

# ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S VOICES: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cycling between incarceration and homelessness among 18 women in Calgary, Alberta and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan employing community based research and arts-based research. Women who participated in the study highlighted the personal obstacles and societal barriers encountered before and after incarceration while identifying gaps in services. The objectives of the research were four fold: (1) to more fully understand the issues of homelessness and incarceration as it affects women, specifically Aboriginal women; (2) to work with women with lived experiences of homelessness and incarceration, community partners, and other collaborators to promote a greater understanding of these issues; (3) to provide recommendations and advocate for programming and policy changes to reduce the occurrence and harm associated with homelessness and incarceration for women; and (4) to effectively disseminate the findings to diverse audiences aimed at primary prevention strategies and improving services to reduce homelessness, recidivism, and other harms. Findings highlight the need for prevention and intervention supports for women living in poverty and the need to address the systemic and institutional racism and sexism that continue to deny women the right to a living income, safe and affordable housing, and human dignity.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal women, incarceration, homelessness, poverty, solutions

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## INTRODUCTION

The rate of women's incarceration in industrialized countries has, in recent decades, increased to astronomical proportions, leading many researchers to refer to the phenomenon as a women's incarceration boom (Kim, 2002; Parsons and Warner-Robbins, 2002a). The increasing rate of incarceration has been linked to processes of globalization, the effects of the transition to neoliberal social policies, including the demise of the welfare state, and the increasing criminalization of poverty. More specifically, the rate of female incarceration can be attributed to the gendered, racialized, and classed systemic inequalities inherent in Western society. The systemic barriers, including economic, social, and political; personal struggles including addictions, mental health, and histories of abuse and trauma; as well as the societal barriers and stigmatization correlated with a criminal record compound and negatively affect incarcerated women's ability to find safe, affordable housing post-incarceration (Pollack, 2004; Pollack 2009a).

The situation for Aboriginal women in Canada is even more dire. As a consequence of the interplay between historical and current factors Aboriginal women are overrepresented in both homeless and incarcerated populations (Walsh et al., 2012). Despite representing less than 2 percent of the total female population, almost one third of women incarcerated in Canadian federal penitentiaries are of Aboriginal origin (Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 2007a) and Aboriginal women account for 35 percent of the homeless Aboriginal population while non-Aboriginal women account for 27 percent of non-Aboriginal homeless populations (NWAC, 2007b).

In this paper we explore the cycling between incarceration and homelessness among Aboriginal women and other women in Calgary, Alberta and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan using community-based research (CBR) and arts-based research (ABR) methods. The objectives of the research were four-fold: (1) to more fully understand the issues of homelessness and incarceration as it affects women; (2) to work with women with lived experiences of homelessness and incarceration and community partners and other collaborators to promote a greater understanding of these issues; (3) to provide recommendations and advocate for programming and policy changes to reduce the occurrence and harm associated with homelessness and incarceration for women; and (4) to effectively disseminate the findings to diverse audiences aimed at primary prevention strategies and improving services to reduce homelessness, recidivism, and other harms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### CRIMINALIZATION OF POVERTY

The rate of women's incarceration has increased steadily despite overall decreasing crime rates. Between 1997–2006 the rate of federally incarcerated women rose 22 percent; more concerning, however, is the rate at which Canada is incarcerating Aboriginal women, which increased 73 percent between 1996–2004 (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2009; Pollack, 2009a; Yuen, 2011). The drastic increase of criminalized and incarcerated women in Canadian society can be correlated to neoliberal shifts in social and public policy. Martinez and García (2000) identify five key characteristics of neoliberalism: (1) the rule of the market, wherein free or private enterprise is released from state regulation regardless of potential social harms; (2) reduction in public expenditures on education, health, social security thus reducing the social safety net; (3) deregulation to reduce government regulation; (4) increased privatization which results in the transfer of state-owned enterprises, goods, and services to private investors; and (5) replacing the role of public good to assigning individual responsibility for social ills. Allspach (2010, p. 704) connects poverty and racism to neoliberal trends, argu-

ing the state's response to "solving social problems through criminalization and incapacitation" has resulted in a widening of state control in the lives of women as the forms of resistance to poverty and racism have increasingly become socially controlled and criminalized through harsher prison sentences as a result of "tough on crime" legislative changes. Such "tough on crime" legislative changes ignore the context in which women commit crimes and neglect the extenuating circumstances of the lives of women (Lawston, 2008).

The gendered impact of poverty is largely ignored in the Canadian justice system, effectively disregarding the reality of women's lives. They are disproportionately represented in unpaid, low-wage and precarious employment; have less access to social and community resources and supports including welfare and affordable day care; and have much higher rates of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse throughout both their adolescent and adult lives (Lawston, 2008; Pollack, 2009b; Status of Women Canada, 2005). The structures of oppression and inequality in women's lives that bring them into contact with the criminal justice system are routinely overlooked. Women's marginal and disenfranchised place in society is maintained and reinforced by a system that fails to provide the proper support for an appropriate human standard of living and the ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the community. Instead, this system increasingly criminalizes and causes further harm to the women who continue to fall through the cracks.

### PROFILE OF INCARCERATED WOMEN

Incarcerated women disproportionately come from marginalized and racialized communities; 75 percent of federally sentenced women have basic education (junior high or less) (Stevens, 2000); 80 percent were unemployed at their time of arrest (Allspach, 2010); 72 percent of provincially sentenced women, 82 percent of federally sentenced women, and 90 percent of incarcerated Aboriginal women have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse (Sugar and Fox, 1990). The erosion of the social safety net, including access and availability to addictions treatment, mental health services, income assistance, and childcare, affects those most marginalized

and vulnerable within our communities, and the demographics of the Canadian prison system are reflective of this. Consequently federal inmates are largely women who are the most economically, socially, politically, and geographically marginalized in our society. Lawston (2008, p. 7) suggests that the "prison system has become a microcosm of society at large" revealing "forms of oppression that originated in the historical and contemporary processes of social, racial, economic and political injustices."

