

A Suitable Place

Positive Change for Federally

BY LORI SPARLING

"If the history of women's imprisonment is one of indifference, it will come as no surprise that the history of Aboriginal women's imprisonment is an exaggeration of the same."

L'auteure examine les recommandations issues du groupe de travail qui a enquêté chez les femmes condamnées sous la loi fédérale, en particulier celles de la loge de guérison Okinaw Ohci Healing et celles de la Première Nation Neekaneet.

For 60 years there have been calls to close Canada's Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. There have also been dozens of commissions and inquiries into the conditions of federally sentenced women in Canada. However, until recently the specific needs of Aboriginal women were not addressed in terms of cultural and historical understandings of their positions in prison and in society.¹ In 1989, the Canadian government convened the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. The Task Force, made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, addressed the issues of women's incarceration and for the first time, listened to the voices of federally sentenced women.

The Task Force resolved to build the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge which would allow Aboriginal women the choice of a better life—physically, spiritually, emotionally, and culturally.

Unfortunately, literature available on federally sentenced women and the struggles they face is scarce. When the focus is Aboriginal federally-sentenced women, documents often become overlapping and repetitive. If not for *Creating Choices: The Report on The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, the voices of Aboriginal women who are incarcerated in Canada would be silenced. *Creating Choices* offers us a firsthand look at the lives of federally sentenced women prior to and during their contact with the justice system.

In 1996, the *Report of the Inquiry Into Certain Events at the Prison for Women* was published. This report addressed a myriad of issues surrounding the internal problems facing prisoners and staff at Kingston's Prison for Women. The Honourable Madam Justice Louise Arbour headed this commission and in her own words, summed up the situation that Aboriginal women faced with regards to the Canadian criminal justice system:

If the history of women's imprisonment is one of neglect and indifference, it will come as no surprise that the history of Aboriginal women's imprisonment is an exaggeration of the same. (218)

The report made recommendations for changing the situation and supports some of the changes that were

already being implemented, such as the creation of the Healing Lodge.

It is important to understand how the lives of federally sentenced women were affected by the previous facilities and programming—which in some aspects, outside of the Healing Lodge, still exist—which were neither culturally or gender appropriate. I will use the words of Fran Sugar,² Sister, friend, as well as speaker for many federally sentenced women:

When we come to prison, we need to adjust to greater and greater violence in our lives. We adjust to increasingly deadly conditions, and come to accept them as "natural." We adjust to having freedoms stolen away from us, to having fewer and fewer choices, less and less voice in the decisions that affect our lives. We come to believe that making \$4.20 a day and things we can buy with it are the most important life goals. We have adjusted to deafening silence, because it is now mandatory to wear headphones. We have adjusted to the deafening noises and screams coming from segregation when our Sister has just been stripped of her clothes and maced in the face. We have adjusted to the deadening entertainment of bingo games that give out prized bags of taco chips and we hear glee of happiness at this score, because some pathetic individual hasn't tasted taco chips since 1979.... We have adjusted to dreaming of our futures.

We become so *phucking* numb from the incredible *b/sh*

Sentenced Aboriginal Women in Canada

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 bodies, because our whole lives have been filled with incredible pain and traumatizing experiences—psychic pain, physical pain, spiritual pain. I entered Prison for Women as a young, poorly-educated, Native woman and ... I will soon be released with similar characteristics—but you can add another deficiency—after seven years—I am now an ... *angry*, young, poor, uneducated, Native woman! (Sugar 89)

This quote speaks to the lives of federally sentenced women and how often life's little moments are taken for granted by those of us on this side of the wall. What is not clear from this reference, (and has been brought to my attention by Patricia Monture-Angus) is that inmates at the Prison for Women were being "maced in the face" long before Louise Arbour's Commission inquired into events at the prison, which took place in April 1994. To be more concise, Sugar wrote about the macing and striping of prisoners in 1989, while Arbour's Inquiry revolved around events five years later. It is obvious that these inhumane practices were not isolated incidents.

When we look at what went "before" in terms of positive change in the lives of federally sentenced Aboriginal women, we find:

Almost all of the healing experiences that Aboriginal women who have been in prison report lie outside of the conventional prison order. They come through bonds formed with other women in prison, through the support of people on the outside, and from the activities of Native Sisterhood. (Sugar and Fox 478)

This suggests that the need for meaningful change must involve the realization that Aboriginal women have their own methods of healing. Given the time and space, Aboriginal women are capable of implementing support networks which address their specific needs.

