

Prison for Women's Invisible Minority

Melissa Stewart

I would like to begin by telling you about how I came to be a prisoner at the P4W. Here is how my life unfolded, from being sane, joyful, community spirited, and relatively calm, to living a nightmare.

I remember the very first time I met Gordon. He was immaculately dressed, his hair neatly combed. He was wearing a suit, with a perfectly knotted tie. Everything was in place. He was big and powerful and moved purposefully. I thought he was the most handsome, suave, debonair man I had ever met. He was very polite and seemed totally taken with me. I was selling real estate at the time. He told me he wanted to buy a small piece of land near the ocean, on which to build a cottage. He kept telephoning me with excuses to have dinner with me, and the like.

Two weeks later we were living together common-law. What started off as a honeymoon became the worst nightmare of my life. Gordon was a violent alcoholic, as were his father and brothers. I never really knew his family very well, except the one time Gordon and his father landed in detox centres at the same time. His younger brother committed suicide about three years before Gordon died.

My whole life was centred around keeping this man "happy." During those years of knowing him and living with him, I felt certain I could "save" him. He criticized me constantly, and I developed feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. I did not feel that I was capable of doing anything right. During this time I was living in limbo, trying to fight off depression.

The physical beatings started right after we were legally married. I wore heavy make-up to cover the contusions and bruises inflicted at various times. He would play one cruel game in which he would put a plastic bag over my head while we were having sexual intercourse and strangle me, saying he wanted me to have a stronger orgasm. He would strangle me to the point where I would almost pass out.

Prior to the physical assaults on me, Gordon would always tell me I was "cruising for a bruising." I wish I could go back and undo the pain of the past. I lived in constant fear. I believe he was a psychopath who liked to inflict pain. He put welts all over my back by beating me with a leather strap. On other occasions he kicked me and cracked my ribs and collarbone. My kidneys were bruised from his beatings.

Gordon began threatening both my daughter and me, stating that he would kill her. About this time he began making sexual advances

towards her. He was drinking a lot and taking cocaine and valium. I was at rock bottom.

On another occasion he held a loaded handgun to my head and pulled the trigger. The firing pin jammed in the gun, saving my life. I called the police. He was charged with the careless discharge of a firearm. They seized his guns and when he went to court he was prohibited from having any firearms for five years.

On the day that Gordon died, he had just been released from jail where he had served two months for assaulting me. This was his second charge of assault against me. On the day that he died, he came after me with a knife. I was asleep in bed when suddenly he was standing over me and holding the knife to my throat. He abducted me at knife point after ordering me to get dressed. We left the apartment and drove around in the car. That day, I told him I was never going to live with him again as man and wife. And that day, he raped me. He performed oral sex on me. He put his penis on my face, then in my mouth. I choked and gagged. I was so frightened. He started striking me on the head. There was no safe place. I could not get away. I was trapped.

After the years of battering, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, I finally recognized that my life was on the line. Everything was unmanageable. My relationship with my children had deteriorated. I had been mentally and emotionally denying the torture I had lived through.

I did not mean to kill Gordon. I only wanted to get away from him. When he was standing behind the car urinating, I sensed that it was my only chance to get away. I slid over under the driver's wheel, turned on the ignition very quickly and put the car in gear. But I put it in the wrong gear; I put it in reverse instead of forward. I backed the car over him, and I left the area at a very high speed. I just wanted to get out of there. We were on a logging road in the woods. I very much regret what happened on that day. I believe my survival can only be credited to luck.

The R.C.M.P.'s Lower Sackville department charged me with first degree murder. At my preliminary hearing, the judge threw the charge out, saying there was not enough evidence to support a first degree murder charge. He had me stand trial on second degree murder instead.

The trial only focussed on that one day in our lives. No mention was made of any battering or sexual abuse in our relationship. My defence lawyer should have brought that up. Only the rape was discussed. There

was courtroom testimony about my pubic hair and Gordon's seminal fluid analysis. I felt nauseated with shame.