Incarcerating women who commit criminal offences related to their economic survival, including drug charges, prostitution, theft, and fraud has become the state mechanism for exerting social control over women who are considered to violate and contradict traditional gender roles and expectations (Kong and AuCoin, 2008). The discourses surrounding women's criminality have largely attributed women's law breaking to "individual deficiencies," "behavioral inadequacies," and personal failings as a result of poor decision making, which, Allspach (2010) argues decontextualizes women's involvement with the criminal justice system from the forms of structural oppression that affect women's everyday lives. Efforts towards rehabilitation and reintegration by Correctional Services Canada (CSC), and its agencies and institutions are meant to modify and correct the inherent "deviant" nature of individualized women as opposed to the larger social structures that contribute to women's law-breaking. Penal discourse and narratives sponsored by CSC adopt rhetoric of "regret and individual responsibility," while the state accepts no responsibility for neglecting the vulnerable and marginalized individuals in society (Allspach, 2010, p. 716). Efforts towards "rehabilitating" individualized pathologies are fostered and facilitated through "rehabilitation" programs. These programs, however are designed primarily for men and demonstrate little understanding of the unique experiences of women, particularly Aboriginal women both before and after incarceration (Walsh et al., 2012).

In a particularly revealing example of the gender indifference exercised by CSC, security classification for women is assessed and determined using the tool designed for men (McGill, 2008). Factors taken

into consideration include variables related to education, employment, social interaction, marital or family status, history as a victim of violence, sexual habits or preferences, addictions, physical or mental health, disabilities, and attitudes (McGill, 2008). McGill (2008) is highly critical of the effectiveness of such "needs assessments" for women as they often result in more restrictive conditions, including segregation, because those with "high needs" are classified as high security. The "one size fits all" method of classification not only neglects gender specific differences in the lives of women and men; but ignores cultural differences as well. As a result Aboriginal women are disproportionately penalized by such standardized tools of assessment. One stark example of this is the overclassification of Aboriginal women as maximum security: 50 percent of maximum security female inmates are Aboriginal.

### ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons has been attributed to a number of interrelated factors including entrenched and systemic societal racism that has resulted in the over-policing and overcharging of Aboriginal peoples as well as uninformed and inadequate legal representation. The social, economic, spiritual, and political injustices inflicted on Aboriginal peoples through attempts at colonization and assimilation, including the residential school system and the *Indian Act*, have resulted in what is now described as intergenerational trauma (McGill, 2008; Yuen, 2011). This intergenerational trauma must be considered when examining Aboriginal peoples' contact with the criminal justice system, particularly as it relates to the high prevalence of substance abuse, family violence, suicide, and physical and mental health rates among Aboriginal peoples in Canada, both on the reserve and in urban areas.

The effects of colonialism on Canada's Aboriginal peoples was acknowledged by the Canadian government in 1996 with the introduction of Bill C-41, which was promoted as a progressive reform to sentencing law premised on curtailing the increasing rate Aboriginal people were being incarcerated. This law advised sentencing judges to give special

consideration to Aboriginal offenders due to the legacy of colonialism. Judges were to consider the conditions of Aboriginal offenders' lives, including poverty, substance abuse, family break down, and the effects of residential school and "take into account all the possible alternatives to incarceration ... focusing on the least restrictive measure and community integration of offenders" (Balfour, 2008, p. 101). Bill C-41 was intended to marry the principles of retributive and restorative justice to slow down the rate of incarceration among Aboriginal peoples, but since its induction, the rate of incarceration has doubled among Canadian Aboriginals. The continued increase in incarceration rates can be attributed to uninformed legal representation, as many lawyers do not rely on Bill C-41 to avoid prison sentences for their clients, or even use the legislation for appeals (Balfour, 2008).

Activists and scholars have pointed to the creation of a victimization-criminalization continuum that results from the lack of understanding regarding the Aboriginal women's lives. For instance, Bill C-41, which was intended to reduce the rate of incarceration, clashed with an existing law that was intended to reduce incidences of gendered violence through mandatory charging. However, as Balfour (2008, p. 102) points out, Aboriginal women have "fallen between the cracks of zero tolerance and restorative justice in that they are likely to be both severely victimized by gendered violence, and coercively punished." Aboriginal women are now being punished more severely by a law intended to protect them, as women are increasingly being counter charged by police for using defensive violence against their abusers (Balfour, 2011).

## METHODS

The point of entry for this research was a call to action from Aboriginal women experiencing poverty, homelessness, and incarceration from both Calgary and Prince Albert. This project was developed based on the principles of CBR and ABR. CBR aims to empower communities to create knowledge that represents community issues and concerns. In advancing local knowledge, CBR embraces creative forms of inquiry such as art, photography, and storytelling,

with the emphasis on process, which must be inclusive of action, reflection, and education (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Austin and Forinash (2005, pp. 460-461) defined arts-based inquiry as:

a research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method. Art forms such as poetry, music, visual art, drama, and dance are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting the research results.

In our study ABR was used as a means of investigation to "probe into areas of society that are typically obscured or invisible within mainstream discourse" (Estrella and Forinash, 2007, p. 378).

CBR and ABR are effective ways to engage participants for a more direct involvement in the research process. The participants use their voice, as well as a number of artistic media, to express both themselves and their experiences, creating research that is more inclusive and empowering (Huss and Cwikel, 2005; Walsh et al., 2013).

