Women remain rare on death row

With more female criminals, experts say situation may change

Alisa Stingley

Brandy Holmes arrived Feb. 23 at Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women at St. Gabriel and was issued the standard death-row inmate uniform: a red jumpsuit.

Sentenced to death Feb. 16 in Caddo Parish for killing a local retired minister, former Shreveporter Holmes, 26, was the first new death-row inmate at LCIW in nearly 11 years. Antoinette Frank, a New Orleans police officer sentenced to death in late 1995, now has company.

Historically, few women in Louisiana or the rest of the nation have been given the ultimate judicial penalty. But is that changing?

In 1991, there were 36 women under death penalty sentences in the United States, according to Justice Statistics. At the end of 2005, there were 48 women on death row, according to the latest statistics from a leading researcher.

Women serving death sentences reached a high of 54 in 2000, according to Justice Statistics numbers. Yet executions of women remain rare: one in 2005, compared to 59 executions of men nationwide.

"The "stereotypical image" of women has kept many off death row, said Marianne Fisher-Giorlando, professor of criminal justice at Grambling State University. "It's simply (the idea) that women aren't capable of doing such a thing."

One reason the nation may be seeing more women receiving death sentences is that as women have sought equal status with men on many levels—work, education opportunities, social status—juries seem to be applying justice with equality in mind, as well.

"Juries think women want to be considered equally... OK, you want to be treated equally, and we'll convict you also," Fisher-Giorlando said.

Experts say it's difficult to pinpoint a trend regarding women and the death penalty, since their numbers are small. Since 1973, only 155 death sentences have been handed down to women, compared to 7,544 for men, according to research by Ohio law professor Victor L. Streib.

In Louisiana, the expectation is that men are more likely to make up the state's death-row population, Example: Angola has 101 cells reserved for death row inmates, with 83 occupied. LCIW has only four cells dedicated for women on death row.

But death penalty juries may be reversing that notion as more women commit crimes. Since 1990, the number of female defendants convicted of felonies in state courts has grown at more than two times the rate of increase in male defendants, according to research by Ohio law professor Victor L. Streib.

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Changes in police arrest policies and in sentencing guidelines have influenced the way the justice system deals with violent women offenders, said Fisher-Giorlando.

"Criminal justice doesn't have the leeway it used to have when it looked at a woman," said Fisher-Giorlando, citing mandatory arrest policies in domestic violence cases and judicial guidelines that set sentences for certain crimes.

Caddo District Attorney Paul Carrouche said there are "plenty" of cases of second-degree murder charges against women, but few that fit the definition of first-degree murder, which, for example, would involve armed robbery, rape or aggravated burglary and would automatically be a death penal-