

## **Praise for *Resistance Behind Bars***

“*Resistance* offers us a much-needed, much broader and nuanced definition of resistance—a woman’s definition based on the real material conditions of women. I hope that when one reads about the experiences of women prisoners’ organizing and resistance, the reader, both woman and man, will begin to glimpse the possibilities and necessity of such forms as we continue to struggle for a more just and equal world free from all forms of oppression. If women worldwide are unable to liberate themselves, human liberation will not be possible.”

— Marilyn Buck, anti-imperialist political prisoner, activist, poet and artist

“Finally! A passionately and extensively researched book that recognizes the myriad ways in which women resist in prison, and the many particular obstacles that, at many points, hinder them from rebelling. Even after my own years inside, I learned from this book. Law breaks the AIDS barrier, recognizing and recording prisoner organizing on HIV as resistance against stigma and medical malpractice in the prison system.”

— Laura Whitehorn, former political prisoner

“Constituting 6% of the U.S. prison and jail population, but over 130,000 in number, and growing, women are an all but invisible segment of the prison population. The issues unique to women, and their behind-bars struggle for justice and equality, are even more ignored by mainstream media than that of their male counterparts. *Resistance Behind Bars* is a long-needed and much awaited look at the struggles, protest and resistance waged by women prisoners. Excellently researched and well documented, this incisive book brings to light aspects of imprisonment unique to women, how the gender-common issues of captivity impact women and the response, protest and resistance to captivity by women. Highly recommended for anyone interested in the modern American gulag.”

— Paul Wright, former prisoner, founder/editor of *Prison Legal News*, and coeditor of *The Ceiling of America: An Inside Look at the US Prison Industry*, *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America’s Poor* and *Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarceration*

“Repression tries not only to crush but to quiet. But as Vikki Law shows in this multifaceted book, all that is unseen is not absent. Guided by years of anti-prison organizing and a palpable feminist practice, Law documents the many ways women challenge the twin forces of prison and patriarchy, each trying to render women invisible. In the face of attempts at erasure, women prisoners resist to survive and survive to resist. We would do well to pay attention.”

— Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity*

“Written in regular English, rather than academese, yet full of fire, this is an impressive work of research and reportage. I hope you’re able to get this to a greater audience, and that it sparks awareness and resistance. Well done!”

— Mumia Abu-Jamal, death row political prisoner and author of *Live From Death Row* and *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party*

“By documenting the myriad rebellions of the most despised and abused, Law has fulfilled a task long deferred by prison activists. A meditation on the ‘weapons of the weak’ that challenges dominant conceptions of what constitutes resistance and liberation, *Resistance Behind Bars* deserves a wide readership not only among those disturbed by mass incarceration, but by all students of the human spirit in the face of adversity.”

— Daniel Burton-Rose, author, *Guerrillas in Our Midst: The George Jackson Brigade and the Anti-capitalist Underground of the 1970s*, co-editor, *The Celling of America: An Inside Look at the U.S. Prison Industry*

“Victoria Law’s eight years of research and writing, inspired by her unflinching commitment to listen to and support women prisoners, have resulted in an illuminating effort to document the dynamic resistance of incarcerated women in the United States. Her work focuses not only on renowned political prisoners, but on the lives of ordinary women of all colors and ages, many being mothers separated from their children. Law makes clear that besides their myriad means of struggle and mutual assistance, they have one thing in common: they are poor and working-class, without the resources needed to achieve what passes for justice in the United States. A prison abolitionist herself, the author is well aware that in that long fight, women prisoners deserve support and honor in their daily efforts.”

— Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, historian, feminist, indigenous rights activist, author, most recently of *Roots of Resistance: History of Land Tenure in New Mexico*

“There are too few books written about womyn in prison. Many focus on these womyn as victims only. It’s a fact that a huge percentage have been abused as children or by husbands and certainly by the so-called justice system that overpunishes and neglects their every basic human need. But this book is different. Its focus is on the herstorical resistance of womyn prisoners! Not just resistance to their local jailers but often resistance to the prison-industrial complex and the ‘masters of unreason’ who own and profit from it. This is necessary information for all of us to have in our consciousness, especially our abolitionist consciousness.”