I pled "not guilty" all through my trial. When I was found guilty of manslaughter by the jury, the judge said his reason for sentencing me to the federal prison was, "deterrence to the public."

After sentencing, I was taken to the Halifax County Correctional Centre. After spending three months there, I was taken from my cell in that dirty rat and bug infested hole at 4:00 a.m., with no prior warning, in shackles and handcuffs. I arrived by van at Springhill Institution around 6:30 a.m. There I was fingerprinted, had my mug shot taken and was listed as a number, before being taken to Moncton N.B. to fly in an R.C.M.P. airplane along with some male prisoners to Kingston, Ontario. All prisoners were designated to different prisons in the Kingston area.

The ride in the airplane was turbulent, but worst of all, I was seated next to a very large, odorous, garrulous man, who continually leered at me. His flesh sprawled onto my chair and seat and he kept leaning against me. It was my first close encounter with a man since my husband died. I found this very uncomfortable and completely unnerving, and I thought it insensitive on the part of the R.C.M.P. to seat a battered woman next to such an aggressive man. We arrived in Kingston and were taken in different vans to local area prisons. I was taken to the Prison For Women ("P4W").

My first impression of the P4W was its dungeon-like appearance. There was a stench of urine and cigarette smoke in the air. I was admitted into the basement area of the prison, along with two other female prisoners. By this time it was around 8:00 p.m.

The walls inside the P4W were grey and ugly, with paint peeling off the bars. Everything was steel and concrete. I was asked routine questions on admittance such as whether I had any enemies amongst the other prisoners. This would influence the decision on where to put me. Most prisoners are placed on "A" Range for the first three months, for assessment, unless they are in need of protective custody or are mentally ill.

After the questions, a nurse was called and a body cavity search was performed on me and the other two women. It was a terrifying and humiliating experience.

"A" Range in the P4W resembled a zoo. There are 50 cells, six by nine feet each in size, in two tiers, with a small sink, toilet, single cot,

and a steel dresser in each. I was put in the upper cell level. By this time I was totally exhausted from the 16 hour trip. The noise level was incredible, with clanging, banging, screaming, and cursing. Some curious prisoners were peering at me inside my cell, wondering who the new "fish" was and whether I would fit into the prison sub-culture. Paired uniformed guards patrol "A" Range every hour.

My first months in the P4W caused me severe emotional deprivation, fear, pain and panic as I began to come to terms with where I was and how I would survive. I suffered multiple crises: being away from my family, the loss of relationships, social isolation, social stigmatization, economical losses, the loss of home and goods, and feelings of unworthiness. My self-hate grew into the thought of suicide. I entered into an agonizing, dark aloneness. I felt emotionally shredded. I was completely numb and my mind was blank. I had no sense of time passing. It helped me to block the pain. I was like this for three months.

LIFE AT THE P4W

Upon entering prison, each prisoner is assigned a case management officer who collects all information pertaining to the prisoner from the police, court and sentencing reports and the judge's recommendations. When this information is correlated, the case management officer classifies the prisoner. In the fourth month after my classification I was moved to the wing area of the prison. Usually the more quiet prisoners reside there, along with some protective custody cases. Fifty women are caged on the two wings. Lately, with the increase in women prisoners, double-bunking has occurred.

Women prisoners in the P4W do not receive natural light and fresh air. They are housed in dismal surroundings, with a lack of privacy. It is a maximum security prison, caging three security levels of prisoners. Intrusive security measures are in force daily. Prisoners have little access to adequate health, education and professional services. There is also a lack of women-centred and culturally sensitive programs.

The contraband system is very common in the P4W, with commodities such as drugs, alcohol, contraband appliances, clothing, institutional privileges, contraband food and canteen items. Sometimes, suicide seems like the only alternative for a prisoner if she owes money to one of the

range's leaders. The prisoners' code keeps women from talking too much.

A typical day in prison begins when you are awakened at 6:00 a.m. In one hour, each woman is to shower, dress, make her bed, tidy up her cell, and be ready to go to the common dining room to eat breakfast by 7:00 a.m. Breakfast consists of "juice," cereal or toast, coffee or tea, sometimes a piece of fruit. On Sundays, prisoners are served bacon and eggs and pancakes for breakfast.

