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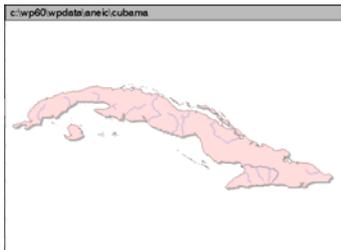
Situation of Women in Cuba's Prisons

Maritza Lugo Fernández

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**Situation of Women
in Cuba's Prisons**

Maritza Lugo Fernandez

Maritza Lugo Fernandez earned a name for herself as an opposition leader against the Castro regime. She was acting president of the Partido Democratico 30 de Noviembre Frank Pais (Frank Pais 30 November Democratic Party). For her activities in defense of human rights, she served 5 years in prison on an intermittent basis. She was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. She arrived as an exile in the United States on January 11, 2002.

SITUATION OF WOMEN
IN CUBA'S PRISONS

Maritza Lugo Fernández
ICCAS Occasional Paper Series
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DEDICATION

This modest work is dedicated to those who suffered the most as a result of my imprisonment in Castro's jails: my daughters Gladis and Rosalía de las Nieves Ibarra Lugo, and my mother Gladys Fernández.

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Introduction*

It is of great personal interest to me that these events, which many women in Cuba and I have gone through and continue to go through, should become known to everyone, so as to ensure that everything that goes on today in Cuba's prisons never happens again after Cuba becomes a truly free and democratic state.

In the following pages, I give you some insight into the plight of women in Cuba's prisons, the working of the penitentiary system in recent years, and proposals for a transition in Cuba with respect to the penitentiary system and female inmates' living conditions.

* Maritza Lugo Fernández, from Santa María del Rosario, Havana, Cuba, earned a name for herself as an opposition leader against the Castro regime. She was acting president of the Partido Democrático 30 de Noviembre Frank País [Frank País 30 November Democratic Party]. For her activities in defense of human rights, she served 5 years in prison on an intermittent basis. She was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. She arrived as an exile in the United States on January 11, 2002.

CHAPTER I

Women's Prisons in Cuba

Since the creation of prisons in the world, especially women's prisons, the suffering endured by all the women who have had the misfortune of having to live through this sad experience has been great. More so if their sentences were unjust. But never have female inmates in Cuba suffered as much as they have in the last 43 years, under the Castro dictatorship. Prior to Fidel Castro's taking power in 1959, fewer than five prisons existed in Cuba. At present, there are dozens. The comparison, in and of itself, reflects the increase in female inmates on the island since Castroism was imposed as the model for exerting control over the will of the Cuban people.

In Cuba, where tyranny, despotism, hunger, poverty and injustice reign, as meted out by that abusive and murderous regime, everything is a crime. Eating meat is punishable under Cuban law. A person cannot prosper nor have individual projects, because doing so makes one subject to investigation by police control mechanisms. Seeking out sources for a better living is dangerous and can carry long prison terms for Cubans, unless one has the backing of the communist mafia, which controls everything.

Due to the hardships suffered by the Cuban people and since almost everything in the country is a crime, prisons number in the hundreds. Grievously, many of those with high inmate populations are women's detention centers. The government has seen itself forced to build more of these grim cemeteries of the living-dead, as women's prisons are called by those who have the misfortune of having to live there—defenseless and unprotected, thinking that they may never get out, as has happened to some of their fellow inmates. Those who do manage to get out are psychologically scarred, requiring many years to recover only partially and never being able to forget this harsh experience. According to studies conducted by the independent press in Cuba and Anti-Castro Internal Opposition groups, the majority of female former inmates are afflicted with these problems upon their release from prison.

In these prisons, the most numerous crimes are those of an economic nature, representing approximately 50%. Among these crimes are "theft against the State" (embezzlement) which holds the top spot, followed by drug-related crimes, which account for approximately 20%. Also numbering in the 20% range are violent crimes and other "acts of violence," such as murder, attempted murder and battery.

The final 10% is made up by other cases such as corruption of minors, contempt, bribery, public disorder, and instigation to commit a crime. There are few cases of female political prisoners, since the regime disguises their cases as other common crimes and never allows them to communicate with each other, to avoid their lending support to one another.

