

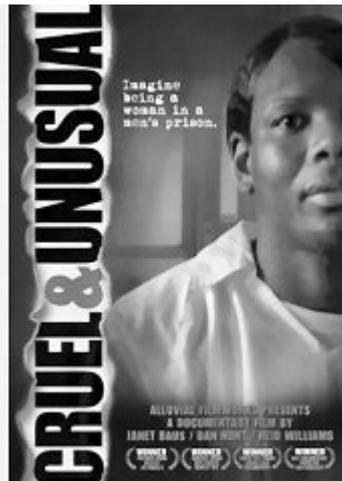
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## Movie Review: Cruel & Unusual

### Transgender Women in U.S. Prisons

reviewed by Dr. Tracie O'Keefe D.C.H.

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**Cruel & Unusual: Transgender Women in U.S. Prisons, directed by Janet Baus & Dan Hunt**

#### Cruel & Unusual: Transgender Women in U.S. Prisons

Directed by Janet Baus & Dan Hunt  
Reid Productions, U.S.A., October 2006

**T**his sixty minute American documentary which screened at various film

festivals in 2006 has now become available on D.V.D. in Australia. It is an award winning series of interviews with transgender women in American prisons where they were incarcerated as men without any consideration of their trans status or what risks that put them at in the general male prison population. Alongside that are comments from professionals working in the field of trans health and equal rights.

Although none of the interviewees had had genital realignment surgery before incarceration, some had been taking hormones for a considerable time. The rightness or wrongness of their incarceration is not the issue of the documentary but rather the way in which they were treated as female identified transpeople born male.

By all accounts they all had a nightmare of a time in prison as their hormones were denied and the prison authorities refused to recognise their transsexualism or provide any kind of treatment.

Furthermore these individuals suffered horrific treatment by the prison authorities who mocked, ignored, beat and isolated them in a prison cell for twenty-three hours per day. There are also disturbing stories of rape and forced sexual encounters by and from other prisoners that always seemed to be ignored by prison officers. Such circumstances at times led to self-mutilation, attempted suicide, self-castration and one prisoner cutting off her penis with a razor blade.

It is plain that many of the incarcerated transgender people in this video probably had personality disorders apart from their trans status but that does not distract from the need for governments to provide sufficient care for trans people in the penal system. Eventually some of those trans people took out legal cases against their prison authorities and won the right to treatment within prisons in those states.

A very clear parallel can be drawn between the inmates in this documentary and the situation in prisons in Australia. Here too we often have blatantly belligerent prison authorities who too often see a prisoner's trans status as being difficult and anti-authoritarian rather than a need for medial intervention. Like America we suffer from the problems of the states having different policies, preventing a national uniform policy for the way in which our trans prison population is treated, or not, as the case maybe.

There are shortfalls in this documentary in that it does not sufficiently explore why so many of the trans community find themselves isolated in society and end up on the wrong side of the law in order to eat or find shelter. Taking that into account, however, as a piece of work it is realistic about its contents and I think this documentary should be seen, particularly by trans people who have never been in prison, by social workers and clinicians, but most of all it ought to be on the viewing list of all prison officers, governors and ministers of correction.

#### Cruel & Unusual

Directed by: Janet Baus, Dan Hunt, Reid Williams  
Starring: Ashley, Ophelia DeLonte, Anna Connelly  
Producer(s): Janet Baus, Dan Hunt, Reid Williams  
Released: 2006

Imagine being a woman in a men's prison. For many individuals, this is a grim reality because the U.S. prison system decides where to place inmates based on their genitalia, not their gender identity. This award winning documentary makes an unflinching examination of transgender women in men's prisons. Ashley, Linda, Anna, Yolanda and Ophelia describe their

experiences undergoing inhumane and humiliating treatment including rape, violence, solitary confinement and denial of medical care. One interviewee explains. "A lot of times I wake up, and I look around at my surroundings, and I see all these men. I think, 'What am I doing here?'" The women in *Cruel and Unusual* don't deny that they must serve their sentences, but their stories raise very important questions about their treatment.



To remain on this website and view parts 2 - 7 of *Cruel & Unusual*, wait until each video ends and select the next part from the on-screen options. Otherwise, to watch the remaining parts of *Cruel & Unusual* on You Tube, select the next part from the links below

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.