years to those deported to Nigeria having served a sentence for drugs in this country. The Home Office have now stopped, for the time being, all such deportations. Why punish them twice? Who else gets two sentences for the same offence, whilst also being stigmatised twice for their behaviour?

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NACRO Some Facts and Findings about Black People and the CJS.

Cynthia Winifred is Project Manager, Brixton I.T. Centre.

A Phoney War: Drug Traffickers in British Prisons

While the media manipulate the human drama of British women Karyn Smith and Patricia Cahill, charged with trafficking heroin in Thailand, few are aware of the plight of hundreds of foreign nationals, convicted of trafficking offences, and currently languishing in British jails. In a political climate where the 'war on drugs' is only to be matched

ideologically by the 'war against terrorism', judicial and parliamentary invective against those trafficking in 'misery, wretchedness and death', is rarely challenged.

But only the briefest examination of those who fall victim to the government's anti-drugs policies reveals a scape-goat scenario not dissimilar to that which has emerged in relation to the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six. By increasing repression and by the incarceration of certain vulnerable groups like foreign nationals and Irish emigrants the state is both defining moral boundaries and

waging war against ideological enemies. So without ever addressing the root causes of Irish terrorism or drug abuse in Britain's deprived inner-cities the state is seen to be dealing with immediate social problems and at the same time assuaging public fears and anxieties. Social cohesion is maintained, the 'culprits' imprisoned and the fundamental inequalities which lead to drug trafficking, drug abuse and terrorism remain intact.

The myth of the trafficker needs exploding. The rhetoric of the legislators and the judiciary as they pronounce on



A PHONEY WAR

'parasites who trade in human misery' serves to ease the passage of ever harsher sentences and increasingly repressive laws, while defining a common moral enemy. The reality of the convicted trafficker, once known, can only expose the hypocrisy of current British drugs policy.

The vast majority of those convicted of drugs importation charges come from impoverished developing countries - Nigeria, Ghana, Colombia. They are not 'professional' couriers, and the meagre rewards offered by the suppliers (normally between £400 and £2,000) may mean the difference between starvation and survival for the courier's family. Many report threats against the lives of their families if they refuse to carry the drugs and none are aware of the draconian penalties which will meet them if caught.

Between 35% and 40% of those arrested by Customs and Excise are women, and the tragedy of their situations is compounded further by the plight of their children, many of whom will have been left at home, with perhaps enough food for a week, under the care of an older child or elderly relative. In Nigeria, from where over 50% of the couriers come, the state accepts no responsibility for the children of convicted traffickers. Shame and fear prevents a considerable number of the women from informing family and friends of their predicament, and these women bear the agony of not knowing if and how their children are being cared for. When 'Gina's' husband learned she was in jail he cut off all ties between them - her 'betrayal' of him means she no longer knows where and how her five children are. In the isolation of their British prison cells, these women are completely powerless - imprisoned

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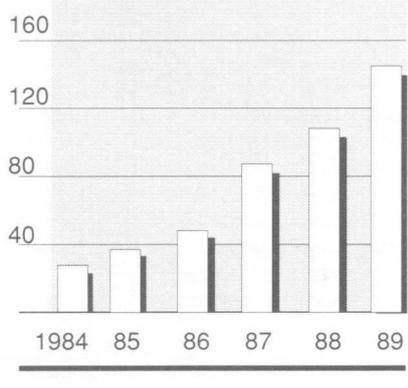
on average for 7 years, and too poor to provide any financial assistance for their families, they have no way of ensuring their children's welfare.

As foreign nationals these women suffer additional privations and discrimination within the British prison system. They are much more reliant on

the prison authorities and charities for basics like clothing - one woman I spoke to had no underclothes and her plastic shoes were broken. Others had no winter clothing at all. As most are serving sentences of over five years they are not eligible for parole, and deportees (all are recommended for deportation upon completion of sentence) are denied home leave even if they have family in this country. Because of the additional anxieties involved in serving a long sentence in a foreign country, the isolation and the poor quality British prison diet, many of the women suffer from serious

Women drug offenders

Women (over 17) serving over 4 years for drug offences at 30 June each year.



Source: Home Office and NAO

medical problems. One seriously ill woman reported a prison doctor in a northern prison as saying '....considering your crime, you shouldn't get anything from the British government. In Malaysia they would have hanged you.'

In some instances women bring their young children and babies with them only to have them taken into care and fostered by the local authority for the period of their imprisonment. This can mean that mother and child are separated for many years and that the children form closer bonds to their foster parents and new culture. When the woman's sentence is served and she is deported, the wrench for her children - relocated by a relative stranger to an impoverished developing country - is traumatic.

In the face of all evidence to the contrary the courts continue to hand down very long sentences on the basis of deterrence. The judiciary, while

acknowledging that the message of harsh sentences fails to deter the undiminishing pool of potential couriers from developing countries, grasp any justification (no matter how fraught with contradictions) for their draconian practices. That the offence is drug-trafficking demands no further questions. The histrionics surrounding the use and importation of drugs has ensured that beyond a plea of guilty and 'providing assistance to Customs and Excise' the courts will accept no mitigation. Being a first time offender, being pregnant or accompanied by children, motivated only by a desperate need to feed one's family, or to pay for a child's life-saving operation - these are factors which only harden the judiciary in their war on this tragic community. In the leading case *Aramagh*, Lord Lane made the court's position clear when he said,

The good character of the courier is of less importance than the good character of the defendant in other cases.... the large scale operator looks for couriers of good character and for people of a sort which is likely to exercise the sympathy of the court if they are detected and arrested. Consequently one will frequently find students and sick and elderly people are used as couriers for two reasons: first of all they are vulnerable to suggestion and vulnerable to the offer of quick profit, and secondly, it is felt that the courts may be moved to misplaced sympathy in their case. There are few if any, occasions when anything other than an immediate custodial sentence is proper for this type of importation.

Clearly, drug couriers are as expendable to the British judiciary as they are to the drugs barons. For the illegal drug profiteers they were cheap investments. For the British state in the ideological war over who is to blame for social ills, they were cheap scapegoats.

The women currently serving out long and lonely drug sentences in prisons like Cookham Wood were simply trying to alleviate their own third world poverty.

Penny Green, Lecturer in Law, University of Southampton. (A research report by Penny Green on Drug Couriers and the British State will be published by the Howard League in early 1991).