During the day, some women are assigned work duties within the prison and go to work at 8:00 a.m. Some attend a program to upgrade their education to the Grade 10 level. Others might play cards if they have purchased their own deck, or do nothing. The work day finishes at 3:00 p.m. The gym is also open one hour per day for those who wish to exercise.

Lunchtime is from 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m. It consists of soup, a sandwich, a dessert, and tea, coffee or "juice." Meals are adequate. Dinner takes place between 5:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Each section of the prison eats separately. The wing area, which houses 50 women, eats first, then "B" Range. Women in segregation are served meals in their cells. In the punitive area of segregation women are served what looks like a large overcooked hamburger, made of questionable ingredients. Liquids are controlled and are given at the discretion of the guards.

Most prison programs focus on counteracting aggressiveness, anger and volatility. As such, the programs treat women as offenders rather than as victims. The prison system is not interested in fostering assertiveness. An assertive prisoner is a potential nuisance to prison authorities, who are mostly concerned with keeping "the good order of the institution," rather than viewing prisoners as future citizens.

The answer to the suicides of Native women in the P4W (as well as the suicides of two Anglo-Saxon women) by administrative staff was to ban some native programs and suspend some native social workers from entering the P4W. The other measure they took was to increase the ratio of guards/prisoners to 78/96.

These degrading conditions and the lack of constructive activity, can lead to suicidal thoughts and attempted suicides. Suicide is a mechanism to escape the brutal conditions. Rather than receive appropriate treatment/counselling, the suicidal prisoner will be placed in the new secure segregation units.

In response to the April 1994 riot, brought to public attention by the CBC television program "The Fifth Estate," this new higher security segregation was ready in April 1995 at a cost of \$475,000 to the taxpayers. Prison officials thought this would be the answer to "those unruly women." It consists of 10 cells located across from the kitchen area, in the basement of the prison. The cells have steel doors in place of bars. Each cell is monitored 24 hours a day by individual T.V. cameras. The beds are welded to the walls. This new segregation unit has a smaller closed outdoor pen for exercise. One of the cells can even accommodate a handicapped person. Why would someone in a wheelchair need to be put in segregation? A reason given by acting prison warden Maureen Blackler was, "There are a few women that are violent and are dangerous to others, they pose a risk to both staff and inmates."

BATTERED WOMEN AND PEER COUNSELLING AT THE P4W

I soon realized that there were a number of women who were in prison for an act committed in self-defence. These were battered women. These women numbered 25 to 30 (a group which included me), were of all different ages and came from very different educational, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Despite these differences, almost all of them had been victims of physical, psychological or sexual abuse, both as children, and then later from their spouses. Eventually, this abuse led to the crimes that brought them their federal sentences: often the killing of the abusers. These desperate acts stood in stark contrast to the women's usually meek, self-effacing personalities.

Many of the P4W's repeat offenders, who are familiar with the prison culture, have developed skills to cope with its harsh environment. Battered women prisoners are horrified by their first encounter with incarceration. The stress of their abuse and their subsequent removal from mainstream society are compounded by their sense of shame and alienation within the prison population.

Within the overburdened federal prison system, these shy and reclusive individuals can become invisible. They sometimes go months between meetings with their case management officers and often find their most basic rights neglected. Women of faith miss out on passes to attend church, and in the most extreme cases, prisoners do not receive their allocations of clothing or even feminine hygiene products.

As a result, the combined emotional and practical needs of battered women prisoners are urgent. However, until I became a member of the prison's Peer Support Team in 1992 and first became aware that we made up a distinctive category of prisoner, there were no programs through which these women could take recourse.

The first P4W Peer Support Team was formed in May 1990, after two years of suicides in which time four native women hanged themselves. There were eight suicides in total from 1988 to 1996 in the P4W, when again on February 21, 1996, another young woman, Brenda D. was found hanged in her cell.