Missing in available research regarding best practices to disrupt the cycling between incarceration and homelessness, are the voices of the women who have had those experiences (Walsh et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2012). Thus participatory research and ABR were chosen to promote and place in the forefront the voices of our participants (Parsons and Warner-Robbins, 2002b; Walsh et al., 2010). Women need their voices, views, and experiences heard, respected, and directed at change that could lead to different conditions, services, opportunities, and options for women, especially Aboriginal women. The intent for the research team in collaborating with women who had experienced incarceration and homelessness was to assist them in finding ways to use their knowledge, skills, and experience to make a difference for themselves and others. Engaging with women who have lived experiences of incarceration and homelessness in the development of the research project was crucial to a better understanding of the trajectories and underlying causes that bring women into contact with the criminal justice system. With better understanding it was possible

to identify changes to policy, services, and practices that could be effective solutions.

Data for the research study was collected in three ways: (1) from discussions during weekly meetings (2) through Photovoice; and (3) using digital stories (Calgary site only). At a weekly meeting held at each site, women discussed issues relating to their involvement with the criminal justice system, their experiences of being homeless and living in poverty, as well as their interactions with service providers to identify best practices and gaps in service delivery.

While women's experiences framed the discussion, participants were actively involved at all stages of the research process: women determined the direction of the inquiry, the questions that were to be asked, how best to go about determining the methods to investigate these questions, and how knowledge produced as a result of the inquiry should be disseminated. As an example, the researchers noted that the topic of mothering was particularly painful; it was seldom a focus of conversation and when raised was immediately silenced. When this was brought to the attention of the groups, women recognized that their mothering was a highly sensitive and stigmatizing topic yet central to their identity and experiences as women caught in cycles of homelessness and incarceration. In reflecting on the importance of the topic, the participants decided that the space created over the course of the study was safe enough to explore this topic further. They then determined how this topic was to be explored, the types of questions to be asked, who would be asked questions, how the data would be brought back to them for interpretation, and how this knowledge could be shared (Walsh and Crough, 2013).

Photovoice, a recent development in action research, is a grassroots, community assessment tool that enables local people to identify, represent, and enhance their community using photography as the medium for communication (Strack et al., 2004; Wang and Burris, 1997). As a tool for investigation, it assists people to critically reflect on the everyday social and political realities of their lives, enriches their understanding of their communities and the issues that are pertinent to them, and gives them a voice with which to educate others on these

issues (Wang, 1999, 2003). The Photovoice process involved discussion around the group-identified themes on key issues, how these issues were personally defined for each photographer, and how they could be represented through images. Discussions included both strengths and weaknesses, brainstorming on possible solutions, and the role photographers could play in igniting change at a local level (Wang and Burris, 1997). Women were asked to take images representing a particular issue, story or time in their life. The photographers were also given a journal in which to write down their ideas around the central theme and possible photographs to accompany them.

All conversations were audio taped and transcribed. Participants then selected photos, assigned captions to them, and organized photos into a story line. This created a visual representation of their message regarding their experiences of homelessness and incarceration.

The third method of data collection used to convey women's ideas was the creation of digital stories. Digital storytelling is a multimedia art form combining both visual and auditory elements (Brushwood, 2009). Digital story creators write a brief autobiographical script, which they then narrate as voiceover paired with a series of still images to relate a personal story (Gubrium, 2009; Tucker 2006). Emerging literature suggests that this art form has notable potential to facilitate participant self-exploration, expression, and empowerment in research practice (Benmayor, 2008; Hull and Katz, 2006).

## RESULTS

After receiving ethics approval from our respective institutions we recruited adult women with histories of homelessness and incarceration via snowball techniques in Calgary, Alberta (n=8) and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan (n=14). The majority of women identified as Aboriginal (n=19). After we obtained written informed consent we met weekly for approximately 16 weeks to discuss the cycle of homelessness and incarceration. Participants recounted the multiple and various stories of their lives, particularly relating to poverty, homelessness, and incarceration. They shared the factors that contributed to their

contact with the criminal justice system and how this affected their sense of self. They identified various obstacles they faced in their own lives; how societal barriers contributed to their cycling between homelessness and incarceration; and reported gaps in services to prevent or intervene in the cycle.

We used a conventional content analysis approach (Creswell, 2012), which was flexible and allowed us to understand cycles of homelessness and incarceration. Two researchers coded the raw data independently and we developed themes through an iterative process of discussion, reflection, and negotiation to increase the quality and accuracy of the analysis (MacQueen and Milstein, 1999). The themes, developed through the weekly meeting, were expanded and developed through the art projects, Photovoice and digital story telling. Data included quotations from weekly meetings, photographs and their written descriptions, and narration in Photovoice and digital story methods.

Through this process we identified the following major themes:

1. The *cycle of despair* which illustrates women's experiences of poverty and trauma preincarceration.
2. The role of *criminality in economic survival* for women.
3. *Closed doors*, which represent the lack of prevention and intervention services to prevent or interrupt the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.
4. *Loneliness and re-creation*, which describes women's alienation while living on the streets and/or incarcerated and their desire to re-create family structures.
5. The *cycle of homelessness and incarceration*, which depicts the interrelationship between these two states.
6. The *stigma and shame* experienced by women after incarceration and challenges of (re)integration.
7. The *substance abuse* and its relationship to homelessness and incarceration was an underlying theme woven throughout women's stories and artistic expressions.

8. A sense of *full circle*, which portrays women's experience of breaking the cycle of incarceration through reconnection with tradition and culture as well as the development of positive social networks.

9. The women's desire to work towards social justice for their *forgotten sisters* – women who remain caught in the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.

In the following section we describe each of these themes with illustrative quotes drawn from captions, narrations of the digital stories, and discussions. Some women preferred to use their real names (Jen, Loretta, Stacie, Toni, and Yvonne) another woman chose a pseudonym (Marcie) and several choose to remain anonymous. The attribution of material reflects this.