— Bo (r.d.brown), former political prisoner, founding mother of Out of Control: Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners and volunteer with the Prison Activist Resource Center

# **RESISTANCE BEHIND BARS**

**THE STRUGGLES OF  
INCARCERATED WOMEN**

**BY VICTORIA LAW**



Resistance Behind Bars:  
The Struggles of Incarcerated Women  
By Victoria Law

ISBN: 978-1-60486-018-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008909321

Copyright © 2009 Victoria Law

This edition copyright © 2009 PM Press

All Rights Reserved

PM Press

PO Box 23912

Oakland, CA 94623

[www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org)

Illustrations by Rachel Galindo

Layout and design by Jason Justice:



[www.justicedesign.com](http://www.justicedesign.com)

Printed in the USA on recycled paper.

Earlier portions of this work have been published in *Turning the Tide*, *Women in Action* and on the website *Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance*.

Earlier versions of “Unlikely Communities,” “Barriers to Basic Care,” and “Women’s Work” were originally published in *Clamor* magazine; earlier versions of “Breaking the Silence” were published in *Punk Planet* and *off our backs*.

# Table of Contents



Introduction	i
Overview	1
Unlikely Communities	19
Barriers to Basic Care	29
Mothers and Children	43
Sexual Abuse	59
Education	77
Women's Work	97
Grievances, Lawsuits and the Power of the Media	111
Breaking the Silence	127
Resistance Among Women in Immigrant Detention	143
Some Historical Background	159
Glossary	171
Resources	175
Recommended Reading	189
Endnotes	201
Index	241
Acknowledgments	251



# BREAKING THE SILENCE

## Incarcerated Women's Media



**D**uring her ten and a half years behind bars, Yriada L. Guanipa wrote to every mainstream newspaper and media source in the nation to draw attention to the plight of incarcerated women. The only response she ever received was a form letter from Donald E. Graham, the board chair of the *Washington Post*: “Thank you for your recent submission. Unfortunately, this is not the sort of work that *The Washington Post* is in a position to publish. I appreciate your interest and wish you the best in finding another outlet for your work.” From other media, including National Public Radio, Guanipa received nothing.<sup>500</sup>

Guanipa's experience is not uncommon. Although the number of women behind bars nearly doubled from 68,468 to 104,848 between 1995 and 2004, their voices and stories still remain unheard by both mainstream and activist-oriented media.<sup>501</sup> Articles about both prison conditions and prisoners often portray the male prison experience, ignoring the different issues facing women in prison. While an occasional article spotlights the sexual abuse in female facilities, less-headline-grabbing concerns have largely remained unnoticed. “We do not hear from the media how many prisoners are killed every day inside our prisons, how many die for lack of proper or timely medical care, how many prisoners are raped inside our prison's walls, how many children are born inside prison walls, how many female prisoners are forced into abortion after becoming pregnant from a staff member, how

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

many of us do not see our children for years, how many of us are just left behind these prison walls for years,” stated Guanipa.<sup>502</sup>

Many activist-oriented publications mirror the mainstream media’s masculinization of prisons and prisoners, contributing to the invisibility of women behind bars. Because they receive much less attention than their male counterparts, women in prison receive much less support from both individual activists and prisoner rights groups.

However, a growing segment of incarcerated women are recognizing the need to make their voices heard. Instead of waiting passively for others to take note of and report their concerns, women in prison are telling their own stories: some have utilized pre-existing alternative media, whether radical feminist journals or prison publications, while others have created their own outlets. 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.

### ***Utilizing Radical Feminist Media***

While many independent magazines and newsletters receive and sometimes publish contributions from prisoners, the majority of the printed letters, essays, articles and columns are from men in prison. While the number of incarcerated men is still more than ten times their female counterparts, the lack of stories by and about women in prison reinforces the assumption that the prison experience is universally male. By focusing solely on the stories and experiences of men in prison, independent magazines and newsletters, such as *Maximum Rocknroll* and *Green Anarchy*, perpetuate the silencing of women’s voices and concerns.

Radical feminist media, on the other hand, have been more receptive to the specific voices and concerns of women in prison.