Around 2002, the totalitarian regime in Cuba also saw the need to build a special prison for the so-called "jineteras," who are nothing more than young Cuban women who earn a

living and support their families by practicing prostitution. “Just one more achievement of Fidel Castro’s revolution.” Once apprehended, hundreds of these young Cuban women are forced to work in the fields, where they are exploited as slaves.

CHAPTER II

Living Conditions

Living conditions within Cuba's prisons are inhuman. The punishment cells are just one meter wide by two meters long. Bodily needs must be done in an 8-inch-diameter hole in the floor, located at one end of the cell, through which rats and roaches come in, especially at night. Located over the hole is a 2-inch pipe where water for drinking as well as bathing purposes flows in. Prison authorities turn on the water for just a few minutes and the spray is so strong that it hits the wall and wets everything, including the place where the inmate must lie down. This is nothing more than a concrete slab, very similar to a tomb, with no mattress, sheet or anything else with which to cover oneself during the day.

At approximately 11 o'clock at night, nylon sacks full of strips, which serve as mattresses, are handed out. Each inmate is also handed a sheet, which is her property, provided to her by her family so she can have something with which to cover herself. If not, the inmate would have nothing with which to cover her body and protect herself against the cold and mosquitoes. All of these things are picked up and taken away at 6 in the morning. In wintertime, these places are terribly cold. In summertime, the heat and humidity are infernal. In addition, these places are completely mosquito-infested.

These cells have neither electricity nor windows; there is only a breathing hole through which neither daylight nor ventilation comes in. In these places, one does not know whether it is day or night. The only way to approximate the time of day is by when it is lunch- and dinnertime. Even sleeping is impossible. Often, some prisoners were negatively affected by the conditions of the place. Others suffered nervous breakdowns due to claustrophobia or fear of isolation. Those who found the place intolerable would attempt suicide. These women would have their clothes removed and would be left with nothing in the cell, to suffer from the cold in winter or the heat in summer. In addition, mosquito bites during the summer months made this a veritable hell for these women.

In wintertime, rats would seek out the body heat of the inmates, who would occasionally be bitten by the rodents. This is a form of torturing the inmates, both physically and mentally. Therefore, when inmates protested about something or did something that was not to the liking of the authorities, the latter would threaten to send them to the punishment cells, and the inmates would start to tremble. This just goes to show the inhumanity of the Castro regime's prison system.

On the other hand, other conditions exist in the areas that house the general prison population. The cubicles, where four inmates live, are approximately 3 meters wide by 4 meters long, with a toilet, which consists of a hole—also some 8 inches in diameter—in the floor, which the inmates call a "polaco." There is also a pipe in the wall through which the water flows in at bath time. These pipes do have a knob to turn the water on and off.

There is also a small sink, which can never be used because it is always in bad shape, either out of order or stopped up. These are the best cells.

There are other larger ones, which hold 16 or more inmates, where coexistence is also very difficult. These cubicles are generally kept shut with bars and enormous padlocks, which are opened only when the inmates are taken to the mess hall, or to the yard to get some sun for 20 minutes three times a week. Not all the wards have TV sets; some are brought by family members of the inmates.

The water is turned on at whatever time the authorities determine, and sometimes it is not long enough for all the inmates to bathe and to collect it in order to have something to drink until whenever they decide to turn it back on. The filthiness of the water is clearly visible in the plastic bottles where the drinking water is stored.

Rats, roaches, insects and other unknown pests are everywhere, in search of food. In the process, they infect everything in their path, negatively affecting the inmates' health. The lack of ventilation also makes the days intolerable. As night falls and the mosquitoes come out, the prisoners become desperate, especially those who do not have mosquito nets. Others resign themselves to bearing the heat under the sheets, which makes life in there even harder.

The bunk beds are made of iron. The top bunks are very uncomfortable to climb up on, which is an impossible feat for older and sick women, who must use the lower bunks, provided that another conscientious and humane inmate is willing to give it up to them in order to help them, because the authorities could not care less about that. In response to the inmates' complaints, the prison guards threaten and tell them, "YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN YOURSELF SENT TO PRISON." The mattresses are also nylon sacks filled with strips, which give off a lot of heat in the summer nights. Some inmates opt to lie down on the floor to cool off a bit, first taking measures such as covering their ears so that the many insects do not get in them.