The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women was thus set up to research and make suggestions toward changing the circumstances of federally sentenced women. Although it might appear to the casual observer that the time constraints (March to October 1989) faced by the Task Force would be too narrow to allow for proper research and development of meaningful recommendations, the Task Force did look to the women in prison for their input, enabling them to come up with their recommendations in less time to come up with their suggestions than those who looked for solutions in books, government institutions, and previous task forces. One has only to observe that there were 26 separate commissions/reports (Shaw 86–7), to realize that a third-party view of federally sentenced women was not sufficient to bring about meaningful change to their condition in prison; the women

needed to be heard.

The Task Force then put forth the idea that, "[just] as we cannot tack women on to a men-oriented system of corrections, so we cannot tack Aboriginal women onto any system be it for men or women" (99). They therefore examined not only what it is that makes female offender different from men, but more specifically how Aboriginal women differ from non-Aboriginal men and women in their offending patterns and needs.

For someone looking at the Canadian criminal justice system for the first time, it is hard to imagine why one group of women would need to be seen as separate, or different, from another. To better understand this, we need to look at some of the marked differences between federally sentenced Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. I cannot put into words the differences that exist for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal federally sentenced women and I would not take that liberty because it is not mine to speak

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of. I can only echo the words of Fran Sugar and Lana Fox, who themselves have firsthand experience of prison and the absence of justice within its walls and who aided the Task Force by listening and writing the words of 39 federally sentenced Aboriginal women:

"It cannot be assumed that Aboriginal women will construct a response to rape, battering and other instances of abuse in the same way the mainstream feminist movement has."

... [Prison] and release from prison are not the starting point. Aboriginal women who end up in prison grow up in prison, although the prisons in which they grow up are not the ones to which they are sentenced under law.

No amount of tinkering with prisons can heal the before-prison lives of the Aboriginal women who live or have lived within their walls. Prison cannot remedy the problem of poverty on reserves. It cannot deal with immediate or historical genocide that Europeans worked upon our people. It cannot remedy violence, alcohol abuse, sexual assault during childhood, rape, and other violence Aboriginal women experience at the hands of men. Prison cannot heal the past abuse of foster homes, or the indifference and racism of Canada's justice system in its dealings with Aboriginal people. However, the

treatment of Aboriginal women within prisons can begin to recognize that these things *are* the realities of the lives that Aboriginal women prisoners have led. (Sugar and Fox 469)

Patricia Monture-Angus advocates the separate system approach by outlining some of the seldom acknowledged differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in her book, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks*:

[It] cannot be (and should not be) concluded or assumed that Aboriginal women will construct a response to rape, battering and other instances of abuse, incest, child welfare laws and abortion in the same way that the mainstream feminist movement has. Nor can it be assumed that the dispute resolution mechanisms that Aboriginal women will advance will look the same as those advanced by the mainstream women's movement. (234)

The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women listened to the voices of federal female offenders and what they needed. They also heard from the families of these women as well as Aboriginal women and men who are concerned about members of their communities (Task Force 104). Together, with the stories of federally sentenced women, and the understanding of women's different needs, the Task Force came up with five principles for meaningful change for federally sentenced women.

The first principle for meaningful change was *empowerment*. Empowerment means improving the self-esteem of women whose lives have led them to prison (Task Force 105–6). Empowerment also means giving women the strength, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically to make the choices the task force recommends.

When I look at this recommendation, I see Aboriginal women being

returned to the positions which they once occupied, and in some communities still occupy in terms of having a voice and the respect of fellow Aboriginal people. Basically, this is an across-the-board understanding of the knowledge and contribution of Aboriginal women to the community. As an Aboriginal woman, I see my own disempowerment leading to anger, frustration, violence, and self-destruction.

The second guiding principle of change for the Task Force was *meaningful and responsible choices*. In order for federally sentenced women to empower themselves, in any way, they must be given the option to choose. The availability of choice in the lives of federally sentenced women prepares them for release in the sense that it builds self-sufficiency and the ability to take responsibility for themselves as well as their families (Task Force 107–8).

The third and perhaps most fundamental principle of the task force when looking toward making meaningful change in the lives of federally sentenced women are the principles of *respect and dignity*. Many of us who live our lives on this side of prison walls⁸ assume that respect and dignity are givens in daily life. They are not. Respect for the all things is fundamental to Aboriginal spirituality and culture and must be looked at as the first stepping stone to helping federally sentenced Aboriginal women retrieve some of what they have lost, or possibly, never had (Task Force 109).

The fourth principle for change involves a *supportive environment*. There can be no healing without the support of those around you. Healing is not an individual thing, just as getting to a place of violence and self-destructiveness is not an individual phenomenon (Task Force 110).

The fifth principle for change is *shared responsibility*. This principle reinforces the notion that the community, as well as the government, and corrections officials must actively participate in and support pro-

grams and initiatives that present meaningful choices to federally sentenced women (Task Force 111).

