

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND COERCION AMONG INCARCERATED WOMEN PRISONERS: EXCERPTS FROM PRISON LETTERS

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There are few existing studies that address sexual misconduct of women offenders toward other women prisoners. This qualitative study examined themes of sexual coercion and sexual assault among women offenders that surfaced in letters sent by one woman offender from prison during a period of 5 years. Four themes emerged from the data: (a) female apathy toward sexual coercion and sexual assault, (b) the femme as the sexual aggressor, (c) insight into one female rape situation, and (d) institutional factors contributing to sexual coercion. To prevent incidences of sexual assault by other offenders, policy suggestions specific to the study included a staff focus on identifying and consistently curbing sexual coercion and installing monitored cameras in restriction dorms.

Countless acts of sexual assault, including acts of coerced sex that may appear consensual, have occurred in U.S. prisons. Sexual assault and coercion jeopardizes both individual safety and institutional security. Although not all sex in prison is coerced, it is estimated that in 1995, there were approximately 359,000 male victims and 5,000 female victims who were sexually assaulted while doing time in U.S. prisons (Donaldson, 1995). Incidents of coerced sex in prison and jail are related to individual and group violence, offender adjustment problems, and health complications (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1999, 2000; Tewksbury, 1989a; Wooden & Parker, 1982). There is a clear need for more research in this area so that administrators can better understand the nature and effects of prison sex. Increased understanding may lead to enhanced staff awareness, improved institutional control, and a decrease in uses of force.

The author wishes to thank Velmarine Oliphant Szabo for sharing her personal experiences and observations from prison during the past 5 years and for bringing to the criminal justice community an awareness and better understanding of female sexual coercion.

THE PRISON JOURNAL, Vol. 80 No. 4, December 2000 391-406
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Previous lines of inquiry have focused either on sexual assault in the community (e.g., Bevacqua, 2000; Odem & Clay-Warner, 1998; Russell, 1984; Schwartz & Dekeseredy, 1997; Scully, 1990; Searles & Berger, 1995; Stanko, 1985) or male sexual assault inside male correctional institutions (e.g., Chonco, 1989; Cotton & Groth, 1982; Dumond, 1992; Eigenberg, 1989; Groth & Burgess, 1980; Jones & Schmid, 1989; Lockwood, 1985; Nacci & Kane, 1983, 1984; Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, & Bennett, 1995; Smith & Batiuk, 1989; Tewksbury, 1989a, 1989b; Wooden & Parker, 1982). Both bodies of literature have ignored the prevalence and nature of sexual assault of incarcerated women.

Academic experts in the area of female prisoner subcultures have only recently acknowledged the possibility of female prisoner sexual assault (Bowker, 1981, 1982; Pollock-Byrne, 1990). Since the 1960s, previous studies have found that many women prisoners participate consensually in play families, intimate (nonsexual) dyads, and/or same-sex couple relationships (for a review of these studies, see Alarid, 1996). Most recently, Owen (1998) described involvement in play families and nonsexual friendships as a way to avoid "the mix." *The mix* is defined as "any behavior that can bring trouble and conflict with staff and other prisoners," which includes reduction of good time, restriction of privileges, or solitary confinement (Owen, 1998, p. 179). The three overlapping behaviors of the mix that most often led to trouble were involvement in homosexuality ("playing around"), drugs, and fighting. Most women interviewed by Owen did not admit to currently being in the mix, only that they used to be involved or that they strongly advised staying out of the mix. Exploitative relationships of an economical and/or emotional nature were found to exist among women prisoners involved in the mix. However, there was little mention of sexual coercion and sexual assault associated with the "homosexual mix" (Owen, 1998).

Outside of academic circles, increased attention has been paid to female offenders who were sexually coerced or sexually assaulted by correctional staff (Amnesty International, 1999; APBnews.com, October 10, 1999; Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, 1996; Smith, 1998; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999). Women prisoners are more likely to be sexually abused by correctional staff than are men prisoners (Donaldson, Dumond, Knopp, Struckman-Johnson, & Thompson, 1995).¹

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are few existing studies, however, that address the prevalence and nature of sexual coercion and sexual assault of women offenders by other

incarcerated women. Two known studies were conducted by Cindy and Dave Struckman-Johnson in 1994 and 1998. The first study was conducted state-wide in three men's prisons and one female prison in Nebraska. The study found, via anonymous mail surveys, that 22.0% of men and 7.7% of women reported that they experienced being "pressured or forced into sexual contact in a state prison facility" (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996, p. 74).³ Of this number, only 29% of prisoners actually reported the incident to prison staff.

