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Amnesty International renews call for urgent investigation in Connecticut women's prison

Amnesty International today renewed its call for an urgent investigation into allegations of sexual abuse at York Correctional Institution for women.

Over the past two months, the human rights organization has received numerous testimonies from inmates and former employees alleging sexual misconduct and general abuse by male guards at Connecticut only women's prison -- which houses girls as young as 14.

Women prisoners have described male correctional staff having sex with prisoners to gain sexual favours; male guards viewing female inmates while in a state of undress, including while showering and using the bathroom; and abusive strip searches. Amnesty International has also received accounts of highly intrusive pat-down searches by male staff: two or more male guards were alleged to have taken it in turns to pat-down frisk the same woman; another guard reportedly squeezed an inmate's breast and groped her between the legs.

The State of Connecticut criminalizes all forms of sexual conduct between prison staff and inmates, but it is reported that prosecutions under this legislation are relatively rare and that the authorities' practice is to deal with violations by either "walking off" (dismissing) or reassigning the employee. It is further alleged that prisoners who dare to speak out or complain live in fear of retaliation. The organization has received several letters stating that staff members, particularly as a result of recent media attention, were taking retaliatory actions against inmates.

Amnesty International has also called on the Connecticut authorities to investigate other allegations of ill-treatment at the prison. This includes the claim that teams of armed guards, in full riot gear, use heavy-handed -- and even brutal -- tactics to deal with women who are "playing up". The women are then hand-cuffed and shackled to the bed face down, sometimes with nothing on. This was claimed to have happened to a 16-year-old juvenile who weighed only 94 pounds.

The human rights organization is also disturbed by reports that girls between 14 and 17 are being housed in the maximum security unit of the adult prison and are guarded by male guards -- including guards who are perceived as sexual abusers or predators by the women inmates.

In its letter to the authorities, Amnesty International said that while it was not in a position to confirm the above allegations, the frequency and consistency of reports suggested that serious abuses may be occurring at York Correctional Institution which are either tolerated by the authorities or are not being adequately dealt with. The organization is urging the authorities to institute a full and impartial investigation into the allegations. Such an inquiry, Amnesty International said, should include a review of measures taken to safeguard against sexual abuse and retaliation and to investigate abuses, and of use of force policies in the institution.

Amnesty International is also calling for an immediate review of the role of male guards in York Correctional Institution. The organization believes that unsupervised access of male guards to female living quarters creates opportunities for abuse which may be difficult to substantiate after the event. The Connecticut authorities' reported practice of training male guards to "look at the feet" of naked women are insufficient to prevent abuse. Furthermore, the organization contends that certain

practices, such as allowing male guards to conduct pat searches, is inherently cruel and degrading. It is widely argued that pat frisks performed by male officers, inflict particularly severe trauma on many women who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse. The authorities should amend prison policies so that male guards do not routinely conduct pat-down searches of women prisoners.

The Connecticut Department of Corrections stated that it cannot ban men from jobs in a women's facility because it is an "equal opportunities" employer. However, Amnesty International maintains that there can -- and should -- be a restriction on the role of male guards in areas where women have an expectation of privacy.

Amnesty International is calling on the Connecticut authorities to promptly review policy to ensure that female inmates are guarded only by female officers and that male staff operating in female facilities should always be accompanied by female officers, as required under international standards. Some US jurisdictions have placed certain restrictions on male duties in women's prisons or facilities in response to abuses and the courts have upheld such restrictions as lawful.

The organization is also urging the authorities to ensure that all employees at York Correctional Institution are aware of state law criminalizing all forms of sexual conduct between prison staff and inmates and that any allegations involving a possible violation of the law be vigorously investigated with those responsible brought to justice. The authorities should also take steps to prevent sexual abuse and to improve investigation of sexual misconduct complaints.

Background

Connecticut is one of six states which still routinely permits male officers to pat frisk female inmates¹ -- a practice defined by a 1998 class-action lawsuit as a "form of legalized sexual molestation". In spring 2000, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Washington State ruled that such practices were "cruel and unusual", changing the policy of that state's correction department.
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¹The other states are Kansas, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York and Pennsylvania.
Telephone survey by NIC Prisons Division and Information Centre, 1 January 1999.

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York Correctional Institution Selected Testimonies and Allegations

Sexual Misconduct

Allegations from Inmate 'Q' include:

- Correctional Officers having sex with inmates in exchange for food or lipstick;
- Affairs taking place between inmates and staff;
- A Correctional Officer grabbing an inmate's breast;
- The dentist has inmates perform oral sex in exchange for dental treatment

Allegations from Inmate "W":

Inmate logged a complaint against a Correctional Officer, stating that he had squeezed her breast and groped between her legs. She has since been placed in 23-hour lock-down, and is currently restricted from using the phone, or from receiving visitors.

Abusive Pat-down and Strip Searches

Allegations from Inmate "T":

- 1999: was strip-searched in a room which doubles as a passage way - a male officer, walking past, saw her completely naked.
- 2000: a guard burst into a utility closet in the gym while an inmate was being strip-searched; male team member standing by the door at the time, saw her in only a bra and jeans;
- During the past two years, new arrivals have been forced to walk in groups, clad only in nightgowns and sash-less robes, to and from the medical unit.

Information provided by visitor to Institution

- Prisoners reported sexual abuse by female and male guards. Female guard engages in inappropriate actions when she strips searches the female inmates: such as making remarks in a sexual tone, or asking inmates to part their genitals for a period of time.

Beatings and Assault

Allegations from Inmate "Y":

Inmate was said to be severely beaten on a number of occasions. During her last beating she was reportedly so severely beaten that her wrists were broken. The guards apparently tied each limb apart, and left her to suffer for hours. She was put into segregation before she could submit an account of her story for investigation.

Information provided from an anonymous caller: caller stated that used to work as an Intern at York County Prison several years ago. Confirmed as true, recent reports in press about the beatings administered to prisoners. The caller asserted that such beatings were common, and stated that the Deputy Warden of the prison was aware of the beatings, as was the President of the Prison Board.

Inadequate Medical Care

Information provided by a visitor to the Institution:

Prisoners are denied medication for psychological problems; not given essential medication promptly (including standard psychiatric drugs or those for HIV treatment) or mis-diagnosed and given

medication with adverse side-effects. One source has reported the over use of sleeping medication.