

Creating real choices: A program evaluation of therapeutic services at the Prison for Women

This article discusses some of the findings of a program evaluation (conducted between May 1992 and March 1993) of therapeutic services at the Prison for Women.⁽²⁾ The evaluation followed the publication of *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women and coincided with the resulting setup of new regional correctional facilities.*⁽³⁾

The findings and recommendations were intended to help provide direction for the development and implementation of programs in the new regional facilities, as well as to assist with program efforts inside the Prison for Women. Why focus on therapeutic services? This focus on therapeutic services was consistent with the findings of a number of previous reports emphasizing the need for program evaluation at the Prison for Women⁴ and other studies identifying mental-health and substance-abuse services as critical programming areas for federally sentenced women.⁽⁵⁾

Numerous reports also highlighted severe inadequacies in the number and type of programs offered at the Prison for Women.⁽⁶⁾

In addition, a 1990 Board of Inquiry investigating the attempted suicide of an inmate at the Prison for Women recommended that external consultants be hired to assess the strength of the prison's programs.

In fact, six inmates committed suicide at the Prison for Women between December 1988 and February 1991.' All but one of these inmates were aboriginal women. A seventh woman, also aboriginal, died in 1992 following an earlier suicide attempt from which she never regained consciousness. Methodology The program evaluation followed a qualitative design and included interviews, observations and document analysis. Initial interviews with 72 inmates, prison staff and program providers determined key questions and concerns.

The issues identified in this first phase of research were addressed in subsequent interviews with 40 prisoners and 20 staff members. Counselling The evaluation demonstrated that among prisoners, staff and program providers there were conflicting views of counselling and its role in the Prison for Women.

Staff generally recognized the benefits of counselling: stabilizing effects on the prison environment, easier adjustment of inmates, and crisis prevention. Yet, a number of those interviewed wondered whether counselling practices were leading prisoners to engage in self-injury, suicide or volatile behaviour.

In fact, there had been some speculation that the suicides at the Prison for Women were linked to a recent increase in the number of therapeutic services provided within the prison.⁽⁵⁾

There was a perception among staff that prisoners were pushed into dealing with issues before they were ready - a "Pandora's Box" of painful memories was being opened during counselling sessions.

When asked about this, 92% of inmates stated that they were ready to deal with the issues they worked on during counselling. If they felt that they were not prepared to confront specific problems, they simply

advised their counsellors of this and discussed options that included moving on to other issues or temporarily withdrawing from counselling.

The remaining 8%, who reported confronting issues for which they were unprepared, stated that their experiences had occurred a number of years ago and with different counsellors.

Indeed, prisoners reported overwhelming support for the counsellors at the Prison for Women.⁽⁹⁾ This high degree of satisfaction may be partially explained by the general philosophy and approach used by counsellors, which are rooted in feminist therapy and informed by the most recent literature on trauma and recovery.

Much of the current research and practice endorses such an approach as the most appropriate for female inmates.¹⁰ More importantly, the counselling practices reflected what prisoners identified as most helpful to them: assistance in taking control of their own lives, the opportunity to value and be valued by others, and space just to be themselves.

These elements reflect the key principles of feminist therapy: personal autonomy and a mutually respectful relationship with others. The feminist approach Feminist therapists frame the experiences of individuals within the broader social environment and help people connect their own experiences and actions and the circumstances that define their lives.

In particular, feminist therapists recognize the close connection between women's marginalized status (as a result of, for example, poverty, abuse, sexism and racism), the offences they are charged with, and their consequent imprisonment.

One of the main thrusts of feminist analysis is an acknowledgment that many women have suffered as a result of others enforcing power and control over them.

However, feminists also acknowledge women's ability to resist and survive violence in its various forms and to find creative ways of coping, even in the most oppressive conditions. Women are not simply victims - they can, and do, move beyond survival to take self-determined actions that are the least harmful and most empowering.

Rather than viewing issues in isolation, a feminist approach attempts to view them in context. Within this framework, personal accountability and agency are not denied or diminished; they are enhanced. As women develop a deeper awareness and understanding of their experiences and of their own strengths, agency and various options, they begin to take greater control over their own lives.

However, this approach also extends accountability to a much broader societal level that includes our communities and the institutions we construct, such as the criminal justice system. This dynamic model allows for much more comprehensive description and analysis.