## THEMES

### CYCLES OF DESPAIR

Overwhelmingly, women recognized that their adult contexts of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration were deeply rooted in early experiences related to child abuse and trauma, family breakdown, and involvement with child protective services. Participants explained that these experiences resulted in early use of drugs and alcohol. In addition, for Aboriginal women specifically, the disruption of traditional culture and values, conditions of poverty while living on the reserve, and child abuse also influenced their adult lives. One woman illustrates how the loss of cultural identity as a consequence of familial residential school experience has affected her own life:

I guess if I was to look back at my life I would have to start before I was born. Both of my parents went to residential school. Women went from being really important people in the community to being ashamed of our bodies and being women. At residential school they didn't have those lessons and those ceremonies that teach young girls about the importance of being a woman and all of that power that that has, and as a result I had a really screwed up childhood.

A number of women noted the long-lasting impact of their experiences in the custody of child ser-

vices and growing up in foster or group homes. As one woman explains:

And then there was foster care ... they pretended to care but they didn't. It was here's your food, here's your clothes go to bed, that's it. Kids are placed in Social Services or with unhealthy relatives then they feel their emptiness and the low self-esteem. They begin to do drugs, alcohol and prostitution, whatever. It begins to be an out of control cycle.

During childhood some participants described episodes of homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system including being institutionalized in young offender centres. Some women spoke in depth about the painful memories of being on the streets at a very young age and the confusion they experienced regarding the perceived indifference of the general public to their situation. Stacie, who had spent 26 years of her life living on the streets, recalled wondering why there was no appropriate intervention.

I was only 12, I was just a little girl and no one ever came and asked me, "Little girl where are you supposed to be?" ... I stopped going to school in grade 5, I ran away from the group home and no one ever came looking for me ... I got lost in the system I guess.

Jen, who became homeless at the age of 13, spoke about her experiences as a child prostitute, which she reported forced her to grow up quickly and develop a "hard shell." She photographed a street corner she used to stand on and shares:

This is the corner that I stood on ... my friend's father was my pimp and I didn't know any better, my mamma kicked me out, and my father was in the hospital and no group home would take me, and so I accepted it. I was like it's OK, but it's not OK! I thought I was doing what I had to in order to survive. People don't see you when you are on the corner. But it's a very shameful experience. When you stand out there you are ashamed of yourself and so you become overly hard, and you don't need anyone now because now I'm doing fine and don't need you. In this moment I am OK. I was very hard and angry ... the harder you are the less people can hurt you.

### CRIMINALITY AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL

Findings from the study support the dominant discourse in the literature that women's criminality is related overwhelmingly to economic survival. As one woman in the study poses,

But what would you do? If you're a single parent you get \$300 from Social Services. That is not enough, like where the hell are you gonna live for \$300?

Participants, particularly those who lived on the streets at an early age, discussed the need to do whatever was necessary to survive. For some it meant selling drugs to earn an income and receive protection, breaking into cars for warmth, and shoplifting. A new identity had to be established as Stacie tells us, "I had to be meaner, tougher ... selling myself was not an option so I had to prove that I was tough, like a man."

Many of the women in the study committed crimes that were either related to their economic survival or their addiction. Both economic status and substance abuse, however, must be considered within their experiences of childhood poverty, abuse, and neglect as noted previously. The capacity to make choices is severely restricted by poverty, especially when one is homeless and battling with addictions. It was important for the women to firmly identify, "no one grows up saying I am going to be a criminal, or homeless, or a drug addict...."

### CLOSED DOORS

Women in the study shared their perceptions of being blamed for their situations and described being unable to access services that would have disrupted the cycle of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration. For example, Marcie, who had never battled with addictions, grew up middle class, and was university educated, admitted that prior to her incarceration she shared many of the social, neoliberal beliefs that blame people for their circumstances, such as being unemployed or homeless. She also shared her story, as a timeline of numbered steps, of how poverty and the lack of services led to her criminal behaviour and subsequent incarceration and challenged her ability to move forward after incarceration:

1. Obtained an education
2. Made \$1,000 a year over the poverty line
  - a. no subsidy for rent or day care
  - b. did not qualify for legal aid to obtain child support after my divorce
3. All avenues expended for help and doors closed
  - a. found myself using illegal means to pay for living expenses — to feed, house, and clothe myself and my children
4. Went to jail — lost my family, friends, reputation and self-esteem
  - a. no programs to accommodate my needs as I did not fall into the Justice Systems rehabilitation program
5. Criminal record upon release — closed doors for employment and further education
  - a. I was rejected for further education and sent over 600 resumes before I was able to obtain employment — after I changed my name
6. I had a hard time finding affordable housing
  - a. I was turned down to a Restitution Order which gave me bad credit
  - b. no longer have my children due to my jail sentence and former spouse obtaining full custody during my sentence, so was put on nonurgent list for housing
7. After I found employment:
  - a. lived in fear that my record would be revealed, so I lived two different lives
  - b. fear realized as employer found out about my record — bye bye employment
8. Back to same cycle ...

Where is the help where help is needed? We are expected to rehabilitate and move forward in life and be productive after our crime; however, the holes in the system are still [there].

A number of women also identified barriers trying to accessing the justice system to report incidences of domestic violence. One woman shared the barriers to disclosing abuse that she has experienced:

Aboriginal women are not taken seriously charging our abusers. 'Cuz even like when it's physical, emotional, sexual, whatever, when we go into charge somebody a lot of times they make us feel like we're sort of feeling like the victim. But no one understands that I don't have safety. It's scary.

Lack of support was linked to shame and stigma for some women. Another woman's story portrays the negative consequence associated with disclosing childhood abuse:

There were times I tried to speak up and find support and that loving feeling I wasn't getting at home. But every time I spoke up I wasn't believed and so you get, you know, you feel ashamed I guess and so I think with not being believed you have a low self esteem. You feel like no one cares about you so I began to not care about myself. You begin to feel powerless. People look down on you. My worker looks down on me.

