

# Health Issues for Women in Prison

## An Interview with Therasa Ann Glaremin

by Gay Bell

*D'après une entrevue avec une femme incarcérée à la prison des femmes de Kingston, l'auteure examine les problèmes de santé particuliers qui se présentent aux prisonnières. Elle parle de l'accès aux services de santé, de la vulnérabilité aux maladies contagieuses et de l'abus de médicaments*

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The Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston is the only federal prison for women in Canada. Women are sent to federal prisons to serve sentences of two years or more.

Therasa Ann Glaremin is a playwright, poet, novelist, and activist who was imprisoned in the P4W. Therasa Ann and I became friends through the Prisoners' Justice Day Committee. Prisoners' Justice Day, held annually on August 10th, is the day on which prisoners across Canada fast and refuse to work in order to remember fellow prisoners who have died inside through murder, neglect, or suicide. The Committee solicits writing from prisoners to educate the public about conditions inside Canada's prisons. In 1989 Therasa Ann sent us poems for our first cultural evening which was held at A Space Gallery in Toronto.

This text is from an interview I conducted with Therasa Ann for Radio Feminist International 1994, CKLN-FM's special programming for International Women's Day.

*Therasa Ann:* I recently got out of the P4W. I'd been there for about eight years. So, I got in the community in September of '93. I'm doing pretty well except for physical things that sort of limit my activities.

I'm a graduate from Queen's University, a degree I got during my time in prison. And I'm currently doing some work on a play that I wrote called "The Hanging Sheet," dealing with issues regarding federally-sentenced women. There is going to be a workshop of "The Hanging Sheet" in Toronto this summer.

*Gay:* With so many women in such a small space, what are the risks of getting communicable diseases when you are inside?

*Therasa Ann:* The risks are very high. They don't have an area of the prison where they can keep someone away from the general population....Most of the medical health care that cannot be contained in the prison health care

unit are usually sent to the segregation unit....It's not a good solution because you are already cut off from your family, and segregation cuts you off from the rest of the community in the prison as well, and limits your communication with the Prisoners' Committee [a committee of inmates in every federal institution who attempt to struggle with the administration for the rights of the prisoners]. It makes you feel that you're being punished for something that you had no control over, and it puts you in a very bad frame of mind.

*Gay:* When a prisoner is first admitted, does she get a private examination and consultation with a physician?

*Therasa Ann:* They'd strip you down and make you take a delousing bath but recently that has been done away with at P4W. If there is any concern—medical or for their safety—they go straight to segregation. Or else they go right to the hospital and are given an appointment and they will see the hospital within a week or two. When I was admitted in '86, I went through the delousing and then I waited for about a week to see the hospital. But this time, when I went back in '92, I had to wait for over two months to see the doctor.

Correctional staff are with you in the hospital area but not with you when you are seeing the doctor unless the hospital directs the security staff to be there because they're afraid for their safety. Because women get really angry when they're placed in segregation for things that they have no control over.

When I was admitted the first time I had epilepsy, and I was taking Phenobarbitol and Dilantin which was sent with me from the provincial prison. When I got there...they took my medication. They said that I couldn't have it because it was contraband.... They had to put me on something else because they told me that other women would pressure me for my Phenobarbitol. So they put me on another drug. Four hundred milligrams a day of this stuff called Tegretol, which is approved for Corrections. The Tegretol caused a lot of problems with my liver.... Four hundred milligrams is a lot and the way it filters through your system was very harmful for me. I ended up not taking it after a while and just having seizures. Then the seizures just went away. I was very happy about that, at least.

*Gay:* Have you identified other health problems as a result of having been in prison?

*Therasa Ann:* Yes. In 1986...I was exposed to a person who had TB. None of us knew it at the time. The next year I was moved to another area of the prison, and there was a huge epidemic of hepatitis, a disease that they couldn't contain in the hospital. So, as a result, I got some kind of hepatitis which wasn't very good for my liver either.