A follow-up study was conducted in 1998 with 2,051 inmates and 518 staff members at seven men's prisons and three female prison units in other midwestern states. The researchers found that the sexual coercion rates reported by female inmates (those who reported at least one incident of sexual coercion) varied among the three facilities: at 6%, 8%, and 19% (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1999, 2000). A second major finding was that between 55% and 80% of all sexual coercion in the three women's units was committed by other women offenders, which is notably more than that committed by correctional staff. Incidents described by the women offenders were defined and classified by the researchers. The sexual coercion ranged from "pressure tactics" and genital touching to "force tactics" such as gang rape. Rape rates for women varied from 0% to 5% of the female offender population. Thus, most of the sexual coercion incidents were committed by other women offenders who fondled, seduced, or somehow pressured women inmates into oral and/or vaginal sex. These studies suggest that sexual coercion rates of women prisoners varied by institution. Institutional factors included institutional size, housing type, and type of offender. Female institutions that were larger, had barracks or dorm-style housing, and housed offenders who were convicted of crimes against persons were more likely to have higher rates of sexual coercion (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1999, 2000).

METHOD

Sexual misconduct among women inmates is particularly sensitive and difficult to study by outside researchers. Barriers to studying prison sexual coercion and assault include inmates' fears of the subculture, which prohibits offenders from disclosing misconduct by other inmates, the stigma of admitting involvement in the mix, lack of sensitivity from correctional officers, a researcher's limited institutional access, and resistance from prison administrators (Alarid, 1999; Eigenberg, 1989; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996).

The present research attempts to overcome some of these barriers by using a qualitative case study approach to examine situations and behaviors underlying sexual coercion and sexual assault among incarcerated women. Surveys were initially disseminated to women in a large urban county jail in the South. The surveys asked women about a variety of attitudes and behaviors relative to the institutional subculture, the inmate code, play families, and sexual and economic behaviors (see Alarid, 1996, for detailed methodology). The survey data unexpectedly uncovered information that suggested that sexual harassment and sexual coercion were present among women offenders in the jail. To further investigate this question, a random group of 25 women offenders who had previously participated in the survey were asked to mail back additional information on sexual coercion. Contact with most of the women was eventually lost as they were transferred or released from jail. One woman, Velmarine,³ maintained weekly contact through the mail for 5 years, as she transferred between four or five different female units. Velmarine conducted observations of all aspects of the prison subculture and recorded them in written letters she mailed on a weekly basis. Velmarine is a 41-year-old African American mother of three children, who is serving a 25-year prison term for her third felony conviction. Although Velmarine has been attending college and trying to keep to herself, she has admitted involvement in the mix. Velmarine detailed her own experiences of sexual coercion and rape, as well as observations of others inside various prison units as they occurred. These experiences and observations were later indexed by the author according to certain themes that emerged and compared to the existing literature.

In this study, sexual assault is distinct from the definition of sexual coercion. Sexual assault is forced sex, and it ranges from unwanted genital touching to oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex. Sexual coercion is pressuring another to have sex, ranging from verbal harassment to extortion to obtain sex (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1999, 2000).

FINDINGS

The data indicate an association between involvement in the mix and sexual coercion, in that the chances of sexual coercion and sexual assault seem to increase during the time women are involved in the mix. Although many women are approached for sex or sexually harassed when they first come to prison, the pressure eventually subsides for unaffiliated women or "prison Christians" who "don't play." However, the vast majority (75% to 80%) of

women in jails and prisons have been or are currently “in the homosexual mix,” in that they experiment with, or are involved in, coupling or relationships that include sexual favors. Many of these women are involved in both play families and sexual liaisons. Women of all races and ethnic backgrounds who are involved in sexual liaisons most often prefer the “femme”⁴ role, whereas the outnumbered “stud”⁵ role is occupied primarily by African American women. Identified lesbians are obligated to play the stud role because most prisons have a low supply of studs compared with the high number of femmes.

Four themes emerged from the data of observations and experiences, relative to sexual coercion and sexual assault among women offenders. The themes were (a) apathy toward sexual coercion and sexual assault, (b) the “jailhouse turnout femme” as the sexual aggressor, (c) insight to one rape situation, and (d) institutional factors contributing to sexual coercion.

