

On Prison Education and Women in Prison

An Interview with Therasa Ann Glaremin

INTRODUCTION

Therasa Ann Glaremin was recently released from Kingston Prison for Women after six years inside that institution and eleven months inside a provincial institution. She is now on day parole and she did a radio interview with me, Gay Bell, on the phone from the halfway house in Kingston where she was living.

I have submitted this interview to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* for a number of reasons: for the information it contains on educational opportunities for federal women prisoners; for readers to have the opportunity to get to know Newfoundlander Therasa Ann Glaremin, a writer of Micmac and Irish descent; and to encourage readers to try to get interviews with prisoners or ex-prisoners they might know onto their local media.

CKLN-FM is a community radio station operating out of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. 'Word of Mouth,' on which this interview was aired, is a program of national news commentary. CKLN-FM does much programming about prisoners and was very open to doing this interview.

National Student Week (October 14 - 18, 1991) was designed to raise awareness of the under-funding of education, the fact that classes are too large, and that marginalized courses like women's studies and African studies are insufficiently funded. I thought it was important to include a woman prisoner's view on the education that was actually available to her while she was inside a federal institution.

THE INTERVIEW

Gay Bell: Would you like to tell us about your educational history?

Therasa Ann Glaremin:

When I went into the system I had only a Grade Six education, and while I was at the Provincial, it was pretty hard to really get anything because they have no programs at the Provincial. They have some limited programs through the Ministry of Education, but as far as the school and that goes, there's not really anything. You're dependent on the postal service for your books and your courses.

When I was transferred from the Provincial in 1986 to the Federal system at the Prison for Women (P4W), I found that the educational

Gay Bell and Therasa Ann Glaremin wish to thank Zoltan Lugosi for his help in preparing this interview for publication.

program was enlarged. That is, they had a school there for prisoners, so I wanted to upgrade myself from my Grade Six level to the ABE level.

Gay: *That's Adult Basic Education?*

Therasa Ann:

Yes, that's right. That's to Grade Nine level. But when I got there, it was a different thing. The Work Board¹ at that time, even though they were pushing to get you to your ABE, they needed people to work in the institution in laborious positions — like in dining, kitchen, cleaners, laundry; they needed people to perform laborious functions to keep the institution tidy and that. They put me in the kitchen apart from the fact that I wanted to go to school. They said that I wasn't going to need my education when I got out, that I would probably get a job in a restaurant or as a cleaner, if I wasn't a housewife.

So what I did was work in their kitchen serving food to the prisoners and cooking and cleaning and washing pots; but on my downtime, the time that was my own, I got my Ministry of Education courses, and I moved forward. I set a goal for myself and I wanted to achieve it. I wanted something more than being dependent on a man for something because I didn't have the education to move forward. So, when I got to my ABE level, I was really happy and really satisfied. When I got my certificate I was really proud, and then I decided that I wanted to move on, forward.

I wanted my high school diploma; so I set my sights for my high school diploma. But the institution had other jobs for me to do. They sent me to microfilming. For about two years I was going outside the institution during the day as a technician doing microfilming. It was a monotonous job. Everything was mundane.

Gay: *Is prisoners' labour contracted out?*

Therasa Ann:

Yes, prison labour is contracted out. Women working there receive the wage of the pen and not the wage of the street. It [microfilming] was run by an independent business which ran sweat shops with no advancement for those in its employment. The microfilming program has since been closed-off to women and has found a place within the walls of Kingston Prison (for men). It is a form of slave labour and offers no opportunities on the street as jobs of this nature aren't available.

So, as I was saying, when I came back to my cage I continued with my studies. There was a period when I couldn't get certain courses through the Ministry of Education. I had to go and see the Warden and threaten to expose what was really going on with these programs that we were supposed to be getting. The Administration was making a big deal about education: 'Oh, the education is great inside!' But we

weren't getting any benefits from that. They just wanted us to clean, and if you were a good stool pigeon you might get into the education program.

Gay: *What does that mean?*

Therasa Ann:

That means that you inform on other prisoners about their activities in order to get favors from the Administration.

Gay: *If you inform you might get something?*

Therasa Ann:

Yes, but I got nothing because I didn't care to talk about other prisoners' business. So I had to fight and put in grievances in order to get some time at the school to take required courses for my diploma, which I couldn't get through the Ministry.

I won my grievance, and the Warden went to bat for me and put me in school for about eight months. I got my high school diploma in June of 1988.

I was the Valedictorian and I gave a very emotional speech about the value of education. I spoke about how we are all at this stage in time and none would move forward if we didn't use this time that we were given as a punishment for being women — that's how I looked at it because I'm not guilty of what they say I've done, so I look at things in a different way.

There was a high percentage of women in prison at that time in 1988 who did not have an education and as a result of the consciousness-raising efforts of myself, Gail Horri, Jo-Ann Mayhew and Fran Sugar, we got things moving towards getting more educational programs for the women. Men have those shops (vocational education courses) where they can get trades at the federal institutions. We didn't have that. We still don't, by the way. Not if the Parole Boards can help it.

Gay: *What do you mean?*

Therasa Ann:

In the federal pens one has the option of learning a trade. The P4W has no programs whereby a woman can leave with a license.

Men can leave prison with their papers to do woodworking, barbering, electronics, mechanics, etc. Women have John's B.P., which is as bad as microfilming. Men can get limited parole to work outside of prison. Women are barred due to their lack of training. The Parole Board makes the decision as to whether a woman can go into the community or not.