I had what they called a stress related illness. I was a

battered wife before my entry into the system but my health was good. I mean I wasn't suffering from anything like tuberculosis or hepatitis.... During my first two years in the P4W several different things started happening to me. I started getting cysts on my ovary and uterus...what they call polyp growth and there was nothing that the doctors could do for me. They just said that it was because I was in prison. I was having four menstrual periods a month....My system would shut down. I couldn't pee, I couldn't poo; and my food wouldn't digest. So they'd take me into the hospital and put a catheter up my urethra to drain the pee out and they would give me an enema to clear

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out my digestive tract below, and make me regurgitate the food in my stomach to make me more comfortable. I went through that for years. The hospital staff refused to send me out, and it was hard. I was fighting to get out to the street to get medical care because medical care in the P4W was very, very limited...and the care of the people suffered.

*Gay:* Are you saying that there aren't enough medical personnel in the prison?

*Therasa Ann:* I'm telling you I was very fortunate to have had the kind of care I did get because I spoke with a woman from the prison yesterday when I went for my conjugal visit<sup>1</sup> and she told me that the health care now is terrible. They do not have a doctor on staff any more at the prison for women because they can't afford to....I thought it was hard enough when I was in there. But they don't have any doctor on call now. They just have the head of the hospital for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). They take care of everything in the hospital unless a death or something occurs and then I guess they have a CSC doctor come in—whoever that is....I'm telling you, the medical care there is...If they like you they might help you.

*Gay:* Yes, a prisoner I know in Kingston Penitentiary has recently reported there is no doctor there either.

*Therasa Ann:* They have limited funding for medical care. They don't have the things that women need in order to survive such a stressful environment. What they offer the women—psychotic medication—they offer that to the women for everything and they usually introduce into the women's systems about the first week after they get in. They are told by the doctor, "Oh, you might have to take this for your nerves." They [are] usually [given] Stelazine or Largactil or stuff like that. I never took any. I refused. If I had, I could've been worse off, because a lot of those women who were taking this stuff developed very bad problems with their organs.

Rather than giving them good health care they'll put them on psychotic medication to kind of mask their physical symptoms, saying, "Oh, it's all in your head," sort of thing. And it's not true that it's all in our heads. I had several surgeries during the time I was at the P4W and I was sent out screeching in pain a number of times. I spent most of 1988 in the hospital, screaming in pain from a six-millimetre kidney stone that had lodged itself into my urethra. The medical staff at the hospital refused to send me out. They said I wanted drugs.

*Gay:* But you don't do drugs!

*Therasa Ann:* You know that, and I know that, but ...they think everybody is a potential drug addict....At the same time, they're giving out these psychotic medications.

Women come in there from terrible situations. They're battered. They're beaten. They've been through a court trial that's not sympathetic to their condition. And then they're placed in...an environment that is very hostile. They struggle to maintain a balance but there isn't any. So they get sick. Like myself. I got sick from stress. The environment and the behaviour of some staff and some prisoners cause a lot of aggravation for prisoners wanting to do good time and staff just wanting to do their jobs.

During the course of their time in prison...[some women] do turn to illegal drugs but it's only because they can't deal with it any more, and that doesn't make them bad women. That just makes them normal. Like the rest of society who can go to their doctors and get prescribed...tranquilizers to help them deal with the stresses in their lives.

Medical seemed to be the reason for the tension between a lot of the staff and the prisoners. The prisoners would get mad at the staff when they couldn't get into the hospital. When the prisoner said, "Please phone in, I'm sick," the hospital would say, "Oh, we're doing someone's toenails right now. We'll get to you." Meanwhile, the person's having an appendicitis attack!

So their priorities are really not in order. And the system is set up so that everybody has got to blame everybody else for what's happening to them. Nobody can make a decision where they can take the responsibility. I'll give you an example. I went in to have the cysts removed. They opened me up. They sewed me back up, and they sent me back to the P4W. At the prison they altered all the medication that the outside doctor had told me I had to be on. It was almost like they were going, "Oh, you think you're so smart, eh, being that sick that we have to send you outside."

