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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“INMATES” BY OLIVIA GAY

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



*My father was a salesman. He would travel all year long to sell the titanic printing machines formerly used in the packaging industry. He was smart, he would dress to impress with three-piece suits, impeccable nails and the scent of « Pour un Homme » from Caron. My mother, like many at that time, married very young as a means to escape her own family. She was most of the time alone with her three children, she would never dress up, but even with her jeans and clogs, everyone said she was a natural beauty. **When** she left us for a younger man, I was 13. I didn't see her for many years. I was left with blurred memories and sharp images.*

I grew up without her and became a photographer, one driven by a keen interest in women and their images. **What exactly is self-esteem? I have been wondering all along. And why are the lives of women so tied to the way other people look at them?**

In 2013, I was invited to exhibit my photographs in the women's quarters of a dilapidated red brick prison in Rouen, France. I had never approached the world of incarceration. I wondered: how do you keep existing if nobody watches you? How do you build self-esteem in a prison cell?

Women were few, only 60 inmates against 700 men but the warden told me that work is more difficult with them as they tend to be more violent. **After passing five armoured doors, I entered a lengthy room with high ceilings and a dirty yellow wall, two anti suicide nets were hanging from the windows as the maddening clatter of keys locking and unlocking prison cells was seemingly ignored by everyone else.**

The inmates came in and we sat down to work in a room made of two cells and recycled school desks. We looked at photographs together before I invited them to pose. The last woman I photographed was named Sophie, a good-natured woman who confided that she was sentenced to thirty years for the murder of her three-year-old.

The stories were harsh, the lives unfair. I wanted to offer these women a respite, a chance encounter with someone who doesn't perceive them as mere criminals or as numbers. Then of course, there was my quest about self image, about inner prisons and my absentee mother. Somehow I could feel all of us there, in the dirty yellow room were yearning for the very same light.



Jail cell N° 17821 — P.

P is Brazilian, she used to own a bar in Spain. One day, she met a customer with whom she fell in love. A few months later, She was working as a prostitute. I found out she needed someone to sponsor her; I met her lawyer who told me she was abused and didn't deserve punishment. After speaking with my husband and children, we decided to welcome her into our home. A few days later, I was told she had been freed after all.



Jail cell N° 17441 — J.

There were 3 of them, they were the Bad Girls, they had managed to introduce little phones that look like car keys sold for 50 euros in Paris' streets. They hide them in their bosom or in their bras. Thanks to the phones they communicate with their families and their men. . J was very young, she said she would get married and have a baby. She was arrested after a fight with one of her husband's colleagues. She stayed for a few months then went on getting married and becoming a mother.

