

Suicide: The Challenges Faced By Female Federal Prisoners

Melissa Stewart and P. Durnford

Prisons can be a breeding ground for the feelings that lead to thoughts of suicide. Historically, there has been little or no support for prisoners, both in terms of suicide intervention, and in helping fellow prisoners cope with the aftermath of a suicide or a suicide attempt. This article will detail the unique needs of female prisoners, with a focus on the current environment of fear and uncertainty. Both the events leading up to the Arbour Commission and the effects of the dispersal of female prisoners to institutions across the country, with no regard to the relationships these women have built over the years, have created a potentially disastrous situation. The recent programs implemented to help these women survive the prison experience will be outlined.

According to Ramsey et al. (1987), Canada's federal prisons have an average rate of completed suicide of 125 per 100,000. This is more than eight times the rate in the general population. The average rate of self-mutilation is more than twice the estimated rate in the overall population of Canada. Adjusting for age and sex, prisoners complete suicide almost four times more often than people in the general population. While data about the frequency of self-mutilation in similar age and sex groups are not available, these behaviours occur at least three times as often in females. "Although specific control studies have not been done, it is probable that all types of suicidal behaviours occur in inmates of Canadian prisons at a markedly higher rate than might be expected if such persons were not incarcerated" (Ramsey, et. al, 1987: 3).

Between 1988 and 1990, six women hanged themselves at the Kingston Prison for Women ("P4W"). There is no information available concerning the number of attempted suicides, nor of self-mutilation (slashing or carving) both of which are common. In these years there were a total of 31 suicides completed by federal prisoners in Canada. Thus, the women accounted for over 22 percent of the total federal prisoner population who committed suicide. What factors are contributing to this problem and what can be done to address it?

Theoretically, it has been suggested (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976) that the reasons for suicidal behaviour in women are different from those of men. Typically it has been thought that the fact that women complete suicide at a lower rate than men, while attempting it more often, is a result of the fact that women tend to be more hysterical and impulsive,

and use attempted suicide in a manipulative way. This is an attitude rooted in the male paradigm of aggressive behaviour.

However, there is a body of work (Weissman, 1974; Rosenthal, 1981; Bancroft, et al. 1979; Simons and Murphy, 1985; Lester and Lester, 1971) that suggests that women's suicide can be better understood by the 'self-in-relation'. There are many interrelated aspects including empathy, connectedness and mutuality which is central to a woman's experience. Kaplan (1984) has suggested that within the proposed framework, a better understanding of why women attempt suicide more often may be gained. The key elements of this framework are vulnerability to loss, the inhibition of anger, the inhibition of assertiveness, and a sense of low self-esteem. As will be shown, these elements are overwhelmingly present in many female federal prisoners, along with other risk factors such as addiction problems. These factors are exacerbated rather than helped, by the institutional setting and practices.

The number of female federal prisoner suicides is a statistic not readily available. Since the number of female prisoners is so low, statistics in general are included with the men. Admittedly, such a small group would likely show wide variations over the years, but including them with the men disguises many problems and differences in prisoner characteristics. The Correctional Service of Canada ("CSC") seems not to know how to deal with this small group of women. This is reflected in the application of treatment programs and disciplinary procedures.

Because no one seemed to know who these women were, apart from age, offense, length of sentence, addictions (if self-identified) and education level, the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women undertook a survey (the first of its kind) from August to November, 1989. At the time of the survey, 203 women were in custody serving federal sentences: 125 of them at P4W; 78 women were being held in provincial institutions, usually on Exchange of Service agreements; 15 women either refused to participate or were on temporary absences.

The majority of women serving sentences of five or more years were held at P4W. Prisoners ranged in age from 19 to 75 years of age, and two-thirds had children. At P4W, 58 percent had children, 48 percent of them had at least one child less than 16 years old, and 24 percent had at least one child less than five years of age. However, only 30 percent of women of P4W had any visits from family and/or friends.