## Breaking the Silence

---

From July 1999 until its closing in late 2002, every issue of the feminist magazine *Sojourner: A Women's Forum* devoted at least one page not only to the unique issues facing women in prison, but also to the voices of the women themselves. The section, entitled Inside/Outside, sought to provide prisoners with “a forum within our pages so that their ideas and personal and collective battles could be better heard and included within national women’s organizing.”<sup>503</sup>

Most women entering the prison system do so with low self-esteem, often after years of repeatedly being made to feel as if their words, thoughts and actions are meaningless. For these women, having their words and thoughts taken seriously is, in and of itself, a major achievement: “Seeing my name, picture and words in the paper made me feel proud and pleased with my accomplishment. It renewed my faith in myself and my [writing] gift,” wrote a woman in Pennsylvania’s Muncy State Prison. “My family was so proud, as well as my partner.”<sup>504</sup>

Furthermore, providing a regular forum for incarcerated women’s writings undermined the alienation that prisons seek to foster. Prisons seek to efface all traces of a prisoner’s individuality and self-determination. Thus, for women who are told when to get up, when to eat, what to eat, when to move and when to stay still, the act of expressing one’s self — and the idea that their expression is heard by others — becomes not only a means of drawing attention to prison conditions but also an act of subversion against both their own lack of agency and the isolating effects of prison.

Inside/Outside provided an opportunity not only for women to express themselves but also to spotlight abuses in the prison system that remained unnoticed by both other media and many groups working around criminal justice issues. During its four years of existence, Inside/Outside covered working conditions in women’s facilities, the dehumanizing treatment of children visiting their mothers, and prisoner suicides. Women used the column to alert outside feminists to the injustices they faced: Jamie Bowen wrote an article exposing the poorly trained staff, bad food, inadequate medical care and Kafka-esque bureaucracy

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

for filing a grievance to complain at the privately run prison where she was held.<sup>505</sup> Sydney Heizer Villa, a woman incarcerated in Texas where any books referencing homosexuality are considered contraband, wrote an article about the rampant homophobia of both staff members and fellow prisoners.<sup>506</sup> Dawnya Ferdinandson wrote about the suicide of her fellow prisoner Carol Bell at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, sparking an expose on the facility's poor mental health care.<sup>507</sup>

In addition, *Sojourner* offered free subscriptions to incarcerated women. Interest was startlingly high: within two years, the number of incarcerated female subscribers grew from twenty to over three hundred and, by the time *Sojourner* closed in late 2002, over 1,000 incarcerated women subscribed to the journal. Letters from prisoners revealed how much *Sojourner* had helped break through the isolation and alienation fostered by incarceration: "I wish to thank you for my subscription to *Sojourner*," wrote a woman at Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women. "It keeps me up to date on current issues that affect women daily."<sup>508</sup> Furthermore, the Inside/Outside section helped prisoners realize that the issues they faced were systemic rather than individual: "I thought no one else had the problems we face here with guards, medical, and basic human treat[ment]," stated "Elsie," a prisoner at Dwight Correctional Center in Illinois.<sup>509</sup>

*Sojourner* not only connected women in prison with each other, but also helped break the additional isolation that many lesbian and queer women feel in prison. In a system that fosters homophobia among both prisoners and staff, the recognition of lesbian, bisexual and transgender concerns is reassuring. "This prison is the only women's prison in Kentucky and the guards are very homophobic. If I sit too close to another woman it is a sexual write-up. The guards say that if they allow us to touch each other then they are promoting homosexuality," wrote another woman in the Kentucky Correctional Institute for Women. "You are my contact with reality and I thank you."<sup>510</sup>

*Sojourner* closed in 2002, leaving incarcerated women nationwide without a regular (and widely read) public forum for their voices.

## Breaking the Silence

---

*Sojourner* was not the only feminist magazine to attempt to break the silence around women in prison. In the 1970s, feminist journal *off our backs* regularly printed letters from Carol Crooks and other incarcerated women about their struggles. In February 2001, it published an issue specifically to women in prison. It solicited the stories of incarcerated women and devoted over three pages to their letters, some of which touched on prison overcrowding, the lack of counseling for abuse survivors, the lack of educational and vocational training and the isolation that prison imposes.

Although *off our backs* did not begin offering a regular column or even actively soliciting submissions from incarcerated women, it remained open to their voices.