APATHY TOWARD SEXUAL COERCION AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

The data excerpted from the letters indicate first that the official (reported) sexual assault rate among women prisoners is fairly low in women’s prisons. In other words, sexual assault occurs between prisoners, but it is not reported. The reasons for the low reported rate may be that women inmates may be desensitized to definitions of coerced sex. Due to women offenders’ past history of molestation, sexual assault, or various other sexually demeaning relationships that many have had as a child or as an adult with previous partners, these women may be overlooking the fact that they have been coerced into committing various sexual acts or have been victims of sexual assault.

Most [women here] have no concept of a healthy relationship to begin with, and thus do not recognize coerced responses. This I’ve ascertained via conversations with other women. The saddest component . . . is the female prisoner basically accepts these relationship behavioral problems in prison, as well as out in society, as “okay.” (August 21, 1997)

A second reason why forced sex may be lower among women prisoners is illustrated by another one of Velmarine’s observations: “If it were not for the fact that most female inmates capitulate with coercion, there would be more forced sex acts or threats of violence, thereby causing recognizable rape to be a more common occurrence among women prisoners” (8/21/97). In other words, the letters suggest that some of the more passive women inmates reluctantly submit to subtle or blatant verbal coercion by getting involved in

relationships of a sexual nature. The passive women may not wish to be involved in the relationship but do so for two reasons. Many incarcerated women hold a strong desire to belong to some sort of group. This need for belonging is not for protection, like in men's prisons, but for companionship and to combat loneliness, which makes doing time seemingly less painful. The problem with women in this situation is that they tend to give in to peer pressure more easily, which can cause more difficulties for them later on.

A second explanation for why women become involved in sexual relationships is that they may be intimidated by threats of violence, property destruction, or "setups." An example of a common setup is while the victim's dorm cubicle is unoccupied, the perpetrator hides contraband (a shank, bleach, etc.) and then reports the contraband to a staff member. The more passive woman, then, is trying to avoid a physical confrontation and possible fight with the perpetrator, having her own property stolen or destroyed, or losing privileges and good time for receiving a disciplinary report. In their reluctance to become involved, the issue of consent may become blurred for these women.

Throughout the past 5 years, Velmarine documented many cases of sexual coercion in which she was victimized and that she witnessed happening to other inmates. For some women, being a target of sexual coercion by a few female perpetrators was a daily experience. Common incidents of sexual coercion included loud verbal sexual harassment, genital exhibition, and masturbation. It appeared that some forms of sexual coercion, if ignored by the target, escalated to other forms of violence: "My first alert to rape danger was when one of my bunkmates began sexually propositioning me, via genital exhibition, then making threats of bodily harm . . . calling me a 'punk' while threatening to 'kick my ass'" (9/9/96).

Sometimes the escalation of sexual coercion did not always involve bodily harm. The letters were full of incidents where one woman destroyed another inmate's property.

Velmarine discusses a second incident that illustrates the importance of learning how to deal with sexual coercion:

Women were waking me up out of good, deep, sleeps to see if I was "ready" or interested [in having sex]. Of course this angered me, but I've learned over the years that there's a thin line to tread to avoid fights or getting "ganged" when rejecting the sexual overtures of incarcerated women. I used to tactlessly speak my mind, not caring how my words made them feel as long as they left me alone. The results were usually derision in return and physical group attacks in retaliation. (January 14, 1998)

**THE "JAILHOUSE TURNOUT FEMME"
AS THE SEXUAL AGGRESSOR**

In this study, the heterosexual "jailhouse turnout femmes"⁶ were more often sexually aggressive than studs. One cause of jailhouse turnout aggression was the perception that studs should always be involved with someone. Thus, studs should not ignore sexual advances from femmes. An example of the effects of unreciprocated love follows:

