

**Prisons Don't Work – written by Books Beyond Bars, 2007**

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**Get in touch : [booksbeyondbars@gmail.com](mailto:booksbeyondbars@gmail.com)**

Books Beyond Bars dedicates our time and energy to direct and simple activities: bringing books to women in prison, providing a creative outlet through writing workshops, and now, publishing their poems and artwork. Books Beyond Bars also tries to critique the prison system through our work, by pointing out that the experiences described in this book are not isolated or rare. This collection illustrates the experiences and emotions of incarceration – frustration, anger, isolation, and regret – but it is part of a larger history, and larger societal problems. We hope to show people what those inside already know; prisons don't work for anyone, those incarcerated within them or society as a whole.

Throughout Canadian history, negative ideas about women offenders have meant poor treatment within the prison system. Compared to men, there are very few women in prison (in federal prisons in 2004, there were 380 women and more than 12,000 men). Historically, the relatively few incarcerated women have been viewed as “fallen women” who are not worth helping. Since the formation of prisons in Canada, women have been held in whatever space is convenient within the larger system of male correctional facilities. This has been true of federal facilities (for offenders serving more than two years) and continues to be true of provincial facilities (offenders sentenced to less than two years or awaiting trial).

Since the early 1800s, federally sentenced women were kept in the Kingston Penitentiary and other male prisons across the country. In 1934 the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario was built. Although P4W allowed for a woman-only space with its own programs and facilities, it was continually criticized for geographically isolating women from their families and communities. P4W was also based on a male model of corrections, offering inadequate programs to address women's issues and needs. Dozens of government reports called for its closing as conditions became worse. Groups like the Elizabeth Fry Society began advocating for incarcerated women's rights in the 1960s. They showed that common life experiences for women, including surviving abuse, providing for families, and living in poverty affect their incarceration. This has been true for decades (in 2005, 80% of women were serving time for economic crimes – theft, fraud, or unpaid fines). Across North America women have higher poverty rates than men, because of disadvantages in the labour force and larger family responsibilities. Currently almost half of single mothers in Canada live below the poverty line, and more than two thirds of federally sentenced women are mothers. In 1995, new federal women's prisons were built. Their design was based on the recommendations in a 1990 report by the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, which was made up of ex-inmates, prison activists, Aboriginal women and government officials. P4W closed in 2000.

The Nova Institute for Women in Truro was one of the four new federal women's prisons built across the country. An Aboriginal Healing Lodge was also built in rural Saskatchewan, as an option for Aboriginal women given minimum and medium security classifications. In the new federal prisons, women live in townhouses with their own room, cook

their own meals, participate in programming suited to women's needs, and have access to a gym, gardens, a library, paid work, job training, and counseling. It is a different type of prison; there are no locked doors, barred windows, cells, or caged pens. The women there are still in prison, and still trapped within the Canadian justice system that keeps them separated from their families and communities, but it is better than before.

Recidivism rates (the number of women who re-offend and return to prison) are lower for women in federal facilities than in provincial. This is because while the new federal facilities offer programming to address individual needs, little has changed in the provincial prison system since the days of the Kingston Penitentiary. Women are still isolated in men's maximum security prisons across the country, in small numbers and far from their homes. This is true for the Central NS Correctional Facility in Dartmouth NS, also called 'Burnside', which holds women from all of NS and PEI. As well, women in Burnside and other men's prisons are kept in maximum security conditions, regardless of their crime. Security classification determines the type of prison you are held in, as well as privileges and community access you are allowed. P4W was all maximum security, and although the new federal women's prisons are medium with a maximum section within them, the provincial prisons offer no choice. In Nova Scotia, this, combined with a lack of programming, support, and paid work at Burnside, has led to the phenomenon of "pleading up": women are asking for longer federal sentences so they can go to the Nova Institute for Women and have more access to their families, better counseling, work training, and more freedom.

As well, the manner in which women are security classified is flawed. Women labeled as "maximum security" prisoners are mostly

labeled this way because they have difficulty adjusting to prison, not because of public safety concerns (unlike men who have a higher rate of violent crime). Women with mental health issues, especially who self-harm, have more problems adjusting to prison life, and are more likely to be kept in segregation or maximum security. Native women make up 40–50% of maximum security women, although they only represent 28% of women prisoners, and only 1–2% of Canadian population. Intense racism and colonization affect their lives, in and out of prison.

The increasing numbers of women in prison is part of a growing problem. According to the Elizabeth Fry Society,

“Crime rates are declining, yet the numbers of women being imprisoned is increasing. In fact, the fastest growing prison population worldwide is women, particularly racialized, young, poor women and women with mental and cognitive disabilities. The escalating numbers of women in prison is plainly linked to the evisceration of health, education, and social services.”

It is impossible to overlook the role that poverty, abuse, mental illness and drug addiction play in most offences. In Canada 69% of women indicated that drugs and/or alcohol played a major role in their criminalization. Racism also affects Aboriginal women; in Canada Aboriginal people are nine times as likely as non-Aboriginal people to go to prison. Incarceration serves to perpetuate poverty and cycles of abuse due to a penalization structure based on punishment instead of support. The new women’s prisons are beginning to address the problems and the needs of incarcerated women, but are only making small steps to address the larger systemic problems behind their incarceration. Provincially sentenced women are being left behind. Claire Culhane, a dedicated

prisoner's rights activist said,

“We can't change prisons without changing society. We know that this is a long and dangerous struggle. But the more who are involved in it, the less dangerous, and the more possible it will be.”

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