In 2003, it published an article on the importance of vocational programs to women behind bars. Its author, Rhonda Leland, was a California prisoner who had graduated from one of these programs and who wanted to rally public opposition to the state's proposal to eliminate them.<sup>511</sup>

The next year, *off our backs* published a letter by Leland on behalf of her fellow prisoner Debra Holmes. After serving 20 years in prison, Holmes was scheduled to appear before the parole board. "The parole board will expect her to parole to the county of commitment, have a job offer ahead of time, and a place to reside. The board will expect Debra to walk out of prison after twenty years and have a pre-fabricated life fit to their design." Leland urged *off our backs* readers to write letters to the California Board of Prison Terms, halfway houses, social service agencies and prospective employers on Holmes' behalf. "She is a participant in women's support groups and long-term organizations. She is active in helping others and is a candidate for parole," Leland wrote. "I am requesting that each person who reads this article donate at least one hour and a few stamps to write letters of support. Let Debra know she is not alone or forgotten, please!"<sup>512</sup> By writing a letter to a nationally distributed journal, Leland not only raised awareness and

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

garnered outside support for her friend but also broke through the sense of isolation shared by many behind bars.

### *Working with Prison Rights Groups*

Women in prison have also reached out to prisoner rights groups to make their voices heard. Since 1996, women in California have regularly submitted short articles, art and poetry to *The Fire Inside*, the quarterly newsletter of advocacy group California Coalition for Women Prisoners. According to its mission statement, *The Fire Inside* defines itself as a space where both women and their supporters “communicate with each other and the broader public about the issues and experiences women prisoners face.”<sup>513</sup>

Like the contributors of *Sojourner’s* Inside/Outside column, the women writing for *The Fire Inside* often felt validated by seeing their words in print: until her death, prisoner organizer and domestic violence survivor Charisse Shumate was a regular contributor to the newsletter, often writing about her struggles to obtain adequate medical care not only for herself but for all of the women in the Central California Women’s Facility. In addition to drawing public attention to the prison’s negligent and sometimes life-threatening medical care, Shumate’s writings “helped her alter her own perception of herself.”<sup>514</sup> Whereas the act of being published and having their voices heard is important for all women in prison, it is particularly so for those whose self-esteem has been chipped away by years of domestic violence and other forms of regular abuse. The act of writing and being published becomes even more significant for women who have repeatedly been belittled, battered and silenced.

In 2002, the Northwest prisoner support group Break the Chains, which had concentrated on male political prisoners, began to recognize its inadvertent exclusion of incarcerated women. The group announced that each issue of its quarterly newsletter would devote four pages to writings from women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon’s only women’s prison. Until its demise in 2005, the group devoted a

## Breaking the Silence

---

section of every newsletter to incarcerated women, raising their visibility among the Northwest prisoner support movement which, until that point, had primarily focused on men. “Response to the women’s writings is really good from a distinct class of activists: Folks who were Black Bloc style anarchists at one point but are now more concerned with identity politics, race, gender and class,” stated one Break the Chains organizer.<sup>515</sup> Including the voices and stories of incarcerated women raised awareness of these issues among readers who, in the past, had simply not considered them.

Like the women who had written for *Sojourner’s* Inside/Outside column, Coffee Creek’s prisoners wrote not only about their personal difficulties but also exposed invasive prison policies. Laura Maca, for instance, wrote a short article exposing the prison’s new (yet unannounced) policy which allowed not only prison employees, but also state employees, law enforcement officials and other government agencies to track prisoners, family members and friends through photos taken during prison visits.

### ***Creating their Own Media***

Recognizing that forums for incarcerated women’s voices are still too few, women have also sought to create their own media. At the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women (EMCFW) in New Jersey, 24 prisoners put out *Perceptions*, a monthly newspaper for the women in that facility. The project began when Rebecca Sanford, a professor teaching weekly business-writing classes at the facility, learned that the prison’s previous newspaper, *The Insider*, was defunct. She and another professor, Dr. Eleanor Novek, gained permission to start a newspaper from the facility’s education department. However, at their first meeting, Charlotte Blackwell, the prison’s warden, warned both women that *Perceptions* would not be allowed to become “a forum for a mass drawing together on issues.” She cautioned that certain topics, such as prison medical care, were to be avoided.<sup>516</sup>

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

Although Sanford and Novek had initiated the project, the women at EMCFW took ownership of it. They met nearly everyday to work on editing, typing, design and layout. The women also decided which subjects and stories were newsworthy. The paper's first issue was printed in February 2002.<sup>517</sup>

In the first issue, only one piece offered any criticism of any of the prison's conditions. One obvious drawback of running a newsletter within the facility and with the administration's approval was the need to censor any criticism of prison policy or conditions: the final decision on content was made by Charlotte Blackwell.<sup>518</sup> The women involved recognized this from the beginning: Dr. Novek recounted an early meeting with the journalism students. One student proposed a story about the warden's disrespect of the prisoner representatives assigned to bring her the other women's concerns. The other students immediately vetoed the idea, voicing concern that identifying critical issues would jeopardize the newspaper's existence.<sup>519</sup>

