

Women in the criminal justice system



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The Canadian criminal justice system, an outwardly fair system of integrity and justice, is a perfect example of a seemingly equal situation, which turns out to be anything but for women (Gunnison et al., 2016, p. 32). The policies and programs imposed in the criminal justice system affect men and women in extremely dissimilar manners. In particular, both men and women are subject to imprisonment, but little attention has been given to the various needs and problems of imprisoned women as opposed to those of men (PRI, 2012, p. 1). This omission is primarily due to the fact that women constitute a minority in most prison systems that are predominantly designed, organized and administered with the male population in mind (Gunnison et al., 2016, p. 26). As such, women in the criminal justice system face many problems; some resulting from their lives prior to imprisonment, others resulting from their imprisonment itself. In order to understand how gender relates to crime and the criminal justice system, it is crucial to examine the situation of incarcerated women (Williams, 2004, p. 6). Therefore, in this critical book review, I will analyze aspects of George Caron's, " Mouse on a String at the Prison for Women", paying close attention to its strengths and weaknesses, and will consider any emerging themes and connections in relation to the relevant course material.

" Mouse on a String at the Prison for Women" by George Caron is a personal narration of his time working as a warden at the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario. As the youngest warden in Federal Corrections at the time, Caron gives an inside view of life behind the bars for female offenders during the 1980's through the use of anecdotes, history and recollection. In his book, Caron recalls prison life and justice, as well as the many individuals

that were incarcerated at P4W, particularly focusing on an inmate nicknamed “ Mouse”. This memoir is very thorough as it touches upon many aspects of prison life, including drugs, illicit weapons, relationships, violence and sex. Throughout, Caron portrays both the justices and injustices that are present inside the prison, from kind-hearted nurses that do more than expected to inmates abusing the criminal justice system to meet their needs.

This book is truly fascinating and intriguing, partly due to the mystery surrounding female prisons, but mostly because of the greater themes that are entwined within the inmates’ stories. Several common themes that were portrayed include: loss of freedom, compromise, fear and injustice. These themes were clearly evident in the transformation of some of the inmates and their journey towards redemption. In particular, Mary Ann, affectionately referred to as Mouse, embodied most, if not all of these themes as she progressed from a shy and insecure woman inside the prison and emerged as a confident and educated woman on her return into the community.

A prevalent concept discussed in the course and mentioned periodically by Carol is the issue of dealing with mentally ill inmates. He states that “ some inmates entered the prison system and came with deep-rooted psychological and mental health issues” and the “ prison environment was the final depository of those with scarred human frailties . . .” (Caron, 2009, p. 177). According to research, female inmates are at higher risk of harming themselves or attempting suicide in comparison to men in prison, due to the higher level of mental illness and the harmful impacts of isolation from the community (Williams, 2004, p. 7). Moreover, studies indicate that since a large proportion of women have mental healthcare needs, diverting them to <https://assignbuster.com/women-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>

a suitable gender-appropriate treatment program would address their needs much more effectively than the harsh environment of prisons (PRI, 2012, p. 6). This may also explain some of the factors behind the suicide of Ashley Smith, who had mental health issues but was placed in solitary confinement (CBC News, 2013, p. 1). This further relates to the conflicting dual mandates of corrections, where incarceration should both punish individuals and rehabilitate them. As discussed in class and based on supporting research, prison is not the proper environment for female inmates as they require specialized mental-health facilities and trained professional mental-health staff to adequately address their needs (Gunnison et al., 2016, p. 286).

In addition, female Aboriginal offenders are a key course topic that is also discussed by Caron. He mentions how he was saddened to see so many Aboriginal women in prison with backgrounds of poverty, unemployment, poor health, and alcohol and drug abuse (Caron, 2009, p. 15). Caron's observations are supported by recent research which found that factors like education, unemployment and poor living conditions are directly associated with arrest and incarceration of Aboriginal women in Canada (Gunnison et al., 2016, p. 84). Studies of institutions across Canada found the Aboriginal group to be less educated, more dysfunctional and from more aberrant family backgrounds than the non-Aboriginal group. Moreover, according to the 2011 Statistics Canada data, 22.7% of Aboriginal people aged 25 years and over had not completed high school and that year, the unemployment rate among Aboriginal people was 13.9%, compared to 8.1% among non-Aboriginal people (Scott & Smith, 2011, p. 1-2). The vast majority of inmates had dependents but no steady employment and considerable prior

involvement with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, Wesley (2012) found that Aboriginal women reported more physical abuse and suicide attempts in their lives than non-native women (p. 3-4). Essentially, the needs of Aboriginal peoples, who are systematically overrepresented in all aspects of the criminal justice system, are not being adequately addressed in the traditional prison system (Wesley, 2012, p. 6). Supported by the Native women's suicide in P4W, female Aboriginal offenders needs were not met then and based on recent research, they are not being met now either (Caron, 2009, p. 15).