For example, feminist analysis reveals the contradiction between appropriate and effective intervention and current correctional practices and policies. Feminist therapy is premised on helping women see their own power so they can resist harm and take self-determined action. But prisons generally remove

whatever autonomy women have left in their lives by enforcing rigid control over inmates: restrictions on movement, space, schedule, activities and communication.⁽¹¹⁾

Such control, coupled with often arbitrary enforcement and application of rules, merely reproduces the sense of powerlessness and unpredictability present in the lives of many women prior to their imprisonment.

It was the rigid control imposed over them that the women identified as the most damaging. Women described the experience as one in which they were stripped of their own selves - their identities as individual women were replaced by the label and stereotype of "prisoner".

Accordingly, the women felt that any move they made, either inside the prison or upon release, was judged in relation to their status as a prisoner.

Further, despite the almost non-existent opportunities for taking autonomous action and making real choices, women stated that correctional staff and the Parole Board expected them to make positive pro-social choices and decisions.

This contradiction between what women were told to do and what they were actually allowed to do creates an impossible paradox for the women and is often reminiscent of earlier abusive experiences. What can be done? The women did provide examples of measures that could reduce the hardship of imprisonment. A dignified planning process, the freedom to safely express emotions, and increased access to programs and people in the community were suggested as ways of reducing the hardship of imprisonment.

The importance of counselling was emphasized but was said to be helpful only if women could choose whether to take part. The women emphasized that the existence of mutually respectful relationships underscored the value and benefit of everything else. Such relationships were described, for example, as "people looking beyond labels of prisoner or guard."

While institutional efforts to foster such relationships could be encouraged, both staff and inmates stated that the potential for mutually respectful relationships inside a prison was seriously restricted because prisons were designed to create an unequal distribution of power between staff and inmates. Discussion The evaluation of therapeutic services at the Prison for Women indicated that the creation of real choices for women lies not in building new prisons but in providing genuine alternatives to incarceration.¹² Such initiatives would have, at heart, a commitment to mutually respectful relationships in which women are treated as equals and their individuality is respected.

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- (2)For the full report see K. Kendall, *Program Evaluation of Therapeutic Services at the Prison for Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).
- (3)*Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).
- (4)M. Evans, *A Survey of Institutional Programs Available to Federally Sentenced Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1989). See also R. Ross and E. Fabiano, *Correctional Afterthoughts: Programs for Female Offenders* (Ottawa: Solicitor General of Canada, 1985). And see *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*.
- (5)L. Berzins and S. Dunn, *Federal Female Offender Program 1978 Progress Report* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1978). See also Elliot and Morris, "Behind Prison Doors," *Too Few to Count*, eds. E. Adelberg and C. Currie (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1987). And see I. Heney, *Report on Self-injurious Behaviour in the Kingston Prison for Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990). And see L. Lightfoot and L. Lambert, *Substance Abuse Treatment Needs of Federally Sentenced Women: Technical Report 1* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1991). And see M. Shaw et al., *Survey of Federally Sentenced Women: Technical Report 1* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990). And see M. Shaw et al., *Survey of Federally Sentenced Women: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women on the Prison Survey* (Ottawa: Ministry of the Solicitor General, 1990).
- (6)L. Berzins and S. Cooper, "The Political Economy of Correctional Planning for Women: The Case of the Bankrupt Bureaucracy," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 24, 4 (1982): 399-416. See also *Report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Solicitor General on Its Review of Sentencing, Conditional Release and Related Aspects of Corrections* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1988). And see F. Sugar and L. Fox, *Survey of Federally Sentenced Aboriginal Women in the Community* (Ottawa: Native Women's Association of Canada, 1990).
- (7)One of the suicides is under investigation as a possible assisted suicide or homicide.
- (8)See, for example, A. Kershaw, "Inmate Suicides Linked to Counselling Programs, Warden Fears," *Kingston Whig Standard*, 14 February, 1991, p.26.
- (9)The high regard for counselling staff at the Prison for Women is consistent with an earlier study by M. Shaw et al., *Survey of Federally Sentenced Women* (Ottawa: Ministry of the Solicitor General, 1990).
- (10)See K. Kendall, *Literature Review of Therapeutic Services for Women in Prison*, Companion Volume I to *Program Evaluation of Therapeutic Services at the Prison for Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).
- (11)See, for example, M. Eaton, *Women After Prison* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993). See also Heney, *Report on Self-injurious Behaviour in the Kingston Prison for Women*. And see M. velimesis, "Sex Roles and Mental Health," *Professional Psychology*, 12, 1 (1981): 128-135.
- (12)See, for example, P. Carlen, *Alternatives to Women's Imprisonment* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).