



Human Rights Abuses in US Prisons

A Panel Discussion

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Introduction

Since 1975, I have been a human rights advocate on behalf of people in prison throughout the country. I coordinate the Prison Watch Project for the American Friends Service Committee in Newark. Prior to that, I was trained as a community organizer, beginning in the southern civil rights movement in the 60's.

I work with Black and Puerto Rican young people in Newark who tell me that the police feel like an occupation army. They speak about a school system being used to feed young oppressed people into youth detention, jails and prisons where those bodies are suddenly worth a fortune. People say that the criminal justice system doesn't work. I've come to believe exactly the opposite – that it works perfectly, just as slavery did, as a matter of economic and political policy. I don't believe that it is an accident that a 15 year old in Newark or Atlanta who can't get a job can suddenly generate 30 thousand dollars a year, once trapped in a criminal justice system, where architects, medical providers, guards, etc. get paid. Just like in the era of chattel slavery, there is a class of people dependent on the poor, and on bodies of color as a source for income.

In the US criminal justice system, the politics of the police, the politics of the courts, the politics of the prison system and the politics of the death penalty are a manifestation of the racism and classism which governs the lives of all of us. Every part of the criminal justice system falls most heavily on the poor and people of color, including the fact that slavery is mandated in prisons by the 13th Amendment of the US constitution. The US didn't abolish slavery, it just transferred it into the prisons. Prison slavery in the form of involuntary labor is real.

Testimonies: Youth

I'd like to share with you some of the voices that I hear during my day. The first two are from youngsters who have spent time in juvenile detention describing a system in which parents have no say so over what happens to their children and a system which prepares them for a future of imprisonment.

"I went in when I was 14. They have what they call an MCU there, and it's like the "hole" in a regular prison. Kids that fight go in there. If you refuse they come and get you. You get a shower once a week and they even bring the food to you. It was so cold. "

"I heard people scream, yell and holler. I saw boys get strung out on meds. The food was mostly Sloppy Joes and one cup of water. They make you take sleeping stuff in the needles. They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting one time. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn't breathe. They kept hitting her. We kept telling them that she had asthma, but they wouldn't listen".

On Mothers Day 2003 in Elizabeth, NJ, Eddie Sinclair, Jr. hung himself in the Union County Youth detention facility; Eddie was 17 and had stolen a bicycle. He had missed

a court appointment, was picked up and locked in isolation. It is not irrelevant that Eddie's father is African and his mother is Puerto Rican.

Testimonies: Adults

I also want to share haunting testimonies of torture being committed in US adult prisons:

"John was directed to leave the strip cell and a urine soaked pillow case was placed over his head like a hood. He was walked, shackled and hooded to a different cell where he was placed in a device called "the chair"....he was kept in the chair for over 30 hours resulting in extreme physical and emotional suffering."

Another person describes a prisoner having his clothes forcibly removed from his body, being knocked to the ground and kicked. He describes being maced in his eyes, being told by guards that "this time we're going to fuck you up right". The prisoner then gives a detailed description of the beating with shields and batons and then being placed in a restraint chair.

A young man just wrote from Utah: I'm 19 and have only been in the adult system for a year. I've been in supermax the entire time. I come out every other day. I think I'll be here another 20 years. I need help to survive."

Women

A woman in Texas writes "the guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of five male guards. Then they carried me to a cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off. They left me in that cell with that pepper spray in my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that. I just didn't want to take my clothes off."

Mental Illness

Some of the saddest letters are from prisoners writing on behalf of the mentally ill – like the man who spread feces over his body. The guards' response to this was to put him in a bath so hot it boiled 30% of the skin off him. These past years have been full of thousands of calls and complaints from prisoners and their families, describing *inhumane conditions including cold, filth, callous medical care, extended isolation often lasting over a decade, use of devices of torture, harassment, brutality and racism.* I have received vivid descriptions of four point restraints, restraint hoods, restraint belts, restraint beds, stun grenades, stun guns, stun belts, tethers, waist and leg chains.

