LOCKED IN, LOCKED OUT: IMPRISONING WOMEN IN THE SHRINKING AND PUNITIVE WELFARE STATE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRISONS FOR FEDERALLY SENTENCED WOMEN .................................................................4
CONTEXT OF THE STUDY ........................................................................................................5
  The Imprisonment of Women in Canada ................................................................................5
  Women’s Prison Reform in Canada: 1990-1997 .................................................................6
  Current State of Federal Prisons for Women .................................................................7
  Women Released from Prison ...........................................................................................7
PROJECT METHODOLOGY ...................................................................................................9
  The Sample ..........................................................................................................................10
KEY FINDINGS ....................................................................................................................13
  FINDING #1: Prison as a Treatment Centre? ..............................................................14
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................15
  FINDING #2: Punishment and Empowerment: “You Can’t Have it Both Ways” ..........16
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................17
  FINDING #3: Addictions & Trauma: “Going Underneath” ...........................................18
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................19
  FINDING #4: Sexual Abuse Counselling Delivered by Community Agencies ..........20
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................21
  FINDING #5: Addictions and Re-integration ...............................................................22
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................22
  FINDING #6: Returning to Community: Need for Concrete Practical Release Planning Support ..................................................................................................................24
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................26
  FINDING #7: Social (Ex)Inclusion: The Meaning of Re-integration and Community ...27
    Summary and Recommendations ....................................................................................29
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS .................................................................................................................................30
REFERENCES ......................................................................................................................33
PRISONS FOR FEDERALLY SENTENCED WOMEN

- FRASER VALLEY COMMUNITY CORRECTIONAL CENTRE
  Sumas, British Columbia
- ORIMAW OCHI HEALING LODGE
  Maple Creek, Saskatchewan
- EDMONTON INSTITUTION FOR WOMEN
  Edmonton, Alberta
- ISABEL MCNEILL HOUSE
  Kingston, Ontario - For minimum security women
- JOILETTE INSTITUTION
  Joliette, Quebec
- NOVA INSTITUTION
  Truro, Nova Scotia
- GRAND VALLEY INSTITUTION
  Kitchener, Ontario
CONTEXT OF THE STUDY
The Imprisonment of Women in Canada

Women represent a small proportion of people in jails and prisons in Canada. In 2003/04, 9% of prisoners in provincial and territorial jails were women and 6% of federal prisoners were women (Statistics Canada, 2006). However, despite decreasing crime rates, the rate of women federally incarcerated in Canada is steadily increasing. In 2003 there were 822 federally sentenced women, 374 (45%) of whom were in prison and 448 (55%) were out on bail or under community supervision. By 2006-07, there were 476 women in federal prisons. Between 1997 and 2006, the population of women in federal prisons jumped 22% (Correctional Service of Canada, 2006).

Similar trends are seen in other industrialized countries. In the US, for example, Chesney-Lind (2002) states that there is a “women’s imprisonment boom.” Both Australia and Great Britain are also experiencing an increase in numbers of women being imprisoned (Balfour & Comack, 2006). Feminist activists and researchers have expressed great concern about this growing worldwide trend and many have pointed to neo-liberal policy changes as contributing to the dramatic increase in the imprisonment of women. Drastic cuts to social assistance, the creation of a precarious low-wage job market, reduction in publicly funded daycare, and cuts to social services, addictions treatment and mental health services have eroded the social safety net. It is the already disadvantaged members of our communities who are most hard hit by neo-liberal socio-economic policies. The dismantling of social services and welfare state provisions have resulted “in the increased criminalization of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of our communities” (Neve and Pate, 2005: 27). An overwhelming majority of imprisoned women are convicted of property offences whereas 3% are convicted of violent offences (Statistics Canada, 2006). The most common charge for women charged with property crimes is theft under $5,000 or fraud. Many women have committed income-generating offences such as fraud, shoplifting, prostitution and robbery to support addictions (AGC, 2003).

In Canada, the fastest growing group of incarcerated women is Aboriginal. The rate of imprisoned Aboriginal women jumped 72.5% between 1996 and 2004 (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2006). Although Aboriginal people comprise 3% of the Canadian population, 19% of federal prisoners are Aboriginal. For women this number is even higher: 32% of federal female prisoners are Aboriginal. Research has illustrated that well over the majority of imprisoned women in North America have histories of childhood abuse, have experienced violence in their intimate relationships with men, often live in poverty, endure systemic racialized violence and have addictions (Giffus, 1992; Comack, 1996; Richie, 1996; Owen, 1998; Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). This research, often referred to as the ‘pathways to crime’ literature, illustrates that attempts to cope with victimization experiences such as childhood abuse and violence against women, propel many women into situations that put them at risk of being criminalized.

Women’s Prison Reform in Canada: 1990-1997

A number of tragic and dramatic events in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s - a Royal Commission of Inquiry, the closing of the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W), a Canadian Human Rights Commission investigation, and reforms in how women are imprisoned - have marked the last twenty years of women’s federal corrections.

Between December 1988 and February 1991, seven women at the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) committed suicide. Six of the seven prisoners were Aboriginal. In 1989, the Solicitor General appointed a Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women whose mandate was to examine how women in the Kingston P4W were treated and to develop a policy and plan that would be more responsive to the needs of women prisoners. In 1990, a report called Creating Choices provided the foundation for the development of a new strategy for incarcerating women serving federal sentences. The Task Force that conducted the inquiry made significant recommendations that were to change the philosophy, geography, and programming for federally sentenced women. As a result of this report, between 1995 and 1997 the Correctional Service of Canada opened five regional prisons for women: Edmonton Institution for Women in Alberta, Grand Valley Institution for Women in Ontario, Joliette Institution in Quebec, Nova Institution for Women in Nova Scotia, and the Okimaw Ocihi Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan, a prison for Aboriginal women. The Kingston Prison for Women was officially closed in 2000. In addition to changes in geographical location, Creating Choices also recommended that these new prisons be based upon what they termed ‘women-centred’ principles such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘respect’ and be responsive to the cultural needs of Aboriginal women.

In 1995, before all of the new prisons were built, a videotape of the strip searching of women prisoners in P4W by an all male emergency response team was brought to public attention by the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Immediately following the television viewing and media exposure of this event, the Solicitor General of Canada announced that there would be a public inquiry into the events leading up to the strip search and into the strip search itself. The inquiry would be headed by Madam Justice Louise Arbour, the current United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Madam Justice Louise Arbour’s recommendations repeated those put forward in the report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, as well as offered new powerful observations about the lawlessness of the correctional culture and discriminatory treatment of women prisoners. In her 1996 report, The Honourable Louise Arbour wrote that in the Kingston Prison for Women “[t]he Rule of Law is absent, although rules are everywhere” (1996: 181). Evidence of the prison system as a “lawless state” was most noticeable at the management levels and thus the Honourable Louise Arbour advocated an integrated approach to change and accountability beginning at the highest level of prison management.

Significantly, she also highlighted the problematic tendency to disregard and ‘trivialize’ the human rights of prisoners. She stated “[when] a right has been granted by law, it is no less
important that such right be respected because the person entitled to it is a prisoner. Indeed, it is always more important that the vigorous enforcement of rights be effected in the cases where the right is more meaningful” (p. 182). The Correctional Service of Canada is subject to the Canadian Human Rights Act as it is required by law not to discriminate on the grounds of national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted. The report of the Arbour commission placed a great emphasis upon the notion of the women’s prison as a lawless state which infringed upon the human rights of prisoners. Seven years after the inquiry and report of the Arbour commission, the Canadian Human Rights Commission found that federally imprisoned women were still being discriminated against on the basis of gender, race and ability (CHRC, 2003).

