

Challenging Confinement:  
Feminist Activism and Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Women in Detroit

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On May 19, 1977, a group of incarcerated women from the Detroit House of Correction, Michigan's only prison for women, launched a lawsuit against the director of the Michigan Department of Corrections. They alleged, "Treatment programs for women are unequal to those provided for men in both quality and quantity. An examination of these programs for women leads to the conclusion that Defendants are perpetuating the idea that the role of women in society emanates from their "natural" abilities as wife and mother, and their "natural" inabilities as thinker and worker."<sup>1</sup> The group of incarcerated women, all of whom were serving life terms, sought remedies from the federal court for the violence, neglect, and unequal treatment they navigated daily.

Several women put their names on the complaint. Mary Glover, who became the class representative, was completing three consecutive life sentences and served as the class representative. Glover was a young, blond, intelligent and articulate woman who also thought she had already experienced the worst aspects of incarceration. Born in 1954 to white middle-class parents in Flint, Michigan, she was one of seven children. Years later, she described herself as a rebellious teenager.<sup>2</sup> She married young, and in January 1976, she and her husband attempted to rob a gas station. A fight broke out and as the Glovers fled the scene, Mary Glover's

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<sup>1</sup> *Glover v. Johnson*, 77cv71229, Complaint filed May 19, 1977, Box 8, Folder 1, FRC.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

husband shot three people. One victim died.<sup>3</sup> Several months passed, and the prosecutor charged Grant and Mary Glover separately. Mary Glover feared the risks of going to trial, so she pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and two counts of assault with the intent to commit murder. The judge sentenced her to serve three concurrent life sentences, which she began at the Women's Division of the Detroit House of Correction.<sup>4</sup>

As many lawyers know, class representatives can be very unrepresentative of the class. Many incarcerated women who wanted to pursue a lawsuit also feared retaliation and harassment from Michigan Department of Correction (MDOC) employees, so they requested to proceed anonymously. One petitioner asked the court to list her as "Mary L. Doe" because "on several occasions after making complaints about the inadequate medical attention given to inmates my needed medication was withheld as a form of punishment."<sup>5</sup> Another woman asked to be called "Jane Doe," because, after complaining about the prison, employees spread rumors about her to the incarcerated population. The subsequent harassment made her fear for her life. She described how the prison also blocked mail and telephone calls from lawyers and family.<sup>6</sup>

The coalition of incarcerated women and attorneys launched the nation's first major legal fight for gender equality in prison. Filed in federal court, *Glover v. Johnson*, 478 F. Supp. 1075 (E.D. Mich. 1979) was the result of women's grassroots interpretations of gender-based discrimination. In the 1970s, incarcerated women learned how incarcerated men were granted

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<sup>3</sup> George Root, the 47-year-old shop owner, died. Henry Bird, 68, and Mark Greg Wilcox, 18, were critically injured from the gunfire. Tony Hornus, "Mary Glover Given 3 Life Prison Terms," *The Argus Press*, August 16, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> *Glover v. Michigan Parole Board*, Supreme Court of Michigan, July 13, 1999; Tony Hornus, "Mary Glover Given 3 Life Prison Terms," *The Argus Press*, August 16, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Affidavit in Support of Mary L. Doe Request, Complaint filed May 19, 1977, Box 8, Folder 1, FRC.

<sup>6</sup> Affidavit in Support of Jane Doe Request, Complaint filed May 18, 1977, Box 8, Folder 1, FRC.

access to high school and college courses, vocational training, and the courts. In contrast, the women's prison offered minimal programming. Through their correspondences with boyfriends, husbands, and relatives, incarcerated women realized that gender-based discrimination defined their punishment and limited opportunities. At the same time women were being thrown into prison in large numbers, they were also graduating from law schools at higher rates. A new generation of lawyers who had grown up with the civil rights movement believed that the gender discrimination amounted to violations of the incarcerated women's constitutional rights.

The convergence of these factors forged new pathways for prison reform while also expanding the reach of the women's movement in the late twentieth century. The story of how incarcerated women deployed the gains of the women's movement, I argue, tells us much about mass incarceration and campaigns for equality and social justice. As Charlene Snow, a young employment attorney in Detroit who worked for decades on the *Glover* lawsuit, argued, "the influence of the women's movement cannot stop at the prison door."<sup>7</sup> Launched in Detroit, the prisoners' rights movement for women was effective in igniting political consciousness among female prisoners. It also facilitated a prolonged legal battle for gender equality that started in the 1970s and concluded in the early 2000s. For decades, a diverse coalition of incarcerated women, attorneys, activists, and academics fought uphill to implement equitable and humane terms of punishment.

This paper examines the history of feminist activism and the legal advocacy movement in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s. This paper examines how radical feminism played a part in this movement and the larger landscape of feminist politics in the Midwest and the nation. Mapping

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<sup>7</sup> Charlene Snow, "Women in Prison," *Clearinghouse Review*, Volume 14, February 1981: 1065-1068: 1068.

out the intellectual exchanges among radical feminism, legal advocacy, and the prisoners' rights movement for women reinforces the appalling ways in which the state and federal government restricted prisoners' rights and connects this history to structural changes that corralled protest pathways in prisons. The paper relies on interviews, federal court documents, Michigan archives, and private collections.