

**FROM ISOLATION TO COMMUNITY ...
... SEEKING MINIMUM SECURITY
FACILITIES 4 WOMEN**

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For several years I have been writing on issues facing women imprisoned in Canada; particularly those incarcerated at the antiquated Prison 4 Women in Kingston, Ontario. My writing is prompted by my personal experiences and from being a captive witness to the pain, indignity and brutality inflicted on very young women, elderly women, physically ill women and many marginally literate women, with whom I live.

My own observations are independently reflected by those of Sally Wills, the Executive Director of Elizabeth Fry Society of Kingston. In a brief (1988) submitted to the Standing Committee of the House of Commons on Justice, Wills states that:

When we look at female offenders it is quickly seen that they are doubly oppressed (by prison and the facts of their own lives). Ninety percent of female offenders are victims of sexual abuse and/or incest (yet "Corrections" maintains the right to the physical violation of arbitrary strip searching). Virtually all female offenders are victims of physical and emotional abuse (but "Corrections" will use mace rather than talk an individual down). 90% are women of poverty, low education and broken homes. Approximately 80% are mothers, 50% are single parents. Most of us have a knee jerk reaction to the Inmate Mother; however, just because a woman is an offender does not mean that she is a poor parent. For most mothers the most difficult part of serving a sentence is the separation from her children. Most female offenders (approximately 80%) admit to drug and/or alcohol addictions.

For over FIFTY years "Corrections" has simply added pain-filled years to the cycles of abuse these women have already encountered. The cost of this traditional mode of incarceration has continually mounted until it is estimated by prisoner Gayle Horii to cost \$80,733 per year per woman. Against the realities of the profile of a female offender and the cost to taxpayers, I continue to speculate whether the continuation of this brutal treatment of women is by accident or a reflection of a more sinister social design of "righteous wrath" against "fallen" women.

In 1988, a former Danish correctional official, Mr. Ole Ingstrup was appointed as our Canadian Commissioner of Corrections. Mr. Ingstrup has issued several Mission Statements that are intended to offer clear direction to the Correctional Service. He has also organized a Task

Force to address the situation of female offenders. I am told that 1989 can be viewed as the "Year of the Female Offender."

I am not optimistic. The "needs of the female" offender have been studied to exhaustion since 1938! In 1989, I have already been told that the most significant remedy being considered is the construction of a 10-12 bed minimum security facility in the Kingston area. This in itself is hopelessly inadequate. It demonstrates, once again, steadfast blindness to the realities of women in this prison and throughout this entire country.

I realize that remedies for addressing the situation of Female Offenders are complex. But the simplistic, naive idea that a 10-12 bed facility had significant merit is bureaucratic solutionism at a most cruelly inept and ignorant level. The only meaning to emerge will exist in the ol'boy back-slapping as construction contracts are signed. Corrections will pacify the public by high profile media coverage of conferences, substituting planning in place of action ... again.

It is past time that basic facts were taken into account as the Correctional Services of Canada is attempting to formulate solutions. It must be accepted that deporting women from all across Canada to Kingston, in itself, constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. Nothing should be done to further entrench this practice. Constructing any new institution in the Kingston area would both contribute to and knowingly compound the existing discrimination.

A viable, economical alternative would be to lease, or purchase for future re-sale, several houses that could accommodate a reasonable number of women. In many ways, there would be substantial benefits to following this course.

Financially, the cost of such an undertaking would be far more economical than the construction of yet another prison. The project could be viewed as a blue-print for a National network. Houses would be a real estate investment and could be re-sold as Provincial facilities developed and the demands on the Kingston area decreased. It would be an opportunity for a government agency to demonstrate fiscal responsibility as well as engage in vibrant social change. These factors would be a healthy challenge to the status quo.

The need for several houses rather than one facility comes from an analysis of women's needs. The women in the custody of Corrections represent distinct groups.

Women sentenced to (relatively) short prison terms frequently warrant minimum security conditions after brief evaluation periods. In a Community Home they would be permitted and encouraged to make full use of community resources. Currently, the CSC pays substantial amounts to have self-help groups and counselling brought into the prison. These funds could be channelled to support and develop similar programs in the larger community.

Often, women doing long prison terms or even life sentences come to be viewed as minimum security risks. They regress when held in a maximum security environment over extended periods of time. These women need relief from the harshness of P4W but they would not be allowed access to the greater community. These women would need resources brought to them and a structure created through which they could earn community privileges to churches, libraries and a YWCA or similar facility.

Two other distinct groups come to mind. One is women who need and want substantial help dealing with substance abuse and past victimization. Current experiences at P4W are making it clear that both of these problems are closely related. The other distinctive group of women is our Native sisters. They would be better served if they were assisted in setting up a residence in harmony with their own cultural and spiritual backgrounds. The dislocation of Native women represents the most brutal form of outrage being tolerated by the Justice System. These women suffer not only geographical and family difficulties but are also placed in a situation where "rehabilitation" is standardized by an alien set of cultural norms.

If successful in the Kingston area, this Community Correctional Housing model could be expanded into a nation-wide network of such clusters. In comparison to traditional prison construction the savings would be enormous. At this time in Burnaby, British Columbia, construction is about to begin on a NEW traditional prison for 140 women, that at a cost of \$50,000,000. The design for Burnaby is a modern version of the failure in Kingston.

In contrast to the fierce fortress model contracted by the mainly Male Enterprise of Corrections, community homes would demand intense human involvement; not just dollars, concrete and steel. Employment would be offered to many individuals with positive social skills. The programming for women in the areas of addiction, sexual abuse, upgrading of educational tools and job skills would serve other community members as both additional referral services to community members as well as a source of employment. The model would also be compatible with victim/offender reconciliation efforts.

Community models could easily be adapted to accommodate **MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN**. The grim and tragic family repercussions of sending mothers to prison is a fact that is ignored by the present system, as Sally Wills clearly points out. The institutionalized practice of separating women from young children to whom they have just given birth or have cared for over months and years is barbaric. Corrections should be moving in the direction of maintaining relationships, developing healthy growth rather than actively contributing to separation, its pain and the ongoing trauma of dislocated primary bonds.

The Task Force on Female Offenders may direct decisions that will dictate the direction of MANY MILLIONS of social dollars. Many institutions dehumanize; but prisons, as they now exist, make it their business. Our brothers in American and Canadian prisons have been trying to tell us that prison breeds hatred, violence and social contempt. Four years within the walls of the Prison for Women are making these male realities my own. The price for this brand of Corrections in Canada is \$759,083,378. each year. The few number of women involved make the feasibility of attempting ALTERNATIVES practical. The issue is much more than dollars and cents, it raises profound questions as to the direction to be taken by the justice System into the twenty-first century. The prison built for women today will incarcerate the daughters of tomorrow - in increasing numbers. Prisons are not left empty and the social definition of crimes is easily changed. I hope Mr. Ingstrup's Task Force will recommend and enact remedies that will avoid entrenching disaster.

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