It is a highly dangerous situation for a prison to be without electric power, especially at nighttime. However, this happens in Cuba's prisons. In a prison where rivalries, hatreds and all types of ill will and wickedness exist, where prisoners who are very dangerous to society and have committed violent crimes, such as murder, are mixed in with other prisoners—many of whom are victims of the system—women who do not deserve to be in a place such as this, as is the case with political prisoners, who have to find the strength to survive in these hellholes, the lives of the most vulnerable inmates are in constant peril. Whenever the prison is covered in darkness for several hours, the excuse given by the authorities is that the power plant engines are experiencing problems.

Almost all the cubicles have leaks; e.g., water leaking from the bathroom on the level above it. This is fetid water, which at times does not allow the inmates to sleep, because the drops fall on their beds. These cannot be moved, either because they are anchored to the floor, or because there is no room to do so. This has been going on for years, as the stalactites on the ceiling attest.

On a monthly basis, the prison sells the inmates a voucher for personal hygiene products, consisting of a tube of toothpaste, one roll of toilet paper, one bar of bath soap and another of laundry soap, and 12 paper sanitary pads. All of these are of the poorest quality and would seem to be factory or store rejects.

The prisons sit atop swamps produced by the waters that run off from the prison bathrooms and kitchen. These waters, that have been accumulating under the prison for so long, give off a very foul odor and are a breeding ground for rats, flies and mosquitoes, which can be the direct cause of the infections that proliferate in the facility.

Under this putrefaction lie the pipes that carry the water used by the inmates. They are in a bad state of repair and full of breaks. When the water is turned on, these breaks contribute to the water's reaching the prisoners in a contaminated state. When the inmates gather the samples of contaminated water in bottles, the samples they hand to the authorities are full of mud and live larvae. The officials who visit the prisoners in an inspection capacity tell them not to use the water immediately upon turning it on, and to let it run before gathering it for drinking purposes. They claim that they are going to look into the matter, but the topic is never mentioned again, unless it is the inmates who bring it up.

CHAPTER III

Food

The food which the prison offers the female inmates is of the worst quality, served in tiny portions, poorly prepared and, at times, spoiled. The menu is not varied, since they repeat the same item several days in a row until they have exhausted all supplies of it. For example, when cabbage is in season, they serve this vegetable every day for lunch and dinner in different ways—raw, parboiled, etc. When the prison gets potatoes, it is the same story, and so on and so forth. The inmates are only served a tiny piece of meat when it is a holiday for the regime, such as July 26, December 31, Mother's Day or when there are problems at the prison or when there is a visitor whom they want to impress.

On the day that this “main course” is served, as dinners which contain meat have been dubbed, everything is super-controlled by the prison officials and a reinforcement of guards. All the chunks of meat are strictly counted and controlled, as if this were something exceptional and unique. Each inmate has to go personally to the mess hall, and if she fails to do so, a guard goes to her cubicle and asks her why she did not go. Then the guard must inform her superiors, under the suspicion that the prisoner might be making a protest. The inmates' desire to eat a little piece of meat drives them to race to the mess hall. Only the political prisoners refrain from going, to show how unimportant that is to them, thereby piquing the curiosity of the common prisoners. Instead, the political prisoners leave a little piece of chicken in the officials' hands, who do not know what to do with it.

On the other hand, the prison guards and authorities have their own dining room and kitchen, with a group of prisoners at their disposal. These inmates, out of fear, act as slaves at the service of the elite ranks of the Cuban penitentiary system. In addition, prison officials and reeducators have a warehouse full of good food. There is no shortage of protein and other basic dietary requirements here.

Inmates who receive visits from their families can count on having their diets boosted and supplemented. Family members are aware of the precarious conditions that exist in Cuba's prisons and devote part of their time to improving the “jaba,” as the basket used to transport food items to the prisoners, during their visits to the inmates, is known. Not all prisoners receive visits. Some of them come from families with limited resources who barely have the financial means to pay for the trip from their homes to the prison site.

The food items permitted by the prison are limited and must meet many requirements. Visitors may not bring prisoners any products that are perishable, nor may they bring prepared dishes. Any prepared food must be eaten during the visit, which is very difficult to do since the tension, stress and nervous state caused by the excitement of seeing their family members render this nearly impossible. The food items that are allowed into the prison are crackers, cereals, toast, candies, powdered milk; in short, food that can withstand being in a damp place with high temperatures.

