

# Life Before, During & After the Prison for Women (P4W)



Carceral Cultures

## Who We Are

We are members of the P4W Memorial Collective, a group of ex-federal women prisoners and supporters based in Kingston, Ontario. We have been working together for a number of years to build a memorial garden to honour all women who died in federal prisons, including the Prison for Women (P4W). The authors of this handout (sponsored by the Carceral Cultures research initiative – see [www.carceralcultures.ca](http://www.carceralcultures.ca)) were imprisoned at P4W, and a few of us were also imprisoned in other prisons too. Our goal is to support and remember our fallen sisters, who became family when we were doing our time in prison.

## Why We Made This Handout

It is important for people to hear from people with lived experience in prison, because we give people an honest perspective on what it is really like to be behind bars. Other voices, including former Correctional Service Canada (CSC) staff and officials, are included in Kingston Pen (KP) tours and have a completely different view. We do not agree with what CSC does and how we are portrayed in KP tours and more broadly. We want the truth to be told: we are human beings and we work hard at our jobs, volunteer and community work, sustaining families, and to support each other. We are people with feelings and hearts.

## 4 Key Facts

1. Statistics paint a clear picture, and we have lived it. Indigenous people account for 30% of people in Canada's federal penitentiaries at a time when they represent only 4% of the general population. In this period of "reconciliation," Indigenous women are the fastest growing prison population and account for 42% of federally-sentenced women. 80% of criminalized women have been sexually, physically, and/or psychologically abused. Most people in prison come from lives of poverty, mental health issues, traumatic events, and addictions.
2. Even though the statistics are there, people do not get the story right. People think we were in prison because we are bad people. When we talk to people, they are amazed to hear the reasons women go to prison. We were in there because of the conditions of our lives and trying to survive.
3. We want you to know the hell that women went through in P4W and other prisons. It is rarely talked about or much less understood. Women were isolated in segregation, they self-harmed, and they died. Women in prison are mothers, aunties, sisters, and they all were loved. We were like family in there.
4. People assume that it will never happen to them, that they will not find themselves in prison, and they take it for granted. No one wants to talk about it. What happens in prisons needs to be remembered and acknowledged.

## What You Should Know About the Imprisonment of Women at Kingston Pen

1. Some of us have been on the KP tour, they just show you the bad stuff like the weapons. They do not tell you about the suffering experienced by prisoners.
2. Before P4W was built there was no other prison for federally sentenced women. Women were isolated in KP in a separate area. That type of isolation in KP was repeated when six women were confined there in 1994.
3. Women were also imprisoned at the Regional Treatment Centre (RTC) next to KP. For women, especially those of us with history of abuse, there was constant fear among those imprisoned there.
4. We know women who were sent to RTC who were not the same after the treatment they received. The treatments harmed them and they experienced diminished ability to act or live on their own. The treatments were an offer you could not refuse, even when it included electroshock therapy and intense medication.
5. While we were in the P4W in the 1990s, they shipped women labelled trouble-makers in small groups to men's prisons. Those women would be on a special range, with no programs, and isolated within men's prisons. Six women from P4W got sent to KP in this fashion. Women were also sent to Springhill Institution, Regional Reception Centre in Quebec, Saskatchewan Penitentiary, and the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon.

## Life Before P4W

1. For a few of us, we had pretty normal lives, and everything changed during and after prison.
2. For many of us, there was a history of psychological, physical and sexual abuse as children, youth homelessness, self-medication with drugs, selling drugs to survive, foster homes, and youth prison. For some of us, our lives felt out of control.

## Life At P4W

1. There were a lot of bad experiences in there, including violence, segregation, women in crisis, and being trapped in a human warehouse.
2. Some of us feel like we grew up in P4W, imprisoned at a young age as teenagers.
3. Some women were treated worse than others. Some of us were placed on the B range, which was far more punitive than the other ranges. We were not allowed to associate with anyone, we had little access to lawyers. We ate in our cells. We were there for months.
4. There were some good memories in the prison: our relationships, the strongest friendships of our lives. P4W was survivable because there was no 24/7 surveillance. You could eke out a life with your friends. That has changed with the new prisons (see below).
5. In the 1970s there were, at most, 60 women imprisoned at P4W. Women stuck together. If one woman on a range went to segregation, we would all lock up there together. There was more unity. In the 1980s, it was different, there were young women doing life sentences. The population had tripled. In the 1990s, the new prisons started to open and women were transferred all over the country.

## Life After P4W

1. Every time CSC closes a prison down, they say the new ones will be about rehabilitation and Indigenization. The architecture looks great, it's top of the line. But over time, everything reverts back or gets even worse.
2. The new prisons that opened during the 1990s – like Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ontario – were different. The new prisons discourage all relationships and friendships, and pit prisoners against each other.
3. The new prisons do not make it easy to get transferrable training to get work on the outside.
4. There is no privacy at all in the new prisons. Male guards do counts (not a male and woman guard), come into your room, look through your curtain. You would come out a shower and see men walking by laughing, making fun of us. For women, especially those with histories of abuse, this is painful.
5. They do not let community-based mental health workers inside GVI. When you go to GVI, they cut off your meds and put you on something else. They want you to see CSC psychologists, but it is impossible to trust them, especially when you have been betrayed by institutional staff from childhood (e.g. social workers).
6. At the new prisons family are treated poorly, as if they did something wrong, subject to scanning and searches. Some of us have children. It is also incredibly hard to try to get work, education, and raise your family with little support and ongoing stigma after prison.
7. After prison, adjusting to the street is a struggle. It still is. Addiction, trauma, mental and physical health issues remain. It is always hard to trust people.

## What You Can Do

1. Listen to and trust what people who were imprisoned have to say about what it is like.
2. Support women's healing, not punishment. Our trauma was experienced over decades, and the need for healing never ends.
3. Prisoners need the opportunity to get passes to visit on the outside, to get used to the community.
4. Support the ability of friends and family to contact and visit people on the inside.
5. Volunteer in prison, because this work is important. Volunteers can see what is happening, are treated poorly too by many institutional staff members and they know it is worse for prisoners.
6. Donate to organizations that support criminalized women. To support our work creating a memorial garden, you can donate to the P4W Memorial Collective (c/o Elizabeth Fry Kingston).

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Visit us at: [www.p4wmemorialcollective.com](http://www.p4wmemorialcollective.com)