### LONELINESS AND RE-CREATION

Women spoke of their isolation, loneliness, and sense of being abandoned while living on the streets and their need to re-create family. For example, Loretta established her identity as a care-giver and became known on the streets as "mom" because she would shoplift clothes, food, and hygiene products for many of the "working girls" for whom she provided care. Many of the women spoke of the surrogate families that they created on the streets; the necessity of building relationships not only for physical protection, but for the sharing of resources, as well as for emotional support. Yvonne evokes memories of family in the image of an empty cul-de-sac she frequented:

I walked through there so many times. I can sit there and look around. I could see and sense the lost tears. I would sit there and get high. I could picture all the people who passed away. But it wasn't all bad that happened there, we used to have fun. It was like a family, and now there is nothing left.

Another woman refers to a former drinking establishment that she used to frequent as a child:

It has been so long since I have been down there. It brings up a lot of bad memories from my childhood, but also reminds me how nice some people were down there.

The sense of loneliness and isolation for women extended beyond life on the streets. Participants expressed feeling lonely and isolated once they were released from prison and had acquired housing,

reporting there was no support or personal contact with the community. Finding shelter was not enough to support women through to recovery as a participant shares:

I finally found a place to stay. I thought this would be a place that could help support me. But, it didn't have any structure to help us find a job or anything. You go to a meeting and that was it. I can't stand this, everyday is the same thing ... it's boring. There was no one there to support me. And so I went to a meeting [Alcoholics Anonymous] and the rest of the day was yours. What do you do? Go back to your old friends, your old using friends. And that's what I did. I went back to my friend's 'cuz I didn't have any knowledge of anything else better to do when I got out of the prison.

Toni describes her feelings of powerlessness over her own life through a poem she entitled "the unheard voice":

I feel so alone and cold,  
I'm lost and blind.  
A childless mother,  
Also the motherless child.  
I walk aimless around and around,  
What I am looking for, never finding.  
I am scarred from the inside out.  
Never to heal my wounds, lost, forgotten.  
Who am I?  
I am any and every woman you have judged on the  
street corner,  
I have died alone in a shallow grave.  
Never to be found,  
And if found, never to be identified  
I AM your mother, your sister, your daughter.  
I am that voice crying for help that falls upon deaf  
ears.

### CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION

Early involvement in "street life" brought many of the women in the study into contact with the criminal justice system at a young age. Many women recounted frequent involvement with the law before being provincially or federally sentenced. They made the explicit connection between their poverty, homelessness, and their involvement in the criminal justice system. Toni, who became homeless as a child suggested, "a lot of homeless people will find themselves locked up because they have nowhere else to

go." The challenge of being homeless and not "loitering" is made worse by being a homeless woman. For example, many of our participants reported the lack of services available for homeless woman, specifically related to addictions treatment, compared to services offered to men. Stacie found it particularly challenging to access shelters for women, since she was not a victim of domestic violence and did not have children in her care she was not eligible for women's shelters.

Once women are released from prison there are very few safe, affordable places for them to live. With inappropriate and unsupportive discharge planning many women return to the shelters and some return to their addiction. One woman explains:

I'm out now. I was clean in [the institution]. It felt good. I came out with a plan. I wanted support, but when I called I said, "all I need is support" and they said, "we can't we have no beds we're filled up." And that's what they keep telling me day after day.

Participants also identified the lack of available services and supports such as affordable housing, treatment for addictions, and lack of employable skills or training as obstacles to successful reintegration and breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. One woman illustrates the challenge of finding supports given her history of alcohol and substance abuse:

And so here I am. I have a bad drug and alcohol problem. I have never had a job, I don't have proper education and basically I've had a rough upbringing. And it's easy for people to look at me and say just go get help — but from where?

Another woman discusses the difficulty of remaining hopeful while homeless:

I've been homeless for seven months now. It's hard emotionally. Just so many things happening, sleeping on the floor, in doorways of buildings ... my belongings are in a garbage bag, and I can't keep clean. I've tried to get a place but there is nothing out there I can afford.

### STIGMA AND SHAME

Women expressed frustration that many of the barriers they faced prior to their incarceration remained

on their release and indeed were exacerbated due to the stigma of a criminal record. The constant fear of being “found out” added enormous stress to the lives of these women and resulted in reported feelings of “inauthenticity” as they struggled to develop new relationships and friendships while constantly monitoring how much they revealed. Marcie shared a story illustrating this fear. Shortly after being released she obtained a job at a grocery store. She recalled an incident when she caught someone shoplifting and the staff and management at the grocery store were surprised and wondered how she knew the woman was shoplifting. Marcie observed that this situation made her uncomfortable; she felt that she was being interrogated and wished she never had said anything.

Another woman, whose employer discovered she had a criminal record, was immediately terminated. A number of additional barriers identified by women in the study included regaining custody of their children; addictions treatment; educational training/upgrading; meaningful employment opportunities; and regaining proper identification, which cannot be obtained without paying previous fines which could total in the thousands. Obstacles to employment were a significant barrier for women. For example, on release Stacie completed her high school diploma with hopes of attaining a career working with people who have battled with addictions and homelessness, her way of paying it forward. Although she applied for numerous positions, she was unable to secure employment with a social agency and now works for temporary agencies doing manual labour and hopes for better.

### SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Woven throughout women’s stories was the role of substance abuse. For some women it was the precipitating factor which led to their homelessness. Women shared how drug or alcohol abuse in their family growing up led to family disruption, breakdown, and children leaving home or being taken into care of the state. For others, substance abuse at a young age led to their life on the streets.