All texts carry perspectives and biases, so it is possible that the author of this book already had some preconceived notions about prison and unconsciously or consciously wrote those notions in his book (McCullagh, 2000, p. 39). The author is a young male with a native background and this can affect how he views prison and consequently how his story is written (Caron, 2009, p. 15). Some voices that are missing from the book are the voices of the inmates, as their stories are simply told from the author's point of view. As such, it would be interesting to read some of the inmates own thoughts and beliefs regarding life inside P4W without the author's personal interpretation.

Before reading this book, I already had prior experience volunteering with offenders and programs in prison. As such, it is possible that my preconceived notions and beliefs regarding incarceration may have impacted my interpretation of the book. Also, I grew up in a culture where it was very rare that a woman would commit an offence, much less be incarcerated.

Therefore, I have a very different perspective of female criminality and incarceration than the author.

As previously mentioned, this book is very interesting and I enjoyed reading it. I thought that an important component of the book is that the author did not avoid revealing tragic events that occurred and presented the reality of incarceration through the perspectives and stories of different inmates. This allowed a much more immersive and engaging experience for the reader. Some the parts that I disliked were the author's occasional crude description of the female inmates. This seemed to sexualize the inmates as there were repeated comments about attractiveness and breast size. For example, the author describes one of the inmates as a " very attractive twenty-eight-year-old woman with long, blonde hair and large, firm breasts. She was a sexy woman who used her assets well" (Caron, 2009, p. 60). Nevertheless, I would recommend the book to anyone interested in women's prisons, whether for educational purposes or casual reading, as it gives a good account about the P4W and life behind bars for female inmates.

This book had several key strengths that made for a memorable reading. A particular strength is the depth of emotions that the reader is exposed to through the unique writing style of the author. The author wrote in such a way that the reader was emotionally invested in the inmates and could only anticipate what happens to them. For example, Mary Ann's background story allowed the reader to have a glimpse into her past and circumstances that led to her criminality (Caron, 2009, p. 48-50). This allowed the reader to sympathize with Mary Ann and understand that while the criminal act itself is wrong, Mary Ann was only a confused and vulnerable woman at the time.

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This observation is important as it is very common that some matters are depicted as being solely black or white. However, after reading the personal story of Mary Ann, it allows for the possibility of a gray area different apart from the seemingly only two choices available. Moreover, throughout her story, the reader witnessed the immense growth that Mary Ann went through as she acknowledged her mistakes and sought for forgiveness. By the end of Mary Ann's story, she had transformed from a mere statistic of female offending to a real individual in the eyes of the reader.

Another strength of the book is the many facets of prison life that are mentioned. The author discusses both legal and illegal events that occur inside the prison, allowing for a more thorough understanding of the reality of prison. Some of the actions of the author may be considered as illegal and overstepping his bounds as warden, but the reader is able to clearly see why the actions may be morally appropriate, if not legally. For example, the author arranged for beer to be smuggled inside the prison in order to treat an inmate who was medically ill (Caron, 2009, p. 77). This was illegal as no alcohol was allowed inside the prison, but it allowed the reader to recognize that the prison staff truly wanted to help inmates despite the possibility of punishment.

Despite its strengths, this book also had some weaknesses. A major weakness of it was the lack of discussion regarding the incidents that contributed to P4W being closed. During the time period of the book, there were many external complaints and reports written petitioning for the closure of P4W (Arbour, 1996, p. 31). However, despite the significance of these complaints, the author did not mention at all any problems that may

warrant the closing of the prison. One would assume that something this important should have been discussed in length or at least mentioned in the book.

In conclusion, “ Mouse on a String at the Prison for Women” by George Caron is a fascinating account of life behind bars for female offenders at P4W.

Discussing female criminality, one cannot stop mentioning their lives after being sentenced. Thus, it is important to look at incarcerated female offenders as a unique subset of the offending population and should be treated as such. This is why Caron’s memoir is important as it allows the reader to get a glimpse into how gender intersects with our understanding of crime and the criminal justice system.

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