

A New Direction for Federally Sentenced Women, Foiled Once Again

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What was the point, anyway, of spending millions of dollars of hard earned taxpayers' money on a new direction for federally sentenced women when the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the Government of Canada were not serious about making real changes?

I came into the federal system in 1986 – to the Kingston Prison for Women. Our justice system fell under the umbrella of the American model, which was not a very good one but the women did not know anything different from a multi-level prison. Shortly after that, Commissioner Ole Ingstrup was instrumental in introducing a new direction for the Canadian penal justice system. Similar to the European direction, it was a system built on reintegration and rehabilitation as opposed to the U.S. model that is based on revenge and punishment. The only problem with the new direction was that changes for women could not be included as a result of their multi-level security status. So when the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (1992) was passed in Parliament it included women as a group who needed special attention. The Principles in section four are the guidelines that CSC must use to direct wardens across the country to ensure that the special needs of women are met.

CSC has repeatedly failed to adhere to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, prompting Kim Pate of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies to use the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) to challenge the organization's treatment of federally sentenced women across the country. What followed was a victory for women as the CHRC (2003) made a series of recommendations to CSC that centred on the violations of the rights of women imprisoned in Canada. Many of these recommendations echoed earlier calls for reform outlined in the *Creating Choices* policy document (CSC, 1990), written for and in collaboration with women prisoners. One of the most important recommendations made in *Creating Choices* was that the Prison for Women in Kingston be closed and smaller regional facilities built where all federally sentenced women were to be housed as minimum-security. Sadly, the millions of dollars spent by the taxpayers have been wasted because we now have a system for women where all five of the new prisons are multi-level security. The *Creating Choices* document, which was supposed to be a new direction for federal corrections for women in Canada, has been all but eroded by

CSC as budgetary increases for security measures by the Government of Canada have not been matched for programming, a result that is detrimental to federally sentenced women across the country.

I have come a long way from 1986 and have been inside to record the changes made in this country on behalf of women prisoners. It is now 2009 and we are worse off now than we were before so much taxpayer money was spent. It seems odd to me that when this country is in a recession that the Harper Government can still be allowed to spend millions more dollars on prisons in Canada. What *Creating Choices* called “a new direction” is similar to what is now called a “transformation” by the Correctional Service of Canada: this “transformation” in corrections aims to remove the section four principles from the Corrections and Conditional Release Act that guide the Service in its treatment of women prisoners. I am heartbroken as I write these words. I tried to hang myself at the Prison for Women in Kingston because conditions were so hard for me to understand. It is not easy for any abused woman to understand the principles of a man based prison, built by men for men but used to hold women that does not include female prisoners in its decision-making. Correctional decision-making regarding women is carried out within a patriarchal government. I was the only survivor of the series of hangings at the P4W (for information on P4W see Elliott and Horii, 1994; Stewart and Durnford, 1999). I lived to bury many women who could not take the systematic abuse any longer. I could not understand why I was allowed to live. I prayed to the Creator while tying knots in my sheets to end the suffering I endured there at the hands of corrupt prison guards and a government who did not care about what happened to women in this country whether they were prisoners or not.

The years flew by and the new prisons for women were built. Many of the women were expected to be transferred down to Kitchener to a community that did not want women prisoners or the prison to be there. I did not want to go. I fought hard to remain in the Kingston Prison for Women regardless of what I went through. I had some foresight and told the correctional staff working on the new prisons that it would not work. There were too many holes in the new direction for women prisoners that they either did not want or just refused to see. I was the last woman to leave the prison. I was the only involuntary prisoner transferred from the Prison for Women. Later, when they closed the only minimum security prison for women in Canada, Isabel McNeil House, in 2008, there were other involuntary transfers.

I came to Grand Valley Institution (GVI) on May 8, 2000. I was escorted by Madame Petite who died shortly after. She was a very kind and caring French woman who had a special relationship with all the women. I am so happy she was working there because she was one of the good ones. I miss her because she left a lasting impression on me because whether I was a prisoner or not she treated me like I was a human being. On the day I left she made sure I had the things I could eat in my lunch bag and even gave me chocolates to eat along with the dozen white roses the warden got for me. I think they did that because I complied with all their instructions as there were a lot of media at the gate waiting for us to leave. They allowed me to take my fish with me and I still have him to this day – his name is Victory and he is almost 13 years old. I am the only one who has a pet at the new prison because we are discouraged from forming any kind of relationships with the animals around us – whether they are cats, rabbits, foxes, raccoons, wolves, ground hogs, ducks, geese, birds, moles, deer, gophers or possums. It is against the rules to be kind to any of them. We are not to feed them or encourage any kind of contact with them. I think it is paramount for prisoners to have something to care for while locked up in prison. It makes one responsible and gives one the opportunity to think twice before getting into a conflict because you can think about your pet and who will take care for it if you are not there to do so. The rules are basically the same for the women – we cannot lend, borrow, give or trade anything to anyone for any reason. It is kind of like living in a world of sociopaths. It does nothing to help a person to be ready for release. What it does is make people afraid of doing anything when they get out.

Since I have been in GVI, we have had six female wardens and now have a male warden named Mr. Dick. We have a new Commissioner of Corrections named Mr. Head. Since the recommendations made by the CHRC for CSC to properly implement the strategies outlined in *Creating Choices*, a new Deputy Commissioner for Women was assigned to oversee the women's prisons.

Our new Deputy Commissioner for Women is Elizabeth Van Allen. At first, I wondered how much power she has to oversee the way the prisons for women are run. I wondered if she has the power to see that the strategies outlined in the *Creating Choices* document were being enforced. I no longer wonder. The recent memo from Warden Dick that was left in our newly built mail boxes tells us that if we do not comply with the new male

management policy that our rights and privileges will be gutted. We are now back to square one. We have a man trying to force us under threat to act and be treated like men. We no longer live in a place where only women guard women or where women are the managers. So what is the Deputy Commissioner for Women saying about that this on our behalf? Looking up from the dysfunctional, hopeless, helpless, hateful, bottom of the slime pit I live in – I can say with all certainty “NOTHING”. I do not think there is any reason for us to have a Deputy Commissioner for Women when she works in a male system that prevents her from saying or doing much to ensure our equality or rights.

I believe it is time for all concerned parties across this country to stand up and disagree with the Harper Government when it comes to their hard earned money. We do not need new prisons or a “transformation” that will cost taxpayer’s millions of more dollars when people are struggling to save their homes and families. I believe this is insensitive, as well as a waste of money that can be better spent on keeping jobs and businesses open in Canada. I wonder if the taxpayers even know how much money is being spent on CSC and its hidden agenda to create more violent people that will do nothing to meet its mandate of ensuring public safety. I know I do not like losing my humanness every time they take something else away from us because of public perception of prisons being too soft on prisoners. Will that make me embrace the community when I get out? Almost every one of us who are in prison will get out someday. Will I be ready to live in a community that treated me like a man and made me ashamed that I was a woman? Will I feel safe in a community who felt it was alright for CSC to mistreat and torture women in their care while not doing anything to see if we were alive or dead? From where I sit, I will probably die in prison because of the way I am being treated. But who cares? The Government of Canada seems to be able to do whatever they want to their citizens. After all, who cares about the abused women in our country and if they are being treated fairly or not? Many of us are in prison due to lack of protection by our Government anyway.

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