Three-quarters of the women had, at some stage in their lives, been addicted to alcohol or drugs. Of these women, all but 17 had some current problem with addiction. The Aboriginal women tended to have severe problems¹: 71 percent said that substance abuse was a major factor in committing their current offense and those committed previously; 40 said they had committed an offense to support a drug habit; and drug-related offenses were the reason for the presence of 49 of the women. Physical abuse was suffered by 68 percent of all the women (a few noted occasional childhood discipline). This abuse skyrocketed among aboriginal women, of whom 90 percent said they had been physically abused, often severely and over a lengthy period. Sixty-one percent had suffered sexual abuse, as opposed to 53 percent in the overall female prisoner population. Twenty percent said they had slashed, cut, or attempted suicide during their present sentence, and 53 had done so at some point in their lives. Thus the situation of aboriginal women among the general female federally incarcerated population is in some sense similar to that of women as a minority within the greater population of federally sentenced prisoners, which compounds their problems.

The institutions have also been described as being “awash with drugs.” One prisoner commented, “It’s easier to stay off drugs on the street than on the inside” (Solicitor General of Canada, 1991). “Home brew” is also readily available. The study ignores the problems of mental illness and emotional abuse the women may have suffered.

Thus there is a small population of women, many suffering from the effects of years of various kinds of abuse, and struggling with addictions problems in a situation where temptation is everywhere. Now add to this the institutional environment and the effects of isolation from family and friends.

The prison is an old-fashioned, dysfunctional labyrinth of claustrophobic and inadequate spaces holding 142 prisoners of all security levels, minimum through maximum. It has been described as “unfit for bears.” It is inadequate for living, working, eating, programming, recreation, and administration. Spaces are insufficient, poorly ventilated, and noisy ... the prison grounds are surrounded by an enormous wall, which in the male system, is used by maximum security institutions only, and in many other aspects the building has the characteristics of a maximum

security institution. (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, 1996, p. 9)

Study after study has been done on the correctional system and/or the Prison for Women. Every major inquiry has commented on the prison, some very unfavourably. It has been generally agreed for years that the prison is unsuitable for women, and that in fact it amounts to a form of discrimination against female prisoners.² Indeed, just four years after the prison was opened, Archambault (1938) recommended closure of the prison. In 1978, Solicitor General Jean-Jacques Blais announced that within a year, the prison would be closed. It was not. Instead, in the early 1980s, \$1.4 million was spent building an 18 foot concrete wall around the prison.

There seemed to be little political will to make changes, until *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task force on Federally Sentenced Women* (1990) was released. The majority of the Task Force members were women, many of them Aboriginal.

The task force reiterated the findings of previous governmental and non-governmental reports on the Prison for Women: that it was over-secure; erroneously based on a male model of corrections; that women prisoners were geographically dislocated and isolated from their families; that the programs did not meet the needs of prisoners serving a life sentence, or Francophone or Aboriginal women; and that there were few community or institutional links (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, 1996, p. 23).

It was finally announced that the prison would be closed in 1994 and five regional institutions would be built with a cottage-like setting. One of these would be a Healing Lodge for Aboriginal women. Two of the institutions have opened and have had some major problems, duly reported by the media³. The current deadline for the closure of P4W is March, 1997. [*Ed's Note: As of July 1, 1997, it remains open.*]

The women feel a lot of trepidation about the move, are uncertain if they want to be moved, and uncertain where they might be sent. They face the possibility of being separated from their friends and in some instances their partners.

Another issue, besides the physical surroundings, is that only 30 percent of women at P4W receive visits from family or friends. Women housed in provincial institutions tend to receive more visits, however difficulties remain. CSC makes some attempt to place prisoners serving shorter sentences in their home provinces, but because of the size of the country, this does little to alleviate the isolation. Of particular concern is the separation of mothers and their children. Many times contact can only be maintained through telephone calls and letters; most times economic circumstances prohibit travel of any real distance.

