

Belly of the Beast: The cruelty of forced sterilization in America

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Directed by Erika Cohn

Belly of the Beast is a valuable documentary directed by Erika Cohn on the subject of forced sterilizations carried out at female penitentiaries in California. It concentrates in particular on the efforts of Justice Now, a non-profit focused on the needs of women prisoners.

The 82-minute film sheds light on the brutality of mass incarceration, a symptom of the vast social inequality in America, and the prevalence of filthy, fascistic ideology in ruling circles.

Artist Mary J. Blige's new song, "See What You've Done," is the movie's musical voice.

A central figure in the documentary and co-founder of Justice Now, attorney Cynthia Chandler, spearheaded the investigation into involuntary sterilizations at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), the largest women's prison in the world. She "uncovered California's coercive sterilization of women in prison through 2012," according to the film's press notes, and successfully led legislative efforts to prevent it.

In the process, Chandler encountered Kelli Dillon, a Los Angeles-based domestic violence counselor and gang interventionist, who was sent to prison in 1995 for killing her abusive husband. While serving time at the CCWF, Dillon underwent non-consensual sterilization after being told she had an abnormal pap smear and needed a cone biopsy to check if she had cancer.

At the time of the calamity that led to her jailing, the then-24-year-old had two young sons. Dillon movingly recalls the smell of their breath, the feel of their skin. "Out of the 15 years I was there [in prison]," she says, "we had about five visits. When I left, my sons were two and four, so I watched my children grow up on the other side of the glass."

Dillon is the heart of the documentary and her story gives flesh-and-blood drama and tragedy to the reality behind the statistics. The authorities, in a cruel and illegal act, took away from her the possibility of having more children. In a visceral manner, she reveals the mental, physical and emotional cost of such ill-treatment.

According to the movie's official website, when "the unlikely duo" of Chandler and Dillon discovered "a pattern of illegal sterilizations in women's prisons," they proceeded to

wage "a near impossible battle against the Department of Corrections." Filmed over seven years with access to and accounts from currently and formerly incarcerated people, "*Belly of the Beast* exposes modern-day eugenics and reproductive injustice in California prisons."

Comments Dillon in the film's production notes: "People don't hear a lot about what's going on inside women's prisons, because the communication is controlled. Prisons control who comes to see you, how long your phone calls are—if you get phone time. ...

"So, if my privilege has been restricted or reduced, it's really hard to funnel out the information, if some form of injustice or mistreatment has happened to me. In addition, correctional officers sometimes withhold the mail that's going out for legal aid or to certain media outlets."

Dillon explains that a prisoner "has to put their freedom on the line, risking their parole date, or potentially adding time to their current sentence, by funneling out (through an underground system) information to make sure that people in the 'free world' know what's going on."

In her statement in the production notes, Chandler, a self-described "prison industrial complex abolitionist," observes that "We are not merely experiencing a pandemic, we are living in a eugenic moment of rising fascism: politicians and business owners are flippantly demanding the sacrifice of elders and people with preexisting medical issues for the betterment of capitalism and the State."

The documentary's creators calculate on the basis of examining California audit and prison records that nearly 1,400 sterilization procedures were performed between 1997 and 2013. Since 2014, California has been required to report the number of sterilizations performed each year in women's prisons and prove the medical necessity of each procedure.

In *Belly of the Beast*, Corey Johnson of the Center for Investigative Reporting is shown interviewing Dr. James Heinrich, who performed many of the non-consensual sterilizations. Tellingly, Heinrich asserts to the reporter that the sterilizations were "cheaper than welfare." In addition to tubal ligations, Heinrich arranged other types of sterilizations 378 times at California's Valley State Prison (then a women's facility) from 2006 to 2012. These included hysterectomies,

removal of ovaries and a procedure called endometrial ablation, which destroys the uterus's lining. From 2006 to 2008, Valley State averaged 150 sterilization surgeries of all types annually.

Demonstrating that Heinrich's attitude is not some personal aberration, the film's release coincides with the recent revelation by a whistleblower that a number of immigrant women detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in southern Georgia were subjected to sterilization through hysterectomies without their consent.

Dr. Heinrich declined an interview with the filmmakers themselves, but wrote a statement about the passage of the anti-sterilization bill: "The new rule deprived women of the option to have their tubes tied after multiple pregnancies, and thereby sentenced them to suffer through inadvertent pregnancies to bear children that they did not wish to bear."

The movie's postscript explains that Dillon and Chandler are working on a reparations bill for those illegally sterilized from 1909 to the present.

The production notes for *Belly of the Beast* contain some harrowing figures: 231,000 women are currently incarcerated in the US and 1.3 million women are under the supervision of the criminal justice system (including those on probation and parole). Nearly 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers.

Women are the fastest-growing segment of the prison population. Between 1980 and 2017, the number of jailed women increased by more than 750 percent. Though far more men than women are in prison, the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that for men since 1980.

(In fact, the US incarcerates women at a higher rate than any other country in the world. Four percent of the female population lives in the US, but it accounts for over 30 percent of the world's imprisoned women.)

In retracing the history of eugenics in California, Cohn brings out the shocking fact that in 1937 German scientists came to the state to study the practice of forced sterilization on behalf of the Nazi regime and drew lessons from what they witnessed. California was considered the epicenter of the American eugenics movement.

According to *sfgate*, elements of eugenics "were enshrined as national policy by forced sterilization and segregation laws, as well as marriage restrictions, enacted in 27 states. In 1909, California became the third state to adopt such laws." Ultimately, some 60,000 people were coercively sterilized in the US. Eugenics practitioners also "barred the marriage of thousands, forcibly segregated thousands in 'colonies,' and persecuted untold numbers in ways we are just learning." Prior to World War II, *sfgate* continues, "nearly half of coercive sterilizations were done in California, and even after the war, the state accounted for a third of all such surgeries."

In an interview with *shondaland.com*, Cohn explained that California had the "most notorious" eugenics program, having sterilized over 20,000 people between 1909 and 1979," but that

over the course of the 20th century, "over 30 states passed eugenics laws, some of which remained on the books until the 1970s and 1980s."

Cohn noted that as recently as 1927, the infamous "Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* ... upheld a statute instituting compulsory sterilization of people who were deemed 'unfit.' That set a precedent for states to legally sterilize people in prisons. And while state, federal, and international law explicitly ban compulsory sterilization, that decision has yet to be overturned."

Belly of the Beast has a tendency to reduce forced sterilization to a racial question, taking into account the disproportionate number of African-American women prisoners affected.

However, the ethnicity and race of the victims of forced sterilization in California, for example, have shifted significantly as the background of those who make up the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class in that state has changed over time.

Alexandra Minna Stern, in *Sterilized in the Name of Public Health: Race, Immigration, and Reproductive Control in Modern California*, points out that African Americans and Mexicans were operated on at rates that exceeded their population in California's state hospitals and homes in the late 1920s. Nonetheless, Stern writes, an "exhaustive study" carried out by Paul Popenoe found out that at the time "the foreign-born were disproportionately affected, constituting 39% of men and 31% of women sterilized. Of these, immigrants from Scandinavia, Britain, Italy, Russia, Poland, and Germany were most represented."

As the WSWS has explained, the pseudo-science of eugenics "has an ideological motive—to emphasise the importance of genetics and the existence of innate inequality." First appearing in the late 19th century, eugenics was part of the ruling class response to the growth of the modern working class and the threat of socialism in particular. It became popular in academic and political circles as a means of demonstrating that "immense social problems like poverty, unemployment and crime were not the product of the social system but of 'defective' human material." *Belly of the Beast* is a contribution toward exposing this outlook.



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