Solitary Confinement

Prolonged solitary confinement has been a long time concern for many prison activists, on both sides of the walls. The reports coming in about the use of devices of torture have largely been from isolation units, which are called control units or supermax prisons, where there are few witnesses. In New Jersey, political prisoner Ojore Lutalo was held in the Management Control Unit at New Jersey State Prison in total isolation from February 1986 through January 2002. One of the first people placed in that Unit in the 1970's was Sundiata Acoli, a member of the Black Panther Part for Self-Defense.

Political prisoners Ruchell Magee, Russell Shoats and Mumia Abu Jamal have been living in isolation units for over two decades. There are thousands of others living in enforced solitary confinement, including young people in juvenile detention facilities and the mentally ill.

Right now efforts to expand the solitary confinement population involve the alleged spread of gang problems in US prisons. This trend is being repeated throughout the country, resulting in the increased building of supermax prisons. In these gang prisons called Security Threat Group Management Units, prisoners are called upon to renounce their "gang" membership – which is reminiscent of the witch-hunts during the McCarthy investigations in the 1950's and the ongoing and current FBI Counter Intelligence Program. I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with who is and who isn't named a gang by the federal government.

International Law

The conditions and practices that I've described are in violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, both of which the US has ratified. Many also violate the UN Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and dozens of other international and regional laws and standards.

Article 1 of the UN Convention Against Torture prohibits policies and practices that "constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment". In 1995, the UN Human Rights Committee stated that conditions in certain US maximum security prisons were incompatible with international standards. In 1996, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture also reported on cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in US supermax prisons. In 2000 the United Nations Committee on Torture cited the US use of stun belts and restraint chairs as violating the UN Convention Against Torture. Practices in US prisons also fit the UN definition of genocide. If you are poor and a youngster of color in this country, and if you look around at what is happening to men, women and children of your nationality, it is not hard to conclude that an economic and physical genocide, as defined by the United Nations Convention on Genocide, is being committed.

Strategies for Promoting International Human Rights Discourse

For the past the years, AFSC's Prison Watch has consciously woven the importance of international law throughout its work. I want to share some of the techniques we've used to address issues of human rights violations in US prisons. In 1998, we helped the World Organization Against Torture write the Shadow Report on the Status of Compliance by the US Government with the International Convention Against Torture. We found that the US was not meeting its obligations under that treaty. Given what has happened at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and given that the entire Executive Branch of the US government seems to sanction torture, it becomes imperative we all give more long term attention is given to prisoner issues.

Publications

In 2002, we published a pamphlet called "Our Children's House", which contains the testimonies of the very young who have been sentenced to youth detention facilities. The children talked of hearing, seeing and smelling things, about enduring treatment that is inappropriate for anyone, let alone children. We've also published "Torture in US Prisons – Evidence of Human Rights Violations", "The Prison Inside the Prison: Control Units, Supermax Prisons and Devices of Torture" and the Survivor's Manual. The torture pamphlet and the Survivor's Manual were joint efforts with many prisoners and family members who teach and give us direction.

Perhaps one of the most useful things we've published is a Resource Guide called "Correlation of Prisoners' Issues and Conditions to International Covenants and Treaties". The pamphlet contains simple grids which correlate, for instance, horrendous medical care to violations of article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Many of these publications can be found at www.afscprisonwatch.org.

Media Work

Aside from publishing, we've used a number of other strategies to push for social change. We work to raise the consciousness of reporters and editors, many of whom are just beginning to understand the relevance of international law to issues of torture in the US issues. While international law has increasingly become part of immigration law, this isn't so when dealing with prison issues and civil law. Last April, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg embraced the practice of taking international thinking and law into account. This boost is being incorporated by many community groups, who have a better sense of human rights than the media or educational institutions.

Mentorship, Technical Assistance, Organizing, Public Speaking, etc.

We do a lot of work with students doing internships to raise their understanding of human rights abuses. We provide technical assistance to emerging advocacy groups. Our public education and organizing includes speaking at community groups, college classrooms and conferences. We help authors writing on prison issues to better understand the importance of the international human rights framework and how dismally the US fails its citizens with its imprisonment policies. Our organizing includes work with people in prison, ex-prisoners, family members, community leaders and the faith community to raise awareness of the importance of the umbrella of human rights. The AFSC is also getting ready to embark on a 5 year campaign to abolish the CAT violations of prolonged solitary confinement and use of devices of torture.