“Since 1985, four studies have been commissioned by the Canadian government to examine the impact of separation on women and their families, the social costs of incarceration, mothers and the possibility of institutional nurseries. But no action [has] ever been taken to address the critical problems” (Solicitor General of Canada, 1991). In the meantime mothers suffer a devastating loss and often lose touch with their children, who are cared for by relatives if lucky, or bounced from foster home to foster home if not. Those mothers fortunate enough to maintain physical contact with their children often do so in uncomfortable conditions. Few prisons are set up to accommodate children. Often they must make do in a common visiting room, for a couple of hours at a time. P4W does have two bungalows, but they are primarily used for conjugal visits.

It has happened that prisoners have not been told about a death in the family until considerable time has passed. In addition, even if the woman is notified in time, it may not be economically feasible for her to attend the funeral. There are no counsellors available to help her deal with her grief except the prison psychologist. Although about half of the prisoners⁴ view the psychologist favourably, the rest are distrustful. In any case, since the opening of the new prisons the Department of Psychology has been gradually eroded. Currently they have very little time to do counselling. Instead, they must concentrate on the assessment of prisoners upon their admission to prison. This erosion of psychological services has occurred despite an increase in the prison population to 151 from a low of 95.

Rules and their enforcement also cause tension. Many women perceive that the rules are arbitrary and applied randomly. Women’s behaviour in prison tends to differ from that of men (it tends to be more verbally abusive), and, “in many countries there are suggestions that many

disciplinary charges in women's prisons relate to very trivial behaviour for which men would not be charged" (Solicitor General of Canada, 1991). The rules are thought to be petty, inconsistent and unfair. This leads to tension and anger, and prisoners have suggested that clearer outlines and less discretion in the laying of charges would be more acceptable to them.

Prisoners feel that their rights are not respected, and, as revealed in the *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston* (the Arbour Report), this is often in fact the case. Many prisoners are denied their legal rights while in segregation, to the point of denying them phone calls to their lawyers. These rights are spelled out in Correctional Service policies and Commissioner's Directives. Custodial staff, however, seem to view these as privileges rather than rights: to be given or denied as a form of reward for good behaviour, or as a means of coercion to elicit particular behaviour from prisoners.

The grievance procedure is very bureaucratic, unwieldy and frustrating for prisoners as well. Lengthy delays and pat responses are common. The Arbour Report found that,

Particularly at the appellate level, both Regional and National, responsibility for the disposition of grievances is often given to people with neither the knowledge nor the means of acquiring it and worse, with no real authority to remedy the problem should they be prepared to acknowledge its existence At present, it would seem that the admission of error is perceived as an admission of defeat by the Correctional Service. In that climate, no internal method of dispute resolution will succeed. (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, 1996, p. 162).

This aggravates the feelings of anger and despair felt by the prisoners. Whether she has a valid concern or not, she feels powerless and that no one will listen to her.

There is also an informal hierarchy in the prison where prisoners with little power can be particularly vulnerable. Also, there is an underground economy that operates within the walls, and prisoners may find themselves in debt without the means to repay. (This is particularly true

of drug debts.) Prisoners may be raped, beaten, or threatened with death by other prisoners. They are sometimes murdered. Some of the guards may turn a blind eye to this activity making the prisoners again feel powerless and despairing. 'Ratting' (informing on other prisoners) is the worst thing an prisoner can do within this informal structure, so often the prisoners have no choice but to bear with it.

Prisoners also tend to form attachments to one another, given the lack of other emotional supports. They may invest a great deal of emotion in these relationships, and for many such a relationship is the first of its kind. If the relationship is in trouble, the women feel intense despair. Once the relationship ends, a woman must deal with living in close quarters with her former lover, and watch new relationships form. This can be very difficult.

Treatment programs for addictions and anger management are available, but they have primarily been developed in the context of a male model, because of the small population of female prisoners. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are viewed with some hostility, particularly by Aboriginal women, because of their Christian basis. Also, there is some evidence that A.A. and N.A. do not work well (Chiauzzi and Liljegren, 1993). This may be particularly true for women because of the effects of labelling ("alcoholic" = "bad mother"), the confrontational approach taken (non-acceptance of a label implies denial of the problem), and the call for "God" to intervene (the alcoholic cannot control herself, and must ask for help; it also continues the dependence of the woman on others). Also the existence of a male God may be distasteful to some women.