The Current State of Federal Prisons for Women: Discrimination Based on Ability, Race and Gender

By 1997, the last of the five regional prisons for women had opened, and in 2000, the Kingston Prison for Women was closed. Based upon the recommendations in Creating Choices, the 1990 report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, the Correctional Service of Canada built five new prisons that were to reflect such principles as ‘empowerment’, ‘respect’ and ‘mutuality’. However, in 2003, two government bodies, The Auditor General of Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission, released reports that condemned the treatment of women prisoners in federal prisons. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) found for example that federally imprisoned women, in stark contrast to being ‘empowered,’ experience human rights violations on the basis of their gender, culture, and mental/physical disability. Areas of particular concern related to prison conditions such as male-based security classification tools, lack of appropriate counselling, limited employment training opportunities and the lack of a grievance mechanism by which prisoners can have complaints such as harassment addressed. On this last point, a recent Amnesty International Report (2007) stated about Canada that:

“There was no progress in implementing recommendations made by a 1996 public inquiry, a 2003 Canadian Human Rights Commission report, and the UN Human Rights Committee in 2005 that there be an independent agency established to receive complaints from women prisoners held in federal detention facilities.”

Amnesty International Report 2007

Most recently, 19 year old Ashley Smith was found dead in her segregation cell (where she had been locked for the past two years) in Grand Valley Institution for Women on October 19, 2007. Four Correctional Service of Canada employees have been fired and criminally charged in relation to her death. The death of Ashley Smith tragically underscores the mistreatment of women prisoners in Canada.

Women Released from Prison

Problems have not only been identified for criminalized women while they are in prison, but also for those who have been released. In 2003, the office of the Auditor General of Canada produced a report which assessed how well the Correctional Service of Canada was meeting the re-integration needs of women leaving federal prison. One of the findings from this audit was that women were not given adequate pre-release opportunities, such as making community connections and developing work skills. Temporary absences can provide opportunities for on-the-job training, maintaining connections with children, developing community contacts, and/or accessing community addiction or mental health treatment, yet they are alarmingly under-utilized, usually due to lack of staff to serve as escorts. Only 7% of women classified as minimum and medium security obtained temporary passes during 2001 to 2002 (CHRC, 2003). From April 2001 to November 2002, only eight Aboriginal women were provided with this opportunity (AGC, 2003). As well, a legislative provision that allows Aboriginal people to be released on parole to their own communities was seriously under-utilized.

The Auditor General found that women in prison were given few opportunities for the development of meaningful work skills. Most of the regular employment opportunities available are gendered in nature, being primarily haircutting, and maintenance of the prison. Further, the employment centres in the community are primarily for males, and therefore fail to address the challenges facing women, such as childcare responsibilities and lack of recent work experience (AGC, 2003).

A very tiny proportion (.39%) of federally sentenced women returned to the community commits violent offences (CAEFS, 2007) and thus presents a very low risk to the community. In fact, well over the majority of women (75%) sent back to prison while on parole have not committed any new offence but have violated a parole condition, usually related to drug and alcohol use. The Auditor General therefore recommended that gender-specific drug and alcohol treatment programs and residences be developed in the community so that women with addiction problems who have not committed a crime do not have to return to prison.

Both the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Auditor General found that the current classification system (the Custody Rating Scale) is based upon risk factors associated with men and is not applicable for women. As a result, women are over-classified as high security risks. Aboriginal women are particularly over-classified, as 44% are designated maximum security and 41% as medium security, while only 18% of Aboriginal women prisoners have a minimum security classification (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2007). One of the implications of the over-classification of Aboriginal women is that they may be prevented from accessing the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, since it only accepts medium and minimum security women. Being classified as maximum security also means one is not eligible for re-integration activities such as work-release programs, temporary passes and other ‘privileges.’ Even more disturbing is the fact
that in 2003 half of maximum security women were being released directly into the community, without opportunities for gradual release planning such as temporary passes and a lower security prison environment. This process is not consistent with the Correctional Service of Canada’s stated goal of a gradual release process to ensure that adequate supports are in place to help with the transition from prison to the community. A related problem, noted by the Correctional Investigator (2007), is that there has been an increase in women remaining in prison until their statutory release, despite being eligible for parole after serving 1/3 of their sentence. This is potentially problematic for two reasons; women are remaining locked up for longer periods of time and women have access to fewer supports when released on statutory release as they are no longer under the purview of correctional services.

Although there have been several significant government reports in the past five years, with the exception of Lasovich’s (1996) report on release housing for former incarcerated women in British Columbia, we have very little qualitative information from criminalized women themselves about the experience of re-integration. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of imprisonment and return to the community from the point of view of criminalized women. This study emerged from a concern about the increasing numbers of women being criminalized and a decrease in community resources to support women experiencing poverty, addictions and/or mental health issues. Moreover, most of the Canadian research on women released from prison is quantitative in nature and does not draw on the perspectives of criminalized women themselves. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this study aimed to investigate how women experience the transition from imprisonment to release and what supports are available to them.
There were two central research questions guiding this study:

1) What are women’s experiences of programming and pre-release planning in the federal prisons for women?

2) What are women’s experiences of returning to the community? What is helpful and what are barriers to re-integration?

Sixty-eight women who had served federal prison sentences were interviewed for this study between 2004 and 2006. Interviews were between 1 and 1.5 hours and were tape recorded with the permission of the participants (two women did not wish to be tape-recorded so the interviewer took hand written notes). Participants were located in 19 large and small cities across eight different provinces. The following chart shows how many women were interviewed in each province.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, my interviews with 68 women represent 17.6% of those incarcerated in federal prisons (as of March 2006, 386 women were incarcerated federally). According to recent Correctional Service of Canada figures (CSC, 2006), this study includes the participation of 20.4% of women in federal prisons in the Atlantic Region, 13.3% of the Quebec Region, 18.8% of the Ontario Region, 11.7% of the Prairie region, and 22% of the Pacific Region.

Interviews were conducted by myself (the principal investigator), another member of the research team, and by graduate students involved with the project. Participants were recruited through individuals and organizations (such as local Elizabeth Fry Societies) that work with criminalized women. I attempted to get participants from a variety of backgrounds and with different types of experiences with the correctional system. For example, efforts were made to obtain diversity in living arrangements (e.g., halfway houses, treatment centres, living on own), racial and cultural backgrounds, various lengths of prison sentences (2 years to life), time out of prison, and type of parole (e.g., day, full, completed parole). Interviews took place in halfway houses, individual homes, shelters, treatment centres and community organizations. Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and asked questions about prison programming and services (including release planning) and experiences of being released back into the community.

### The Sample

#### Self-identification of race & ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal/Métis/Inuit</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Highest level of education completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest level of education</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed G.E.D.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed college degree/diploma</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some university</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed university degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree completed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary unspecified</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Age at time of interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 or younger</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>37.67</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Length of sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of sentence</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-5 years</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Time in prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time in prison</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 4 years</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 8 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 10 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### When released relative to interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When released</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year prior</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 4 years prior</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 8 years prior</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 12 years prior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 12 years prior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unescorted Temporary Absences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Type of release

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of release</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day parole</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>54.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statutory release</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full parole</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant expiry</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unescorted Temporary Absences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to current Correctional Service of Canada population statistics in relation to federally sentenced women in Canada (CSC, 2006), this sample seems to be representative of the overall population in terms of age, ethnic origin, and sentence length. The percentage of women in the sample who were serving a life sentence (13.2%) was, however, somewhat lower than the proportion of women serving a life sentence (18%).

Thirteen key informant interviews were also conducted with community workers with expertise in the area of women’s imprisonment and criminalized women. Some key informants had themselves been incarcerated. These interviews were not taped and were designed to utilize the expertise of the key informants who were well versed in issues related to women’s criminalization, imprisonment and parole. Key informant interviews helped to set the policy and practice context in which criminalized women find themselves after being released from prison. (For more detail about the methodology and analysis of the interviews please see Pollack, 2007).
KEY FINDINGS

The key findings emerging from interviews with 68 women are discussed below. Key findings are grouped into 7 themes: Prison as a Treatment Centre?; Punishment and Empowerment; Addictions and Trauma; Sexual Abuse Counselling; Addictions and Re-integration; Returning to the Community; and Social (Ex)Inclusion. The report concludes with recommendations for community services.
Women in this study described lives of poverty, violence, racism and addictions that contributed to their criminalization. Of the 68 participants, 66 (97%) stated that they had been addicted to drugs or alcohol. Participants identified obstacles to receiving drug/alcohol treatment in the community such as long waiting lists, programs that are not culturally relevant for Aboriginal people or responsive to women’s needs, and expensive fees. Caitlin points to the relationship between poverty and addictions and offers a poignant reflection on the role that imprisonment plays at this nexus.

