

**International Women's Day - March 8, 2001**  
**Human Rights are Women's Rights**

**March 8, 2001 (Ottawa)** Over the years, we have seen many calls for reform of women's corrections, in particular, it has been 11 years since the government tabled *Creating Choices*, the report of the task force for federally sentenced women, and five years since they released Madam Justice Arbour's report following the *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston*.

After years of discussions attempting to negotiate with Corrections to implement all of the recommendations of both, as well as legal actions and representations to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, we are now seeking the assistance of the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Today, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and the Native Women's Association of Canada are filing a complaint to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and requesting that the Commission conduct a broad-systemic review. In addition, we are asking the CHRC to use its authority pursuant to s.61(2) of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* to report on the manner in which the Government of Canada is discriminating against women serving two years or more, breaching their human rights. We are alleging that the discrimination is on the basis of sex, race and disability.

As Gayle Horii's 13 year old Canadian Human Rights Commission complaint and ongoing law suit exemplify, unlike their male counterparts, with the exception of 13 beds that have been slated for closure, women who are classified as minimum security prisoners do not have access to minimum security prisons. Furthermore, there are insufficient community based releasing options for women, especially Aboriginal women. Similarly, in addition to being subjected to a discriminatory classification scheme, women classified as maximum security prisoners and those identified as having cognitive and mental disabilities are not provided with adequate or appropriate carceral placement options.

Aboriginal women represent 1-2% of the population but 23% of the federally sentenced women population. Of these located in the Prairie region, in particular, approximately half are languishing in segregated maximum security units in men's prisons. Women identified as having mental and cognitive disabilities face a similar plight. In addition to being subjected to a classification scheme that results in too many maximum security designations for these women, they are increasingly isolated in what the Correctional Investigator has referred to as brutal and discriminatory environments.

Moreover, although the Correctional Service of Canada and the Solicitor General have committed to the closure of the segregated maximum security units in men's prisons by the end of September this year, the Correctional Service of Canada plans are to replicate these isolating units in the new regional prisons. We are concerned that these proposed maximum security units which cause conditions which mirror the isolation of segregation units but do not respect the specific rights of segregated prisoners under Canadian law. The isolation of women causes us concern because it is damaging and dangerous to those women and is contrary to principles of fundamental justice.

This complaint is also being supported by Assembly of First Nations, National Association of Friendship Centres, Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, Sisters' in Strength, DisAbled Women's Network Canada, National Action Committee on the Status of Women, National Association of Women and the Law, Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, Canadian Bar Association and Amnesty International and many local members, as well as the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies' membership. Human Rights and Prison Watch International as well as Amnesty International have already indicated their concern regarding the human rights abuses in Canadian prisons for women.

Canada prides itself on its international human rights reputation. When it comes to the manner in which we treat our most marginalized, that reputation is too often not warranted. The Canadian government has refused to implement repeated recommendations by the Correctional Service of Canada's own task forces on federally sentenced women and segregation for external oversight, as well as its own commission's recommendations for judicial oversight. Canada has even rejected the recommendations of the *Parliamentary Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights* on this point.

We are hopeful that the Canadian Human Rights Commission will look at the systemic issues that contribute to a correctional context for federally sentenced women for which Canada must be held to account. The human rights abuses experienced by federally sentenced women create a situation which is shameful for all of us, as Canadians.

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