

Editors' Introduction

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On behalf of all women incarcerated we thank the Board of the JPP for their unyielding courage and continuous efforts to render the perspectives of prisoners about prisons. The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons provides a forum unmatched in its breadth of content and its readership.

We had difficulty reaching women in prison and hope that this issue will find wide distribution in order to support, encourage and inspire women in prison over the world to submit articles to the JPP. The voices of the women in this issue are unfettered by academic standards. The form and content speak openly of our struggles to affect the minds and hearts of the readership - to hear our truths. The words are authentic and united in message.

This special issue on women in prison is dedicated to all people incarcerated, those dead, and those still struggling for life. It is produced with gratitude for the many thousands of humanitarians who promote the ideal of social justice through their work and their examples. Some are mentioned in this issue but we extend our sincerest gratitude to each and every one - among them that great woman, Claire Culhane of the Prisoners Rights Group of Vancouver, Canada, who teaches us all that survival is the first priority. Thank-you all, in the gentleness of Sisterhood.

Typically unnoticed in the din produced by perpetual criminal justice debates, women prisoners suffer extreme isolation. Yet while women constitute approximately 50% of the population, how is it possible that so little can be heard from women prisoners?

There are at least a couple of possible reasons for this. The first is due to the very nature of prisons themselves, as warehouses at the low end of a massive administrative chain. Within degrees there is the belief that prisoners forfeit their rights at the gate of the prison, such that it is always possible to silence their voices. This is a politically dangerous situation. It closes our access to understanding and knowing the workings of state justice as administered on our behalf.

In a pamphlet proclaiming the objectives of the 1971 French based, Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP), it is declared that, "We have to disseminate as quickly and widely as possible the revelations that the prisoners themselves make - the sole means of unifying what is inside and outside the prison, the political battle and the legal battle, into one and the same struggle" (quoted in Eribon; 1991:227). The struggles of women prisoners are the poignant manifestation of the struggles of women generally. Yet, the women's movement has not sufficiently addressed the concerns of women prisoners.

These deficiencies are starting to be acknowledged in Canada as the article by Kim Pate of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry

Societies (CAEFS) attests. In addition, the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) resolved at their 1993 AGM to:

- make anti-racism a priority
- support creative feminist approaches to women in the criminal justice system which would include ... the development and implementation of non-custodial alternatives
- consult with and lobby on behalf of women in prison to address the issue of systemic gender based inequalities
- support greater funding and subsidies for women with children in halfway houses (NAWL, 1993)

In 1994, the B.C./Yukon Society of Transition Houses put forward a resolution:

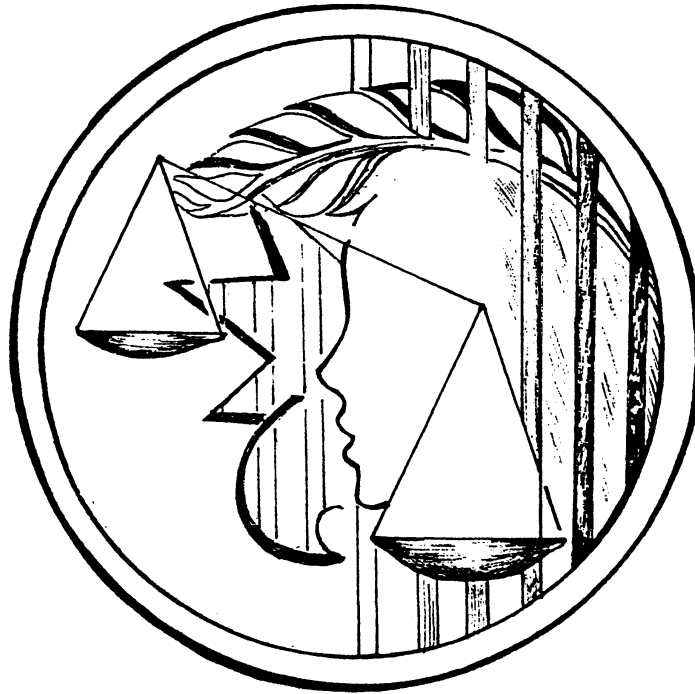
That the B.C./Yukon Society of Transition Houses call for alternatives to incarceration for women and that these alternatives be developed in participation with and in response to the needs articulated by the women affected by these services.

These resolutions result from having heard the voices of women in prison.

The prisoner status however, generally unites women and men in concerns which are foreign to the experiences of those in the women's movement of mainstream society. The voices of prisoners belong to themselves, and we should not necessarily speak for them. As the GIP recognized, the political task is to provide prisoners with "the possibility of speaking themselves and telling what goes on in prisons" (Eribon, 1991). We believe that the JPP is an expression of that goal.

The second reason for the silencing of women prisoners' voices is due to the gender status which has been "naturally" bestowed upon us. Women's sexuality has historically been an integral factor of so-called women's crimes and sins. Around 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Witches Hammer) proclaimed: "the word woman is used to mean the lust of the flesh", and quoted Cicero, "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman" (quoted in Summers, 1971:43). With a reputation like this, is it any wonder women find it difficult to experience justice in a society which punishes them both for breaching criminal laws and having female, sexualized bodies?

Michel Foucault (1977), a founding member of the GIP and controversial philosopher, described the prison as "the most frenzied manifestation of power imaginable". The constant monitoring and control of movement and activity in a prison is testament to this description, as is the physical enclosure of the walls themselves. That women are more familiar with such manifestations of power over our sexualized bodies, which are typically the locus of much wider moral, medical and political attention and control, testifies to the differences between the experiences of female and male prisoners.



Prisoners' expressions of their experiences of incarceration in this issue of the JPP are manifested in different forms - from academic analyses to visual analyses - but each expression speaks in some way of the politics of incarceration. These politics are repeated across national borders, as the articles by the anonymous female prisoners in Brazil, of Californians - Karonji Spears, Joann Walker, Norma Stafford and Daisy Benton and Canadians - Melissa Stewart, Julie McKay, S.B., Jo-Anne Mayhew, Heather Evans and Gayle Horii, all speak of similar effects of womens' incarceration. The experiences of First Nations' women prisoners, Cedar Woman and Fran Sugar add another political dimension to the previous reports, that of race.

An effective examination of the politics of power generally must include in its scope the limit of death, an ahistorical political tool of repression and control. In consideration of this, we look first at the issue of AIDS in prison, in two pieces by Patrice O'Donnell who did not survive to read them in the JPP. The other pressing political issue for women in prison is that of suicide. The Canadian authors of these works on suicide - Sandy Sayer, Marie Custer, Pat Bear and Marlene (Shaggy) Moore - eventually succeeded in their own efforts to release themselves from the horror that is prison.

This issue concludes with Norma Stafford's review of Karlene Faith's (1993) *Unruly Women*, the most recent publication on the history and politics of women's "criminality". We also present in the Response section of the Journal, two accounts relating to work on the other side of prison walls by two extraordinary Canadian social activists, Claire Culhane and Kim Pate. In connecting these voices to those buried in women's prisons, we show that no amount of concrete and barbed wire can separate us from our sisters inside.

In this volume, the voices of women prisoners are diverse, spanning country, race and socio-economic status. In some cases, the text has been edited with the permission of the authors. In other cases, the text, including spelling, is left intact, against the conventions of academic writing. We believe that the literary world will survive the breach of such conventions - indeed, it will be richer because of it.

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