Beyond Attica: The Untold Story of Women's Resistance Behind Bars

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"When I was 15, my friends started going to jail," says Victoria Law, a native New Yorker. "Chinatown's gangs were recruiting in the high schools in Queens and, faced with the choice of stultifying days learning nothing in overcrowded classrooms or easy money, many of my friends had dropped out to join a gang."

"One by one," Law recalls, "they landed in Rikers Island, an entire island in New York City devoted to pretrial detainment for those who can not afford bail."

Law shares this and other recollections in her new book, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (PM Press). At 16, she herself decided to join a gang, but was arrested for the armed robbery that she committed for her initiation into the gang. "Because it was my first arrest -- and probably because 16-year-old Chinese girls who get straight As in school did not seem particularly menacing -- I was eventually let off with probation," she writes.

Before her release from jail, Law was held in the "Tombs" awaiting arraignment. While the adult women she met there had all been arrested for prostitution, she also met three teenagers arrested for unarmed assault. "Two of the girls were black lesbian lovers. In a scenario that would be repeated 13 years later in the case of the New Jersey Four, they had been out with friends when they encountered a cab driver who had tried to grab one of them. Her friends intervened, the cab driver called the police and the girls were arrested for assault." Law notes that "both of my cellmates were subsequently sent to Rikers Island."

These early experiences, coupled with her later discovery of radical politics, pushed Law "to think about who goes to prison and why." She got involved in several projects to support prisoners, which included helping to start Books Through Bars in New York City, sending free books to prisoners. In college, she "began researching current prisoner organizing and resistance," and upon discovering almost zero documentation of resistance from women prisoners, she began her own documentation and directly contacted women prisoners who were resisting. A college paper became a widely distributed pamphlet, and at the request of several women prisoners she'd corresponded with, Law helped to publish their writings in a zine called *Tenacious: Art and Writings from Women in Prison*. Law writes that the zine and pamphlet "heightened awareness not only about incarcerated women's issues, but also women's actions to challenge and change the injustices they faced on a daily basis."

"This book is the result of seven and a half years of reading, writing, listening, and

supporting women in prison," Law says about *Resistance Behind Bars,* noting that each chapter in her book "focuses on an issue that women themselves have identified as important." The chapters include topics as diverse as health care, the relationship between mothers and daughters, sexual abuse, education, and resistance among women in immigration detention. *Resistance Behind Bars* paints a picture of women prisoners resisting a deeply flawed prison system, which Law hopes will help to empower both the women held in cages and those on the outside working to support them.

Who Goes To Prison?

Since 1970, the U.S. prison population has skyrocketed, from 300,000 to over 2.3 million. According to the U.S. Justice Department, this staggering increase has not resulted from a rise in crime. In fact, since 1993, the prison population has increased by over one million, but during this same period, both property offenses and serious violent crime have been steadily declining. The *New York Times* recently cited a 2008 report by the International Center for Prison Studies at King's College London documenting that the U.S. has more prisoners than any other country. Furthermore, with 751 out of 100,000 people, and one out of every 100 adults in prison or jail, the U.S. also has the highest incarceration rate in the world. With only five percent of the world's population, the U.S. has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners.

While women comprise only nine percent of the U.S. prison population, their numbers have been increasing at a faster rate than men. As Law documents, "between 1990 and 2000, the number of women in prison rose 108 percent, from 44,065 to 93,234. (The male prison population grew 77 percent during that same time period.) By the end of 2006, 112,498 women were behind bars."

Like with male incarceration rates, women behind bars are disproportionately low-income and people of color. Law writes that "only 40 percent of all incarcerated women had been employed full-time before incarceration. Of those, most had held low-paying jobs: a study of women under supervision (prison, jail, parole or probation) found that two-thirds had never held a job that paid more than $6.50 per hour. Approximately 37 percent earned less than $600 per month."

A 2007 Bureau of Justice study documented that 358 of every 100,000 Black women, 152 of every 100,000 Latinas, and 94 of every 100,000 white women are incarcerated. Explaining this racial discrepancy, Law argues that inner-city Black and Latino neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement. She cites a 2005 U.S. Department of Justice study which concluded that Blacks and Latinos are "three times as likely as whites to be searched, arrested, threatened or subdued with force when stopped by the police."

The so-called "War on Drugs" has played a key role in the growth of the U.S. prison population. Law writes about the impact of New York State's Rockefeller Drug Laws passed in 1973, "which required a sentence of 15 years to life for anyone convicted of selling two ounces or possessing four ounces of a narcotic, regardless of circumstances or prior history. That year, only 400 women were imprisoned in New York State. As of January 1, 2001, there were 3,133. Over 50 percent had been convicted of a drug offense and 20 percent were convicted solely of possession.