Many of the women inside the prison trade their belongings for food. At bedtime, the hunger pangs become intolerable. Some develop certain productive skills, such as knitting, embroidering, drawing, doing manicures, etc., in order to have something to trade in exchange for anything to eat.

Another thing that also affects the inmates greatly is the schedule for serving lunch and dinner: it is never the same. Breakfast, which consists of some tea with a small piece of bread—if and when it is served—is at approximately seven a.m. Lunch is served at whatever time it is ready—usually two hours after breakfast, and sometimes sooner than that. They do this so they can finish early. To avoid turning off the burners, dinner is served shortly after lunch, when the prisoners still have not finished digesting the soup they had for lunch. Five or six hours later, hunger begins to set in, and the inmates usually go to bed hungry. When dinner is served very late, they tell the prisoners that there was no fuel for the stoves, and that they had had to cook with firewood. The inmates have to accept their lot. Otherwise, if they protest, they are taken off to the punishment cells where they continue to be hungry, under even worse conditions.

CHAPTER IV

Medical Care

Despite the fact that the dictatorial regime that is in power in Cuba claims to be a world power in the field of medicine, medical care throughout the island is a veritable disaster. The problem is worse in the prisons, where the female inmates are completely dependent on the penal authorities and have no possibility whatever of having the periodic check-ups which, as women, they require.

For an inmate to be seen by a doctor, she must write her name down on a list several days in advance. When her turn comes, if she has not had any problems, and if there are guards available to do so, she is taken to be assessed clinically. They cannot always take care of everyone who needs this service, given the great number of inmates and the variety of problems they have. The care provided by the doctors is very limited. When an emergency occurs, such as an asthma attack, strong pain, loss of consciousness, fainting spell or some case involving bleeding, the prisoners start shouting and banging on the locks and bars for the authorities to come and give the proper medical care. Only in this way will the guards do something and take the inmate to the infirmary, where she is given an injection or some kind of medication, provided that the doctors have it in stock. Then she is returned to her cell. Only in the case of evident death is the inmate removed from the prison and taken to a hospital.

There have been several instances of women who have died because they did not receive medical attention in time, especially in cases of acute asthma attacks. Some prisoners have attempted suicide. However, the authorities tell the inmates that they have no means of transportation to take them on an urgent basis to specialized medical centers. There are times when transportation is available, but there is no fuel, and other times when breakdowns make it impossible to move the patients.

There is a shortage of medications. Those family members who can, bring the inmates whatever they are able to get their hands on, since even an aspirin is a hard-to-find commodity. At times, there are outbreaks of diarrhea, produced by spoiled food. The health measures practiced by the prison authorities consist of handing out, in large quantities and every so often, guava tea or some other kind of infusion.

The women are also prey to being infected by parasite-related diseases caused and spread due to the lack of hygiene, the humidity, as well as the contaminated and stagnant water with which they have to bathe and also drink. The water which the inmates consume is full of harmful agents which they all ignore but which are clearly visible. When the prisoners collect samples to show them to officials who were taking the count, the latter would simply tell them not to take any water when they first opened the faucet; to let it run a bit so that the dirty and foul-smelling water could flow out. They would take the sample and that would be the end of that.

In the same prison, women who are infected with AIDS are put together with those who are not; this constitutes a major health risk due to the high degree of violence that exists in these places, where incidents of bloodshed are commonplace.

The majority of doctors and nurses are inmates of the same prison facility, women who are in no condition or lack the ability to do their work properly, since they are beset by problems caused by the prison and the crime they committed.

When a prisoner becomes pregnant following a conjugal visit, or enters the penal system already with child, the prison authorities do everything in their power to make her have an abortion. When they fail in their efforts, about five months into the pregnancy, the inmate is transferred to the prison infirmary, where the care is terrible and she is witness to one atrocity after another. But she is forced to remain there, although she might prefer to be in a cell block with the other prisoners. The hapless baby is born right there, in the infirmary, where he or she is also a prisoner until the age of six months, at which time a relative can claim the infant and take him or her away. If the child has no family member who can take him or her in, the child becomes a ward of the state until the mother is released.