You can put yourself in detox. They keep you to a maximum of 12 days, and then where do you go from there? Unless you have a family who has a lot of money and is willing to pay for treatment centres…where do you go? What do you do?...I wasn’t asking to go to jail, per se, I was asking to save myself from my life, because I was an addict and I couldn’t get a hold of myself.1

It is important to understand that the context in which many women are increasingly being criminalized is one of poverty, racism, addictions, lack of community supports and violence against women.

I was on the street and this guy attacked me and I stabbed him three times. I went to prison, I was on dope and I went to prison, like no one helped me when I was on the street. No one. I cried out for help many times... - Hannah

I would be dead if I hadn’t gone to prison. I mean I would have OD’d or somebody would have killed me, that’s where my life was going. - Susie

At the same time that publicly funded addiction, counselling and mental health services are being eviscerated in the community the federal women’s prison system appears to hold the promise of therapeutic support for criminalized women. Given the difficulties of finding subsidized addiction treatment in the community – particularly outside large urban centres – many women in this study intended to deal with their addictions while incarcerated. The notion of prisons as therapeutic, healing and supportive sometimes appeared as a better option than doing time in provincial jails. Provincial jails across the country, infamous for their lack of programming and support (Micucci & Monster, 2004), tend to function primarily as warehouses. Given the dismal conditions in provincial jails the idea of a therapeutic prison may be particularly appealing, even if it means enduring a longer prison sentence. In fact, the promise of obtaining treatment in federal prisons has led some women facing shorter sentences in provincial jails to request federal prison time (Maidment, 2006; Neve and Pate, 2005). The following comment from Quinn, a participant in this study, illustrates this point:

I saw women that were incarcerated [in a provincial jail] - 6 months, 18 months, 2 years less - and I just could not believe the sight of them. They were just zombies. And no programming, no funding... it was just so sad. And I... just knew I had to take care

1 In order to protect confidentiality, all participants chose a pseudonym for themselves. When quoting participants I have not revealed what region they are from. Given the small population of women who have served federal prison sentences, identifying where they live could potentially identify them.
Prison as a Treatment Centre?:
Summary and Recommendations

Findings from this study are consistent with previous research identifying addictions as a major problem for criminalized women. Ninety-seven percent of participants in this study said that they had struggled with drug/alcohol problems for many years and that they had met with little success in obtaining services in the community to help them. Some of the reasons for this were: lack of treatment facilities in rural areas, expensive fees for treatment, waiting lists for publicly funded treatment, and lack of culturally appropriate and/or gender specific treatment options.

Criminalized women are sometimes requesting longer prison sentences in the hopes that they will receive treatment from the federal prison system which promotes itself as therapeutic in nature. The following recommendations regarding criminalized women and addictions emerge from this study:

- **Community based sentencing options, not imprisonment**, be provided for women with serious addictions.
- **Resources be provided in the community, not in prison**, for addictions treatment.
- **Develop legal arguments** against the criminalization of women needing treatment.

The fact that women are willing to serve longer prison sentences in order to get help that is often unavailable in their communities, and that Judges are willing to sentence them, is quite disturbing. Holding out the promise that women will get real help by doing a longer prison sentence could potentially increase the number of women doing federal time. Longer prison sentences compound women’s circumstances when they are released: they are away from children for longer times and they are disconnected from family, community, and the labour market, which further exacerbates their community disconnection and alienation. As Kim Pate, the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies points out, jails and prisons are increasingly used as a means of warehousing people who need treatment and support and tragically they are currently “the only institutions that cannot say ‘our beds are full’ or ‘you don’t fit within our mandate’” (Personal Communication, December 12, 2007). Maidment’s (2006) research with criminalized women from Newfoundland also found that prisons for women are the last resort for women with a diagnosis of mental illness.
FINDING #2:

Punishment and Empowerment: “You Can’t Have it Both Ways”

“Maybe some of the staff should have the experience of being locked up when they’re doing their training and being strip searched themselves… But for them to have the experience of being locked up for twenty-three hours. Maybe some of them, their attitude would change.”
- China

“There’s a lot that goes on inside those prisons that nobody knows about, and there’s so many people that are afraid to talk about it, because these guards in there, they’ll retaliate. And they do retaliate. I think that maybe there should be some kind of… what do you call it?… [People should be] brought into the prison to follow and watch what all the prisoners… how they treat the prisoners.”
- White Rose

The Correctional Program Strategy for Federally Sentenced Women (FSW) adopts the principles recommended by the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. These principles are:

- **Empowerment**: Strategies which assist FSW to gain insight into their life situations, to identify and build on their inherent strengths, as well as support and challenge them to take positive action to gain control over their lives, are recommended.

- **Meaningful and Responsible Choices**: FSW have experienced reduced life choices due to their lack of empowerment. Furthermore, dependencies on alcohol and drugs, men, and social and financial assistance, have prevented them from making free and responsible choices about their lives. Opportunities to make real choices is an essential part of their healing.

- **Respect and Dignity**: Establishing mutual respect and dignity is a necessary precondition for change.

- **Supportive Environment**: A positive and supportive living environment will help foster self-esteem and self-worth, and dignity and respect for themselves and others.

- **Shared Responsibility**: A holistic approach to the development of support systems for FSW involves all levels of government, the private sector, NGO's and the community working together. This will help ensure that FSW are successfully reintegrated into their community networks on release.

All participants in this study were aware of the correctional rhetoric about therapeutic and supportive programming. Women’s comments about their experiences of imprisonment under the ‘woman-centred’ regime across the country reflected an engagement with contradictory discourses of prisons as both empowering and punishing.

One of the central themes in relation to this contradiction was a sense of disappointment and disillusionment that prisons provide relatively little support and are not safe places for healing. The following comments reveal an awareness that correctional policy has shifted its discourse from one that frames women’s prisons as punishment to framing the experience as supportive. Yet despite the correctional rhetoric, women’s lived experience confirms the reality that the purpose and mandate of imprisonment is to punish and control. As Liz states “call it prison and we’re going to punish people. Don’t call it rehabilitation and re-integration, because it’s not. You can’t have it both ways.”

Other women observed:

…they have some staff there that are… really small-minded and think that jail is all about punishment and that kind of stuff. So I think that’s where the problem comes in, yeah. And it’s too bad, because if everybody had the attitude… about their mission statement, about creating choices and empowering women, I think that it would really make a difference for women.
- Sherri

…I know that maybe it’s not necessarily CSC’s [Correctional Service of Canada] job to help these women, but isn’t that the point of being in jail – rehabilitation, not punishment?
- Caitlin
You cage them up for a couple years and say ok your time’s up. Ok, go. And that’s not what it’s supposed to be about anymore. – Stephanie

Sometimes I think it would be better to go back to the old way, you know - where you got nothing, you didn’t expect anything. And you got nothing and, you know, that was the way it was. – Susan

The women-centred rhetoric also leads women to expect that they will be treated by correctional staff in supportive and respectful ways. As Sherri states above, some staff “think that jail is about punishment” – suggesting that her own expectations are that jail is no longer only about punishment. However, it is precisely because prisons are indeed about punishment that the women-centred rhetoric rings false. Winn provided a succinct statement in this regard:

I think I have more issues than when I went in, because the issues you go in with, you can only do so much work on them because the prison compels [sic] them and any guilt and shame and regret and all those other negative feelings just get compelled by being incarcerated. Like every day you’re reminded of ‘what a shit-ass person you are for committing a crime and how it has affected every day of your life.

…it is like a psychological death sentence. And I think that that’s what people don’t understand and I blame the media…I think that our media, in general, they don’t do investigative journalism, they only look for sensationalism….And I think the media has failed the women in prison miserably…until you’re in there, you really don’t understand. Until you see the look in their eyes, those women. – Liz

Women who had been incarcerated at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (the prison for Aboriginal women) also spoke to the contradictions of enforced or mandated healing. Okimaw Ohci incorporates Aboriginal healing methods and cultural practices into the operations of the prison. Although women did express an appreciation for the opportunity to have access to cultural and spiritual traditions and to speak with elders, the fact that the Healing Lodge was operated by the correctional system framed their experiences. Steph gained a lot from speaking with elders, fasting, and taking part in sweat lodge ceremonies. However, she questioned a prison environment that intertwines punishment and healing and points out this contradiction.

