

Stephanie Hayman

Imprisoning Our Sisters: The New Federal Women's Prisons in Canada

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This is a well-written, comprehensive analysis of the landmark 1990 report, *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, the feminist-inspired document hailed as revolutionizing female incarceration in Canada. This report recommended the construction of four new prisons and an Aboriginal Healing Lodge, and achieved the closure of Kingston's infamous Prison for Women, an institution that withstood more than 60 years of Royal Commissions recommending its demise. The prisons that replaced it were designed as cottage style, low security institutions with holistic culturally-sensitive programs, carefully selected and trained staff, few (visible) external barriers, constructed in areas that would allow federally sentenced women access to community services and contact with their children, communities and families. The adoption of this report indicated, many said, that feminist and aboriginal voices were finally being "heard" by the government of Canada, specifically by the Correctional Service, the Ministry responsible for prisons. However this book, an anatomy of the construction and implementation stages of the report, can also be read as a vivid illustration of the truth of the maxim, "Be Careful What You Wish For". Indeed Hayman argues that the dangers of "progressive" groups giving support and thereby lending legitimacy to initiatives they are unable to control could have been foreseen. As she puts it: "events in Canada [are] entirely consonant with other attempts at penal reform – they demonstrate the unflinching ability of the prison to reassert its supremacy over those attempting its reformation" (p. 256).

Empirically the work is solid and convincing: the author made four separate field trips to Canada, visited all the new prisons at least once, and Saskatchewan's Healing Lodge a total of four times. She also went to several provincial institutions for women and to Shakopee, the Minnesota Correctional Facility used as a model by the task force. She obviously secured the trust of the key players; the interviews, documents and personal letters that ground the analysis are exhaustively documented. The book is divided into two equally valuable sections: chapters 1-5 tell how the *Report* came to be written and its recommendations; chapters 6-9 outline its implementation.

Hayman does an excellent job situating the Task Force, the conflicting personalities and interests within it and the compromises each constituency had to make to participate. Most of her attention is focused on the pivotal Working Group, those who actually wrote the report, as opposed to the larger Steering Group. The dilemmas were particularly acute for representatives from the voluntary sector, particularly CAEFS, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, and NWAC, the Native Women's Association of Canada. Both groups were well aware that their participation could be used to legitimate institutions they fundamentally opposed. In Hayman's view, the decision to participate originated in what they felt was their obligation to make one more attempt to alleviate the oppressive conditions at P4W.

Early chapters provide capsule – and ambitious – mini-histories of Kingston Penitentiary, the Prison For Women, a century of Commissions and court challenges, the story of Euro-Canadian/aboriginal relations, federal-provincial relations, the significance of Canada's "French fact" and, lastly, the growing power of feminist forces. Hayman points out that "Nowhere – had feminism made such marked inroads into official discourse than Canada" (p. 23, from Shaw 1996: 179). The report was written under rigid time constraints, thus the first drafts had to be done before the commissioned

empirical research was complete. The need to quickly achieve consensus among committee members also shaped the *Report*. The resulting document highlighted two points on which unanimity was achieved: P4W must be closed forthwith, and women's needs must be tied to women's choices. Hayman is critical of the failure of the Task Force to give sufficient attention to security needs, behaviour problems and so-called "Hard to Manage" inmates due to their belief that conditions at P4W were the cause of unruly and violent behaviour. Thus the *Report* focused on designing institutions where such behaviour would not be necessary. She is also critical of the Task Force assumption that incarcerated women were victims – of the dominant culture or Euro-Canadian racism – not victimizers, and their "presumed lack of agency" (p. 91). Finally, Hayman points to the voices not heard, the constituencies excluded from the *Report*. Given Canadian history and the fact that approximately 21% of all federally sentenced women are francophones, it is surprising that the Task Force had no Quebec representatives while having two aboriginal members. This paved the way for aboriginal dominance at the expense of francophone perspectives. In Hayman's words: "the seemingly less powerful Aboriginal participants capture[d] the moral high ground – involving others in the dissemination of their views". By so doing they were able to politicize "the agenda of a government-sponsored initiative (p. 79).