CHAPTER V

Violence

There is a high incidence of violence in women's prisons, even greater than in men's penitentiaries. This violence is provoked by the many tensions, altered emotional states, injustices, needs, abuses and, above all, despair. Violent crimes are commonplace. The same is true of arguments and acts of aggression, at times brought on by feelings of impotence and the inability to tolerate the rigors of a maximum security prison. Prisoners inflict harm on themselves, in the hope that they will be taken to the hospital and be able to get out for a time and improve their living conditions. This happens more often in the punishment cells, where several women have died in the attempt, since they have to be seriously injured to be taken out of the cells. In other cases, they are punished even longer, and do not go anywhere. More than a few inmates have wires or sharp objects embedded in their bodies, which they inserted in themselves with full knowledge and intent. Many bear horrible scars and signs attesting to prior incidents of self-inflicted injury.

When, spurred by nervous breakdowns, prisoners try to take their own lives, preferring to be dead rather than to continue living out long sentences in inhuman conditions, with no rights or protection, the reaction of the prison authorities is to treat these attempts as a serious lack of discipline. They do not give them the necessary specialized medical care, as these cases require, and the inmates are sent to the punishment cells for alleged violations of penitentiary regulations.

In these punishment cells, those who suffer from nervous disorders quickly worsen and when they become insufferable, or no longer tolerable due to attacks and crises, they are sent to a psychiatric hospital, although it is almost always already too late. Several women do not react like normal human beings. One of the methods frequently used to treat these cases is the dreaded electroshock, to ensure that they do not recall the horrible things they have experienced and seen in prison. In those cases in which the inmates are not suffering from nervous disorders, they become traumatized when they are taken to the punishment cells, as a result of the horrible sights and sounds to which they are subjected there.

Another cause of violence is homosexuality. The prison keeps gay inmates mixed in together with the other prisoners, which leads to many acts of violence and bloodshed. Still another cause of violence is the mistreatment on the part of the guards, officials and "reeducators." On occasion, when they beat a prisoner, the other inmates rebel, resulting in major disturbances which have a very negative impact on the inmates.

CHAPTER VI

Work Exploitation

Part of the Cuban penitentiary system is to make the inmates work in exchange for “benefits,” such as extra visits, being transferred to a better cell block where there is a bit more freedom, being able to watch TV and having their sentences reduced. The prison authorities take advantage of the fact that the inmates want to improve their lot and get out as quickly as possible, and exploit them to the maximum. They put many of them to work several hours a day under the sun and rain, under conditions that are inhuman. In the field, the inmates do different kinds of labor. These jobs may involve working in the kitchen, tending the animals, mowing the grass and cleaning the grounds surrounding the prison. This is a way to enslave the women and get the most out of them as cheap labor. There are places in the countryside where the inmates are taken to work at planting and transporting decorative plants to be exported and sold in dollars; these plants are very expensive and the vast majority of inmates are not paid. If the prison is located in a place with citrus groves, the prisoners are put to gather the crops and plant them.

The prison does not provide the inmates with cleaning products to maintain a certain degree of cleanliness in the cells and cubicles in which they live. The prisoners have to ask their families—if they can—to bring them floor rags, mops, detergent and black tar deodorant to disinfect a bit. If the family cannot do so—as is usually the case—the inmate must resort to using an old article of clothing to clean the floor. Meanwhile, the authorities make daily inspections to demand that the inmates maintain their cells clean and neat.

At times, prisoners have been used as guinea pigs in experiments involving vaccines, without knowing for sure what they were for or what effects they could have. The only thing the inmates are told is that they are being injected against some disease, and they have no choice but to submit to them. They are not given any sort of receipt, as they are not entitled to that information.

CHAPTER VII

Mistreatment and Humiliation

When the long-awaited family visit day arrives, the inmates are forced to undergo degrading and humiliating strip searches, in which they are stripped naked and searched by several guards. The guards search their hair; the inmates are made to crouch down while nude, to ascertain whether or not they have anything hidden in their private parts; their shoes and other belongings are also searched. Whereas the inmates cannot file any claim denouncing the countless human rights violations committed in the prisons, these measures are implemented even more rigorously in the case of political prisoners, given the fact that these are more aware of what is going on around them, as they are there precisely because they are against the Castro regime.