…the Healing Lodge staff want you to heal too fast, and on their terms. Like you know what I mean? When you go to the Healing Lodge they make you write – it’s called the healing plan – and they make you write like all your issues. Like, for example, you know, abused, sexually abused as a child, and you know, got into prostitution and addictions and all that. So they want you to write all that stuff and what do you think you need to do to overcome that. What can you do daily, and like you gotta follow that, like that’s part of being there.

Steph continues to say that if you do not participate daily in your healing program you can be ‘charged’, which means being punished and/or being denied access to certain rights and privileges. She states that you have to heal “on their terms” which means adopting the routines, strategies and methods employed at the Healing Lodge or risk being penalized. (A similar observation has been made by Pollack & Kendall, 2005 regarding a Dialectical Behaviour Program for imprisoned women with mental health needs). Overall, women who had been incarcerated at Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge compared it favourably to the other non-Aboriginal based prisons, although they also (like non-Aboriginal participants) struggled with notions of mandated healing and empowerment.

Punishment and Empowerment: Summary and Recommendations

The current promotion of Canadian federal corrections as the world’s most gender-sensitive incarcerators of women should be carefully scrutinized. The contradiction of a prison that is empowering is not lost on criminalized women who experience disillusionment and frustration when rhetoric does not correspond with reality. In fact, most participants in this study experienced imprisonment as anything but supportive and empowering. Many women had some concrete recommendations for how to improve women’s corrections if the goal of dealing with women’s various needs and of supporting their re-integration is to be achieved.

- A consistent ‘primary worker’ (correctional officer) with whom women can build trust and work on their goals. The importance of consistency was underscored by Susie who said “I think for people whose lives have been lived that way with no structure, with no continuity, nothing is consistent. You can’t put them in that environment again and expect some radical change.” This comment reflects the idea that you should offer an alternative for women with histories of poverty, abuse and addictions, rather than an environment that replicates their unhealthy experiences.

- Flexibility in how group programming operates. A number of issues were raised about the group format that dominates correctional programming. In addition to the prevalent concerns about confidentiality and trust (when you are living with the group members 24 hours, seven days a week), some women identified the need to be more flexible in how the groups were run by taking into account the needs of the women. Susan observed that “when you run a course with an iron hand, you’re not going to have any people, you know, that benefit from it.”

- Opportunity to learn from peers. Over and over again, women stressed the importance of having the opportunity to receive support from women “who had been there.” In the context of prison programming, Dirty D recommended that “they should have somebody from the jail that’s an addict and going in and talking to them”. Allowing women access to women with similar lived experiences of addiction and criminalization was considered inspirational as well as an opportunity to connect with non-correctional workers with whom they felt they would have a more trusting and open relationship.

- Prisoner advocate inside. Participants spoke of the importance of knowing your rights while incarcerated. They spoke of how hard it often is to know, for example, when
their rights were being violated, how to access information about their ‘case’, and what they did and did not have to sign. It was recommended that a prisoner advocate be available who could help with grievances, access to information, and explain prisoner rights. The Human Rights in Action Project being conducted by the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, Native Women’s Association of Canada and Strength In Sisterhood has already begun working on such a project with the goal of enhancing the capacity of women inside to address advocacy issues in the prisons for women, as well as developing community release options for Aboriginal women exiting federal prisons.

**FINDING #3:**

Addictions & Trauma: “Going Underneath”
Typically, the correctional approach to addictions is one that focuses upon behaviour modification and on identifying ‘triggers’ and situations in which people are at ‘high risk’ of using drugs/alcohol. If the criminal justice system has identified that drugs/alcohol were related to the offence for which they were charged, women are mandated to take a prison-run drug/alcohol treatment program. The program offered at federal prisons is called Women Offender Substance Abuse Program (WOSAP).

In relation to the relapse prevention aspect of the program, some women said that it was, in theory, helpful to identify triggers and patterns of their drug use. They also mentioned that some of the facilitators treated them “as humans, not animals”, which offered a welcome contrast to the overall correctional climate. Particularly for women with longer sentences, however, the program felt disconnected from their outside lives and they had few opportunities to apply the relapse prevention principles. The reality is that for women with longer sentences, their focus is often on staying clean while inside prison and on understanding the underlying reasons for their drug/alcohol use. (There was also some evidence from Key Informant interviews that imprisonment itself is implicated in the development of addictions as a way of coping with the stresses and abuses of incarceration). Many women felt that, once released, the WOSAP program was a distant memory and/or did not offer them a space to process the role that addictions played in their life, in particular the relationship to trauma. The need for more intensive addiction support was a common recommendation offered by participants:

"Like you learn about these relapse preventions and (...) situations and how we’re not going to use again, and to stay clean and sober... why does the person use in the first place? What’s the root of the core? ...would be a very awesome program to have in there, definitely." - Stephanie

"...they tell you all the different parts of addiction, but they only hit the surface, they never go underneath." - Bobbie-Jo

A similar theme related to dealing with the relationship between addictions and experiences of trauma and other painful events was raised by women who had been paroled to addiction treatment centres. Five women were residing in addiction treatment centres at the time of the interview for this study and one other woman had just been released from an addiction treatment centre. One of the central themes they raised was the importance of dealing with their histories of trauma and addictions within the context of a supportive environment. As Dor said, "...we need more sexual abuse counseling (...) in prison. Because a lot of us have been abused in one form or another. I think, because I was not born a drug addict, I became one." Another participant spoke about the multi-dimensional approach to addictions that she experienced in the treatment centre she was in. Andi’s comments reflect the notion that women often use substances as a strategy for coping with family of origin experiences, abusive relationships and other painful events and losses: "...it’s not just alcohol here (...) at the addiction treatment centre; it’s everything. It’s your relationships with men, your relationships with your family, family dynamics, guilt and shame, grief..." The comments from the six women who were released from prison into addiction treatment centres suggest the importance of a multi-dimensional (not only relapse prevention and cognitive behavioral strategies) treatment approaches that include a focus on underlying issues such as trauma, family of origin, violence against women, grief and loss.

Addictions and Trauma: Summary and Recommendations

Although participants valued the skills and understanding about how to handle situations that place them at higher risk of using drugs/alcohol, many felt this was not sufficient to help them abstain once they were released. This was particularly true for women who were serving longer sentences and whose immediate issues were related to drug use while incarcerated. Many women also spoke of valuing the opportunity to understand and work through the connections between drug and alcohol use and various losses and trauma they had experienced. Several recommendations related to addictions and trauma emerged from this research:

- **Development of holistic addictions treatment model**
  which incorporates a variety of treatment modalities and includes a peer support component.
- **Increased opportunity for women to have temporary absence passes**
  to attend addictions counselling in the community from organizations that specialize in trauma and addictions. Section 17 of The Correctional and Conditional Release Act, the legislation guiding the Correctional Service of Canada, specifically allows prisoners to exit prison “for medical... [or]... personal development for rehabilitative purposes.” This legislative provision should be used to assist women in obtaining meaningful addiction treatment.
- **Increased opportunity for women to serve their time or be released on day parole into addiction treatment centres**
  that have a gendered understanding of trauma, loss and addiction.

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Finding #4: Abuse Counselling Delivered by Community Agencies

You know, it was just so, healing me, sort of, and it was just, like, I had six weeks of one-on-one with the counsellor there. And it was really good, because she didn’t just go by the book, like the other facilitators did... it wasn’t like that, it was more to do with ourselves, instead of just going through, ‘what do we have to do this week’? - River

Being imprisoned often activates flashbacks and other effects of abuse since the carceral environment is reminiscent of abuse dynamics, such as powerlessness, extreme power imbalances and unpredictability. Sometimes women use familiar coping strategies such as dissociation, anger, and self-harm while imprisoned in order to deal with feelings and memories associated with abuse. As well, experiences of trauma and sexual abuse are linked to drug and alcohol addiction which often play a role in the criminalization of women.