At this point the book shifts focus to implementation, showing how the Task Force's vision was translated into policy. Almost immediately, CAEFS is frozen out of decision-making by the CSC and refuses to participate further. Sites for the new prisons, which the Task Force wanted in urban areas and/or close to aboriginal communities, were put out to tender. The first institution, opened in Edmonton on November 18, 1995, admitted inmates when it was still "far from complete" (p. 148). Many came directly from maximum security cells at P4W into an unfinished institution with new, idealistic staff and an open concept design. Here they were expected to work, live and problem-solve with prisoners they might dislike, and with staff. Predictably, the first 3 months of operation saw 23 self-injuries, 1 successful suicide, several unsuccessful attempts, 3 assaults and several "escapes". (Due to low security conditions, inmates could virtually walk away.) One suicide was later ruled homicide and 2 inmates were charged and convicted. Media attention was constant and vitriolic. On May 1, 1996 the CSC responded to the pressure by closing Edmonton for remodelling. When it reopened 6 months later it had become, basically, a conventional medium security prison. The CSC blamed its presumed "failure" on the prisoners, pathologizing them for their "inability to cope". Hayman is more even-handed, and faults the CSC for sending a disproportionate number of inadequately prepared maximum-security inmates to an institution that was not ready to receive them. But she also lays blame on the Task Force for its failure to plan for "difficult to manage" women, a failure that, she believes, gave the CSC *carte blanche* to set policy.

The incidents at Edmonton had major effects on all the other institutions, producing upgraded security, the construction of secure units, more separation between prisoners and staff, and lower trust on both sides of the carceral divide. In her analysis of implementation Hayman devotes particular attention to the Healing Lodge, the institution she calls a "unique experiment", a major achievement of the Task Force that signifies a long-overdue "recognition" of Aboriginal peoples (p. 200). Unlike CAEFS, aboriginal women from the Task Force were not frozen out by CSC; they remained involved throughout site selection, construction and staff training. The Healing Lodge had almost no major "incidents" – escapes, assaults or suicides. However by 2003 it was clear that even this institution was not operating as its founders had hoped. Staff left and new staff did not receive the same intensive, aboriginal-sensitive training. The CSC was "reluctant" to promote capable local staff lacking the "right" educational credentials. Top-level staff remained "largely non-Aboriginal" (p. 221-2). Notably, Hayman highlights the effects of all of this on the prisoners. Unlike the other institutions, eligible women chose to come here (maximum security prisoners were kept

out). But once they arrived they faced what Hayman calls “double responsabilization”, the need to live up to the expectations of two different cultures. They were expected to conform to both the explicit, official, Euro-Canadian, CSC norms, and the implicit but equally ambitious (and perhaps unwelcome) Aboriginal norms. Hayman’s analysis of the implications of this situation is intense, original and important.

Overall, this is an excellent book. Hayman situates her study in traditional prison literatures, especially British studies, but she also links it to Canadian prison studies, especially those of Hannah-Moffat, Shaw, and Kendall. The book has important theoretical implications – the “capture” of a major policy initiative by an overlooked minority group deserves further exploration in that it reverses the usual phenomenon of state cooptation. And there are important lessons to be drawn from the material on how well-meaning reform initiatives were institutionalized and grew. Every book has some weaknesses: Hayman could be faulted for not making stronger, more explicit links between her study and macro-level theory. There are gaps in the literature review – for example, she uses Elizabeth Comack’s important studies of imprisoned women less than she might have. Her assessment of the ultimate “success” or “failure” of the Task Force is equivocal. To defend the participation of progressives and abolitionists in legitimating the building of 5 new prisons” she asserts that “some women were undoubtedly helped”. But she does not give us the information we would need to evaluate this claim – namely, how many were “helped” by P4W, what is the help/harm ratio of new versus old institutions? Moreover, what are the implications of the expansion of the carceral net that occurred when more prison beds became available? However these are small criticisms, points that might not be “knowable” except through epistemological and ontological exploration. This would be an entirely different – though perhaps equally valuable – book.

Hayman’s most important argument is one that bears repeating: reformers tempted to cooperate with prison authorities must above all remember that, whatever their rationale, prisons end up damaging those they incarcerate.

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