I felt pressured to select a black sexual "playmate" to avoid pressure from such women as "Carolyn," an unattractive, odious, obese and tall, black woman. . . . In all of her vulgarity, Carolyn would openly begin masturbating whenever she thought that I may have been looking in her general direction. . . . Carolyn stood a good 5' 10" and weighed over 300 pounds. . . . She threw a cup of hot coffee at me, and luckily missed. I believed that there's some things that we just don't back down from in life especially in jail. My acceptance of this treatment from Carolyn in front of the entire dorm would have labeled me as a coward to have anything done with, and to, that anyone might have wished. My commissary, "head" (oral sex), and nothing else would have remained mine to control. . . . As Carolyn raised her left arm and made a fist, she lumbered towards me. I picked up a sharpened pencil from my mattress. As Carolyn swung down, I side-stepped her and jumped up onto her massive body. . . . I drove the pencil deeply into the flesh of her left upper arm before I felt the pencil snap. . . . Due to the fact that the Warden had actually seen what occurred. . . . I was allowed to explain why and how Carolyn had come to a peak of bullying based upon sexual coercion because they hadn't fully understood the reasons for what they'd seen via the two-way mirror. (January 20, 1998)

Sometimes, verbal threats and sexual harassment by femmes can lead to physical altercations (e.g., property destruction, scalding with hot liquid, assault) of a stud. One of the results of this situation is that studs, perceiving the need to uphold their reputations, may spend more time in a restriction dorm or solitary confinement for fighting. These situations occur, in part, because effeminate-looking heterosexual women may be favored by correctional staff over other women perceived to be gay or masculine looking (Eigenberg, 1989). In any case, it appears that femmes currently have many advantages over studs, as indicated by Velmarine:

Forceful persuasion is used by the femmes against the "studs" for participation or sexual favors if the stud is unwilling. Currently, femmes tend to attack their studs for suspected infidelity or what they term as disrespect, e.g., flirting with other femmes. I've often observed the "stud" (often but not in all

cases) back away from the femme that turns her attentions to another “stud.”
(February 8, 1997)

Studs who ignore femmes who express sexual interest in them means rejection in the form of personal disrespect. As a result of the perceived disrespect, some femmes unite as a group and in retaliation, they become involved in sexual extortion—fabricating stories to correctional officers that a stud is causing them problems. The stud broad might receive a disciplinary report. The extortion would continue until the stud broad “agreed” to be sexually involved in a relationship. Velmarine writes,

There’s a prevalent perverse idea [by the officers and inmates] that if a lesbian gets involved with an obsessive woman who wishes to continue to harass after the involvement has ended, then that obsessive behavior [by the perpetrator] is alright. In other words, if a feminine-looking woman is physically attacking a tomboyish or masculine-looking woman, that is seen as alright because she [the femme] only wants the sex that the other should never have offered.
(August 2, 1996)

In sum, sexual pressuring, unreciprocated love, and jealousy are the basis of most female prison violence. These were the same reasons for many incidents of male prison violence (Nacci & Kane, 1983).

Like most male offenders, some women attempt to ward off sexual victimization by emphasizing toughness and de-emphasizing characteristics that are considered weak or feminine. A display of kindness or caring through giving away commissary is considered weak and tends to open up oneself to being seen as a target (Smith & Batiuk, 1989). Velmarine remembers one example:

When “Roberta” [a femme] first entered the dorm [transferred from another unit], she made a pass at me and every stud (which I don’t consider myself) in the dorm. I was given the privilege of rejecting her first. After she made her rounds, she came back with a sympathy “poor me” ploy. . . . After I rejected her offer of cunnilingus, Roberta developed a nasty attitude with me . . . so I called her to the square (challenged her to a physical fight). She backed down and left me alone. (August 21, 1997)

Homosexual alliances were often formed by studs as a form of protection from sexual advances and assaults. Most of these relationships were destructive and short-lived:

Some stud broads reacted to the harassment by disrespecting their femme during the short-term relationship. After using them for sex, some stud broads would go to great lengths to rid themselves of the femme in hopes that they seem less appealing to other potential harassers. Verbal abuse in public was the most common form of disrespect between feuding partners. (September 12, 1998)

For the most part, female studs seem to deal with femme harassment in isolation. Studs do not form play families as protective liaisons against femme harassment.

The reluctant sexual submission of women offenders to other, more aggressive women inmates while in prison mirrors past experiences of coerced relationships with men outside of prison. Furthermore, the lesbian target and the female heterosexual aggressor observed in this study were similar to the roles found in Wooden and Parker's (1982) study of domineering male heterosexual "jockers" who targeted gay men for sex.

