

Women prisoners can't e

by Heather Conn
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You can never erase a prison experience. No one can ever give back freedom to replace the dehumanizing days, months, years spent behind bars - the mindless daily schedule, pentup rage, total lack of privacy, sneering provocations from leering guards and petty punishments used to silence "troublemakers." Brutality and power-tripping mind games are bitter points of prison life as remembered by four women ex-cons in Vancouver. Now enrolled in a pre-employment program at the rehabilitative Elizabeth Fry Society, the women recall vividly their cell-bound past.

"The whole system is designed to make you feel like a piece of shit," says Bev, not her real name, who served time after being busted with 28 caps of heroin. They (prison authorities) expect you to be happy, to carry on a normal routine as if you were on the outside. People on the outside get grumpy and tired and bitchy... but you can't in jail.

"They play mind games. They fuck with your head. So they put you under more pressure and maybe you'll mess up and they can send you off to Oakalla or Kingston (penitentiary) or whatever."

Male guards are supposed to knock before entering a woman's cell, says Bev; but at the minimum security Lynda Williams community correctional institute in Vancouver they always walk in unannounced, often when a prisoner is standing naked, she said.

"One old guy walked in on me. I turned around, I was bare-assed nude and I said: 'Get a camera and take a picture, it'll last longer.'"

Women in confinement face continual harassment and abuse from male guards, especially at Oakalla women's jail, says Ruth, who has

served sentences in maximum-security units.

"The male guards at Oakalla, I just couldn't believe it. The screws they had working there were frisking you all the time. They weren't frisking you, they just had nothing better to do except feel up chicks.

"The guards are like that, walking around, eyeing you all the time, leering. That's exactly the way they look at you."

In December 1979, Oakalla inmate Geri Ferguson charged that guard Don Stevenson handcuffed, stripped and assaulted her. Last October, he was acquitted of an assault charge she said, even though the judge admitted Steveson's behavior was "unwarranted and unjustified — even barbaric."

In 1978, B.C. Supreme Court justice Patricia Proudfoot condemned the Oakalla women's prison as a poorly-run institution whose male guards took advantage of their position to invade women's privacy. As a result, she recommended that male staff be barred from areas that affect "human decency and privacy."



But according to Vancouver activist group, Women Against Prisons: "If anything has changed since then, it's been for the worse."



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