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BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

May 28, 2009 - Issue 326

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**Conditions are Deteriorating,
Allies are Few,
Women of Color Must Survive
on our Own
Women of Color
By Suzanne Brooks
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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It is disappointing that after discussions and correspondence with the Campaign for Gender Equality, Women Count and others, women of color are as marginalized by these groups as by society at large. There is no mention at all of the intersection of racism and sexism which only impacts women of color. This clearly reflects the fact that women of color are subjected to the same racism as men of color and the same sexism as white women, but in addition endure sexism from men of color and racism from white women. As long as these real issues which have contributed to the circumstance that 48% of the foreclosures have been on homes of women of color and the already highest suicide rates by women of color over all other groups is skyrocketing, warrants an answer to the question: If the women advocating a presidential commission are indeed the sisters and allies of women of color, why the near total refusal to address the most important and unique issue which only women of color experience?

Such behavior is a graphic example of institutionalized racism because there is both a determination to inhibit any mention of the intersection of racism and sexism and anger at those who keep pointing it out. Brilliant and educated Michelle Obama is not engaged with women of color at the grassroots, working class levels to discuss our lives and the debilitating discrimination experienced. There are women of color who have been appointed to positions in the Obama administration but, with rare exceptions, they are family, friends and cronies or their wives and daughters. This is hardly a solution for the masses of women of color who are not in those circles, even when well educated and talented.

The determination to keep women of color in this country invisible amidst assertions of sisterhood and expressions of support for international women is appalling. We are

waiting for leadership on this from the Campaign for Gender Equality, Women Count and all the other women's and civil rights organizations who claim to be our allies but whose actions do not even include mention of us or our most critical issue: the intersection of racism and sexism.

Meanwhile, women of color in this country are losing jobs at the highest rates, dying from all curable diseases at the highest rates, committing suicide at the highest rates. There is no fence to sit on in this. Either you are helping save our lives or aiding our extermination. Mine is not the only voice crying out.

Close to Home: Women are Hidden in State Prison Crisis

By Barbara Bloom

"We are facing a correctional crisis in California that is unparalleled in other states. With prisons at or above 200 percent of capacity and federal court intervention imminent, a hidden aspect of corrections is the plight of incarcerated women.

Relative to men, the number of women in state prison may seem small. But, at more than 11,000, female prisoners are a growing and significant population, currently the largest in any state. Additionally, there are almost as many women locked up in county jails. The net result is more than 22,000 women in custody.

A vast majority of women in prison (68 percent) are incarcerated for property or drug crimes rather than crimes against persons... ..Incarcerated women are poor, disproportionately African American and Latina and mothers of children under the age of 18.

USA: Golden girls in prison-New America

Why Are we Keeping Old Ladies Locked Up in Prison?

Nonviolent and medically neglected, elderly prisoners in California routinely die horrible deaths.

By Viji Sundaram

New America Media: February 10, 2009

<http://www.alternet.org/rights/126041/?page=entire>

Last month, prisoner Number W 41465 passed away, her greatest wish unfulfilled: to die a free person. Eighty-eight years old, nearly blind and deaf, her mind enfeebled by Alzheimer's and in the terminal stages of kidney failure, Helen Loheac had hoped to spend her last days at Crossroads, Inc., a transitional home for formerly incarcerated women in Claremont, Calif. For 10 years, Crossroads had been waiting to take her in.

But a few months ago, when Loheac shuffled before the parole board seeking compassionate release, after serving nearly 19 years behind bars on a conspiracy-to-murder conviction, the board told her she would be a risk to public safety if she were freed.

On Jan. 5, Loheac, the oldest female inmate in California's prison system,

died of pneumonia in a hospital near the Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, where she had been incarcerated. She was shackled at her waist and ankles, two guards at her bedside.

Loheac, ...has become the poster person for the widespread practice in California's prisons of inhumanely incarcerating the elderly, some of whose bodies are so withered that even simple daily chores become overwhelming. "It's a terrible injustice, what's going on in those prisons," said Gloria Killian, a former inmate of the California Institution for Women (CIW) in Corona, and now a fierce prisoners' rights advocate... "These people are not a threat to society."