Conclusion

Oppression is a condition common to all of us who are without the power to make the decisions that govern the political, economic and social life of this country. We are victims of an ideology of inhumanity on which this country was built. If we dig deeper into the US practices that I've talked about, the political function that they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts, the prison system and the death penalty all serve as

social control mechanisms. The economic function they serve is equally chilling. Many people with whom I work believe that prisons are a form of neo-slavery and economic slavery.

The Department of Corrections is more than a set of institutions. It is also a state of mind. That state of mind led to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. That state of mind led to the American style ethnic cleansing that many say occurred in New Orleans. Sending the military into New Orleans instead of caretakers is yet another piece of US genocidal history. People in prison call freedom out here "minimum custody" with good reason.

We need to alter the very core of every system that slavery, racism and poverty has given birth to, particularly the criminal justice system. The United States must stop violating the human rights of men, women and children. We need to decriminalize poverty and mental illness, and in many cases, homosexuality. We must eliminate solitary confinement, torture and the use of devices of torture. We need to listen to El-Hajj Malik Shabazz who, in his last speech, directed us to fight for human rights through the enhanced use of international law. The restriction of civil rights is something we can and should debate regularly as a society. The violation of human rights simply isn't negotiable.

This is excerpted from "Close to Home", a Ford Foundation study which presents 13 case studies of human rights work that is making life better for people in the United States. The whole document is online at http://www.fordfound.org/publications/recent_articles/close_to_home.cfm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SEXUAL ABUSE OF WOMEN IN PRISON

A Thematic Case Study

Advocates began thinking in terms of 'human rights' instead of 'prisoner rights,' and the movement was transformed.