INSIGHT INTO ONE RAPE SITUATION

Based on the data obtained during the 5-year period, rape occurred at a much lower rate than other forms of sexual behavior. However, when rapes did occur among women offenders, there were multiple perpetrators rather than a single female offender. Davis (1968) found that many male sexual liaisons developed after inmates were threatened with gang rape or following a gang rape incident. This does not appear to be the case for women. In this situation, it is likely that gang rape was used as the instrument to express feelings of resentment and anger that other inmates had toward their target. The following situation depicts the events that preceded Velmarine's rape, the trauma of the rape itself, and the aftermath:

Back in July of 1991, the . . . jail was extremely overcrowded. There were three women crammed into cells designed to house one or two women. I was sharing a cell with two Hispanic women, "Valerie" and "Anna." Valerie was more feminine and Anna, her lover, was more masculine. Nonetheless, Anna had made it clear on several occasions that she was attracted to me. I decided to give a little attention to "Sherylynn" a woman in the cell next to ours who had been subtly flirting for quite a while. . . . In spite of Anna's quiet protest, I moved into Sherylynn's cell that same night just before our doors were racked.

After one fantastic night with Sherylynn, I made out my commissary list using most of my allocated order spaces on her. What I had not counted on was Sherylynn being one of the women that has been in such abusive relationships with men that they can't accept someone loving and being kind to

them. . . . Sherylynn had to have mates fighting over her to make herself feel worth something. Once Sherylynn had the commissary I'd purchased for her, she . . . pitted Anna against me and threw me out [of her cell]. Sherylynn wasn't getting [the reaction] that she wanted from Anna, so she began playing back up to me. Anna caught on to what Sherylynn was doing and quickly made amends with me. . . . [Anna] let me move back into the cell with her and Valerie. The next week, when I couldn't make store, Anna would spend on me like I was accustomed to doing for others.

One night after Anna latched on to my hand in her sleep, I found myself allowing Sherylynn to join me in the shower. Anna was so infuriated that she called 15-20 women in the tank to observe Sherylynn and I, while Anna threw my belongings out of my cell. . . . I moved into a cell with an older harmless Caucasian woman.

Three days later . . . while I was standing at the bars of the dayroom, [and Valerie and two other inmates left to go to the law library], a stocky black woman named "Joniqua" (a friend of Sherylynn's) grabbed me from behind. When I began to struggle, Sherylynn and one other woman grabbed my arms. Anna was directing them to "Bring her into my cell, c'mon hurry, bring her in here!" I felt the weight of three more women pushing me into the cell. Joniqua got my panties off and threw them into the dayroom. I realized then that this was no practical joke or game. I was stripped of my bra and county dress (all women wore one piece dresses in the County Jail at that time). While four women were holding me down, Anna ordered one grotesque female to sit on my face and to force me to perform an act of cunnilingus. When I refused to cooperate, and threatened to bite her if she tried, they moved me to a smaller cell. As I struggled on the floor of Cell #7, I felt fists pummeling my legs and thighs. When I relaxed under the blows, Anna straddled my face while begging me to "just stick your tongue out a little bit." If I would have complied with Anna's pleas, (I found out later) that Sherylynn and Joniqua would have forced as many women to try to have me in the same manner. To add to my humiliation, Anna had secreted vaginal fluids all over my nose and mouth, which seemed to appeal to the animalistic frenzy these women had worked themselves into.

The girl who was in Cell #7 was ordered out, and it was given to me. When my grievance about the rape incident was completely ignored [by staff], I began to be asked to be racked in my cell all day except for meals and showers to keep Anna, Sherylynn and Joniqua from fondling me whenever they felt the safe urge. Everytime I'd come out for a shower, I'd get fondled or dragged out naked to the dayroom. After about two weeks of this living hell, a nurse came to my rescue. I was in the shower, and Sherylynn and Joniqua were fondling my nipples, when the nurse wheeled in the medicine cart. I suddenly got brave and shouted: "Get your hands off my tits!" Sherylynn and Joniqua didn't see the nurse, and began to assault me. The nurse wheeled her cart out of the vestibule as if escaping a fire. The nurse ran straight to a Deputy and said "There's an inmate about to be raped in there!" I was moved out of the tank [the same day].