Other states passed similar laws, causing the number of women imprisoned nationwide for drug offenses to rise 888 percent from 1986 to 1996."

Distinguishing women prisoners from their male counterparts, Law cites a Bureau of Justice study which "found that women were three times more likely than men to have been physically or sexually abused prior to incarceration."

Women Prisoners Don't Resist?

The central thesis of *Resistance Behind Bars* is truly profound. In clear, non-academic language, Law argues that recent scholarship documenting and radically criticizing the increased incarceration rates and mistreatment of women prisoners "largely ignores what the women themselves do to change or protest these circumstances, thus reinforcing the belief that incarcerated women do not organize." Alongside academia, Law also harshly criticizes radical prison activists, arguing that "just as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s downplayed the role of women in favor of highlighting male spokesmen and leaders, the prisoners' rights movement has focused and continues to focus on men to speak for the masses."

Law gives honorable mention to two books that documented women's resistance at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York State: Juanita Diaz-Cotto's *Gender, Ethnicity, and the State* (1996) and the collectively written *Breaking the Walls of Silence: AIDS and Women in a New York State Maximum Security Prison* (1998). Since these two books "no other book-length work has focused on incarcerated women's activism and resistance," writes Law. As a result, Law argues that women prisoners "lack a commonly known history of resistance. While male prisoners can draw on the examples of George Jackson, the Attica uprising and other well-publicized cases of prisoner activism, incarcerated women remain unaware of precedents relevant to them."

Epitomizing the scholarship that Law criticizes, author Virginia High Brislin wrote that "women inmates themselves have called very little attention to their situations," and "are hardly ever involved in violent encounters with officials (i.e. riots), nor do they initiate litigation as often as do males in prison."

To challenge Brislin's assertion, Law gives numerous examples of women rioting and initiating litigation, including the "August Rebellion" in 1974 at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York State. On July 2, 1974, prisoner Carol Crooks won a lawsuit against prison authorities, with the court "issuing a preliminary injunction, prohibiting the prison from placing women in segregation without 24-hour notice and a hearing of these charges," writes Law. In response, "five male guards beat Crooks and placed her in segregation. Her fellow prisoners protested by holding seven staff members hostage for two and a half hours. However, 'the August Rebellion' is virtually unknown today despite that fact that male state troopers and (male) guards from men's prisons were called to suppress the uprising, resulting in 25 women being injured and 24 women being transferred to Matteawan Complex for the Criminally Insane without the required commitment hearings."

Law also criticizes author Karlene Faith, who acknowledges that women resist, but who wrote that in the 1970s, women prisoners "were not as politicized as the men

[prisoners], and they did not engage in the kinds of protest actions that aroused media attention." To challenge Faith's argument, Law cites several rebellions that received significant media attention, including one that the *New York Times* wrote two stories about. As Law recounts, "in 1975, women at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women held a sit-down demonstration to demand better medical care, improved counseling services, and the closing of the prison laundry. When prison guards attempted to end the protest by herding the women into the gymnasium and beating them, the women fought back, using volleyball net poles, chunks of concrete and hoe handles to drive the guards out of the prison. Over 100 guards from other prisons were summoned to quell the rebellion."

In light of the many such stories documented in *Resistance Behind Bars*, Law argues that "instead of claiming that women in prison did not engage in riots and protest actions that captured media attention, scholars and researchers should examine why these acts of organizing fail to attract the same critical and scholarly attention as that given to similar male actions."

Resisting With Media-Activism

In the chapter "Grievances, Lawsuits, and the Power of the Media," Law observes that "gaining media attention often gains quicker results than filing lawsuits." Among the many organizing victories that were significantly aided by media attention, in 1999, Nightline focused on conditions at California's Valley State Prison for Women. Law explains that "after prisoner after prisoner told Nightline anchor Ted Koppel about being given a pelvic exam as 'part of the treatment' for any ailment, including stomach problems or diabetes, Koppel asked the prison's chief medical officer Dr. Anthony DiDomenico, for an explanation."

DiDomenico was apparently so confident that he would not be held accountable for his misconduct, that he answered Koppel by saying "I've heard inmates tell me they would deliberately like to be examined. It's the only male contact they get." After this interview was aired, DiDomenico was reassigned to a desk job, and as of 2001 he had been criminally indicted, along with a second doctor.

Demonstrating the power of this media coverage, Law notes that the "prisoner advocacy organization Legal Services for Prisoners with Children had been reporting the prisoners' complaints about medical staff's sexual misconduct to the CDC for four years with no result."