The starting place

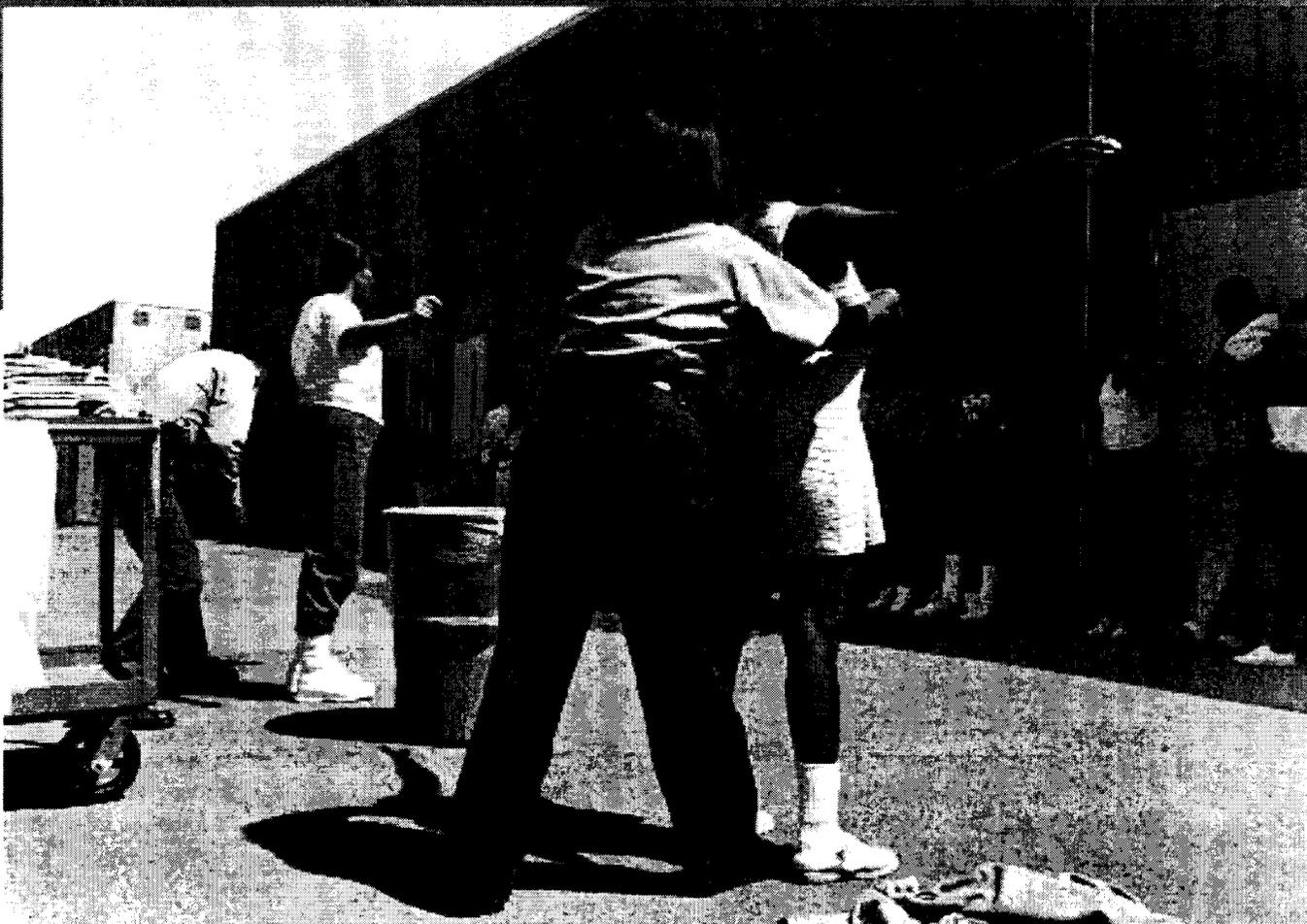
When Brenda Smith, Ellen Barry and Deborah LaBelle filed their respective lawsuits in the 1990s challenging the treatment of women in several U.S. state prisons and the District of Columbia, none of them made reference to human rights. "I was looking for immediate relief for my clients," Smith said. "I wasn't sure what kind of impact human rights would really have." Barry was "generally aware of human rights," but there was "no sense that it was viable." To LaBelle, "It just wasn't part of my lexicon." By the end of the decade, and through a collaborative effort involving a wide range of other activists, several international human rights organizations and the United Nations, the attitude of these three advocates toward the value of human rights to their work had profoundly changed. This is a chronicle of that transformation.

Barry founded and ran Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in California and focused primarily on health care issues for incarcerated women. LaBelle was an attorney in private practice in Michigan and litigated issues of systematic sex discrimination and custodial sexual misconduct. Smith directed the Women in Prison Project at the National Women's Law Center in Washington, D.C. and provided direct services to women in the D.C. prison system. But for all their differences in approach, these three advocates, like their counterparts in other states and at the national level,

had one overriding concern in common: the skyrocketing population of women in prison in the United States and the deplorable conditions and treatment that they endured all too often.

Smith's ultimately successful 1993 case, *Women Prisoners of District of Columbia Department of Corrections v. District of Columbia*, for example, charged the D.C. Department of Corrections with rape, sexual assault, and use of degrading language among other violations. LaBelle's 1996 federal case, *Nunn v. Michigan Department of Corrections et al.*, which settled in 1999, exposed rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, privacy violations, physical threats and abuse. Barry's suit, *Shumate v. Wilson*, which settled in 1998, focused on inadequate medical care in the California women's prisons. As these advocates pursued their work on women in prison and strategized with others through the National Roundtable on Women in Prison and other organizations, several troubling trends began to emerge: First, activists were addressing concerns that went far beyond their respective jurisdictions. Second, existing domestic legal and administrative remedies were insufficient to address the mounting problems. And third, both the state and federal governments were essentially indifferent to the plight of women under their supervision. A

Male and female guards pat-search fifty-four new arrivals. Central California Women's Facility, Chowchilla, California, 1995.



Human Rights Watch began an investigation into the sexual abuse of women by guards in U.S. state prisons. The resulting report relied in large measure on the work of Barry, Labelle, Smith and others to expose the abuse and mistreatment of women in prison.