When I got transferred to prison [from the County Jail], Sherylynn was there and laughingly told me how she and Joniqua charmed the Deputies at the disciplinary hearing and only received 10 days loss of privileges (no commissary or visits), with no segregation or loss of good time. Anna's excuse later given to me [for the rape] was: "None of this would have ever happened if you hadn't been bragging about how good you were." (August 2, 1996)

This incident demonstrates that continued sexual harassment and fondling occurred weeks after the rape, until Velmarine saw an opportunity to obtain a transfer to a different part of the jail. These incidents seem to follow offenders to prison, where victimization is likely to continue.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SEXUAL COERCION

As previously mentioned, Velmarine did time in at least five different prison units in a period of 5 years, and she was therefore able to compare various institutional environments. The data in the letters indicated that there were two main institutional factors that contributed to increasing incidences of sexual coercion and sexual assault among women prisoners: (a) open dormitory-style housing and (b) correctional staff ignoring or encouraging offender sexual behavior.

Institutions with a greater proportion of open dormitory-style housing seemed to have more incidences of sexual coercion and sexual assault than areas with one- or two-person cells. In addition to having open dormitory housing, there were some prison units that had entire areas with dorms or cubicles for women on "restriction." The restriction dorm is the place where women are housed for temporary loss of privileges for prison rule violations. Velmarine pointed out that more inmate rapes occur in the restriction dorm, where the deprivation factor is temporarily intensified for all inmates, due to no television, no outside recreation time, no scrabble/cards/dominos, or other activities. Below is an example of one such witnessed incident:

On the date of 9/1/96, I observed two Black "stud broads," one White "stud," and four black femmes grab a Hispanic femme and half carry, half drag, her off into a corner of Restriction Dorm where there was no camera coverage, nor were the Officers able to view the scenario from the outside of the dorm.

After they stripped her out of her clothes, one of the Black stud broads vaginally penetrated the Victim with her fingers, the other Black stud administered passion marks to the victim's neck while the White "stud" continued to help hold the victim down. Several femmes looked on and gave loud blow-by-blow descriptions of what was transpiring. After about five minutes of this commo-

tion, the victim was called out by Officers amid yells from the dorm inmates to “cover up her neck. The victim . . . screamed and hollered “no” every step of the way. This leads me to believe that an involuntary sexual act had taken place with force, which equals rape irregardless of how the victim later explained it to inquiring staff. The inmate chose not to tell (for good reason), came back into the dorm trying to smile or “grin it off,” although she still appeared a bit shaken. So ends another episode of sexual exploitation among women. It saddens me to realize that these victims are not always able to recognize the fact that they’ve been victimized. The same Black “stud” that gave the “hicky” to that inmate was the same one that grabbed my buttocks a few mornings later while I was returning from breakfast.

Had I tried to go to any Officer about some of the stressful things I was experiencing in Restriction Dorm (a.k.a. the Butt Naked Club—called that by Officers and Inmates alike), I would have been laughed away from their presence. (September 6, 1996)

The actions (or inactions) of some correctional officers have been shown to contribute to the problem of offender sexual coercion in men’s prisons (Eigenberg, 1989). This problem seems to be present in women’s institutions as well. The correctional officers who are part of the problem tend to be undereducated about sexual coercion and sexual assault, less rigid and less consistent about rule enforcement, and may even encourage unruly behavior to “have fun” or to “play” with inmates. For example, sexually victimized inmates who attempt to prevent an incident are sometimes stigmatized through laughter and name-calling by correctional officers, even in the presence of inmates. A more serious form of officer misconduct is encouragement from correctional officers and other inmates to engage in sexual behavior. Velmarine writes about an incident in which another inmate [“Yvonne”] is attempting to coerce her into sexual activity:

With the CO’s [correctional officers] joking around with Yvonne, and telling her she is doing the right thing, [and with] inmates telling Yvonne that I’ll come around, I don’t have a chance in hell of deterring Yvonne’s attempted affections or threats.

Correctional officers who are advocates of prisoners’ welfare are held in disdain by other correctional officers (Lockwood, 1980). The same situation seems to hold true in women’s prisons. Velmarine offers a suggestion that would likely decrease sexual coercion and assault:

CO’s who perform their jobs *well* are often resented by inmates, but they’re respected. The officer’s rigid adherence to the rules eradicates most otherwise

intended criminal behavior during their assigned work area and shift with simply their visibility, as these officers are known for their zero tolerance for rule infractions. I presume that a good officer's presence would counter . . . coerced and consensual sexual acts among women. (August 21, 1997)

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative study examined themes of sexual coercion and sexual assault among women offenders that surfaced in prison letters sent by an incarcerated woman during a 5-year period. One caveat is that this study was not meant to represent all situations of sexual misconduct behind bars—only the situations that were directly experienced or observed by one offender. Experiences of women targets in prison varied among small samples of women in other studies (Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996).