Despite these concerns, not all approved content painted the facility in a positive light. In an editorial, *Perceptions* writers broached the question of what they would and would not do if they (the prisoners themselves) were in charge of running a women's prison. 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. In a subsequent issue, two prisoners interviewed the facility's education supervisor about the prison's age limit for college classes, both drawing attention to the exclusion of prisoners over the age of 24 from higher education programs and pressuring the supervisor to keep his promise to change this condition.<sup>520</sup>

As promised, writing directly critical of the prison has been censored: Marianne Brown submitted an essay criticizing the prison's waste of food. "The administration would not let me print it, but it's the truth."

## Breaking the Silence

---

According to Brown, Blackwell visited her personally and told her, “*Perceptions* is not the place to air out our dirty laundry. It is for the women to share positive things with one another.”<sup>521</sup>

In addition, the “privilege” of having a forum for their voices is also tenuous. In 2006, the administration stopped both the journalism classes and *Perceptions*.<sup>522</sup>

However, having such an outlet for expression — even one with the possibility of administrative censorship — is still a rarity for most women in prison. When Yraida L. Guanipa attempted to establish a prisoner newsletter through the NAACP chapter at her federal prison, the administration refused to approve the project. “The camp administrator did not give us a reason,” she wrote. “They do not need to. The answer was [simply that] the proposal was not approved and there are not [administrative] remedies available.”<sup>523</sup>

Other women have sought to both circumvent administrative control and reach a wider audience. In 2002, women at Oregon’s Coffee Creek Correctional Facility decided to create a zine written by and for women in prison. “My goal was to unite women prisoners and get their stories to people in the outside world,” wrote Barrilee Bannister, whose earlier attempts to write for anarchist zines had resulted in disciplinary action and being labeled a gang member by prison authorities. “I wanted the voices of women in prison — who are also mothers, daughters, grandmothers, aunts and nieces — to be heard.”<sup>524</sup>

Lacking access to equipment and supplies such as printers, copy machines and postage, Bannister asked women on the outside to publish and distribute *Tenacious: Art and Writings by Women in Prison*. Announcements of the zine’s existence and its promise of free subscriptions to incarcerated women were sent to *Sojourner’s* prisoner subscription list and to those who requested books from the Women’s Prison Book Project, an organization sending free reading material to incarcerated women nationwide. Both submissions and requests for subscriptions came from women across the country.

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

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. An account of harassment for reporting a prisoner-officer affair led to a letter-writing campaign spearheaded by Break the Chains members, who demanded an end to the harassment and that staff members be held accountable for their actions.

In another instance, the act of publishing also prompted a more personal response. Stephanie Walters Searight, a 27-year-old Michigan prisoner, wrote about discovering that she was HIV-positive when she entered prison. Her story had an unexpected result: "My last article has inspired my mom to travel the five states [from Georgia to Michigan] to visit. You'll never know what that means to me," she wrote in a note included with a subsequent submission. "It has been years since I have been able to see her."<sup>525</sup>

*Tenacious* also raised awareness about women in prison among individuals who had previously been uninvolved in prison activism. The women's social justice zine *Caryatid Rises* made women in prison its theme for one issue while the editor of the Midwestern mama-zine *Mad Lovin' Mama* decided to not only accept submissions from mothers in prison but also to look into doing support work for women imprisoned in her home state.

Not all prisoners are lucky enough to find sympathetic outsiders to help them get their words out. Hoping to persuade an outside church to support her endeavor, Yraida L. Guanipa designed a mock-up for a newsletter of articles written by women at Florida's federal prison in Coleman. However, despite the advocacy of at least one member, the church remained uninterested in the project.<sup>526</sup>

"This is not the first time that I have created a sample," Guanipa stated. In past years, she had submitted three other sample newsletters to both

## Breaking the Silence

---

individuals and organizations that originally expressed interest in the idea. Despite their initial enthusiasm, all have ultimately turned down Guanipa's proposal.