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new approach had to be explored. Through what Smith called “a confluence of factors,” including new initiatives by domestic human rights groups and the United Nations, the use of human rights as a potentially transformative framework to improve the conditions for women in U.S. prisons gradually took shape.

The turning point

In March, 1994, Human Rights Watch (HRW), a U.S.-based international human rights organization, began an investigation into the sexual abuse of women by guards in U.S. state prisons. The resulting report issued two years later, *All Too Familiar: The Sexual Abuse of Women in U.S. State Prisons*, relied in large measure on the work of Barry, LaBelle, Smith and others to expose the abuse and mistreatment of women in prison and denounce the failure of state and federal authorities to remedy the problems. All three advocates participated actively in the Human Rights Watch study, but not without considerable initial skepticism. “They weren’t much interested in something they thought might only bring about cosmetic change,” remembered Widney Brown, then a consultant to HRW’s Women’s Rights Division. As LaBelle recalled, “I wasn’t sure how their work would be of any real benefit, and I didn’t trust that they were familiar enough with the issue to get it right.” Smith’s concerns revolved more around the group’s method. “I have always been worried to some degree about the commodification of people’s stories,” she said. “I was worried that my clients’ experience would be packaged, bundled and sold.” But over time, the relationship between HRW and the activists evolved and a degree of mutual understanding emerged. “It was very important to recognize what each of us could do and be respectful,” Smith noted. “A lot of learning was done on both sides.”

The journey

That collaborative process enabled all the parties to take full benefit of the release of HRW’s report in December of 1996 to advance their advocacy locally, nationally and, ultimately, even internationally. “It was like a drum beat,” LaBelle remembered. “The press coverage locally and at the national level was just fantastic. It gave the issue an exposure it never had before and we took immediate advantage of it.” In LaBelle’s case, for example, the heightened visibility of the issue had two immediate effects: First, the U.S. Department of Justice, which would file its own sexual misconduct suit against the Michigan Department of Corrections in 1997, consolidated its effort with LaBelle’s. She amended the joint complaint to include human rights arguments and attached the HRW report. Second, the state resisted—and lost. “The Michigan Department of Corrections moved to strike the report,” LaBelle said. “The court clearly read the report and was impacted by it. Their motion was denied.”

Things also began to shift in the nation’s capital. “The HRW report and the work that followed generated important attention nationally and internationally,” Smith said. “That didn’t have an effect on our claims or what the court decided,” she said, “but it helped send the Department of Corrections a message that they had been exposed.” That exposure in turn led to heightened scrutiny by Congress, due to the efforts of D.C. Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, and the General Accounting Office. In Smith’s view, the use of a human rights approach did not so much alter the nature of the work on behalf of women in prison as “buttress and elevate” it.

The human rights component expanded even further with the involvement of Barry, LaBelle, Smith and many others in the 1998 investigation of sexual mis-

conduct in U.S. prisons by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy from Sri Lanka. Although the Clinton Administration had been slow to address the abuse of women in U.S. prisons, it was a vocal proponent of women's human rights globally and a supporter of the U.N. resolution that created Coomaraswamy's position. It could hardly refuse, once approached by local prisoner rights activists and the Rapporteur herself, to extend her an invitation to visit. "None of the local activists had ever heard of the Special Rapporteur," Brown, now HRW's deputy program director, recalled, "and at first they basically thought, who cares?" Coomaraswamy shared their skepticism. "I wasn't sure what I would find," she said.

During Coomaraswamy's visit, from May 31 to June 18, 1998, she investigated state and federal facilities in California, Connecticut, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota and New York, examining both problem areas and seeking best practices. "Everyone received me very well," she said, "except the governor of Michigan who suggested that I was an unwitting agent of the federal government" and denied access to the state's prisons. To Brown, who spent the months before Coomaraswamy's visit making sure that the federal government would provide her the necessary prison access, this decision was both "deeply ironic" and a political blunder. "It was an extreme embarrassment to the state," LaBelle said, "and it got the attention of the media and the court."

Coomaraswamy's report was released at the March 1999 meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. It relied on extensive information from official and activist sources across the United States and detailed abuse that went well beyond the findings of HRW's report, highlighting in particular the pernicious role of race discrimination in the incarceration of women. LaBelle and Smith went to Switzerland for the report's release and their first visit to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. "It was fantastic," Smith recalled, "the issue got exposure it had never had before."