Each prison is supposed to provide a trauma/sexual abuse counselling service. This is a very small program contracted out to community organizations and generally involves time limited one-to-one counselling sessions and the therapist can usually see only a handful of women per week. Although there are differences in opinion as to if and how sexual abuse counselling should be provided to women prisoners (CHRC, 2003), findings from this study indicate the importance of providing this type of therapy and, in particular, the significance of utilizing feminist-oriented community agencies that have some autonomy from the Correctional Service of Canada.

Despite the fact that this service is very limited, women in this study who had the opportunity to see a sexual abuse counsellor greatly valued the experience. Participants who had one-to-one counselling sessions spoke about the insight they had gained into both their addictions and other behaviours and feelings. In all regions, the sexual abuse counselling program was viewed in very positive terms and respondents felt this type of therapy had a significant impact on their post-prison lives. Women articulated several reasons for this. First, and most importantly, the counsellor was not considered to be part of Correctional Service Canada, in that she was hired from the ‘outside’ to deliver the program. Participants in this study spoke of the obstacles to being honest, open and vulnerable with prison staff and the significance of having a therapist/counsellor who was allowed to keep their therapy sessions confidential.

There is another program run in CSC [Correctional Service of Canada], but not through CSC, which was very beneficial to me. And it’s called Trauma and Abuse, for survivors of trauma and abuse, and it’s run by an independent group of social workers who are actually paid by CSC but don’t work through CSC, so… and that’s voluntary as well, it’s not a part of anybody’s correctional plan, so the people that were in that program wanted to be in that program, and that made a huge difference. - Caitlin

That the women emphasized the voluntary nature of this program is reflective of the prison environment that mandates certain kinds of programs and therapies, documented in a woman’s “correctional plan.” Most correctional programming is cognitive-behavioural, targeting women’s thoughts, attitudes and behaviours that are believed to be associated with crime. This type of programming goes “by the book,” in the sense that the facilitators tend to define the general topics of exploration, provide information to the women, and guide them through the weekly agenda.

Although on contract with CSC, women felt that sexual abuse counsellors’ approach was founded on notions of respect,
confidentiality and support. One of the ways that this manifested itself was through the fact that some sexual abuse counsellors allowed women to see the files they were keeping about them. Files and documentation hold a lot of significance in the prison context as what the ‘authorities’ write about a prisoner has serious consequences. The theme of ‘the file’ loomed large in these interviews as many women felt as though expert discourses were privileged, such as those of the psychiatrists and psychologists, over their own accounts of their experiences. In contrast, they experienced sexual abuse counsellors from ‘outside’ as more collaborative in their approaches. Colleen’s comment is illustrative of what participants said about sexual abuse counselling.

Sexual abuse therapy – fantastic program. The lady, [therapist’s name] who runs it – unbelievable. She is not under their contract; she’s an outside contract. So she comes in and women feel more comfortable with her. Unless you are endangering your life, other’s lives, or… people in the others’ life, what you and her talk to, it stays between you and her… She writes a report for them, and she lets you see. Here’s a copy of the report, so you know exactly what’s been put into your file. And that’s fine. Whereas the psychologist and the psychiatrist are run by them [Correctional Service of Canada].

That sexual abuse counselling sessions were confidential (not shared with prison staff), and the transparency of the documentation had the effect of building trust and providing a context in which women felt comfortable dealing with past trauma. As Jessi commented, “I liked seeing her, because she was from the outside and she didn’t tell corrections what I said. Like it was private.”

Women stated that although the therapy was quite time-limited, they gained insight into their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. These insights helped them to better deal with such things as self-blame, addictions and self-harm, allowing them to respond in new and positive ways. A number of women also arranged this type of therapy once they were released, because as Tanya said, “I need my sexual abuse therapy to help keep me strong, so I don’t re-offend.”

Sexual Abuse Counselling: Summary and Recommendations

In 1993 the Correctional Service of Canada commissioned an evaluation of therapeutic services in the former Prison for Women which was conducted by Dr. Kathleen Kendall. Dr. Kendall found that feminist therapy which is built upon the principles of power sharing, connecting women’s marginalization (including experiences of abuse and violence against women) to their criminalization, and fostering autonomy and respect were the most beneficial models within the context of women’s prisons. She recommended that if prisons for women were going to provide therapeutic services they should be from a feminist-oriented model and perspective (Kendall, 1993). Incredibly, the recommendations from her report were not implemented in the new women-centred prisons.

In this study, the unanimity of responses by those women who talked about their experience of sexual abuse counselling was striking: they appreciated the awareness of power and control issues that these counsellors illustrated, as well as the treatment approach taken, which appeared to reflect respect and collaboration (See Pollack & Brezina, 2007 for a discussion of power issues in counselling in prisons). The central aspect of the model employed by agencies contracted to deliver this type of counselling was the ability to facilitate trust through confidentiality and non-correctional treatment modalities. In particular, women benefited from the fact that the counsellor came from ‘outside’ and was ‘not controlled’ by Correctional Service of Canada. Participants were secure in the fact that their confidentiality was assured and felt as though the sexual abuse counsellor allowed them to direct the course of therapy rather than following a set agenda or script. Therefore, it is recommended:

- **This program should remain and be expanded** to allow more women to benefit from this type of service.
- **It is crucial that this program remain** provided by feminist-informed trauma specialists from the community.
- **Specific details and information should remain confidential** and not be shared with criminal justice staff, beyond the normal legal requirements (i.e., immediate harm to self or others; child is being abused).
- **Community rape crisis and sexual assault centres** be contracted to offer this program to women who are released into the community, to ensure a continuity of care and continued treatment if desired.
Many women spoke of the challenges of being released in general and specifically about the complex terrain they need to negotiate in order to keep from relapsing. Given that the women felt as though they did not have the opportunity to get to the ‘root cause’ of their addictions as well as the generally overwhelming experience of returning to the community, staying clean was often challenging. Women identified a number of factors that were difficult. These included:

- The location of too many halfway houses in low income neighbourhoods with a high concentration of drug users/sellers.
- Stresses related to re-establishing relationships with children, particularly in relation to feelings of shame.
- Lack of non-judgemental supports and feelings of isolation.
- Negotiating complex and depersonalizing bureaucracies such as banks, social services, child welfare agencies, department of motor vehicles, employment centres, etc.
- Difficulties finding employment due to stigma of criminal record.
- Relationships with correctional personnel (parole officers, psychologists, halfway house staff) that often felt demeaning and unsupportive.

Participants identified the months immediately following release as particularly difficult. Many said that it was during this initial period that they often felt as though they might be better able to cope back in prison. They identified the reasons for this as having to do with the infantilization, lack of support, judgements and stigma they perceived from those involved in supervising their post-prison lives as well as the difficulties finding childcare and employment. All of these factors were seen as contributing to women’s frustration and thus to the potential that they would turn to drugs or alcohol as a strategy for coping with shame and feelings of powerlessness.

Many participants said the experience of parole was characterized by negative and pessimistic discourses that framed the women as constantly ‘at risk’ of re-offending. The notion of being ‘at risk’ lends itself to focusing on the ‘negative’ things they have done at the expense of encouraging women’s capacities and supporting the changes they have made. As Quinn remarked:

> It’s like, no respect… like I’m not important, because I’m the offender. I’m the parolee… And it’s this constant theme from the PO [Parole Officer], the workers at [the halfway house], the psychologist… You’re not valuable, because you’re always at risk of reoffending. And it’s that constant theme of being treated that way. They’re always suspicious.

