

**“Can you imagine . . .  
What if Women Were Sentenced to Education?”  
Women Speaking Out Inside the Gate**

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When they crack the gate —  
You're out you got a bus ticket  
Back to where you started

*This system of Crime and Punishment is obviously not working. We need to educate the country, help people see that the system is archaic, locked up (in awareness). This system has to change: we need to get rid of some of the guards, slim down the prison population, provide resources outside. We need to be dealing with the problems on the street.*

I'm doing time,  
I need positive things in here to do on the outs  
Negative talk, shit like that,  
You're stuck in the same place

This is going to be a long process, ma'am

*In prison, the entire structured system governs women. Women in prison are told what to do, how to do it, when to do it, and “you have a blue shirt standing behind you.” You're here waiting to be sentenced, to start your countdown, 'til they crack the gate, to get . . . back to where you started.*

You got no one  
Cause of the life you made  
Because of the choices you made

When they crack the gate . . .  
You feel . . .

Total anxiety  
Stress

Happy, you get that happy feeling in your chest

Overwhelmed by the outside world  
Even the cars seem like they're going too fast  
The simple everyday things seem like too much

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<sup>1</sup> Authors are listed alphabetically by first names to respect confidentiality; to acknowledge that researchers and the participating women were engaged reciprocally in this research endeavor; and to not privilege the researchers by using surnames.

*Most of the women in the prison system are uneducated, from financially challenged families who because of failures in our system wound up on the street and losing themselves in the use of drugs.*

*Formal Education, maybe but lots of informal education.*

My pipe is my way of dealing with things

Can you ever imagine another way?

It's the only way I know

This is what I do this is what I know

*The majority of women in prison are physically and mentally abused and suffer from low self-esteem. **DRUGS KILL PAIN.** And all of us in here are core-deep suffering. We need to replace the guards with facilitators, educators, provide one-on-one counseling, not once a week, but when a woman is in need.*

We are the voice because we are living it.

Can you imagine doing one-on-one counselling?

And then bringing up problems you've never dealt with

And they look at their watch . . .

And you get stressed, and punch someone out

And they say, okay next week you can come back

I'm lucky my mom's all for recovery

My mom's like a blue shirt, she'll be standing right there for me

I tell my mom, I'm getting a year — she says she's missed ten years of my life, what's another year?

When I had my son I stayed clean and I stayed out of jail. My son was my drug

My son is what kept me clean

A year and two days

Who's going to help you if you relapse?

*They don't have recovery houses for people who have other addictions. Most women in here are women who have gone through traumatic experiences. We're being punished for being abused. Killing the pain with drugs — the only way we know how to deal with pain. It's a band-aid.*

I've broken that cycle for myself

She's broken the cycle but she still feels the pain

And she'll feel it for the rest of her life

Unless it's addressed

One-on-one

You can empty yourself to this person

Give feedback

And show you how to heal

A lot don't know how to heal.

Recovery is all about relapse

Whether you can get up and dust yourself off

Whether you can recognize the symptoms (systems)

If you get caught using

You're out you're back in jail

You're back to step one . . .

*People go through N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous) treatment centres on their release, and counseling that still doesn't address the fact that after that there is still a void in Education, in the sense that a person should be able to find out what their passion is so you have the facilities to educate a person in their chosen field with a back-up of educators and counselors taken right to the point of job placement or apprenticeship, of course, with follow-up counseling to make sure that their concerns are addressed.*

When I got arrested

Okay it was bad timing

I got money owed to me I'm going to collect

I'm just setting myself up to come back

Just 'cause I'm in jail it doesn't mean your debt is cleared

It was bad timing . . .

Can you imagine coming here,

find out what your passion is,

sentenced directly into an educational institution, counseled,

and put right into a job?

Lot better than sitting in jail

All jails do is institutionalize people. We need to shut these prisons down and get the money out where it can do the most good.

If you break the law, has to be addressed. People just waiting to get out to do it again.

Lots of people don't want to change. Welfare wouldn't support me . . . you need to be — know (no) where else to go

That's a big thing, money,

That's the reason I'm in jail

You sold to a cop

That happened to me too

You go hustle  
Hustle, hustle man

*Given the knowledge that prison isn't working, funding could be accomplished by stopping imprisonment in the courts, and instead sentencing these people to educational facilities where they could be placed when given the choice of what they could do to make their life better. We need half way houses for provincial women. If they didn't put you in prison, you wouldn't have that record.*

If you had some hope  
If you could choose a direction that would heal you  
If you had some support . . .

My boyfriend will keep me clean — that's my hope  
He was upset when I came in

If I had some hope I could get the education I need  
I could get my skipper's license  
I want to start a charter business in time for the Olympics but now I'm on hold  
Set a goal and get yourself there

I've got my plan  
To open my own flower shop  
I had my own computer, I was making payments  
I pay into my son's education

I just found out I can get a grant

I want my own travel agency  
Just travel for free

*Fulfilling desires can take people a long way. In this way the need for so many guards and prisons could be eliminated and all that money in wages and costs of keeping inmates incarcerated could be put into places that would do the most good. Can you imagine a woman coming to jail, finding out what her real desire is, choose a career, educate, get a place . . . can you imagine a better system outside the box — imagine that!*

I can imagine going back and staying clean  
We can't continue our plans we've been put on hold  
He's my everything, he's my support  
I still got things on the outs that still need to be taken care of  
If they didn't put you in prison  
You wouldn't have that record

I want my place back

When they crack the gate —  
You're out you got a bus ticket  
Back to where you started

#### End Note

This article shares our learning from a participatory action research project conducted with women incarcerated in a provincial correctional centre. This project was part of an ongoing federally-funded research project investigating ways to improve the health and wellbeing of women in prison and those in transition. Four of the authors were prison inmates and members of the research team established inside the prison that consisted of prison inmates in role as peer researchers. The peer researchers worked in consultation with the correctional centre's doctor and recreational director who were members of the university research team. Two of the authors, a university researcher and a volunteer in the correctional centre, facilitated discussion around a transcript that was to be analyzed and coded. The transcript being discussed was a portion of a transcribed tape of an inaugural meeting organized by the prison doctor to initiate the participatory action research project.

The text is a compilation of fragments of conversation as the four peer researchers responded to the transcript text. The present text is entirely verbatim. The text in italics was written during lunch break by one of the peer researchers in response to our conversation. This multi-voice interpretative text is what might be called a reciprocal analysis of the original transcript and emergent discussion, with recommendations. The researcher and volunteer recorded the women's conversation, selected and rearranged the text in its current representation — a poetic response to the commitment and care and passion that the women brought to our conversation together. The final version was read and approved by all participants. All names are first names for reasons of confidentiality and so as to not privilege any individual but to recognize that in participatory action research projects, such as this one, we are all learning reciprocally within each other's presence.

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