In 1998, the women-in-prison movement also received a dramatic boost when Amnesty International, the London-based global rights group, decided to

include sexual misconduct and other custodial issues in prisons in its 1998 annual campaign—which focused on the United States for the first time. "For some time Amnesty had been discussing a U.S. campaign," said Sheila Dauer, the director of Amnesty International's U.S. women's human rights program. "The work of local activists, HRW and the Special Rapporteur all contributed to our decision to go forward," she said. Ultimately, Amnesty International issued three reports: *Rights for All* (1998); *Not Part of My Sentence* (1999); and, perhaps most crucial for the state level advocates, *Abuse of Women in Custody: Sexual Misconduct and Shackling of Pregnant Women* (2001), a state-by-state survey of policies and practices in the United States.

The accomplishments

The use of a human rights approach to advocate on behalf of women in prison in the United States affected prisoners, activists and even state and federal authorities charged with overseeing women's prisons. "If you'd told me in 1992 that we'd be where we were with human rights and women in U.S. prisons in 2003, I would have called you a liar," LaBelle said. "It's still a shock to me how little I knew about human rights and yet how powerfully it's changed my approach to these issues."

For activists, this shift was much more than a linguistic gesture. "To me it was always about much more than language and method," said LaBelle. "More than anything it was about fundamental principles." And for Brown, this has the most lasting effect. The human rights approach, she said, "takes you back to the primacy of human dignity and equality no matter what the circumstance. Once you reassert that basic principle," she continued, "people's perceptions of the problem change and new avenues for advocacy open up."

The new mindset produced new legal tactics. Regressive legislation—such as the federal Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1996 and Michigan's 1999 law declaring prisoners "non-persons" under the state's civil rights and disabilities acts—were setbacks. "We were trying to represent clients in a socially marginalized class," LaBelle recalled, "and we didn't want to keep using socially marginalized law. We were getting

Most activists agree that the greatest lasting value of human rights is its vision. "As advocates we often get hoisted on particularity. Human rights let us step back and put our work in a larger frame."

stuck on prisoner's rights, and the introduction of human rights allowed us to talk to the court in a different manner." This entailed, among other things, making explicit references to international human rights law, including the U.N.'s Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the internationally recognized right to an effective remedy.

As these legal innovations were being tested through litigation, human rights advocacy started to take root on the local level. "The grassroots activists got it and ran with it," Brown said. Working with Amnesty International and using the Web-based tools derived from its state-by-state prison survey, local activists across the country succeeded in achieving significant reforms of state policies and practices regarding sexual contact between staff and prisoners in custody. When Amnesty International's survey was released in 2001, 13 states had no laws governing custodial sexual misconduct. Now 11 of those 13 states do. "Amnesty International's work with local groups is a good part of the reason those states have sexual misconduct laws," said Brown. "That work was critical."

Change was afoot on the federal level too. In 1996, a collaboration between the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, and Smith's National Women's Law Center had compiled surveys of custodial sexual misconduct laws throughout the country. By 1999, with additional funds from Congress, NIC was conducting training in every state prison system in the country to heighten awareness of sexual misconduct in prison. Smith was brought in as the chief trainer. "We use the HRW, Amnesty International and Special Rapporteur reports and the [U.N.'s] Standard Minimum Rules. It's a different approach," she said.

An important benefit of using a human rights approach to address custodial sexual misconduct—be it on the local, state or federal level—is the remarkable media attention it generates. Just a few headlines give a sense of the media drumbeat that accompanied the reports' revelations: "U.N. Rights Panel Is Told of Violations in U.S. Women's Prisons," March 31, 1999, (The New York Times); "Can We Ignore All the Voices Crying Out Over Prisoner Rape?" Nov. 15, 1999, (Detroit Free Press); "Lawmaker Introduces Bill to Make Sexual Abuse of Inmates a Crime," Feb. 23, 2003, (The Associated Press). Broadcast media picked up the stories as well, including National Public Radio, Dateline NBC, Lifetime TV, Nightline and Geraldo Rivera.

