Entrenched Social Catastrophe

Native Women in Prison

BY FRAN SUGAR

Native people lead the KKCountry in statistical categories such as unemployment, alcoholism, early death rates from infant mortality, violence and criminally-related activities. According to a recent study by Trent University, the Dangerous Offenders Act, Bills C-67 and C-68, Native people in the criminal justice system are more likely to be gated under this bill, and therefore are deemed the most dangerous and most violent offenders in Canada.

Native women face double, triple and quadruple standards when entering the prison system. Number 1 is because we are women, number 2: we are Native, number 3: we are poor, number 4: we do not usually possess the education necessarily equivalent to the status quo.
Profile

Ms. Cree is eighteen years-old, a single parent with 2 children. She lives in the city of —— where the offence took place. She was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 4 years. Her parents are deceased. She has 2 sisters and 2 brothers. Ms. Cree was a housewife whose sole income was social assistance.

Ms. Cree entered the institution with a grade 4 level of education. She quit school due to problems in her foster home. Ms. Cree has not been involved in an Education upgrading program. She has been offered a job cleaning yet has refused this placement because she feels the school supervisor does not treat her or other Native students properly. As a result she will not work anywhere in the institution.

Ms. Cree was first arrested at age 16 for uttering and forging documents. She was put on one year's probation which she completed successfully. The subject displays no responsibility for her criminal involvement. The subject clearly has a drug and alcohol problem. Her institutional participation is limited to Native Sisterhood. The writer strongly suggests that Ms. Cree remain a maximum security inmate. The writer is not in support of community release at this time. Day parole denied. Full parole denied. Escorted temporary absence denied for one year. Ms. Cree was involved with a would-be serious incident with a number of her friends on May 1, 19—, when security staff were proceeding to dispel an incident in another part of the building. As a result Ms. Cree not being able to remain charge-free for any length of time, her cavalier attitude, her activities and friendships with many known drug dealers in the institution, it is the writer's opinion that Ms. Cree meets #2 & #3 criteria under Bill C67-68.

Ms. Cree is a danger to society, to herself and the staff members of the institution. Ms. Cree is being referred under Bill C-67-68. Ms. Cree’s sentence expires January, 199—. Next case management review scheduled December, 199—.
This is a fictional profile, but it closely resembles a perceived reality on the part of the bureaucracy who assess the Native woman as she enters prison. Those who assess us come from an opposite life-experience. The average case management person is Caucasian, married, has 1-2 children, a university degree, from an upper-middle-class background with no comparable experiences to a Native woman.

Obviously there are going to be some very profound difficulties that the Native woman will have in making adjustments within the institution and in serving out her sentence. Almost every Sister I have talked to has told me they were raised in foster homes, sent to juvenile detention centres, were victims of sexual abuse, were victims of rape. And finally entering Prison for Women, we have all become victims of bureaucracy because we do not have the right colour of skin, the right kind of education, the right kind of social skills and the right kind of principles to get out of here.

Most often criminal defense lawyers, in conjunction with crown prosecutors and judges, agree that a guilty plea with a lower-middle-class background with no comparable experiences to a Native woman when we have never had an equal footing in the case management strategic planning sessions that take place. The bureaucracy and paper pushing out-weighs the importance of listening to what we have adjusted to divorcing ourselves from relationships with our husbands. We keep adapting to new and ever more dangerous conditions and ideas in the name-sake of survival.

We forget how life once was, how blue the sky is, how good food tasted. We forget because the changes are gradual and unannounced. No one can forewarn us of what lies ahead. If we could imagine ourselves taking pleasure in a slave job like cleaning floors over and over again, day after day, year after year and see ourselves as fanatical psychos when our freshly waxed floor gets a scratch on it and ruins our entire day, we would recoil like cleaning floors over and over again, day after day, year after year and see ourselves as fanatical psychos when our freshly waxed floor gets a scratch on it and ruins our entire day, we would recoil with horror and shame because our minds and values become as twisted and irrational as the ones that impose these conditions upon our lives.

We become so phucking numb from the incredible bish we are exposed to: trying to see a case management officer to get a call to our children is a major, major event. It is no wonder that so many of us cut our throats, lacerate our bodies, hang ourselves. It is no wonder that we need to identify our pain onto our physical bod-