Inmates over age 55 cost taxpayers two to three times the cost of younger prisoners, who average \$35,000 a year. Dee Mariano, 59, said that in the 11 years she spent in California prisons, the state spent about \$70,000 a year on medications and treatment for her chronic lung disease and degenerative bone disease. Now, it costs her only \$17,000, with the state and federal governments sharing the cost.

"They were spending about \$250,000 a year on Helen, if you include the cost of two prison guards who would always accompany her when she went to the hospital for dialysis about three times a week," said Killian, who is about to launch the Helen Loheac Memorial Release Project to help elderly women prisoners live and die in dignity. Prisoners' rights groups say there is a reluctance on the part of the State Board of Prison Terms to release prisoners when they are due for parole, in clear violation of the California Penal Code.

"The board generally finds no more than 4 percent of the prisoners suitable for parole," said Marisa Gonzales, a staff attorney at the San Francisco-based non-profit, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC). The few who get the nod from the board then must be approved for parole by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, they say, wants to please victims' rights groups and be viewed as tough on crime.

"The board gives us a release date, and the governor takes it away," said Jane Benson, 60, a prisoner of 22 years at CIW, who succeeded in persuading the parole board to free her the fourth time she came up for parole. But she said her luck ran out when her papers reached the governor's desk.

Crossroads executive director Sister Terry Dodge believes that denying older women parole after they've done their time "is just political. ...Indeed, federal studies show that the recidivism rate for prisoners over 55 is between 2 and 4 percent, according to Heidi Strupp, an advocacy coordinator with LSPC.

Meanwhile, the graying of the prison population mirrors that of the general population. With tougher sentencing laws, it is projected that by 2030 there will be 33,000 geriatric prisoners in California alone, costing the state at least a \$1 billion a year. There are currently 532 women 55 and over in the state's three prisons - CIF, Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) and Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

Despite a 1976 Supreme Court ruling that established that inmates have a constitutional right to health care, they don't always have ready access to it.

A federal judge in 2006 appointed a receiver to oversee California's prison health care system, after finding that an average of one inmate a week was dying of neglect or malpractice. Dee Mariano, who did time in all three California women's prisons before she was released in 2004, said she used to see her fellow prisoners with cancer and hepatitis treated with Tylenol and Motrin. "I saw one woman with throat cancer, who kept getting denied parole, fall into her own blood and die," Mariano said.

"I saw another woman get down to her knees and beg for morphine," she said. "It was disgusting. When you're in prison, all you want is to be able to die with dignity." ...Some had heart disease; others suffered from osteoporosis, arthritis or diabetes. Many had asthma and other lung diseases. ...As prisons go, CIW is one of the better run prison facilities in California, former and current inmates assert. Thanks to some compassionate policies Davison has introduced since she took over four years ago, inmates over 55 can opt for a lower bunk in their cell, get two blankets and two pillows instead of the customary one, and endure shorter waits on the cafeteria and "pill" lines. Every cell has only two bunks, unlike the CCWF, which has eight bunks to a cell."

...CCWF is the only facility with a medical unit. "I've seen 70- and 80-year-old women with arthritis trying to crawl up to the upper bunks," she said. Killian, who founded Action Committee for Women in Prison shortly after she was exonerated in 2003, said, "Prisoners who come back from surgery are made to go up to the upper bunks." ... Loheac, they say, was one of those who should have come out long ago.

Parole Issues: What to do with an Aging Prison Population?

By Ellie Hidalgo

<http://www.the-tidings.com/2008/022908/parole1.htm>

At age 85, confined to a wheelchair, Helen Loheac...

Struggling to survive with failed kidneys, three times a week she is driven to a clinic for dialysis treatment. But unlike most dialysis patients, or most grandmothers, when Loheac leaves for treatment, her feet have to be shackled in order to protect society.