The Task Force recommended the establishment of five regional facilities, an Aboriginal healing lodge, and additional community release programs. The healing lodge would look to the knowledge of Aboriginal women for structure and programming (Task Force 114–5). The Task Force clearly had a vision for federal female corrections that had never been seen before in the world, both in terms of size and availability of choice.

There is a place in southeastern Saskatchewan the Cree call, *Okimaw Ohci* (in translation, “thunder hills”). It is here that the Neekaneet First Nation has let sacred land to Correctional Services Canada for the site of the Healing Lodge so that federally sentenced Aboriginal women can begin to heal themselves. The Healing Lodge is also open to non-Aboriginal women whose own life plans show that they will benefit from the kinds of spirituality and healing offered at Okimaw Ohci. These women must apply to be sent to the Lodge (Correctional Service Canada 1997a). The site of the Lodge was chosen on the part of Correctional Service Canada, because the Neekaneet First Nation:

[Demonstrated] a long tradition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cooperation, an offering of sacred rural land, a sincere interest in making the Healing Lodge part of their communities, and a strong sense of responsibility towards Aboriginal women under sentence. (Correctional Service Canada 1997b)

From the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women’s recommendations arose a planning committee to “carry out assessments, facility design and overall plan” (Correctional Service Canada 1997b) for the Healing Lodge. The Planning Circle consisted of government and non-government people, Aboriginal groups,

as well as delegates from the town of Maple Creek (Correctional Service Canada 1997b). It was the job of this committee to oversee the implementation of the Task Force’s recommendations through structure and policy for the Healing Lodge. An Elder’s Circle worked closely with the committee as spiritual guides (Correctional Service Canada 1997a).

When planning was completed and the Healing Lodge opened November of 1995, the Planning Committee was replaced by *Kekunwem-konawuk*, or “Keepers of the Vision” (Correctional Service of Canada 1997a). It is their job to ensure that the initiatives recommended by The Task Force are maintained (Correctional Service of Canada 1997a).

Although the booklet on Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge—published by Correctional Service Canada [n.d.]—is quite useful in terms of making available information that does not exist elsewhere,⁴ I am under the impression⁵ that some of this information is bordering on Sacred and some of the stories/wording(s) have possibly been appropriated without proper accreditation or respect. Another problem I had with the booklet is that it comes across as incredibly patronizing and insensitive to the realities of federally sentenced women. For instance in one section there is a statement that says, the “[health care] model will mirror *real life* as much as possible” (emphasis added) (Correctional Service Canada [n.d.], 15). For many Aboriginal women, prison is the only reality that exists—it is *real life*.

Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge is so removed from the traditional prison system that for those who visit, it is easy to forget that it is still a prison. There are no concrete walls, no razor wire, and no metal bars. The geography of the land is such that you can see for miles along the treeline, hear the creek splashing below the Spirit Lodge, and see where the beavers make their home. On any summer day you would see children playing in the playground, and

even hear the drums and voices of the pow wow if the season is right. The main building is circular and from the air, one can see that the entire structure, including the residential units, and the Spirit Lodge⁶ are built in the shape of an eagle (Wiebe and Johnson 7). To the Cree,⁷ the eagle carries great spiritual meaning, thereby reinforcing the tie between spirituality and the Lodge.

The external physical structure gives way to the internal guiding structures of the Lodge. The warden is not called a warden, instead she is called, *Kikawinaw*—Cree for “Our Mother” (Correctional Service Canada 1997b). The other staff members also have (Cree) family designations (Wiebe and Johnson 7). These people oversee the daily operations of the Lodge. In casual conversation there is no delineating of “us” and “them,” however, the presence of cameras and paperwork, act as reminders that this place is still a prison.

There are several programs in place at Okimaw Ohci which allow federally sentenced women to expand their knowledge and skills. These programs may be mandatory such as literacy, or elective such as crafts workshops. The programs include (but are not limited to): drug and alcohol treatment, education, and work programs. The residents can also take anger management group, participate in

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survivors' groups, first-aid certification, and food handling (Correctional Service Canada [n.d.], 4). The programs promote healthy lifestyles with a blend of Aboriginally-focused programs as well as skills that ensure successful reintegration into the community upon release.

Perhaps the most significant change to the lives of federally sentenced Aboriginal women, outside of having meaningful choices, is the option of having their children with them during the child's pre-school years. According to the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, "Two out of three federally sentenced women are mothers, who said they had primary responsibility for their children" (Task Force 101). The Task Force also found that, "Federally sentenced women who chose to remain in their home provinces, under Exchange of Services Agreements ... did so to maintain regular contact with their children"⁸ (Task Force 101). It has also become increasingly apparent that,

experience with the criminal justice system is intergenerational and that the children of incarcerated parents may be at greater risk than their peers for future involvement with the criminal justice system. Thus the impact of incarceration becomes multigenerational. (Bloom 28)

So we can see that it is not only the mother and child who suffer when women are incarcerated, it is future generations of children as well.