Prison psychologist Julie Darke and social worker Jan Heney began the first P4W Peer Support Team. Heney had done a study on self-injurious behaviour at the P4W and discovered there existed amongst the women prisoners an informal network of counselling and support. She recommended that a team be formed and formal training started. The first class of five prisoner/counsellors graduated in May, 1992. These women could be available to help other women in crises; thus began a team of women prisoners ready and willing to help others. It gave me the opportunity to help other women; something positive which came out of something so overwhelmingly negative.

Peer Support Team members have many of the same experiences as the people who use their services. However, peer support counsellors' own access to many resources is limited. As well, confidentiality is difficult since service users and counsellors live in the same close quarters among the very same people. While correctional staff still have more resources at their disposal than peer counsellors, many prisoners are more comfortable dealing with peer counsellors as they often feel they are in an adversarial relationship with correctional staff.

In the absence of programs specifically designed for battered women, many relied heavily on peer-support counselling to help them cope. Sometimes a woman would call three or four times in one week. Realizing that the peer-support program could not effectively meet this sort of demand, I approached the administration and suggested that a battered women's support group be formed. Nothing happened. Then Dr. Heather McLean of the psychology department wrote a letter in praise of the proposal, and permission was granted. Under the supervision of chaplain John Hess, we held our first meeting in April, 1993.

Together, members formulated the criteria for admission to the group. They decided that each member must be the survivor of abuse, that she must support the group's vision of itself which is founded on a "hope to heal in a non-healing environment," that she must respect fellow members' rights to confidentiality, and she must be in prison for a crime committed in self-defence.

We also established group guidelines, drawing heavily from the Quaker-sponsored Alternatives to Violence Project, which has offered workshops in the prison since 1992. These guidelines include looking for and affirming one another's good points, volunteering oneself only, committing oneself to non-violence, and being willing to take risks and possibly to suffer, if necessary, in order to maintain that non-violent stance. We recognized that non-violence is not passivity, submissiveness, or martyrdom. Members also have the right not to participate in an activity. The aim of these guidelines is to establish a "principled space" in which members can encounter the most positive aspects of themselves and each other.

Soon the Battered Women's Support Group (BWSG) grew into a positive force in the P4W. Membership in the group was voluntary, as was attendance. Members were permitted to drop out at any time if they needed to, then return as their circumstances permitted. Instead of being referred to the group by staff, prisoners learned of the group by word of mouth and attended entirely of their own volition.

Meetings were informal. Members sat in a circle for presentations, which were then followed by question and answer sessions. However, some evenings were reserved for talking things out and struggling with the emotions stirred by the talk. Vital to the group's success was the commitment of volunteers from outside the prison. These volunteers visited from as far as Toronto and came from a mixed-bag of backgrounds. As founder of the BWSG in The P4W, I was invited by the previous warden to attend group meetings as a community volunteer, when I left the prison on day parole in July 1994. This was something close to my heart, so attendance at meetings was something I enjoyed. The group had always functioned as a collective, and made its decisions accordingly. Over the three years we had been meeting, the group had evolved into a cohesive entity. I marvelled at the level of trust that had developed, and at the feeling of camaraderie we had built up.

The dedicated community volunteers attending the battered women's support group included Jo-Ann Connolly, a Kingston lawyer and currently chairperson of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies Battered Women's Defense Committee. We also worked with Queen's University Law Professor, Sheila Noona, who originally did the ground work for a legal process which would permit women incarcerated for defending themselves against abusive partners to have an "en bloc" review of their cases. Sheila has offered insights into how the battered women's syndrome could affect reintegration into a small community, because of the nature of the offense and the complex relationship between victim and offender in small, often isolated communities. The communities themselves are often unwilling to accept prisoners back after release from prison. Today, Sheila continues to be a support to many group members.

Toronto broadcaster Sian Cansfield commuted weekly to show her solidarity with the women and gave them a voice on her radio program. She did a one hour show just before Christmas 1994, and discussed issues surrounding abuse survivors and how the group members were dealing with their pain and separation from family members during the festive season. The broadcast resulted in Christmas gifts being donated to group members.