The central role of addictions in coping with trauma and abuse was noted by participants. Addictions, women in the study explained, were

often a consequence of coping with childhood and/or adult experiences of abuse and trauma. Living in poverty or becoming homeless also led to further harms for women and turning to addictions was a common result. For some women living on the streets precipitated drug or alcohol use, for others it exacerbated preexisting addictions.

The role of alcohol in coping with physical and emotional pain is poignantly captured in one woman’s story:

I try not to think about my kids in care, or the house I used to have. I forget that I am hungry. Sometimes I won’t eat for four days at a time, but it doesn’t matter because the crack takes away the hunger pangs.

It’s in those moments when you wake up in another strange doorway that you begin to feel hopeless. That’s when I start thinking, “I don’t care about myself, I’m just gonna go do this and go do that.”

Stacie describes the impact of her addiction and how she used it to cope:

I am surrounded by a hundred people, but I am alone. That is my life. Addiction is so powerful, it’s a disease. When I was sleeping in intox [a unit in the shelter for residents under the influence of drugs and alcohol] I was so messed up I didn’t even feel that pain — that concrete floor wasn’t cold, my loneliness wasn’t killing me, as long as I woke up with my fix it was ok to me. Living like that was ok to me because I was “dope sick,” that’s how sick addiction is. That’s how blind and covered you get. You get so fucking numb that you don’t feel that pain.

Addictions were also implicated in the road to becoming incarcerated. Some women recounted how they resorted to criminal behaviours to support their addiction. This also resulted in further problems including being banned from homeless shelters as one woman states:

Every single homeless organization would not allow me in their facility. So I mean banning me from every facility in the city isn’t gonna say “I better not sell crack,” all it’s gonna make me wanna do is sell double so that I can go down the street and get a hotel. Which means I’m gonna really put my hustle on.

Many of the women also described being “stuck” in their addiction and feeling ashamed and misunderstood in terms of their addiction. Yvonne states:

You see so much out there that you can’t speak of, because it’s sad a lot out here. You can’t control it because of addiction. Silence can’t appreciate the good. It’s a hush, hush lifestyle. They don’t know what’s behind the addiction. No one listens and you’re stuck.

A sense of being stuck, unheard, and unwanted contributed to decreased levels of self-esteem and worth, leading many women to attempt to cope with the pain through the use and abuse of substances. Women in the study suggested that the sense of loneliness and lack of available support featured predominately in the cycling between homelessness and incarceration. This cycle was often mediated by a return to addictions as poignantly illustrated by one participant:

I feel lost and alone. I have no answers. There’s not much support out there. That’s why a lot of women end up back on the streets. Most of the time that’s where we end up. Or, we get drunk again.

### FULL CIRCLE: BREAKING THE CYCLE

Despite facing insurmountable challenges on release, the women who participated in this study were able to overcome significant obstacles and break their cycling of incarceration and homelessness through support and encouragement from family, agency and service providers. For many, a return to cultural and spiritual traditions was instrumental in breaking the cycle. With support, women described coming “full circle” where instead of ending back in the correctional system or homelessness, they report living more balanced lives. One woman describes the role of support from an agency:

I need to find a home for my kids. I hear of this Aboriginal organization that is supposed to help people with getting a house. I walk in and they’re so welcoming. I trust them, they understand me. They tell me about housing and then they helped me fill out forms for low income housing. They give me information on different areas like apartments and all that, and expected me to do the footwork. You know, like they believed I could do it.

For another woman it was educating her children about cultural and spiritual traditions to disrupt the intergenerational trauma and be proud of whom she was and teach her children to be proud:

You know in residential school they told us we were wrong and that being Indian was bad. But we’re Indians. So no matter what anybody says, you’re still gonna be an Indian. I want my kids to regain their sense of self. Find their self-image and be proud of who they are again. Because I used to be really ashamed of who I was. But then I learned the cultural way. I started to care about myself; I was going to Pow Wow’s and stuff like that ... it made me feel good. And that’s what I want for my kids. There’s a lot of anger and violence in our communities and we need to start healing. So you know what I’ve taught my kids? I teach them love. I even tell them every two minutes and they’re sick of hearing it. But you know what else they need to hear? “You’re beautiful” or “you rock” you know, my kids got so much self confidence man you tell them they’re beautiful and they’ll tell you they know!

For others it was finding the resilience within themselves and their communities. One woman shares how the historical resilience of Aboriginal peoples led her to make better choices for herself:

The other day I was walking I thought of the Indian Nation, I think we’ve survived against all odds. I’m sure they all thought we’d be gone by now, or assimilated into the white society. But we’ve stuck to our guns. But how often do we ever get that opportunity to actually be that voice? You know, to take our stories and make them into knowledge about hope and courage? I thought about this for a while and decided to go to university; I want to be that voice for our people.

Many of the women who participated in this study still experience challenges in finding affordable housing, meaningful employment opportunities and rebuilding a positive sense of self, but the process of healing had begun for many. These women are not only creating change in their own life through the sharing of their stories, but are helping other women tell their stories as well. Women involved in the study demonstrated a commitment to social change and making it better for the women still caught in the cycle.

## THE FORGOTTEN SISTERS

Women in the study were interested in creating change for women experiencing poverty and homelessness and involved in the criminal justice system. Many of the women could vividly recall the sense of loneliness they experienced "out there" and it concerned, even created a sense of guilt, for some that they had a safe place to be while their "sisters on the streets" did not. One woman captures this sentiment:

I think of my friends on the street. I think of the people that had my back for so long, that are cold and lonely as I am in my warm house. I know there's a van that comes around every night and feeds them and everything and gives condoms and warm blankets, and they could go to the [a homeless serving agency], they give you food, and drink or whatever; bandage you up, whenever you're in pain. But it doesn't seem like enough. It just doesn't seem right that I am in here and they are out there.