Along with agitating for coverage in the mainstream media, women prisoners have also created their own media projects. The chapter titled "Breaking The Silence: Incarcerated Women's Media" documents many important projects. Law explains that these projects are necessary because women prisoners' "voices and stories still remain unheard by both mainstream and activist-oriented media. Articles about both prison conditions and prisoners often portray the male prisoner experience, ignoring the different issues facing women in prison." Therefore, "women's acts of writing -- and publishing -- often serve a dual purpose: they challenge existing stereotypes and distortions of prisoners and prison life, framing and correcting prevailing (mis) perceptions. They also boost women's sense of self-worth and agency in a system designed to not only isolate and alienate its prisoners but also erase all traces of

individuality."

Some activist-oriented publications have been receptive and have published prisoners' writings. From 1999 until its final issue in 2002, the radical feminist magazine *Sojourner: A Women's Forum* featured a section on women prisoner issues which included writings from the prisoners themselves. Law writes that this section, entitled "Inside/Outside" covered many topics, including "working conditions in women's facilities, the dehumanizing treatment of children visiting their mothers, and prisoner suicides.

Law spotlights many different projects. From 2002 to 2006, *Perceptions* was a monthly newspaper published by and for the women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey. Because of censorship from prison warden Charlotte Blackwell, *Perceptions* was forced to limit its criticism of the prison, but the women published what they could. For example, in one issue, women wrote about how they would run the prison differently if they were in charge. Law notes that "their fantasies revealed the absence of programming for older women and those in the maximum custody unit, emergency counseling and therapeutic interventions and opportunities for mother-child interactions. It also drew attention to the facility's overcrowding and increased potentials for violence and conflict among prisoners."

Tenacious, the zine published by Law, was initiated by women prisoners who sought the help of friends outside the prison to actually publish and distribute it. "Free from the need to seek administrative approval, incarcerated women wrote about the difficulties of parenting from prison, dangerously inadequate health care, sexual assault by prison staff and the scarcity of educational and vocational opportunities, especially in comparison to their male counterparts. Although circulation remained small, the women's stories provoked public response," writes Law.

"Prison officials do whatever they can to strip prisoners of their dignity and self-worth," stated Barrilee Bannister, one of the founders of Tenacious. "Writing is my way to escape the confines of prison and the debilitating ailments of prison life. It's me putting on boxing gloves and stepping into the rink of freedom of speech and opinion."

Arguing For Prison Abolition

When Victoria Law was first introduced to radical politics, shortly after her own stint behind bars, she "discovered groups and literature espousing prison abolition."

"These analyses -- coupled with what I had seen firsthand -- made sense, steering me to work towards the dismantling, rather than the reform, of the prison system." Law's subsequent research has only served to affirm her belief in the need for abolition. She states clearly that "this book should not be mistaken for a call for more humane or 'gender responsive' prisons."

Some readers may view Law's prison abolitionist politics as being abstract or overly theoretical. However, to support her abolitionist viewpoint, she makes the practical

argument that prisons simply don't work to reduce crime or increase public safety. She writes that "incarceration has not decreased crime; instead, 'tough on crime' policies have led to the criminalization … of more activities, leading to higher rates of arrest, prosecution and incarceration while shifting money and resources away from other public entities, such as education, housing, health care, drug treatment, and other societal supports. The growing popularity of abolitionist thought can be seen in the expansion of organizations such as Critical Resistance, an organization fighting to end the need for a prison-industrial complex, and the formation of groups working to address issues of crime and victimization without relying on the police or prisons."

Towards the end of *Resistance Behind Bars*, Law quotes Angela Y. Davis, who is a leading activist intellectual of the prison abolitionist movement. In her recent book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis writes that "a major challenge of this movement is to do the work that will create more human, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system. How, then, do we accomplish this balancing act of passionately attending to the needs of prisoners -- calling for less violent conditions, an end to sexual assault, improved physical and mental health care, greater access to drug programs, better educational work opportunities, unionization of prison labor, more connections with families and communities, shorter or alternative sentencing -- and at the same time call for alternatives to sentencing altogether, no more prison construction, and abolitionist strategies that question the place of the prison in our future?"

As if answering Davis' question, Law concludes that while striving for prison abolition "we need to also reach in, make contact with those who have been isolated by prison walls and societal indifference and listen to those who are speaking out, like many of the women who have shared their stories within this book. Because abolishing prisons will not happen tomorrow, next week or even next year, we need to break through these barriers, communicate, work with and support women who are in resistance today."