Education is the only certification a woman can bring with her and

she has to be allowed, by decision of the Board and the Warden, to attend a men's prison to get that education because these university programs are offered on a larger scale to men. They are only offered to a limited number of federal women prisoners.

Gay: So, there's education for trades in the men's prison, but there's nothing for women.

Therasa Ann:

Non-existent; and that's why Gail Horri, Jo-Ann Mayhew, Fran Sugar and I were speaking on behalf of the federally sentenced women by sitting on panels and task forces to decide what was the best thing we could do for the women. We believed that what the women wanted, their consensus, was to have trades. They wanted to leave with certificates, something they could have that would enable them to get jobs when they got out so they wouldn't have to be lower-class citizens. They had three strikes against them: they are women, they are in the prison system, and they are uneducated as well. When they came in, most of them were below the ABE level like myself — maybe Grade Eight or Nine. About seven or eight percent of the women had high school, university degrees, things like that. In the crowd that I hung around with, 75 percent of the women had less than a Grade Nine education.

What was being taught inside and outside were just two totally different concepts. So the chance of a woman coming out with her hairdressing diploma and using it to get a job on the streets was very marginal, unless she fell down on her hands and knees and begged the employer to please let her have a job, or did something drastic. She would never get it on the merits of that hairdressing diploma because it was so poor in quality. And women never had the chance to leave prison with a mechanics certificate, or a certificate from a shop, or barbering, or anything.

Anyway, through the efforts of me and my fellow sisters, we endeavored to start programming at the Prison for Women; and indeed programming did start — tons of programming through the ABE. But once again only those chosen few could go into the ABE. Then toward the end of 1988, coming into 1989, they sort of changed it all around. They started rounding-up people in droves and forcing them to go to school against their wills.² Something had to have come down from the upper echelon of power that corrections works through because they took people out of their jobs and put them in school. They were saying that anyone who worked in these jobs had to have their Grade Nine education. The jobs had been done by women who didn't have their Grade Nine education and were doing quite well. That didn't matter. Now, they wanted them all to go to school in order to qualify for the same job.

Gay: *How did the women feel about that?*

Therasa Ann:

It really confused the women. They were pissed off. Some of them didn't go to work, some of them withdrew, some of them turned to substance abuse. That didn't matter.

Gay: *Tell me about the Queen's University Correctional Project.*

Therasa Ann:

It is a program headed by Queen's University and Correctional Services Canada.

The high school diploma was the highest you could earn in the prison system. A fine lady named Darryl Dolen foresaw this about twelve or thirteen years ago. She had a high school diploma herself. She fought really hard to continue her education and challenged the process that eliminated women. As a result she was allowed to take the program, thereby opening the doors for women to be allowed into the university program. She was the forerunner, the one who got Queen's Correctional Law Project going, and now women inside have the option to continue with their education through to completing their BA while in prison.

Gay: *So, that's how you started at Queen's, is it?*

Therasa Ann:

That's how I started doing it. This system was put in place by Darryl Dolen and it seemed that all we had to do was take the bull by the horns — if you'll excuse the rude expression, I don't want to grab any bulls by their horns — and move forward with it. But it wasn't as easy as all that. When I and the women involved in the program wanted to move forward with it, we found that we couldn't.

As it stands now, there are no functional programs at the P4W that enable women to become better equipped for the workforce when they are released. The education program is the most beneficial program to the women but courses are limited in number and women are chosen not because of their desire to attend program, but by the Work Board and Warden who decide which women should go.³

Whatever programs are offered at the federal level to women, they cannot even compare to what men in the system receive. Women are still not seen as the 'breadwinners' in our present class structure, and, therefore, programs offered to them, when they come into conflict with the law, reflect and reinforce the patriarchal system by offering programming of a personal, psychological nature, rather than affirmative action programs which would enable entry into the workforce.

Gay: *So what do you see a woman prisoner's rights to education as being?*

Therasa Ann:

For those locked away, entry into a university program or an educational program, as opposed to correspondence courses, should be a right and not a privilege at the Warden's choice. Parents are liable to go to jail for not providing education to their children. Likewise, Corrections have become 'bad parents' when it comes to the education of women prisoners in its care.

Gay: *How can women prisoners protest when their rights are not respected?*

Therasa Ann:

One of my sisters, Murdock, just came off a death fast because the Warden offered her a job in the gym if she would end the fast. She had been locked on the range for over one year with no job placement and no stimulation of any kind or any chance of personal growth, let alone the chance to be able to work or contribute something to her prison community. This is a prime example of a woman being treated like an animal in the privacy of the system that professes to help her.

Gay: *Then let's dedicate this radio show to Murdock and her courage in standing up for her rights. Thank you, Therasa Ann, for sharing your experiences and knowledge with our listeners.*

ENDNOTES

1. The Work Board is a panel of department heads (e.g., the head of school, head of laundry, head of social development) which places prisoners in the federal system into work placements during their stay. A prisoner must work in the Board's placement in order to be paid a wage. There are five levels of pay, and one must stay in a job placement for fourteen weeks before receiving a wage increase or obtaining a job transfer. These placements are satisfactory only to the Work Board: they are never the choice of the prisoner.
2. Parole Boards began asking prisoners why they did not get an education while inside and turned them down until they at least finished ABE.
3. Zoltan Lugosi adds that women are chosen for courses if they seem to be able to carry the extra workload because it keeps the scholastic achievement statistics on the rise, thus making the program coordinators look good to senior management.