

FPWP/HIBISCUS DIRECTOR'S REPORT

FPWP/Hibiscus was established in 1986 to provide support for women prisoners of all origins and nationalities within the Criminal Justice System. The objectives of the organisation are to assist BME women and foreign national prisoners to establish, develop, and maintain contacts with their loved ones in their countries of origins who are often thousands of miles away; to educate personnel in the prison service and the general public about the conditions of these prisoners and highlight their special needs; to provide advocacy for prisoners without the means or ability to access their rights.

FPWP/Hibiscus works with women prisoners from all over the globe. In the last twelve months we have worked with over 1,600 women 55% of whom were from the Caribbean and West Africa, the others 45% are from Europe, Vietnam, China and many other nations.

The drugs trade is a universal phenomenon. However, it is the women who are prosecuted for being couriers and who serve the longest sentences. They are therefore separated from their families and loved ones for many years. We work with these women from the time that they arrive in the prison system through to their eventual release, deportation and resettlement into their communities.

Our work with women who have been arrested for other offences is both demanding and time consuming. The number of women that are arrested upon arrival at UK airports, for holding false passports and other irregularities in their documentation has increase dramatically in the past year. Therefore the need for immigration advice and proper legal representation has meant expanding partnerships and referrals to specialist agencies, and we are grateful to the few specialist organisations who accept our referrals for their help. These women, who are arrested for holding false passports or irregular documentation, tend to serve short sentences, but their immediate needs upon arrest are still urgent and upsetting and must be addressed.

The Criminal Justice System has hardly changed during the past year and still persists in the misguided and counter-productive manner of handing out long deterrent sentences to first time offenders, many of whom were coerced or deceived into offending. Although the early removal scheme to some extent avoids this erroneous approach and is a method of circumventing the system, the prisons are still clogged up by women who should not receive custodial sentences. We have continued to campaign for shorter sentences and for consideration of the drug mule's background circumstances to be taken into account. To this end, we have continued to make representations to the Sentencing Guidelines Council. The success of our educational campaign should not instil complacency amongst those who are responsible for arresting, convicting, sentencing and imprisoning these vulnerable women.

This year the organisation celebrated two decades of working with women in prisons throughout the UK, and abroad. During 2006 we were awarded several honours in

recognition of our work, and our enlightenment campaign to reduce the numbers of foreign national which resulted in numbers falling dramatically.

It is no surprise that these awards were given for the effective use of information, in educating the inmates, prison officials, potential drug couriers, politicians and the general public. Information has served both to educate people and to raise the issue of women prisoners on the political agenda. In Nigeria and Jamaica and Trinidad enlightenment campaigns have taught potential couriers, among the mass of the desperate and poor women in society, that drug smuggling is not a solution. The lesson that drug smuggling is itself a serious problem has begun to be heard. In the UK, we have continued to highlight the fact that most women prisoners are victims to be rehabilitated and not only criminals to be punished.

The first honour was the New York Festival Gold Award for public education which we received for a one minute animated film. This depicted a true story of a drug mule being forced into swallowing cocaine and the impact the separation had on her children while serving ten years in prison in the UK. This campaign was commissioned by the Foreign and Commonwealth office and was shown repeatedly on Jamaican TV and cinema screens. It contributed to the dramatic reduction of drug couriers coming from Jamaica to the UK.

FPWP/Hibiscus was also named best UK charity of the Year for its good management and success in public education on the subject of the crisis of foreign nationals in UK prisons. With a very modest budget and with the work of dedicated volunteers, we have managed to carry out the job of very costly government bureaucracies. Through our

educational campaigns we have deterred women from offending, and as a result we have saved millions which would have been spent on the imprisonment of these women.

Owing to the success of Hibiscus' campaign, in recent years the dealers have again shifted their activities from Jamaica to Trinidad and West Africa, including Nigeria and Ghana. After requests from governments and civil society organizations, we have launched the education campaigns in Trinidad and Nigeria, using the animated film and very graphic posters. A similar campaign will be launched in Ghana in the near future.

The awarding of these honours and the interest shown by agencies worldwide demonstrates the impact that the charity is having on the problem of women prisoners who have been used as pawns and foot soldiers in international drug wars. The drug barons, almost all men, use the resources at their disposal with a total lack of compassion. They turn their drug wars into wars against poor, desperate women. This year has been our best so far and we can be proud of our organization and the international awards it received.

We are now a team of seven paid staff in the UK three in Jamaica and 12 volunteers and between us speak 12 languages. This year Hibiscus had to cope with several changes which affected the work of the organisation. This included the increase in the female prison population to over 4,500; a dramatic increase in the number of Nigerian women arrested for false documentation; and the increased demand for Hibiscus services. We have managed to cope with the changing situation, and the new contracts with two additional prisons have been a success. It is a pleasure to report that contact has been made with nearly every non-English speaking prisoner sentenced and remanded during

the past year. These prisoners inability to communicate represented almost insurmountable problems for themselves and the prison staff. Through Hibiscus and its volunteers who speak the women's languages, most of the prisons are now able to reach out to the women and make relationships with the staff less stressful, commensurable and fruitful. These contracts have indeed served as a good model for the prisons to achieve good practice in providing services for their inmates.

As the only organisation working with foreign national women, some of their special needs put a strain on the welfare budget of Hibiscus. The lack of discharge grants to foreign nationals by the Prison Service means that we are still in-undated with demands for resettlement support to help with resettlement, when they are deported. FPWP/Hibiscus continues helping the women maintain contacts with loved ones and dependents, providing counselling service through structured meetings and discussion groups; advocacy, assistance including cloths, money and school fees. This takes place especially through our office in Kingston, Jamaica.

OLGA HEAVEN
DIRECTOR