This study found that sexual pressuring and sexual harassment were much more prevalent than sexual assault in women's prisons. Although many women prisoners experienced sexual coercion at some point while in prison, women who participated in homosexual liaisons, particularly in the masculine role of the stud, were more likely to experience repeated incidences of sexual coercion.

A related finding was that sexual-pressure tactics may be a related factor in later incidences of physical violence and sexual assault among women offenders. These findings suggest that to prevent incidences of sexual assault among offenders, correctional staff may wish to focus on identifying and curbing sexual coercion. Ignoring or encouraging sexual coercion may contribute to volatile and potentially violent situations.

A third finding was the dynamics between sexually aggressive heterosexual femmes and their targeted studs. Femmes seem to have become more sexually aggressive because there are few current restraints on their behavior. Heterosexual women possessing feminine qualities do not seem to be perceived by officers as an institutional threat. This situation might be prevented by correctional-staff education and consistent reprimand of all parties involved.

Because sexual coercion in women's prisons is an underresearched topic, the implications of the data were meant to suggest new ways for researchers to further examine the nature and prevalence of sexual coercion and sexual assault in women's jails and prisons. Social learning theory has been suggested as an explanation of women's sexual aggression. Using social learning theory, Anderson (1998) found that college women who had been sexually abused in the past and/or who viewed sexual relationships as adversarial

were more likely to be sexually aggressive than nonabused, nonadversarial women. Allgeier and Lamping (1998) suggest methods of measuring sexual coercion that might be applied to women in prison.

The role that correctional institutions and prison administrators have played regarding prevention, intervention, and prosecution of sexual assaults has been slowly improving. Identifying and segregating targets from perpetrators has been suggested as a prevention tactic. Segregation has resulted in increased institutional safety for some targets, such as gay and bisexual men, but incidents of sexual coercion still occur in protective custody (Alarid, 2000). Others have suggested that to prevent sexual coercion, facilities may wish to increase surveillance in vulnerable areas where assaults have been known to occur. These areas include "transportation vans, holding tanks, shower rooms, stairways and storage areas" (Cotton & Groth, 1982, p. 54). This study suggests that in vulnerable areas, such as restriction dorms, prison administrators should install and make regular use of more cameras.

Finally, prosecuting perpetrators of pressured or forced sex has drawn increased attention. It has been suggested that facilities should inform new inmates of the probability they may be sexually assaulted while incarcerated. Information should be given to new inmates about how to avoid becoming a target and what medical, legal, and/or psychological help is available if someone is targeted (Cotton & Groth, 1982; Dallao, 1996; Lockwood, 1985).

NOTES

1. On March 4, 1999, Amnesty International launched a campaign to pass laws to criminalize the sexual misconduct of prison staff in 13 states. As a result of their efforts, six states enacted laws. As of June 2000, seven states still did not have any laws against sexual misconduct in prison: Alabama, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin (Amnesty International, 1999).

2. In 1999, there were approximately 138,000 women behind bars (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). If we assume that 7.7% of women in prison are sexually assaulted, there would be more than 10,600 women victims.

3. All participant names and places have been changed to fictitious names to protect the confidentiality of individuals. Written permission was granted to use Velmarine Oliphant Szabo's real name.

4. A "femme" is a slang term used by prisoners for a female inmate who plays the feminine role in the sexual/courting relationship (Alarid, 1996).

5. A "stud," "butch," "little boy," or "mac daddy" are slang terms used for female inmates who speak, dress, and play a masculine role in a sexual/courting relationship. Studs may initially coax a femme with commissary to become interested in a sexual liaison. Once the two become a couple, the stud then demands goods (commissary) and services (clean the cell, wash clothes) from the femme. The stud may threaten to deny sex or physically abuse the femme in some way if the stud does not get what "he" wants (Alarid, 1996).

6. A "jailhouse turnout" or "douche bag" is a woman who experiments with homosexual sex for the first time while in jail or prison. A jailhouse turnout chooses either a femme or a butch role, and may move between both roles.

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