While the women recognized that progress had been made in terms of services available for women they continued to express concerns for women in similar circumstances. In particular, with gentrification the loss of available, safe space for women to use as a respite, a safe haven was identified. The loss of physical space also correlated with the breakdown of community and family structure the women had found. As Jen explains in her photograph of an empty church yard:

A lot of working girls used to come here. Before they put up the gates we would go in behind the garbage cans, or tuck ourselves in around the corner to shelter ourselves from the wind and cold. Lots of women have used this place as shelter. They have put up these gates to lock the women out and now I feel bad for all the women who can't use it because it's not there anymore. It meant a lot when it was there. It wasn't only a place to get high, it was a shelter from the cold, and there was a kinship because we were all there for the same reasons. I was so young when I was out there, and it's just sad that it's not there to give comfort to someone else.... I think it's a pretty big fence to keep out women. People think to solve the problem you need to lock it out, to put blinders on and pretend it's not happening. This used to be a safe

spot for us ... we could duck into those corners and feel safe.

Although our weekly meetings began as a collective space to understand women's experiences of incarceration and homelessness and to identify gaps in services, they became an opportunity for empowerment. The women courageously shared the stories of their lives with the hope that it would help the women still out there and prevent women from following the same pathways. The women came together to find inspiration and healing and offer solutions and ways of fostering belonging and inclusion for themselves and women in the community. Lorretta speaks to the importance of hope upon release and the need for women to know they can succeed. As Lorretta explains:

Show people what is out there to do. When you go downtown, what do you see? Addicts, drug dealers, prostitution, negative shit ... because you're an addict and nobody wants to spend time with you. I think things like that; showing people when they are getting out of jail, where they can go is more significant than showing them what they did because we all know what we did time for. We all know what our crimes were. What we don't know anymore is "are we able to get back to that ever?" Because no one has reached out a hand to show us that they want to allow us back on the normal side of life.

Study participants expressed the principle that women released from prison settings or leaving shelter systems need to have safe places to access. Not only safe physical spaces, but emotionally and socially as well. They stated that women need support to rebuild their sense of identity, self-esteem, and worth. Women coming out of prison often return to their communities marginalized and isolated, which can have a profoundly negative impact on their ability to reintegrate. Many of the women in this study just wanted to someone to talk to, someone to share their experiences with in a nonjudgmental way. For Yvonne, that sense of acceptance was found in her Creator and her dog, which she describes as her best friend:

He is my best friend, I take him for walks two or three times a day because when I am feeling sad

and I'm at home all day and I have no one to talk to, he listens. He knows when I am sad or bored and he will go get his leash. Because he knows when I go for a walk, I pray to my Creator. He's helped me in my recovery, this is the longest I've ever been sober in my life.

## DISCUSSION

The cycling between poverty, homelessness, and incarceration exists because, in part, social services are unavailable or inadequate to meet the needs of women prior to their coming into conflict with the criminal justice system. For many of the women involved in the study, the series of events in their lives and traumas they were exposed to from childhood trapped them in poverty, which led them to commit criminal acts and eventually culminated in incarceration. The cycle of poverty, homelessness, and incarceration was repeated many times for the women in our study. This cycle, which for most women in the study began in childhood, points to the necessity of prevention and intervention supports and services for children and youth. This includes the public education and foster care systems, both of which play critical roles in the lives of young people. Specific interventions to reduce exposure of children to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect are required to facilitate optimum well-being for children. In addition, every effort needs to be made to ensure children and youth are not growing up with all the disadvantages and barriers to achieving their potential that stem from poverty. Early intervention strategies need to be adopted and utilized so that children and youth are not involved with the criminal justice system at an early age.

Stronger supports are also needed for women living below (or barely above) the poverty line to ensure their basic needs are being met, including access to safe and affordable housing, addictions and mental health treatment, affordable day care, access to legal aid, and meaningful employment opportunities that provide a living wage. When women are denied the ability to living independently and with autonomy to support themselves and their children, they may be forced to commit illegal acts to survive. This results, as we can see from the findings of the study, in a cycle of hardship and dysfunction,

which is difficult to break through and risks becoming intergenerational. The discourse surrounding women's criminality then must recognize women's crime as not a result of deviance and irresponsibility, but rather as what may be a last resort. The criminal justice system then needs to account for the lives of women, and the context and circumstances that brought them into contact with the law in the first place. Changes will not be made through the alteration and modification of individual women's behaviour and capacity for decision-making. The changes must take place on the larger structural level that continues to deny women the right to a living income, housing, and human dignity.

While the criminal justice system has, through the initiative Creating Choices, recognized the need to facilitate empowerment and opportunity for women, there has been little effort to materialize these ideals (Task Force of Federally sentenced Women, 1990). Programs for women are still lacking and those that are available within the institution often have long wait lists. Programs and services offered within the institution need to be based in the unique experiences of the lives of women; such as gendered and racialized inequality, histories of physical and sexual violence, motherhood, and their various and unique identities as *women*. A major concern to arise out of our group was the forced assimilation of female inmates to traditional roles of women, including emotional management. Participants discussed the frustration of not being allowed a safe place to be angry, to do emotional work, or cope with their frustrations and negative thoughts, despite the fact that many female inmates have abundant justification for their anger.

Programming that allows Aboriginal women to connect or reconnect with traditional Aboriginal culture is imperative to break the cycle and allow them to begin another journey (Walsh et al., 2012). For many of the Aboriginal women, change was rooted in a spiritual reconnection to their cultural teachings. The incorporation of traditional teachings and ceremonies, as well as access to Elders in the programming of the correctional facilities proved to be pivotal in their healing journeys. For many, there was a spiritual void that they were searching to fill.