The discouragement and disrespect is reflected in the media as well as in correctional discourse, and as Susan observed, “you never hear ‘two people got out on parole and they’re both doing wonderful.” The persistence of being perceived as deficient and deviant greatly contributed to post-release challenges. Michelle explained:

> It degrade[s] you. It makes you feel like you’re not important. It makes you feel like you’re not worthy. It makes you feel like you’re not worth somebody spending the time and taking the time to get to
know you and realize that you made a mistake. You screwed up, this is not who you are. - Michelle

If a woman is on day parole, her primary access to support is through halfway house staff and parole officers. One of the contradictions and challenges raised by participants in this study was in relation to their use of drugs/alcohol and the supervisory/risk management role played by the professionals in their lives. Participants reported that they were told to be honest with parole officers about such things as drug/alcohol use, finances, and relationships. Julie 1 explained that her parole officer urged her to be “transparent” about how she was doing in re-establishing life after release from prison. Her attempts at ‘transparency’ however, backfired when she admitted that she had used drugs and was then sent back to prison:

…I had confessed to her [her parole officer] that I had relapsed… I decided to get help. Then my probation [sic] officer said… ‘I can’t leave you outside in your condition… but we’ll go back to the board, [National Parole Board] and we’ll request treatment.’ I thought that when I asked for help, that she would take me through the transition, that she would take me directly to treatment. But I thought when you relapse you’re supposed to ask for help, I didn’t realize that that’s a no-no.

The contradictory role of parole officers as both supports and social control agents made it difficult for women to develop trusting and honest relationships – to be ‘transparent’ as Julie 1 said.

A further barrier to gaining support for substance use is an all too common parole stipulation that prohibits contact with other criminalized people. When a woman has this stipulation placed on her from the National Parole Board, it can mean that she is unable to associate with certain or all people who have a criminal record (the legality of this stipulation is questionable). This prohibition often means that women are cut off from receiving and giving support to other women on parole.

They’re trying to make sure they don’t associate with nobody… who can do something criminal. I guess they figure if there’s two people, both criminals…they might think up something to do another crime. Whereas a lot of times they just want support, two women, helping each other, support each other… - Tanya

There was a woman [in the halfway house]…She didn’t know how to get to a corner store… but where I had an association clause, listen to this one now… I wasn’t allowed to show her how to get to the mall, or we weren’t allowed to go to an NA meeting together, ok? But she didn’t know how to get to a corner store! - Sherri

Parole stipulations that they are not to associate with anyone who is known to be involved in illegal activities often means that relationships established while in prison can no longer be officially maintained while on parole, thus cutting women off once more from potential social networks. Not only do women face the stigma of being criminalized but they also repeatedly expressed feeling judgments and misunderstandings from those who did not share common experiences, such as dealing with being abused as a child, addictions and criminalization. The parole requirement that they are unable to associate with others who have been criminalized compounds this isolation by preventing women from gaining support and companionship from those with whom they may feel most comfortable. The importance of peer support and friendship was again a common theme when women were discussing the challenges of refraining from drug and/or alcohol use. These three participants explained:

…you’re releasing junkies - releasing hard-core junkies, hard-core drug addicts from prison, and hard-core alcoholics. After being there for so long - some coming out of max [maximum security units] (max is the worst, it shouldn’t be happening). There should always be something for the women. Like some kind of peer support, something where they can go, to know that they’re safe. - Marie

But I mean, it’s hard… especially with me - because I was in so long … Like, two girls that I hang around with quite a bit both have criminal records, they’re both on parole right now, you know, but they both have jobs, and…they live at home with their parents because it’s cheaper (laughs), and they’re making better lives for themselves… sometimes those kinds of people can be supportive to be around, if you’re struggling, because you can see somebody else making it. - Cassandra

I go up to a person who just has that black and white from the book, taught from the book. I’d rather have someone with thick life experience than with the person who had been taught by university…Because the recovering person understands where that sick person is, you know, because they’ve been there before, and they know what it’s like to go through what they go through. - Selma

* Exceptions to this stipulation appear to be occasionally made when a woman’s partner and/or close relatives have been criminalized.
Addictions and Re-integration: Summary and Recommendations

One of the biggest challenges facing women on release is staying clean from drugs and alcohol. Participants also spoke of the tension between using parole officers and halfway house staff as support and the reality that they have the power to put them back in prison if they are deemed to have violated a parole stipulation. Some women were able to negotiate this tension, while others felt it greatly interfered with their ability to trust and therefore receive the help they needed. Women spoke consistently about the need for non-judgmental peer supports who themselves had successfully dealt with their own addictions. This type of support was seen as especially helpful as such a person would not be required to break confidentiality and would have no power to return them to prison. One participant had found this type of support by herself and said she found her to be “inspirational.” The following are recommendations to enhance supports to women with addictions returning to the community.

- **Peer support programming** that enables women to connect with others who have successfully dealt with their addictions and who also have been criminalized. This should be in the form of some sort of buddy system. The peer support should not be required to report to CSC or keep any documentation. Confidentiality should be a central feature of this relationship.
- **Parole officers should be given greater scope** to allow for a harm reduction approach to addictions. Most women (75% from 2001 to 2002) returned to institutions are revoked for technical violations of conditions rather than re-offence (CHRC, 2003). The most common reason for suspension is substance abuse. The contradiction of asking women to be ‘transparent’, open and honest with parole officers but having parole revoked when they have a slip, sets women up for being re-criminalized.
- **Resources be enhanced for halfway houses** to provide greater support for women on release. Workers should also be permitted more discretion in how to support women struggling with addictions and release.
- **Increased addiction treatment options for women to go to when paroled**, such as Stonehenge in Guelph, Ontario, Grant House in Toronto, Ontario, and Tsow-Tun Le Lum for First Nations and Aboriginal women on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

“So I know that today a woman gets out and she doesn’t want to use but she doesn’t have no money either so she think I’ll just go turn a trick and make 100 bucks. But as soon as you do that it puts you at higher risk to use because then you feel shitty about yourself and you wanna numb that pain or that ugliness, so you use and then starts the whole cycle. So I mean even having no money, I mean as crazy as it sounds, puts you at risk to use”

- Sherri
The Canadian research on women released from federal prisons paints a bleak picture about their post-prison lives in the community. Once released, criminalized women often lack employment, supports, and housing. Research also suggests that little assistance and support is provided for their transition into the community (AGC, 2003). These findings were replicated in this study as well.

One of the central themes raised by women was the need for concrete support with release planning. Although in theory women are supposed to get pre-release support before they leave prison, only a few women said they had much more than a place to live and the name of their parole officer. However, Elizabeth Fry Society workers who did prison visits were considered quite helpful and often provided women with information about community supports and resources such as where to get clothing and connecting with Elizabeth Fry services. Yet many participants mentioned the need for considerably more support. Women highlighted the need for increased opportunities to make connections in the community through such things as Escorted or Unescorted Temporary Passes and apprenticeship/job training experiences. Women stated that there were very few opportunities to accomplish pre-release planning. Very few women are permitted to do work-release programming throughout the country. While temporary absences and work releases have the potential to provide opportunity for on-the-job training, job contracts or sustaining treatment in the community, only 7% of women classified as minimum and medium security participated during 2001 to 2002 (CHRC, 2003). The same is true for Aboriginal women; while two provisions exist that would enable them to be released into a community that is sensitive to their culture and needs, these provisions are not effectively communicated to them as a release option. As such, from April 2001 to November 2002 there were eight releases of Aboriginal women under these provisions (AGC, 2003).

In relation to concrete pre-release planning, women identified the need for:

- Help regaining their ID such as driver’s license and health card. Sandi and others suggested the need to have: “... somebody from the outside going in two months before [release], gettin’ your social insurance. Now you need picture ID for everything. Now you have to get a bank account.”
- Obtaining a physician in the community they would be living in
- A list of NA and AA meetings and locations
- Bus route maps
- Location of employment centres and support finding jobs
- Help finding gender-specific addiction treatment resources
- Arranging for a sexual abuse counsellor
- Help with banking
- Emotional support dealing with the stigma of criminalization
- Emotional support to refrain from drug use
- Improved access to vocational or educational opportunities

Some of the obstacles they faced while in prison in obtaining this support were:

- Correctional officers say they are too over-worked to help them
- Prisons say they do not have enough staff available to take them on temporary passes to do some of these pre-release tasks; they also don’t train citizen escorts, who can and do want to take out women on Escorted Temporary Absences
- No access to the internet in prisons to develop contacts/support in the community or otherwise locate resources themselves
- Difficulty accessing culturally specific supports, such as different spiritual leaders, especially Elders, language interpreters, or other cultural supports; this is even worse for Aboriginal women released from maximum security units or segregation units.
- Lack of job skill development in prison. Most jobs are gender-stereotyped such as cooking, cleaning and hairdressing in the institution. Hannah stated “they need to have more training in prison, like specific training. I don’t understand why girls can’t do something like mechanics or something like that eh, in there... a job that is real, like a man’s job.”