Sandra Dean, a local interior designer, has offered constructive suggestions on dressing and speaking in ways that increase a woman's chances of being treated with dignity and consideration. She did a presentation on colours and the right choices of wardrobe, as well as proper etiquette.

Addictions counsellor Carol Bielby brought in three of the Boston Terrier pups she breeds. She talked about the love and devotion a dog can offer, and the respect and affection they deserve in return. The direct emotional connection between the women and those six-week-old pups was intensely moving. Some group members had lost touch with their feelings, and the puppies provided a way to emotionally connect again. In prison, women are not encouraged to express their feelings. And all of the feelings associated with addictions, along with the unique and serious emotional experiences these women have endured, can be so overwhelming. Only a pet could bring these feelings to the fore.

Healer Bonita Currier helped some of the women release residual feelings from childhood sexual abuse, and Salvation Army Major Carol

Barkhouse brought in entertaining and instructive videos. Some of the topics dealt with same-sex relationships, addictions, group dynamics, family violence, as well as comedies.

Supplementing the steady contributions from our six stalwart volunteers were presentations from various guest speakers, including:

- Dr. Mary Pearson, on diet, exercise, and wellness
- Shiatsu therapist Beth Morris, teaching massage techniques
- criminal lawyer Josh Zambrowsky, on the impact of Bill C45 on women prisoners
- George Best (who counsels battering men), on the connections between early childhood conditioning, gender roles and male violence
- four University of Ottawa criminologists: Sylvie Frigon and Christa Armitage, on the legal use of the battered women's syndrome; and Ashley Turner and Irene Sernowski, on the value of keeping a journal (along with gifts of a notebook and pen for each group member)
- Kingston Interval House staffers Terri Fleming and Pamela Needham, on power and control issues in relation to domestic violence and the importance of equality in partnerships
- drama workshop facilitator Susan Raponi, of the Salvation Army in Toronto, leading illuminating role plays.

Two gatherings were particularly outstanding. One was the Christmas party - with "imported" home-made foods, portable piano keyboard to accompany carols and, best of all, carefully selected gifts for each member of the group. As much as the gifts themselves, the women appreciated the fact that they had been specially purchased by people from the outside who just wanted to express their support and affection. The gifts came at a time when, for the first time in years, parcels from home were not being permitted into the institution because of concerns about contraband.

The other important gathering was the National Day of Awareness, held in the gymnasium on August 30, 1994, and attended by representatives from North American native societies, local community and church groups, the various levels of government. Group members told their personal stories. Film producer Barbara Doran then showed her film *When Women Kill*, which kicked off a panel discussion. Journalist June Callwood spoke, as did federal justice committee chairman Warren

Allmand. Also in attendance was Member of Parliament, Peter Milliken. This gathering was attended by over 110 guests. Substantial donations of money were sent by retired Supreme Court Justice Bertha Wilson and the Kenora Sexual Assault Centre. Despite the resounding success of this event, prison authorities ruled out the possibility of such gatherings in the future. As a concession, they let us use the gymnasium for a bingo on March 22, 1995, to which no outsiders were invited.

Later, in response to the fall-out from the *Commission of Inquiry Into Certain Events at the Prison for Women* (1995) chaired by Madame Justice Arbour, corrections department officials took over the operation of the Battered Women's Support Group and began to regulate it as a prison program. Prisoners must now attend the group for six weeks, at the end of which time they receive certificates of completion. All meetings are chaired by a guard instead of having a member facilitate. Instead of sharing their feelings when they are ready, participants are told when to express themselves. These conditions violate the original goal of the group which was to provide a "safe space" in which abuse survivors could share their experiences and work to heal themselves. The presence of the guard can be intimidating for many members, while the six week certificate of completion trivializes the emotional pain with which survivors of long-term abuse must wrestle.