Many of the guards who work in the prisons are gay, and take advantage of the authority conferred upon them by the prison uniform, their strength and the fear they instill in the majority of the inmates, to threaten and mistreat them in different ways. There have already been several cases in which guards have been expelled from the prison for improper conduct. In fact, this has been due to the existence of such conclusive evidence against them, that failure to take action on the part of higher-ranking officials would be detrimental to the latter's careers.

There are male officers in the women's prisons, who have also had their way with the inmates, abusing their position of authority and the weaknesses of the prisoners. If they have sex with the inmates, they either punish or reward them, as they see fit.

The prisoners are tortured both physically and psychologically, especially in the punishment cells, where the inmates are alone and there is no one to serve as a witness. The guards beat them with hard rubber canes known as "Tonfa." The psychological torture is constant, and the methods used very diverse. One form of humiliation, for example, is as follows. In the hallways, offices, infirmaries, etc., there are chairs or armchairs in which the prisoners may not sit unless ordered to do so, even if the seats are empty. If they do so, they are yanked out of them in an offensive manner to remind them of their status as prisoners. The family, and especially children, are also often used as an instrument to torture the inmates. The prisoners are under the care of an official known as a "reeducator," who meets with the inmates quite often, asks lots of questions, and insinuates many things to them, such as that she, the inmate, is responsible for her children's not being with her and for their not doing well in school or having problems at home. The prisoners are also made to watch certain television programs of a political nature, always in favor of the regime, such as the news and roundtable shows, which are truly insufferable.

The method used by the officials on duty to take a daily headcount of the entire prison, to make sure that no prisoner is missing, is truly humiliating. While the officials are counting, all the prisoners must stand at attention for a very long time, in order and in full prison uniform, and worse still, must recite communist sayings and answer any question

“yes,” even if it is the biggest lie they have ever told. If the inmates fail to please the bosses, after they are removed they are taken to the prison director’s office, where they are threatened, humiliated and measures are taken against them, ranging from having a visit suspended to being sent to the punishment cell, depending on how serious the officials consider the alleged disciplinary violation to be.

In order to gain some points, the inmates have to participate in some theater activities, such as singing, dancing and doing anything amusing to make others laugh. This makes the prisoners feel very bad, because they paint them up garishly and make them feel ridiculous. They almost always end up in tears.

The language that the officials use with the prisoners is quite offensive and obscene, in order to humiliate them in front of others and to provoke them when they have some kind of interest in punishing them for something they did not want to do.

Several prisoners who have children have no one else who can take care of their kids while they themselves serve out their prison terms. The state puts these children in a boarding school, and often years go by without the children’s being able to see their mother, because this is another way to make the prisoners suffer. If these inmates do not do what the officials want, they are told that on such-and-such a date they are going to bring the children to see her, and after the mother has prepared herself psychologically and managed to get some little gifts for her children, such as candy, drawings or clothes that she herself has made, they tell her that they cannot bring the children because there is a gasoline shortage or because the means of transportation is broken. Almost always, these inmates feel that they have been made fools of, and due to their feelings of powerlessness in the face of this abuse, they inflict injury on themselves, or protest vehemently, and end up in the punishment cells.

CHAPTER VIII

Situation of Family Members

Many Cuban families have had the misfortune of having one of their family members in prison, and have suffered a great deal as a result. Most Cuban families, unless they are from the privileged classes, are going through difficult economic times, and even more so if they have a family member in prison. These families have to take over the care of the inmate's children and sometimes also of the husband, who may be in prison as well. Almost always, family members have to travel long distances to get to the prison, this being a way of extending the inmate's punishment to her family, who supports her and tries to protect her in any way possible. In Cuba, transportation is terrible and very expensive, especially if one has to go to other provinces.

Getting a food bag ("jaba") together for the inmate is also very difficult and expensive. Sometimes when family members go to see the prisoner, they only take her whatever food they're going to eat at that time and bring her the children so that she can see them. The visits are very sad, because the prisoners, in particular, cry a lot with their children. Meanwhile, the prison guards and authorities are circling constantly the entire room, sometimes with dogs that sniff out drugs, since some common prisoners consume these substances and it is not known how they get them into the prison. Those families who can, spend what little money they have on procuring an attorney, who rarely can do anything because the courts are biased toward the government.

CHAPTER IX

Tending to Religious Needs

Any human being who finds himself in a difficult situation turns to God and his faith with the hope of overcoming so much suffering. This is very latent in prisons. Many a female inmate has converted while detained.