Moreover, women spoke emphatically about how overwhelming and challenging the first few months of release are, due to being unfamiliar with community resources. As Rachel suggested:

... your parole officer should be there and go, ‘Ya know what? There are these places that can help you, here’s the numbers, here’s the name, give them a call if you need them.’ Ya know, like, they should be helping you with your supports and places that you can go... like me when I first got out, I didn’t have nothing. My parole officer’s number and phone her, that’s it...

Since they are not permitted to access the internet while in prison, women rely upon correctional workers to find out information about the community to which they are being released. They often do not know the community and are released with very little information about where the resources they need are located and how to get to them. Compounding this issue was the feeling that those supervising their release were often unaware of what community resources were available.

Caitlin noted:

...it’s not their fault that they’re not able to help you, they don’t have access to what they need either, and it shouldn’t take a parolee to inform their parole officers and halfway house staff of what’s available and how to get there. But I’m willing to do that if that’s what it takes to even help one other person.

Some challenges to getting support once released from prison were:

- Parole officers and halfway house staff in some areas were often not aware of community resources
- Stigma attached to using their Correctional Service of Canada parole card, which is often their only form of picture identification. Sandi stated: “I had to use my bloody parole thing, that’s embarrassing, that is. Make sure they get a picture ID without Correctional Canada on it.”
- Paying for medication that was available in prison. Some women spoke of being given medication - both for physical
Returning to the Community: Need for Concrete Practical Release Planning Support

Summary and Recommendations

Although the mandate of prisons includes ensuring the safe return of prisoners to communities, the reality is that more and more women are leaving prison on their statutory release date, which means being released without a gradual integrative process and with very little access to supports, including housing. Women who were released on day parole, despite having housing support in the form of halfway houses, identified the period immediately after release (first six months) as extremely overwhelming, in large part due to the various parole requirements they had to fulfill or risk being returned to the prison. Dealing with bureaucracies such as child welfare, financial institutions and the parole system were also seen as overwhelming and often frustrating. Trying to stay clean from drugs and alcohol was also identified as extremely challenging. The following are recommendations to assist women in their return to the community.

- **Women need to be given the opportunity to obtain pre-release information**, such as bus routes, time and location of AA and NA meetings etc. Prisoner advocate and support organizations should be hired to gather this information for each woman.
- **Women who have experienced the transition process be hired** to put together a community resource pamphlet; halfway house and parole officers should have a community booklet of relevant resources that each woman could be given (the resources would include, for example, a list of employment training centres, counselling services, community health centres).
- **As a method of assisting with the transition from inside to outside, peer mentors** should be available to accompany women to appointments, help navigate various bureaucracies, and to familiarize them to the city. “If they had something that was out here especially for women that are coming out, like...other women that...have been inside, maybe, that could be a part of it, that could go to the halfway house and get women and take them out to their appointments, or help them get a routine happening, they should try to set something like that up, because I’m telling you, I bet you women would be a hell of a lot more successful... but to make that solely somebody’s job?? That would be the ideal!! That would be awesome.” - Sherri
- **Increase the availability of temporary passes** so women can begin arranging such things as ID, social insurance numbers, meeting with community agencies, etc.
- **Allow women more autonomy** to choose community supports for themselves. For example, currently women have little choice but to see a correctional psychologist. Colleen said that counsellors who are “not government controlled” are also really important as “sometimes you need your own community support so that you can heal.”
- **Opportunities for the development of job skills** so that women have some employment experience when they get out. Several women recommended the following: “…it would be good if some sort of company, this is just a suggestion, I’m probably dreaming, but if some sort of big company would be able to say ‘We’ll hire women that are getting released from federal prison, and pay them this much’, or whatever. Like, just to know that somebody... if you had a job leaving the institution, I think that would make a world of difference because people wouldn’t be coming back, they’d be out there busy working and making a few dollars, something like that.” - River
Responses to questions about their post-prison experiences reflected a challenge to the taken-for-granted notion of community as a place in which one re-integrates or finds a place of belonging. All women in this study spoke about the challenges to feeling and being accepted by ‘the community’ at large as well the individual communities from which they came.

The stigma of having been imprisoned was by far the greatest barrier to feelings of ‘inclusion’ within the outside community. Susie reflects on the fact that communities have failed criminalized women before they entered prison and suggests that we have a responsibility to support them when they return. Her perspective challenges the common ‘othering’ that occurs when we divide communities into ‘us’ and ‘them’.

I go into this building, it’s a big fancy building, downtown [name of medium sized city], and it’s like got this whole open floor concept where there’s just real nice partitions between everybody’s office but you can hear conversations from here to down the block, right? The woman sits there and you know she starts to talk, and she’s really friendly at first, but she’s loud and she says ‘Oh Suzie, it’s so good to finally meet you’, and she’s like on and on and on and on and on and on right? And then she asks me, ‘how long were you in prison for?’ ‘Duh me, ahh 6 years, right? She basically rolled herself back from the desk and she said, ‘oh my god you must have done something very, very bad to go to jail for that long. ‘As loud as she said ‘hi Suzie it’s so nice to see you.’ ‘Yeah! So, ya know, it’s stuff like that. The issues that I think women re-integrating into the community face are not theirs. It’s the community’s issue.

Women identified many barriers to feeling and being included into communities, such as the virtual impossibility of gaining employment after a lengthy incarceration period, negative judgments from banks, parole officers, social assistance workers, halfway house staff, government bureaucracies (such as department of motor vehicles) and potential employers. When people in the wider community were perceived to be "not a forgiving bunch", women’s own feelings of social isolation and feelings of shame and guilt were compounded.

For the women who struggled with addictions prior to imprisonment, isolation from community was particularly tricky as their former social contacts (i.e., community) were other people who were involved in drug/alcohol abuse. In order to stay clean, women needed to sever themselves from their former friends - this results in being caught in a ‘nowhere community’ zone, where they are barred from the larger community and are no longer connecting to their former community.

Thirty-seven (54.4%) of the participants in this study were on day parole. For many of these women, their connection to ‘community’ was through their contact with various professionals, most of whom they were mandated to see. Women on parole are generally required to report to a variety of professionals, such as parole officers, Correctional Service of Canada psychologists, addiction counsellors and/or halfway house staff. All these people are required to assess and/or evaluate a woman’s behavior and attitude for the purpose of managing the risk she poses to herself and/or the community. Many women have no social connections or supports in the community they are living, either because they

— Suzie
are no longer involved with previous drug related connections or because they have moved to an unfamiliar community. As a result, their primary connections are often with workers associated with the correctional system.

...the only friends I have are CSC [Correctional Service of Canada] related. We're not friends, but you know what I'm saying, they're the supports. I'm surprised that there isn't more support in the community for people re-entering, where you can be absolutely honest and not be worried that oh my god, someone's going to write a report now that's going to be archived forever and ever. - Winn

... so I've come to a community I don't know. I have no friends. I haven't talked to my family in years... in this community I have nobody. Only professionals... I think CSC [Correctional Service of Canada] expects me to be best friends with them, because when I got out, I had nothing. - Dawn

Reflecting upon their experiences of imprisonment and release into the community, women often spoke of the ways in which relationships with professionals associated with the correctional system affected their lives in both concrete and emotional ways. Contact with professionals in the community is characterized by the agenda to protect society by predicting, controlling and managing the 'risk' posed by women on parole. Risk discourses proliferate throughout the criminal justice system, and for participants in this study, such discourses provided the interpretive frame through which their behaviours and feelings – their entire selves – were understood. Sometimes the uni-dimensional focus on risk has the effect of negating what women themselves know and feel; as Julie 1 states: “But when they - the staff - come face-to-face with somebody, really face-to-face - they can't even see you.” The women generally felt as though they were not truly ‘seen’ or ‘heard’ by those whose interpretations are considered more legitimate and accurate than their own perspectives on their lives and needs. As Julie 2 observed:

I mean, they're going to rely on the report from the psychologist, the report from the psychiatrist, the probation officer, but, basically, they don't really know you. Their job is... is to determine whether you represent a risk to society.