The sacred understanding of the land and how its boundaries are outlined helps one to better appreciate the freedom and respect that Aboriginal women have been allowed at the Healing Lodge:

[The] Elders tied four ceremonial flags to the trees on the limits of the land at the four directions, to let the Creator and Spirit World acknowledge the place. So the spiritual bound-

aries were set, and now no bars or fencing are needed here because if you cross the boundaries of the four colours you defy the Creator and the Spirits, the ultimate disrespect.... (Wiebe Johnson 7)

It is this spirituality and cultural sensitivity that will ensure the continued healing journeys of federally sentenced Aboriginal women now and in the future.

The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge at Neekaneet is the most peaceful place I have ever had the opportunity to visit. From the moment I drove onto the land, I felt an inner peace that I was not even aware of at first. As I drove along the road I tried to imagine why I felt so at peace, and then I realized that it was because I was among people who understand. They understand what it is to live on the margins of society, to be shunned in public, and to struggle with addictions and abuse in its many forms. They understand that acceptance is the most fundamental aspect of life, an aspect we all seek, and hope to find in the hearts and eyes of others. As I drove along, I realized that the reason for the Healing Lodge being in this place was for all of these reasons; because these are some of the very same experiences that have led Aboriginal women to prison.⁹

It has been evident for a number of years that the Canadian criminal justice system has failed Aboriginal people and, more specifically, Aboriginal women. It has only been within the last decade that there been movement toward changing the face of corrections for federally sentenced women in Canada. The change began with the formation of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, which recognized that in order to make meaningful change, women in prison must have a voice. From that arose, *Creating Choices: The Report on The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*. This 134-page report detailed the thoughts and feelings of federally sentenced

women and came up with a list of meaningful recommendations for changing women's corrections in Canada. For Aboriginal women, this meant the creation of a Healing Lodge on Sacred land on the Neekaneet First Nation. The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge was built to accommodate 40 women and up to four children. It observes the cultural understanding of the four directions and a policy of respecting the traditions of all Aboriginal nations considering it houses Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women from across Canada (Correctional Service Canada [n.d.], 4-6).

The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge also respects the cultural understanding of Aboriginal women and how the absence of positive life choices have led most of the residents into conflict with the Canadian criminal justice system. It speaks to the belief that healing is not a solitary process, and that according to tradition it involves the community, the family, and the children. Thus, the women at Okimaw Ohci are given the opportunity to choose their life paths and journey on the trails that best suit their needs; rather than those impressed upon them by the Canadian criminal justice system which operates on a different value system than that of the Aboriginal community (Ross; Correctional Service Canada 1997b).

The Healing Lodge has moved justice forward (Monture-Angus 249), for federally sentenced Aboriginal women, their children, families, and communities. By doing so, Okimaw Ohci will serve to better the tomorrows of all Aboriginal people. The experiences of federally sentenced Aboriginal women in Canada, have, and will, act as a guide for tolerance and understanding in relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people the world over.

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¹For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term Aboriginal or Aboriginal people, which according to its constitutional definition includes Indian, Inuit, and Metis.

²I will not disrespect the experiences and realities of the women whom I am speaking of by pretending to understand or even be able to properly paraphrase the experiences of federally sentenced women.

³I do not assert that those of us who are not incarcerated in a federal institution are entirely better off in circumstance than federally sentenced women. For many who live out their days without food, shelter, or close bonds with families and friends, life on this side of the wall is not always so appealing. I was told once that many of the women in prison have, in prison, what they do not have on the outside—namely relationships, security, and knowledge of knowing what will happen next as well as respect of friends and fellow human beings. I do not think for one minute that I am above any of these women or that life on this side of the wall is the most desired goal for everyone—because I know that it is not.

⁴Due to the fact that this book is published by Correctional Services Canada, it does not offer what I consider to be a neutral view of the Lodge. However, it does provide information on a subject for which information is, at best, rare.

⁵I use the word impression due to a lack of specific knowledge of Sacred Teachings on my part. This *impression* is my own and any error in understanding is my own.

⁶The Spirit Lodge is built in the shape of a tee-pee (Wiebe and Johnson 8).

⁷I am Cree and my husband is Saukteaux/Cree; he has shared his understanding of the eagle with me.

⁸According to Patricia Monture-

Angus, task force member and research advisor, a mother-child program was the number one item that federally sentenced women asked for.

⁹These, of course, are my own perceptions and reasonings, not those of the Task Force, planning committee or *Kekunwemkonawuk*.

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