The human rights approach to women in prison wrought major changes in the way the issue was perceived and how abuses were remedied. But most activists agree that the greatest lasting value of human rights is its vision. "As advocates we often get hoisted on particularity," said Smith. "Human rights let us step back and put our work in a larger frame." This more expansive intellectual framework allowed activists to come together in a steady, if not always easy, collaboration that they maintain to this day. "We were surprisingly isolated from one another," LaBelle reflected. "Human rights gave us a way to connect, including to our counterparts overseas."

The obstacles

Integrating human rights values into the cause has unquestionably helped to strengthen the rights of women in U.S. prisons, but the effort was by no means trouble-free. "Let's not go overboard," LaBelle said. "There are still lots of problems." The most serious challenges are similar to those that rise up wherever

advocates seek to impress human rights laws and standards onto domestic social problems. The most worrisome difficulties for advocates are conflicts between international and domestic law, limitations on how human rights is applied in the United States outside the courts and the persistence of U.S. "exceptionalism."

As for conflicts between international and national law, perhaps the best example is cross-gender guarding. Domestic equal protection law allows male guards in women's prisons. The U.N. Standard Minimum Rules do not. Some state jurisdictions have accepted restrictions on cross-gender guarding in the interests of protecting the bodily integrity and privacy rights of women—and men too. Others have rejected this approach. Activists on both sides agree that the introduction of international law has stirred up debate about existing domestic protections and spotlighted the need to craft new remedies. "Sometimes introducing human rights law is like putting a big sign that says 'Kick Me' on your back," said LaBelle. "You have to pick your spots. But this is also how progressive law is made. You introduce new ideas as often as appropriate until they become commonplace."

Activists have concerns about how domestic human rights are applied outside the courtroom as well. On the issue of substance, for example, Barry worried that human rights as applied might emphasize issues of physical violence (a traditional human rights concern) to the exclusion of other pressing rights issues for women prisoners. Citing one instance, she found it "interesting" that the issue of family integrity for prisoners, including their visitation rights, was not covered in the HRW report to the same extent it was by the Special Rapporteur. Like Barry, LaBelle cautioned that the human rights approach is no panacea. "It's not just semantics. It's a new construct and you have to work with it as it applies to the issues of concern to you."

In methodological terms, serious concerns have been raised about "backlash." In a 1998 study, *Nowhere to Hide: Retaliation Against Women in Michigan State Prisons*, HRW found evidence of retaliation against prisoners who spoke out about custodial abuse. "Ultimately, the decision to proceed or not to proceed rests

with the women [prisoners]," said Brown, the report's author. Under the best of circumstances, these are difficult decisions to make. "You must defer to the client," LaBelle said. "More often than not I find they want to speak out." It would be difficult to overestimate, these advocates said, the resistance of the U.S. prison system to external scrutiny and its intolerance for those inside the system who provoke such outside attention. "If you are going to work in this area you have to take retaliation into account," said Brown, "but you also have to be willing to fight with everything in your power for the woman who wants to stand up for herself and her dignity."

Ultimately, the greatest challenge to human rights work on behalf of women in prison in the United States is the widely held belief, even among some activists, that human rights do not, or even should not, apply in this country. "One of the biggest obstacles we had to overcome was our own insularity," said Barry. In 1998, at Amnesty International's celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris, Barry noted "palpable excitement" among activists from many different countries that the U.S. participants were finally acknowledging that their country should be held to international human rights standards. "I know it's not the government saying that," she said, "but the activists saying it is a beginning. It's not going to happen if the activists don't raise it."

The road ahead

From three different starting points, these three U.S. activists—Smith, Barry and LaBelle—found themselves seeking to raise the consciousness of the United States government about the human rights of women in prison, and in the process altered their field and themselves. "I am not saying that human rights transformed everything," said Barry, "but to a certain extent it was a sea change in the way activists viewed women in prison in this country." The challenge now is to apply the human rights approach more generally. "I plead human rights wherever it's relevant," said LaBelle. "I just can't see the United States remaining this isolated. We'd be a pretty strange country if we did." ■