It is moving to see how, both openly and covertly, small prayer groups get together. The inmates pray the Rosary, perform the laying-on of hands on both the physically and spiritually ill, pray at night or say grace, all to please God and to ask Him to hear their prayers. There are believers of several faiths and all get together to pray; undoubtedly, this pleases God, who is the same God for all of them.

These religious activities are repressed by the prison authorities and guards. When they see that a group is growing, they start to take persuasive measures to dissolve it.

Religious attention is practically non-existent and totally limited by the governmental and prison authorities, despite the fact that it is an alleged right that the inmates have, as set forth in the prison regulations.

Catholic priests and nuns can see certain inmates every three months, but only those designated as special cases, such as foreign and political prisoners, because these cases enjoy a certain notoriety and can cause problems for the prison authorities as regards the false image they wish to convey.

Many inmates request this religious service, but the authorities do not respond affirmatively. This visit takes place in a room prepared beforehand, so as to be able to see and hear everything that is said and done there. They also put an official to watch and keep tabs of the time. Under these conditions, although the visit is encouraging and fortifying for the prisoners, it is also very limited, because they cannot even make a confession for fear that everything they say will be heard. The inmates, before and after receiving these visits, have to go through a room where they are thoroughly searched to avoid their getting out a letter or denunciation against the regime through clandestine means, as is wont to happen in these places. Thus do the priests perform their religious duty.

The Catholic Church is carrying out a nationwide project that is known as “The Prison Pastoral.” Its purpose is not only to visit prisoners, which is a matter of great concern to it, but also to send some aid to inmates, male and female alike, through their families, by means of their nearest community Church. On occasion, some priests and nuns have been denied permission to enter the prisons due to their solidarity with political prisoners.

There are also religious leaders of other congregations who try to minister to the needs of those inmates who request their services, but it is also very difficult for them to do so.

The inmates, for the most part, have Bibles and saint's cards in which they place all their hopes, praying for their loved ones, their freedom and, most especially, their children.

CHAPTER X

Corruption of Prison Authorities

Most of the guards who work with the inmates are very young women who have emigrated from the eastern provinces, where there is much poverty, to Havana where, due to its status as the capital, there are greater resources and possibilities.

These women, who are uneducated and uncultured, are given a course and placed at the service of the prison authorities who use them at their convenience in exchange for a wage that most definitely does not solve any of their problems. They are in Havana, but have no home or family. They live in a shelter, far from their loved ones, as recruits. Moreover, according to personal testimonies given by some of them, there is much theft among them and some are expelled for performing degrading acts in the prison.

Those prisoners who, thanks to the amount of time they have spent in prison, are a little more cunning, easily bribe the guards, who allow many things to go on in exchange for a gift—such as taking inmates' letters out of the prison, without their being reviewed by the officials in charge. They also allow the prisoners to sleep outside their cubicles or cell blocks, which is prohibited by the prison. They allow them to bring in prepared foods, do business within the prison and share the proceeds with them.

CHAPTER XI

Recommendations for a Transition Process

When the time comes for a transition, the first thing that must be done is to improve living conditions within the prisons, and to take urgent measures to deal with those officials and guards who may have committed acts of mistreatment, injustices and human rights violations. Cases must be reviewed, since many of them are unjust and provoked by the system itself, such as in the case of the crime of “Dangerousness.” The State considers a person dangerous without the commission of a specific crime. The same is true of the detention of “jineteras,” young women who support their families by practicing the world’s oldest profession, prostitution. Other examples are crimes involving the theft of food items, such as fruits, vegetables and beef, among others. The totalitarian system is the true source of these crimes.

The goal of the transition process is to improve the penitentiary system by offering inmates more facilities, giving them the opportunity to truly better themselves; allowing them to have more recreation and relaxation time; seeing to it that they receive adequate medical care and that the families who are left unprotected are taken care of; granting them the right to be represented by a defense attorney; keeping them close to their places of residence; housing gay and straight inmates in separate quarters (this avoids fights) and, finally, feeding them a balanced diet that includes both proteins and carbohydrates.

The important thing is to succeed in bringing down the high prison population that exists in Cuba, to improve the inmates’ living conditions and to see to it those who work with prisoners are qualified personnel, so as to ensure that these women can become reintegrated into society, giving their best, for themselves and for their families.