The problem of treatment programs being designed for (and by) men, but being applied to women, is pervasive. Female federal prisoners have very different life experiences than do men, as well as different histories of offending. These programs may not be suitable for this very reason. Yet, the small numbers of federally incarcerated women do not make it economically feasible to research and design specific treatment programs.

The prison is obligated to educate the women to the Grade 10 level, but this depends on the willingness of the particular prisoner. Vocational training and work programs are primarily geared towards prison maintenance, and are traditional "women's work" in nature, such as laundry,

beauty parlour and clerical work. These are limited in nature, and do little to allow the prisoner to escape the cycle of poverty once released.

These women have suffered estrangement from their families, isolation, and perhaps losses because of relationships on the inside; they are not free to express their anger and have it validated for fear of punishment. They cannot assert themselves, and if they try to “right” perceived injustices through the grievance procedure, they are brushed off. Many women have very low self-esteem stemming from years of physical and emotional abuse. They are imprisoned in bleak surroundings, most times at a level of security not warranted by their histories (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, 1996). It is not surprising that so many women resort to self-mutilation or suicide. It is perhaps surprising that so many of them survive the experience.

“During the latter part of 1979 and the early 1980s the number of suicides and self inflicted injuries among inmates in Canada’s federal prisons rose sharply” (Ramsey et al., 1987). In response to this, CSC commissioned a study to examine these behaviours. They made a number of recommendations, dealing with implementing new policies and specialized staff training. This treatment model was developed in Calgary, and demonstrated in three Atlantic institutions of varying security levels. Since female federal prisoners not at P4W are primarily housed in provincial institutions elsewhere, this study did not include them, nor were their concerns considered separately from those of the men (Ramsey et al., 1987). From the subsequent rash of suicides at P4W, it seems evident that if staff there did in fact receive this training, it proved ineffective. This is another example of non-applicability of male-based models to female populations.

If a prisoner at P4W slashes or attempts suicide, she is placed in segregation, her clothes are removed, and she is given a paper gown. This is a long-standing practice. The environment in the segregation unit is punitive. The bars are painted black (in fact after the events leading to the Arbour report the cells were fitted with metal treadplate, making them dimmer and more cage-like). There is a cot, a sink, and a toilet. Until recently, the electrical wiring was so inadequate that prisoners could not have a radio or television, in direct contradiction of CSC directives concerning segregation.

Prisoners feel that, “[w]omen cannot shut out the pain of their neighbours, and each incident threatens to become a contagious epidemic” (Kershaw and Lasovich, 1991). After the suicide of Marlene Moore in 1988, an outside consultant was brought in. Jan Heney, who had had success treating women outside of prison, stated bluntly that,

... long standing prison practices and policies had fostered the kind of tension and desperation that provoked self-mutilation; more than that, the institution’s manner of responding to women who slash was likely to escalate rather than reduce the rate of self-mutilation and suicide among prisoners.

She recommended an immediate end to the use of segregation for women who slash, saying that isolation increases rather than decreases suicidal tendencies (Kershaw and Lasovich, 1991).

However, the involuntary segregation of suicidal prisoners continues. The segregation unit is so feared and hated by the prisoners who are in such desperate need of human contact, that many women who slash sew themselves up rather than seek medical attention. This leads to a great deal of scarring.

If a prisoner does complete suicide, the lights are turned off in her cell for 24 hours “as a show of respect.” Since the lights in the prison are normally on continuously, this is a grim reminder to the women that one of their group could not make it. These women are friends, lovers, enemies: all know one another. This can lead to a rash of suicide attempts. On November 25, 1988 a prisoner attempted to commit suicide. Before dawn there were two more suicide attempts, and one week later Marlene Moore was dead (Kershaw and Lasovich, 1991).

