

Chris Tchaikovsky, Director of Women in Prison, talks to Mary Eaton

In 1983 Chris Tchaikovsky formed Women In Prison, as an organisation of women campaigning for and on behalf of women prisoners and ex-prisoners. During the years that followed she has worked to bring issues of gross injustice to the attention of policymakers and the public. In September 1998 the London Evening Standard nominated her as one of the capital's top 100 women because of her influence on conditions in Holloway prison. Here she reflects on the achievements of the last decade and her hopes for the future.

When I knew I was going to talk to you about this I turned to the press cuttings of 10 years ago - January 1990. There was the case of Tracey Scott, a young black teenager of 17 with a baby, who'd let her friends, who were her co-defendants, through a check-out at a supermarket. Judge Pickles had sentenced her to prison and famously said that if he didn't give her a custodial sentence women might get pregnant and have babies to avoid a prison sentence. Really the issue remains: women are inappropriately imprisoned. In 1990 there were 1700 in prison and there are now 3,320.

Last week I was at Styal Prison and saw two little boys - rising 18 months - on a mother and baby unit and I felt then, as I'm sure any right

thinking person would, that it just all continues. I spoke to a mother of a younger baby and she was in for shoplifting £700 worth of goods and I thought there isn't one woman on this mother and baby unit who anybody could think should be in prison. By definition if the woman is a danger to the public she is a danger to her children. You're not just a danger to the public indiscriminately. And if she were really dangerous, her children would have been taken from her. So, again, undangerous women in prison, no threat to the public and same old story from 1990.

That's the down-side but there have been achievements. I'd like to focus on three:

- The Holloway Remand Scheme - a pilot recently completed.
- The Holloway Health Advisory Board - a committee that could make a difference.
- Women in Prison Education and Training Connection (WIP/Etc) - a new project funded by the national lottery

Holloway Remand Scheme

The Holloway Remand Scheme was set up in May 1994 as an intensive programme to divert women from crime and custody by developing community based programmes combined with practical support. We work with women who intend to plead guilty and are held on remand prior to sentence, and with their probation officers and legal representatives. With them we develop a plan to address the problems underpinning offending. The case-worker attends court with the woman and the plan is presented to the sentencing magistrate or judge. If the plan is accepted the case-worker accompanies the woman to the community project, remains in contact throughout and follows up afterwards. The results of the impact of the scheme on the first one hundred women will be published in December 1999 by the Cambridge Institute of Criminology as a Cropwood Fellowship publication.

Holloway Health Advisory Board

I'm pleased to be a member of the Holloway Health Advisory Board set up by Dr. Shan Biswas and the governor. There are some really good and strong women on there. Claire Raynor is the Chair, Helena Kennedy, the journalist Angela Neustatter, Moe Wurr, the Chair of the Board of Visitors, and independent criminologist Silvia Casale who is also the British

representative on the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture. So there are some really strong and well placed people on this committee and the idea is to get change going in Holloway in the health care provision. What we've got now, I'm happy to say, is some really strong older women who, whatever happens, have taken up the cudgels and they won't stop until they see that change effected. And health care provision in Holloway has been appalling over the years, as we know, so there's everything to work for and everything to change.

WIP/Etc

And finally there is the Women In Prison Education and Training Connection (WIP/Etc). This is a three year pilot project funded by the National Lottery Charities Board. During this time 250 women prisoners will have their education and training needs assessed and an individual education plan will be developed for each woman. Bursaries will be allocated for distance learning courses for women in the latter stages of their sentences. Placements at local further and higher education establishments will be arranged for newly released women. WIP workers will offer support throughout the process for both prisoners and ex-prisoners. The project has been developed as an outcome of the Holloway Remand Scheme. The fact that women convicted of serious crimes could respond to an opportunity to change confirmed our belief that despite years of neglect and underachievement, women would also want to take up educational and training opportunities if these were presented in a form that was meaningful and appropriate.

Yes, good work is going on in some parts of some prisons, sometimes developed by the prison and sometimes by outside agencies like WIP. However, after working closely with thousands of women prisoners over the past 16 years I have to say that nothing I have subsequently said detracts from my original comments about the essential inappropriateness of prison for the women held there. In the long term no good is achieved by putting these women outside of society, in effect excluding many who have always been excluded. Whatever can be done for these women is better done outside the prison and within the society of which they are and always will be a part.

Further information can be obtained from www.womeninprison.org.uk

"I look forward with real optimism to demonstrating that the Prison Service can make a real contribution to reducing offending through our offending behaviour work, our drug strategy and our drive to improve literacy and numeracy."

Martin Narey, Director General, HM Prison Service