When they discovered, or rediscovered, their cultural traditions it marked a turning point in their lives. The cultural and spiritual practices provided skills for coping with life that the women may not have had before. It also produced a sense of belonging and community that comes with participating in cultural ceremonies. While not all women attributed their "coming full circle" to renewal, recovery, and living a more balanced life to the teachings of the Anishinabe medicine wheel, several women portrayed their experiences within this framework. The medicine wheel framework, derived from the teachings of Anishinabe Elders in Waywayseecappo First Nations community in Manitoba, presents a world view as interconnectedness between all beings and forces in the physical and spiritual worlds (Longclaws, 1994). In this framework the interdependence between a person and the environment is of the utmost importance. This sense of interdependence has helped women in the study create balance in their lives in a holistic way with attention to their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs.

Developing culturally relevant services and support are crucial to breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among the Aboriginal female population (McCallum and Isaac, 2011; NWAC, 2007a, 2007b; Ruttan et al., 2008). Culturally relevant solutions should strive to nurture and develop the talents and abilities of Aboriginal women.

Similar to other research findings (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Grant, 2007; NWAC, 2007a, 2007b), we note the major contribution of substance in the cycle of homelessness and incarceration for women. Specific services and supports should be designed to promote "the acquisition of new adaptive strategies" to increase resistance and promote coping among women. However, as Plourde et al. (2012) suggest, strategies for adapting this to Aboriginal cultures have not been realized.

Support must be provided to enable Aboriginal women to gain safe, permanent housing and improve self-sufficiency. This can be facilitated through increased flexibility of social services and by building networks of support. Research suggests that because many homeless mothers receive help from relatively

few professional resources, helping agencies must be creative in fostering networks of community support (McCallum and Isaac, 2011). Providing education to service providers and policy makers about the culture and experiences of Aboriginal women may develop more effective solutions to the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. Such solutions should involve key members of Aboriginal communities. Policy makers should also consider the role of social support when developing shelter, health care, educational, and community development initiatives to improve the lives of homeless and economically disadvantaged families (Letiecq et al., 1998).

The cycling between homelessness and incarceration does not have to exist. If doors were opened and cries for help were answered by social and government agencies many of these women would have never walked through the gates of prison. Furthermore, if the criminal justice system and the government accepted part of the responsibility for the crimes committed by women, as they relate to addictions and poverty, and better prepared female inmates for reintegration through supportive and attainable discharge planning, many women would never return to prison. Presently, however, recidivism rates for women remain high, not for new offences, but for parole violations. Many women return to their communities facing new, and previously existing obstacles and barriers including finding housing, employment, and maintaining sobriety as wait lists for treatment centres continue to grow.

During the course of this study it became readily apparent that peer support is a critical component of successful reintegration and well-being for women after incarceration. The women involved in the study identified the need to develop relationships with women whom have had similar life experiences, had experienced incarceration and the trauma of the institution, and had faced similar challenges in their community. Peer support has the potential to rebuild self-esteem and confidence, provide a space for healing, and facilitate empowerment through collective associations. These are all things the research team witnessed during the course of this study.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rates of incarceration among Aboriginal women in Canada will continue to increase if policy changes are not made to ensure women the opportunity to an appropriate standard of living through their own autonomy and agency. To disrupt the cycling between incarceration and homelessness we must engage in primary intervention strategies that keep women out of poverty. Changes must also occur within a system that continues to criminalize women for being poor. It is essential that the justice system contextualizes crimes committed by women to understand the correlation between crime and survival. The responsibility will then be to initiate every alternative to prison and provide rehabilitation in the community as opposed to in the penal institutions. Further, developing culturally relevant services and supports are crucial to breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among the Aboriginal female population. These services must be developed and informed by Aboriginal women themselves.

For women currently caught in this cycle, it is imperative that secondary interventions are put in place to target the variables that brought them into contact with the criminal justice system to begin with. This includes poverty, histories of abuse and trauma, lack of education and employment opportunities, issues of substance abuse, and access to treatment and counseling for both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health. Program interventions directed towards these variables must begin inside the institution, giving women access to trauma counseling, education upgrading, vocational training and life-skills training, including self-esteem workshops. These programs will facilitate appropriate discharge planning allowing the women to be active in their release planning and feel prepared re-entering the community. These partnerships and collaborations should take place between CSC and Aboriginal community members to ensure the success of women on release. This means that women cannot be released into the community without safe, affordable, and stable living and without a means to

meaningfully contribute to the community whether through employment or education.

Overwhelmingly this research, both the process and the findings, have disclosed the need for peer support and positive social relations as women are released into the community. While housing, employment, and treatment are key factors determining success after incarceration, the women have highlighted the importance of friendship, acceptance, and support on release. The emotional and psychological healing is just as important as the physical needs for women. Efforts towards developing peer support programs and mentorship have great potential to reduce recidivism rates, increase success chances of reintegration, facilitate healing in a non-judgmental space and allow women with the lived experience of poverty/homelessness and incarceration to use those experiences for advocacy and social change.

It is the women who have been caught in this destructive cycle who hold the answers to where gaps and solutions are to be found. Allowing the women's voices to be heard on needs within the institutions, as well as their own discharge planning, supporting women to express what they want in their life, and providing the opportunity for engagement and advocacy after incarceration can create real change both at the policy and community level. Research methods like CBR ensure the voices of those with lived experiences are heard and provide the means for the voices to effect change within the community. CBR is an effective tool for empowerment and invites participants to be an active part of the conversation towards finding effective and sustaining solutions to problems faced by themselves and their community members. One woman evokes the power of stories in creating individual and collective change:

I used to cry to my Elders about all the time I spent wasting my life in jail. They said, "No you didn't waste your life in jail that was your lesson that you learned so that when you leave here you will be able to help people." And that's why I think it's really important for all of us to tell our stories because other women who are listening to your story will say, "I can really relate to that." Your stories will help other people. And the more



you tell your stories, the stronger you get and the more strength and power we have together to create change. Thanks for listening.

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