That's because for the last 17 years Loheac has been serving prison time at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in Corona for conspiracy. Her role? She held some money for her son, which he later used in planning criminal activity. "I didn't know a blessed thing," Loheac said of her son's plans. The courts thought otherwise.

Since being in prison, Loheac's husband has died. She has a daughter living on the East Coast. One friend still comes to visit. "Everyone else is dead," said the octogenarian, who was denied parole...

According to the Older Women's League, by 2030 one-third of U.S. inmates will be 55 and over. In California, the number of geriatric prisoners has increased 350 percent in 10 years. The population of older prisoners continues to grow due to longer sentences, mandatory minimum sentencing

laws and tighter parole policies.

California taxpayers are paying approximately \$70,000 a year to house an elderly inmate. As medical care costs increase by age, the cost of keeping geriatric women in prison will increase the burden to taxpayers even though, as a general rule, people become less dangerous as they age, said the Older Women's League. Californians may be poised to pay the most money to keep its least dangerous inmates locked up...

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Women of Color Now a Majority in New York City

By Marieme Daff WEnews correspondent

<http://www.womensenews.org/index.cfm>

A new study details the issues facing New York City's women of color - now a majority in the epicenter of diversity. While each group has distinct experiences, they share the common experiences of poverty and inadequate education and health care

New York (WOMENSENEWS) - For the amount of money New York City spends to incarcerate one woman for a year - about \$64,000 - it could pay full tuition for four women to complete undergraduate degrees at the City University of New York. ... a new report by The Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University that contends that **women of color - now the majority of women living in New York City - continue to lag behind white women in several areas including health care, educational attainment and employment.**

"Women of Color: Two-Thirds of all Women in New York City Still Invisible in Policy - The 2nd Annual Report on The Status of Women of Color in NYC" ... comprehensive data on the living conditions of black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, Asian and Native American women, who together constitute 64 percent the city's female population, and attribute their social hardships to lack of adequate policies.

...the report ... urges policy makers to give women of color their fair share of budgetary resources, as well as legislative solutions to their growing hardships.

New York University professor of public policy Walter Stafford, co-author of the study along with graduate student Diana Salas, says the research is a significant break from past efforts. "Historically, women have long been ignored - and today, this is still true for women of color," says Stafford. ...although the 1990 census showed that their [women of color] number exceeded white women, "few analysts or planners highlighted the demographic changes and their policy implications."

In the absence of such critical data, the extent of these changes remains unnoticed and New York City's majority women continue to carry the stigmas

of their groups. "There is a serious lack of research on this subject," says Pier Rogers, director of the network. **"Most statistics are made either on the basis of gender or on race - but both factors are rarely brought together."**

Poverty Stands as Major Barrier to Health

The report found that women of color have the highest mortality rates of all women and those diseases are the primary cause of death. **In 2000, black and Puerto Rican women accounted for an alarming 80 percent of HIV-related deaths in New York**, climbing from 60 percent in 1990. ... In 2000, 65 percent of New York women who died from the disease [diabetes] were women of color.

Poverty stands as a major barrier to adequate healthcare. ...**black women have the highest unemployment rate (9.5 percent), followed by Hispanic women (8.6 percent) - both well above white women's (5.3 percent)** and the city average of 6.3 percent. For single mothers, those rates are even higher, reaching 10.9 percent for black women and 12 percent for Latinas.

...when they do have jobs, **women of color often remain confined in low-wage industries, while white women have moved up** to higher-paying managerial and professional occupations. **Those wide disparities are reflected in income.** ...the 2000 median family income for white households in Manhattan was \$119,000; it was \$37,605 for Asian families, \$27,939 for black families and \$25,939 for Hispanic families living in that same borough. For single mothers, the situation is even worse. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 - which limited welfare entitlements to five years over a lifetime - has left many of them stranded. "These women live in terribly depressed conditions," says Stafford ... As New York's poorest, they are more likely to receive a lower standard of care and be denied access to drugs that might prevent or treat diseases.