Then I'd say, "We'll, the doctor sent me back with a prescription to get some stuff."

"Oh, you'll never see that here." The nurse acts like she's the doctor. So she'll phone the doctor and say, "They've given her this but we don't recommend this," so then they end up giving you something different. Usually they'll want to give you Gravol or Tylenol.

In my case, the surgeon was afraid of infection after the surgery and I was supposed to take an antibiotic and a pain pill but the medical staff in the prison wouldn't give me

either. They gave me Gravol and Tylenol. I couldn't take the Tylenol because I was allergic. The pain...got really bad and I had to be sent back for more surgery.

The doctor opened me up then...sent me back with instructions saying he couldn't do anything because there were so many adhesions he couldn't do any work. He wasn't going to...correct the problem because he wasn't getting paid by Corrections to do that. They only paid so much of any care that you're getting in an outside hospital, because you don't have a health card or anything. You're under the umbrella of Corrections.

But it got really bad so I had to be sent out again....They opened me up again. They did some repair surgery; but ... when they sewed me up they sewed my large intestine onto my uterus. So, the problem is still there. I refused to have more surgery after having four operations.

During the course of these surgeries, the morale and situation in the prison was so bad that we were having a lockdown.... A prisoner had hung herself, and one of the staff told me that the police had called and they were dragging the river for my thirteen-year-old boy. And then she walked away. It did something to me. I tried to hang myself.

I'm sorry. I didn't have any reason to live after that....I was cut down and revived. This was after one of the surgeries. About two weeks after. I was bleeding...They sent me upstairs to segregation after threatening to mace me because I had tried to kill myself.

I couldn't see any other way....Many women were dying or slashing up. Things were very bad...not having good medical care and suffering all the time, my physical state deteriorated, and when I was given the news, I didn't know how weak I was.

*Gay:* But that wasn't true about your son, was it?

*Therasa Ann:* No, it wasn't. He had run away, and they were searching the river for him, but he wasn't dead. He was alive. But they'd communicated it to me...without any understanding of what the news would do to me. It was very cold.

*Gay:* What was it like for you when you finally got out?

*Therasa Ann:* When you get out into the street, you have to [look after] your own health care...You can't get away from the label of being a "prisoner" but not only that! I've found that you can't get away from being under the care of Corrections. I've been fighting since September to get my medical records from the P4W to my

doctor. They will not release records...

When I was about to be released the prison doctor said to me, "Therasa Ann, you're going to go out into the community and you're going to be getting a doctor, and I would like you to know what you have to do to take care of yourself."

Meanwhile I'd been working in a [prison] job, cleaning and carrying heavy mop buckets—about 550 pounds of supplies every week—up three flights of stairs, really doing hard labour.

The doctor said to me, "I have to tell you that you have been exposed to tuberculosis, and you're supposed to be taking this drug every three months, but you can't take it because of the damage that the hepatitis did to your liver. You've also been exposed to hepatitis, and you have arthritis on your spine and you should take some care with it."

The arthritis on my spine is a condition from prolonged beatings by my abusive partner before I went into prison. When I

heard the doctor I was furious! I felt betrayed. I'd been fighting these people all along for medical care because I knew there was something wrong with my body. It wasn't responding the way it should...

I had to [have] two [operations] to cut the polyps off my uterus because they were growing so long. Polyps were growing on my throat. There were little bumps coming out of my body, like little mole type things, which were polyps.

Because of being in this fight and flight syndrome, because there's always something going on, you're always tense....If you're in that kind of state of mind for a long time, your body suffers because you're excreting chemicals into your system that are only there if these things are happening.... They're your own natural chemicals but they can do a lot of damage to you....I started to have an increased polyp growth. They still haven't been able to...deal with my medical situation since I ended up at the P4W.

