

# STRUGGLE NOTES

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## MULAWA MEDICINE

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In 1975 a group of ex-Mulawa prisoners and women sympathetic to the plight of women in prison got together and formed the Women Behind Bars. One of these women, Michelle House, a Mulawa prisoner had been kneeed in the stomach and assaulted by Mrs Kiernan, a Mulawa prison officer. Ms House gave evidence to the Nagle Royal Commission into prisons regarding the incident.

Needless to say no action was taken against Kiernan and it is an indictment of the system that today she is Acting Deputy Superintendent at Mulawa, has been Acting Superintendent since the Royal Commission and is currently involved in a concerted campaign to become permanent Superintendent.

Conditions since the Royal Commission have become progressively worse. The existence of an internal and external system of razor wire fences (condemned by the Geneva Convention) makes it impossible for prisoners to move about even within the confines of the jail. The introduction of the pass system - where passes must be issued to move around the jail has added even further to the confinement and immobilisation of the women.

Organising classes or activities at Mulawa has always been a major problem. One of the most common reasons is the attitude of the screws which for the most part could be construed as outright sabotage. Educational programs, AA meetings and visits by the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre are all subject to the whim of screws. They now often deny the women an escort, yet the women have in the past walked the short distance there on their own.



Total obedience to the will of each and every screw is an essential prerequisite for any prisoner wanting to do any activity. Lack of communication is another common reason why programs never get off the ground. Whilst some prisoners are told about them, others are not and because groups of prisoners are isolated from each other by fences and pass systems. As a result, attendance at programs and activities is often low and this is then used as an excuse to terminate them. Video courses, legal rights courses, mechanics courses have at some time been available at Mulawa but they have always been abandoned even when they proved popular with the women because directly or indirectly they were sabotaged by the screws.

The control that Mulawa screws have over the women prisoners far exceeds that of the screws in the men's jails. The women feel they are far more downtrodden than the male crims and this is evident in many areas. The screws blame the increasing tension in Mulawa (it is higher than it has ever been) on the amount of drugs getting into the jail and this excuse seems to be readily accepted by the Department.

Drug use however can be seen as a red herring when other factors are taken into consideration e.g. increased security, fewer opportunities for communication between prisoners, lack of activities, little or no physical exercise, and lack of work opportunities.

The women previously worked at the

Parramatta Linen Service which gave them extra money as well as a bus ride that let them see the outside world. But, it was argued, for prisoners to be going out of the jail at all constituted a security risk and an opportunity to obtain drugs so women were stopped from going to the PLS. Now the only work available to most prisoners is sewing flags all day in the sewing room.

Visits were previously held on the lawn, a more relaxed and pleasant atmosphere in which to communicate with friends and family than the dreary room now provided, where prisoners are separated from their visitors by tables and watched closely by screws. Strip searches are common place, a further indignity prisoners are made to suffer. The bar-b-ques for friends and family previously held at Easter and Xmas have been stopped.

No wonder the women feel they are returning to the dark ages and have little faith in Dr Vinson's promises of reforms and progress. With conditions being made so grim it would seem obvious that more women would turn to drugs.

However the screws' allegations that the women's drug use is being fed from the outside and is the reason for increased tension are totally hypocritical. 'Legal' drugs are used within the jail as one of the main forms of control. Not very long ago the daily medication of one of the women, Robyn Lynch, consisted of the following: 50mg of Largactil three times a day, 75mg of Sinequan, 10mg of chloral hydrate and 2mg of Ruhypnol. These are, in order, a major tranquillizer, an antidepressant and two sedatives or hypnotic drugs. More than enough to make life little more than a blur.

Even if there are drugs getting into Mulawa, could they be any worse for the women than what they are already being given under the guise of 'treatment'?

Given that 60% of women in Mulawa are there for drug-related offences you would expect that there would be considerable attention paid to providing proper detoxification facilities and AA type programs run by people who have the necessary understanding, training and non-judgmental attitudes. To date these facilities have either not been provided at all or else only in a tokenistic and inconsistent way. Yet Mulawa continues to masquerade as a rehabilitative institution while ignoring the problems of 60% of those locked inside. This is not to say that the remainder are catered for either. Women who are in jail because they are victims of domestic violence or other social/anti-

ornamental and psychological circumstances have their problems ignored almost completely, except for so-called 'psychiatric treatment' - which is little more than a prescription for sedatives and tranquillizers.

After a long time and much effort Leichhardt Women's Health Centre was given permission to visit Mulawa prisoners on a regular basis. However the screws had made it extremely difficult for prisoners to see the women from Leichhardt.

When the women object to such restrictions they are threatened with withdrawal of weekly phone calls, buy-ups, visits etc. These repressive actions by the screws lead to an atmosphere of general demoralisation in the face of which it is extremely difficult for the women to become organised or for much solidarity to develop amongst them.

The latest method that the Department has decided to use to punish those women who continue to resist or who are unable to control their frustrations, which sometimes come out in acts of self-destruction, is to send them off to Narrabri Prison. Vinson has said that if the women can show they can 'behave themselves' at Narrabri and 're-earn' their good names then they will eventually be allowed to return to Mulawa, possibly via the Special Care Unit at Long Bay.

It is in the screws' interests to encourage the myth that the women are dangerous, uncontrollable and crazy because then they can justify the need for increased security which in turn puts them on a more equal footing with their male counterparts and increases opportunities for promotion, riot squad training and higher pay.

Dr Vinson has stated his commitment to improving the situation at Mulawa frequently, but his method of doing so usually means a trade-off. Each and every time something, no matter how trivial, is gained, it is done so at the expense of something or somebody else. For example, women are being sent to Narrabri before razor wire fences are brought down and pass systems abolished. In the end it results in the prisoners who need changing the most being punished more severely than ever.

Nothing will improve in Mulawa unless there are widespread changes made from the top regardless of opposition from groups of screws who are out for their own ends.