The theme of not 'being known' ran throughout the interviews in this study. Women made many attempts to break through the dominant correctional approach in order to try and get the support they needed. However, more often than not, they met with limited success. This was because, as Susan observed:

... [W]ell I feel, anyway, that they say they want you to take responsibility for what you've done, but when you do, and you work it out for them, you're always wrong. It's got to be one of their shrinks or one of their people.

Explaining yourself in your own terms within the context of community correctional supervision carries its own risks.

Because, the first time I was there, I cooperated, then they made some files, they write things down about you, they build a file on you, then after, they give you a copy. Then, you're looking at it thinking “well, that's not what I said, that's not right... So, then... the more you cooperate, the more you realize that it gets used against you... So, then I said to them “that's it. That's it. You won't get me again”. So, when I saw people, it was like... “what do you want to know?” “Open my file, read it, I don't have anything else to say. That's it.” It was the same thing when I came to the halfway house. - Julie 1

The feeling that one's correctional file was “the bible” that described and circumscribed women's experiences and needs greatly impacted how women felt they were treated by those in charge of 'supervising' their release. The weight given to 'expert discourses' and the feeling that their own understandings of themselves (that may lie outside the boundaries of correctional discourses) were given little credibility contributed to feelings of disconnection and exclusion from community. In addition, participants spoke of the stigma attached to having been criminalized and the concrete ways this influenced their relationship with 'community' – such as potential employers and various bureaucracies they needed to engage with in order to establish a post-prison life. Time and time again, women said they were isolated and that they had “no friends” and that their primary connections were with professionals associated with the correctional system.
Although women utilized the required supports, they often felt as though their community was defined by and consisted of correctional personnel. It is challenging at best to develop new social networks when you have been locked away for a number of years, your former community is either no longer where you want to connect and/or you are not permitted to socialize with them. There are also serious challenges to developing social networks through employment since many women had difficulties finding an employer that would hire someone with a criminal record. Further, women’s correctional files follow them from prison and carry significant legitimacy in the eyes of those supervising their release. Consequently, women often feel as though they have very little influence over how they are perceived and treated. The following are recommendations to enhance women’s autonomy and to provide them with a wider range of reintegration supports.

• **Facilitate and formalize a peer support service** that women can draw upon for support. Facilitators should be women with lived experience of being criminalized. This group should be autonomous from the Correctional Service of Canada.

• **Community agencies with expertise** in issues effecting marginalized women should be better funded in order to expand their mandate to support and advocate on behalf of criminalized women. This would provide a wider support network for women upon release.

• **Women’s correctional plan should be more flexible** in order to allow for non-correctional supports, such as psychological counselling, in order to provide some options for women to choose various counselling perspectives and methods.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS
It is well established in the literature that criminalized women generally come from poverty, experience high levels of abuse and male violence, are disproportionately from racially and/or culturally marginalized communities, and have substance abuse problems. The 'pathways to crime' literature illustrates the relationship between socio-economic, gender, and racial marginalization and the criminalization of women. Further, poor, racialized and Aboriginal communities are over-policed, racially profiled, and experience biases within the criminal justice system (Chan & Mirchandani, 2002). It is indisputable that Canadian prisons incarcerate disadvantaged women and men from marginalized communities. Within this context of social exclusion, then, the notion of 're-integration' makes little sense. Re-integration implies that women were integrated within 'mainstream' (which implicitly means white, middle class) communities. In reality, women leaving prison are not only unlikely to re-integrate, but in fact their marginal status is significantly augmented; they have been severed from family, community and the labour market and, most significantly, carry the stigma of having been criminalized and imprisoned. Such factors greatly impede a woman's chance of entering into the labour market and community, from which she was isolated in the first place.

Community supports need to be developed that actually reflect what criminalized women feel is helpful. Correctional responses are only one type of response – supports developed from non-correctional frameworks carry the potential to help connect women to resources, training, counselling and other supports. Community supports and programs should be built upon the recommendations made from women who participated in this study. These include:

- **Utilize the expertise of women who have experienced criminalization and/or addictions.** Employ women as addiction supports, mentors, outreach workers, etc. with the lived experience of criminalization and/or addictions.
- **Maintain autonomy from the criminal justice system** in terms of the confidentiality of documentation and program/service content and delivery. As Winn stated, a participant who currently supports women who are released from prison: "you’re not the interrogator. You could ask, you know, ‘how are you?’ You don’t have to ask ‘what happened to get you back in there [prison],’ or belittle them, that’s not your position there. You’re trying to build a position of trust and support and warmth and caring and compassion… because our position is support in the community and helping women stay in the community and if she needs to be brutally honest with me, then unless she is going to hurt herself, I am not going to breach that trust."
- **Provide alternative frameworks** for understanding women’s criminalization that do not replicate dominant discourses of women as pathological and/or ‘bad’. This involves understanding the structural, systemic and relational factors, such as racism, poverty, and violence that affect women’s lives.
- **Have awareness that prison is damaging** and that part of release involves coping with the social and emotional after-effects of being imprisoned. Marilyn describes her experience: "I've had 11 years in, between all those 3 places, and like I said I've seen a lot. I cut down a girl, you know… no wonder you suppress so much, because you really have to block it out, because if you don't it would just drive you crazy. And then deal with it later, when you're in a better headspace, and you're ready to deal with it, which is… that's what I do, and that's what I'm still doing." Liz also says "[A]nd you imagine somebody on a ten or fifteen year sentence, it destroys the soul. And you only have to look into their eyes and you can see it".
- **Advocate with and on behalf of criminalized women.** Connect with organizations with expertise in the area, such as Elizabeth Fry Societies, and work with mental health, addictions, and trauma organizations to expand their organizational mandates to include enhancing prison conditions and community supports for women.

It has now been 12 years since the opening of the first ‘women-centred’ prison. Since that time, the impossibility of establishing a prison – an institution designed to punish and control – that is empowering and supportive has been made clear. Researchers and activists have illustrated the myriad ways in which feminist discourses of empowerment and gender have been transmuted by correctional frameworks and used to further the penal agenda of regulation, punishment and control (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000; Pollack and Kendall, 2005; Hayman, 2006). A common theme underlying this work is the fact that regardless of what they are called or how correctional programming and policy is discursively framed, prisons cannot be empowering or even simply be benign; the ethos of imprisonment is deprivation and punishment, not care and support. This is one of the reasons that many advocates for the rights of imprisoned populations have argued against tinkering with prisons to make them better at incarcerating people and have instead advocated decarceration strategies (Davis, 2003).

Globalization has had a dramatic impact on creating and perpetuating social exclusion. One of the hallmarks of globalization worldwide is the dismantling of the welfare state. This dismantling is, in part, based upon the premise that government should not be a provider of social support as it creates dependency rather than self-sufficiency (Garland, 2001). Within the neo-liberal globalization paradigm, the welfare state is viewed as impeding economic progress and is now reconfigured as a facilitator of the free market economy rather than a provider of social support (Mullally, 2007). At the same time that neo-liberal policies are exacerbating poverty and devastating social
services, the number of women being sentenced to prison terms is skyrocketing worldwide (Sudbury, 2005). Not coincidentally, prisons have become big business in industrialized nations. The expansion of the prison industrial complex has had the most extreme impact on poor women worldwide, and in North America it is racialized and Aboriginal women who are most affected (Sudbury, 2005). Further, the diversion of resources from community supports into the correctional system only serves to intensify punishment efforts. ‘Law and order’ discourses and increasingly harsh criminal justice responses obfuscate the realities of increasing economic and social marginalization, which is contributing to the ever-expanding numbers of women being incarcerated. We need to examine the role that prisons play within the current neo-liberal context and question and challenge imprisonment as a response to gendered and racialized realities such as poverty, immigration, homelessness, mental health difficulties, violence against women and addictions. Prisons are not and should not be treatment centres.
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