In 1990, a Peer Support Team was initiated by two members of the Psychology Department, in response to the rash of suicides, attempts, and slashings. This program, while successful in its way, has inherent limitations. The Peer Support counsellor (a specially trained prisoner), while often sharing the same experience(s), has little or no access to other resources. Confidentiality is also difficult because of the close living quarters. Corrections staff have access to more resources but the prisoners often feel they are in an adversarial relationship with them.

A Battered Women’s Support Group was also started at the Prison for Women in 1994. This group helps women deal with their histories of

abuse and attempts to give them a sense of empowerment, and to help them break out of the cycle of dependency. However, in 1995 this was made an official program by the Prison for Women and chaired by a guard. The women spend six weeks being urged to speak whether they want to or not, after which they 'graduate' with a certificate. Attempts are being made to restore the group to its original collective format. There is also an attempt being made to establish a Grief and Bereavement group inside the prison in order to help prisoners deal with their losses.

The Elizabeth Fry Society can also be of help to prisoners, but again, many prisoners are distrustful of their close relationship with CSC.

The need was seen for a non-judgmental, independent agency which would counsel prisoners in crisis and provide community resource information and emotional support. In 1994 Project Another Chance Inc. (PAC) was formed with a grant from the Trillium Foundation. PAC's mandate is to aid female federal prisoners and parolees in distress and to aid their transition into the community. The lines are staffed by volunteers with many backgrounds, including ex-prisoners and those who have struggled with addictions problems. Most volunteers have received extensive training in crisis management, addictions, and awareness of native issues. PAC is also investigating the development of a women's treatment centre, for addictions problems, parallel to those existing for men. No treatment for addictions is currently available for female ex-prisoners.

Thus far, the response has been encouraging. Particularly for prisoners with no contact with family or friends, having a person they can call on to express frustration, anxiety, find information about legal matters, or simply to chat, is a welcome change. PAC has managed to avert several would-be suicide attempts, and contacted one institution on behalf of a prisoner when she was asking to be put into segregation for fear she would self-injure. She was finally put into the enhanced unit and is fine.

One concern for PAC, with the dispersal of female prisoners to the new regional prisons, is that CSC is resisting the continuation of the current practice of allowing prisoners access to PAC's crisis line. Instead, one Warden has determined that she will use the services of the Canadian Mental Health Association ("CMHA"). While the CMHA

provides a valuable service, PAC maintains ongoing contact with a number of prisoners who will be moved, and who are suffering some anxiety about it. One would think that any means available to reduce the tension in the new facilities would be welcomed, in light of the problems encountered with the transition so far.

Women prisoners are likely to remain a small proportion of the total number of prisoners. Their backgrounds necessitate innovative treatments and strategies in order to successfully integrate them into their communities upon their release.

ENDNOTES

1. Aboriginal women have been recognised to have a particular set of problems, namely:
 - Aboriginal women are over-represented in the prison population of Canada.
 - They are quite distinct culturally, linguistically, and socially from the broader prison population of federally sentenced women.
 - They have significantly different personal and social histories.
 - They have significantly different offending histories.
 - The dispersion of Aboriginal communities across the country is a special burden to them.
 - The holistic approach to healing and reintegration into the community is at odds with the cultures and philosophies of conventional prison environments. (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison For Women, 1996, p. 218)
2. Female federal prisoners have been treated as if they were an afterthought of the CSC. In fact, the undue hardship they must face in dislocation from their families was the subject of a court challenge (based on a Charter of Rights argument) (Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison For Women, 1996, p. 246). This was overturned on appeal, but without the opening of the regional institutions this would no doubt have been the subject of further challenges.
3. In Edmonton, there was a multiple escape (3 women), a suicide, self-mutilations and an attack on staff in the first 5 months. "Uncaged Women", the Sunday Sun, April 28, 1996. "Escapee Caught in Edmonton", The Toronto Star, May 1996.
4. This remark stems from conversations held between Project Another Chance staff and volunteers and the prisoners themselves, in an informal survey.

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