However, Guanipa refused to give up: "I will keep trying until I find an organization or person to help me. I truly believe that we federal prisoners have better resources and we can help our sisters in state and county prisons."<sup>527</sup>

### ***New Possibilities: Utilizing E-mail***

In 2005, utilizing the Bureau of Prisons' new e-mail system for prisoners, Guanipa began sending out descriptions of life in FCC Coleman. "Prison Talk On-Line" (PTO) started with only five recipients and the idea that each would pass her e-mails to a wider audience who, in turn, could ask questions about her experiences or about the federal prison system in general.<sup>517</sup> One correspondent reposted Guanipa's words on a Weblog and, one year later, reported that the site — also named "Prison Talk On-Line" — received over 500 hits per week.<sup>529</sup> Like the women who write for *Tenacious*, Guanipa's mode of communication freed her from the confines of having to seek administrative approval, allowing her to write critically about her surroundings. Her first PTO detailed the preparations for a visit from prison officials from Iraq: "A week before their visit, the authorities ordered us to wax, paint and/or wash everything to make our prison look like a spotless heavenly prison (unrealistic)."<sup>530</sup> In a subsequent PTO, she detailed the dismal gynecological care: "They all wanted to perform a hysterectomy, I once questioned the authorities about that and they said that it was cheaper for the BOP [Bureau of Prisons] because the hysterectomy solves all female problems instead of providing gynecological services for 10-15-20-25 . . . years to a female prisoner (make your own conclusions)."<sup>531</sup>

### ***Forbidden Words***

Creating their own outlets of expression has not freed women entirely from the reality of prison censorship: less than two years after the

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

inception of *Tenacious*, incarcerated women complained about not receiving their subscriptions. Despite rules requiring prison mailrooms to alert both the sender and the prisoner about rejected mail, several disposed of the publication without informing either. In addition, many mailrooms failed to return the zine to the sender. Thus, neither the outside editing collective nor the imprisoned subscribers were aware that *Tenacious* had been prohibited in certain facilities. “I thought you had gotten busy and forgot to send me a copy,” wrote one contributor.<sup>532</sup>

In spring of 2004, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility banned the seventh issue. A piece that named and accused specific correctional officers of harassing a lesbian prisoner was deemed inflammatory, (“disrespects staff at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility”) and was thus labeled “detrimental to the security, safety, health, good order or discipline of the facility.”<sup>533</sup> The Pocatello Women’s Correctional Center in Idaho rejected the zine specifically because it contained writings by other women in prison and thus could be considered inmate-to-inmate correspondence, which is banned in several states, including Idaho.

Other publications with articles criticizing, or even exposing, prison conditions have also been prohibited. Because of Dawnya Ferdinandson’s article about suicide, the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) banned that particular issue of *Sojourner*. One prisoner at ORW complained, “I was called to the mailroom and told I could not have the paper as it was a risk to security, detrimental to inmates and a whole bunch of other negative b.s.”<sup>534</sup> In addition, ORW officials confiscated another issue of *Sojourner* from Ferdinandson stating that, although the journal had previously been allowed in, it now “had to go to the newspaper committee.”<sup>535</sup>

Less than a year after she began PTO, Guanipa also encountered problems: “My PTO articles have been under heavy scrutiny by SOME correctional officers. Apparently some officers were offended with my writing and their decision was to hold off on some of my privileges.”<sup>536</sup>

## Breaking the Silence

---

The privilege threatened was Guanipa's furlough, which would have allowed her to spend 36 hours outside the prison with her two sons. "My furlough was on hold because the unit manager (the highest authority in the camp) does not like my PTO articles," Guanipa wrote the following week.<sup>537</sup>

The threat of losing her furlough almost had the desired effect. "I can easily handle the rest of my sentence even if all of my privileges are taken away. But if any of the privileges taken away involves my family, I'd have to think twice."<sup>538</sup>

Guanipa ultimately did receive her 36-hour furlough. Perhaps because the threat never became a reality, she continued writing PTO, exposing the fraud, neglect and abuse perpetrated by prison staff and the official policies that allowed these behaviors to continue.<sup>539</sup>

Content, however, has not been the only reason prisons have prohibited prisoner-created media. In some instances, merely the fact that women are able to have their words printed is seen as threatening. In 1997, women participating in a writing workshop at the Northeast Prerelease Center, a medium/minimum security prison in Cleveland, Ohio, created *The Circle*, a chapbook of their finished works. However, when the writing instructors attempted to bring the chapbooks to the workshop, the guards refused to allow them to bring them in, stating that they needed permission from the warden first. "So we had to leave the books with the guards at the entryway that day and await word from the warden," recalled one instructor. One month later, the prison still had not granted permission and the women had still not seen the final product. The prison administration never gave a reason for denying the women access to their books.