*Gay:* People know so little about what happens to women inside prison!

*Therasa Ann:* It's hard to get the news out. I was told to shut up or I would lose contact with my partner, Roy.<sup>1</sup>

*Gay:* Thank you, Therasa Ann, for sharing your painful experiences with people. I believe that this will help society to have a better understanding of the fact that prisons are not places of rehabilitation or healing.

*Therasa Ann:* No, they're not. They're places of oppres-

*Research has established that possibly as high as 90 per cent of women who have come in contact with the law have been abused physically, sexually, and emotionally, at one time or another in their lives. The Women's Issues Task Force at the Ontario Ministry of Corrections has recognized that women in a correctional facility are in a state of crisis. Therefore the facility must establish an environment of safety and healing in all aspects of its service delivery.*

(Draft Report of Women's Issues Task Force of Ontario,  
Ministry of Corrections)

sion and of pain. I didn't expect to come out of prison with TB, hepatitis, and arthritis on the spine. There is no such thing as healing in the P4W. There is only suffering, degradation, oppression, and pain. There is little or no understanding of the physical needs of the women that have been abused. At the P4W you're not treated like you're a human being. You're not give that kind of consideration because you're in prison, and every measure that is taken against you is not one to heal you but one to further strip you of your human spirit.

For information concerning August 10th Prisoners Justice Day write to: A Space, 183 Bathurst Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2R7.

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<sup>1</sup>Since Therasa Ann's release, she returns to P4W from time to time to visit her husband, writer and activist Roy Glaremin, who is incarcerated in Collin's Bay Penitentiary in Kingston. The conjugal visits take place in a trailer behind the P4W.

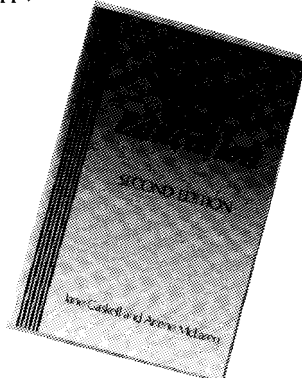
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*I think I'm seen as bad because I don't want to see the psychiatrist. I resent having my private life dug into...there is no Native help available.*

(Aboriginal prisoner in a provincial institution)

*Because of the Native Sisterhood, I finally knew the meaning of spirituality. I learned how to pray in a sweat and with sweetgrass. I learned the meaning of the Eagle feather and colours. With that I was even more proud of who I was in my identity.* (Aboriginal ex-prisoner)

*It is racism, past in our memories and present in our surroundings that negates non-Native attempts to reconstruct our lives. Existing programs cannot reach us, cannot surmount the barriers of mistrust that racism has built. Physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists are typically white and male. How can we be healed by those who symbolize the worst experiences of our past?* (Aboriginal parolee, member of the Task Force Steering Committee and member of the Aboriginal Women's Caucus)

*The critical difference is racism. We are born to it and spend our lives facing it. Racism lies at the root of our life experiences. The effect is violence, violence against us, and in turn our own violence. The solution is healing: healing through traditional ceremonies, support, understanding and the compassion that will empower Aboriginal women to the betterment of ourselves, our families and our communities.*

(Aboriginal parolee, member of the Task Force Steering Committee and member of the Aboriginal Women's Caucus)

*The Native way is life teaching. It's telling young people to follow our culture and to be somebody. As Elders, we try to share what we know...what we learned from our ancestors—we invite wardens to listen to our teachings—we are not trying to teach anything bad.*

(Joan Lavalee, Elder, Aboriginal Women's Caucus)

*It is our belief that non-Native society has much to learn from Native traditions and wisdom. It is our hope that the demonstration of tribal justice systems would gradually move toward a restorative, community-based justice model in our country. In that way, all citizens affected by the injustices of current practices, be they Native or non-Native, male or female, would benefit from a more humane and sensible way of administering justice.* (John Howard Society, Manitoba)

Excerpted from *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, Ottawa, April 1990.