The good news is that as of September 3, 1996, after I relayed these concerns to corrections officials, I have been assured the group can go back to its original mandate, without the presence of the guard. Once more I will attend the group to help members draw up a new constitution, as well as arrange to have a different group member volunteer to facilitate the next meeting. This will give members a chance to hone their organizational skills and to feel more comfortable in the limelight. This is especially crucial now, as the Correctional Service of Canada is gearing up to relocate the P4W's population to five new regional facilities across the country. Prisoners have no choice about where they will go and, in many cases, the move will separate women from their partners of long-standing. The turmoil and pain this process poses for prisoners is exacerbated by a lack of information about the relocation process. There seems to be little information about the move available to many Corrections employees, and what information exists is not filtering down to the prisoners. This has created an atmosphere of fear, suspicion and

tension. Prisoners will need ongoing support as they adjust to their new environments.

After the fall-out from the P4W inquiry, access to the prison by outside groups in 1996 has been increasingly restricted. Currently, only three community volunteers are allowed to attend the Battered Women's Support Group: Sandra Dean, Jo-Ann Connolly and me.

A news release from the Department of Justice in Ottawa, October 4, 1995 stated:

“The Solicitor General of Canada, Herb Gray and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Allan Rock, today announced the appointment of the Honourable Lynn Ratushny, a judge of the Ontario Court of Justice (Provincial Division), to lead a review of cases involving women convicted of killing their abusive partners, spouses, or guardians.”

When I spoke with Judge Ratushny on August 13, 1996, she told me there were 98 cases submitted for review. The “in custody” applications total 63; 35 cases are not in custody. She states that she has dealt thoroughly and fairly with 45 cases, and has contacted the women involved. Some of these files have been looked at, because she is dealing with the women in custody first. There are still 15 women in custody, whose cases need to be reviewed.

Upon leaving the P4W in July 1994, I began developing my vision of having an agency run by and for prisoners, enlarging upon the peer support team model I had learned in the P4W. With the help of important community leaders and since its incorporation in April of 1995, Project Another Chance Inc. has, with the support of the Trillium Foundation, made great strides towards establishing a conduit to the community for women in prison and female parolees. We now have 75 committed volunteers, many of whom have received intensive crisis response and suicide intervention training, as well as orientation on native women's issues. The “Right On Line”, a crisis phone line for women prisoners and parolees, has been in official operation since December, 1995. I have been taking calls on restricted hours since May, 1995 and already the response from service users is very positive. After a great deal of organization and training, we are beginning to see the results of the very necessary service we provide. We have made a specific mandate

to seek the cooperation of prison administrators across the country in order to allow prisoners, who have increasingly restricted telephone access to the outside, to use our services.

Operated by a tiny staff and over 40 professionally-trained volunteers (including several ex-prisoners), the “Right-On Line” offers quiet, non-judgmental support, suicide intervention, referrals to prison and community resources and strives to establish a community link for women in conflict with the law. Parolees who call the Right-On Line can tap into practical information on resumé-writing, conquering addictions and finding affordable products and services, as well as building a supportive network of friends and advisors.

The P4W has always been and continues to be a living nightmare, designed and operated as a maximum security prison. This is inappropriate and harmful to federally sentenced women. They struggle with geographical and cultural dislocation, and have little or no contact with their children, families and communities.

When leaving prison, you are usually told a day or so ahead of time that you will be released. This gives the prisoner time to pack up her belongings, clean up her cell, say their farewells and prepare herself for the outside. It is quite disorienting and overwhelming when you know you will be released. Some women panic at this stage and are unsure if they can “make it” outside.

The dehumanizing aspects of incarceration cause prisoners to become more angry and bitter. They lose faith in the “system,” and while imprisoned they are essentially schooled in the commission of crime. Those released are less able to function as responsible, caring citizens.

Prisons represent a temporary warehouse where goods will eventually come out. But what if these goods are then more spoiled? We have prisons because we have come to believe in them, even though they do represent only a small proportion of the criminalized. Prisons represent that end of the system where we put the most readily detected, the most readily prosecuted, and the most readily forgotten about.