Eventually, the instructors asked each participant for a family member's address and sent him or her the students' copies.<sup>540</sup>

### ***Getting Their Words Out***

The absence of other media indicates the continued lack of resources and support for incarcerated women's voices within both the radical feminist and prisoner rights movement.

## Resistance Behind Bars

---

In addition, prisoner-made media is not widely distributed, if it is distributed at all. *Perceptions* is not made available to people outside the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. “Many have made their way outside the prison when writers send their articles home or to friends,” said Rebecca Sanford.<sup>541</sup> Thus, while *Perceptions* provides an outlet for women to express their ideas and experiences, its lack of distribution to a wider audience prevents it from being a tool to raise awareness about — and possibly galvanize public response to — issues concerning women in prison.

The newsletter for Break the Chains was distributed by the group itself and not included on other literature lists of prisoner support groups or mail-order zine distributors. In addition, Break the Chains remained a regional group, focusing on those incarcerated in the Pacific Northwest. Thus, while providing women imprisoned in Oregon with a forum to share their concerns with each other and with their male counterparts, the newsletter’s limited distribution prevented their stories from being widely read.

Despite its inclusion of women incarcerated across the country, the mailing list for *Tenacious* is similar in size. However, unlike the “Break the Chains newsletter,” copies of *Tenacious* are sold at several infoshops and small bookstores along the East Coast, such as Baltimore’s Atomic Books, the DC-based Brian MacKenzie infoshop and Toronto’s Uprising Bookstore. Several zine distributors — small, such as Dreamers’ Distro, and large, such as Microcosm in Indiana and Great Worm Express in Canada — also distribute *Tenacious*. Despite its slightly greater distribution and favorable reviews in widely read activist publications such as *Slug and Lettuce*, *HeartattaCk* and *Maximum Rocknroll*, requests for *Tenacious* from non-incarcerated individuals remain much fewer than those of women behind bars.

*The Fire Inside*, the newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, is an exception to the limited distribution of prisoner-made media. It boasts a circulation of over 2,000 and has an online archive accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.<sup>542</sup> The newsletter’s

## Breaking the Silence

---

extensive circulation, as well as its connection to advocacy group California Coalition for Women Prisoners, is especially important given the California Department of Corrections' 1995 rule forbidding the media from arranging to speak with specific prisoners.<sup>543</sup> The ban left prisoner organizers unable to communicate with sympathetic journalists. Thus, *The Fire Inside*, launched the following year, became all the more crucial for women incarcerated in California to have their voices — and their complaints — heard.

Yraida Guanipa's "Prison Talk On-Line" is another exception. The blog dedicated to Guanipa's writings receives over 500 hits each week, indicating a consistent public interest in the experiences of women in prison. However, the online availability of *The Fire Inside* and "Prison Talk On-Line" are still rarities. The majority of incarcerated women lack access to the Internet. This lack of access often limits them to print media that they can (usually) receive but which has limited outside distribution.

The small-scale circulation of these media should not overshadow their importance. Both prison walls and society's assumptions about gender and incarceration often silence the voices of women. Media created by or willing to include the voices of these women are valuable tools in both raising public awareness and strengthening the women's own sense of self-worth and agency. Yraida Guanipa, who knows all too well the difficulties of having her voice heard by the mainstream media, agrees. "It's important for females to know that someone listens and that someone cares and that we are not rejected."<sup>544</sup>

"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."<sup>545</sup>



## About PM Press

PM Press was founded in 2007 as an independent publisher with offices in the US and UK, and a veteran staff boasting a wealth of experience in print and online publishing. We produce and distribute short-as well as large-run projects, timely texts, and out of print classics.

We seek to create radical and stimulating fiction and nonfiction books, pamphlets, t-shirts, visual and audio materials to entertain, educate and inspire you. We aim to distribute these through every available channel with every available technology — whether that means you are seeing anarchist classics at our bookfair stalls; reading our latest vegan cookbook at the café over (your third) microbrew; downloading geeky fiction e-books; or digging new music and timely videos from our website.

PM Press is always on the lookout for talented and skilled volunteers, artists, activists and writers to work with. If you have a great idea for a project or can contribute in some way, please get in touch.



**PO Box 23912**  
**Oakland, CA 94623**  
**[www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org)**