The authors argue that if policy makers had paid more attention to the particular problems of these groups and allocated more resources to these communities, the deadly consequences of this health crisis could have been largely reduced.

Violence is also a major cause of death ...women of color accounted for more than three-fourths (78 percent) of all female homicide victims, with an especially high rate for **black women, who made up almost 50 percent of the total, although they represented only one-quarter of the female population** aged 10 years and older.

Black and Hispanic women made up 85 percent of all women arrested in 2001. Although controlled substances, assault and larceny remain the leading causes of arrest, prostitution has significantly increased. Between 1995 and 2001, the proportion of women aged 16 to 24 incarcerated for prostitution jumped from 25 to 42 percent.

In 2001, the incarceration rate for black women (730.7 per every 100,000) was not only the highest for all women in the city, but

even exceeded that of white men (488.3 per 100,000.) Those numbers were substantially lower for Latinas (341.8 per 100,000) and drastically different for white women (114.9 per 100,000.) Black men had an incarceration rate of 5,468.3 for the same year and Hispanic men had about half of that proportion (2551 per every 100,000.)

Low levels of educational attainment appear as a major issue for all women of color. ...in 2000, almost half of the female Hispanic population over 25 in New York City had not completed high school. Comparable high school graduation rates for black women are 29 percent and for Native Americans , 43 percent. **Even Asian women**, represented well in higher education - 35 percent of the group completed at least four years of college - **had an equal proportion (35 percent) of high school dropouts in 2000.**

Access to higher education is still mainly dominated by white women who make up 65 percent of all the women with professional or graduate degrees in the city, while they are only 36 percent the city's female population. Comparatively, only 17 percent of black women, 14 percent of Native American women and 8 percent of Hispanic women had completed four or more years of college.

Marieme Daff is a free-lance writer based in New York.

[PDF] **Women of Color** in U.S. Society **women's** problems to **discrimination in education**, employment, housing, and health care. **Educational institutions**, though a primary...

www.temple.edu/tempess/chapters/657_ch1.pdf

From "**Difference and Domination**" by Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill "The experiences of women of color have challenged feminist scholarship to rethink the relationship between race and gender ..." and to acknowledge the differences among women which arise from power and privilege not experienced by women of color...

"Today women of color on average receive the lowest wages, hold the worst jobs, and are more likely to be unemployed ... They are more likely to live in poverty ...than their white counterparts.

Women of color are subordinated in this way because of patterns of hierarchy, domination and oppression based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation built into the structure of our society. ... At the same time these structures create disadvantages for women of color, "they provide unacknowledged benefits for those who are at the top of these hierarchies - Whites, members of the upper classes and males." The privileges of those at the top are derived from the exploitation of those at the bottom. "For women of color, this has meant...providing services to more privileged people" while having less resources and having to depend on the "'social largesse' of more privileged people" while their sexuality is "more likely to be used and abused by more privileged people."

Readers are encouraged to read this all of this work as the authors present

important evidence of the intersection of racism and sexism and offer suggestions for a "reformulation of the feminist agenda by asking a basic sociological question of each reform strategy. Who benefits?"

For all the claimed advances for women, authors and researchers like Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill point out, that there has also been a backlash against social progress for women which has primarily targeted women of color, excluding them from the newly claimed benefits which not available to indigent and other women of color across the social spectrum. The evidence is indisputable and overwhelming; the intersection of racism and sexism exists and is wiping women of color out of existence. It is apparently pointless to appeal to human decency on the part of most of the rest of society. The beneficiaries of our oppression lack the will to do the right thing, the just thing, the equitable thing. It remains for women of color to save ourselves through research, study, advocacy, activism - implemented daily. Some action can and must be undertaken every single day or we will not survive. We will continue to beat this drum until we achieve equitable, substantive justice.


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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog


BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator Suzanne Brooks is the founder and CEO of International Association for [Women of Color Day](#) and CEO of Justice 4 All Includes Women of Color. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Brooks.

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