

President's Report

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Submitted by

Ailsa M. Watkinson, Ph.D.

For most of this term I have been on sabbatical in Australia, located at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, Perth W.A. During that time I was in constant email contact with Kim and other executive members. I want to thank everyone for accommodating me in this way. I want to especially thank Colleen, our Vice President, for stepping in for me on many occasions and thank Kim, our Executive Director for her extra-ordinary good work.

Shortly after the September 2005 Board meeting I left for Korea and presented a paper at the 18th Asia-Pacific Social Work Conference, Seoul, Korea (September 21-24, 2005). The title of my paper was "Women Prisoners and Human Rights". I discussed the human rights process we initiated with the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC), their findings and our subsequent work with the Human Rights in Action (HRIA) project. A great deal of work has been done on our HRIA project throughout the year. I was kept informed of its progress and provided comments and information as required. Deb Parkes stepped in for me while I was away and I also want to thank her for the work she has done on the project.

As a result of my work with the Elizabeth Fry Society I was asked by the Director of the Center for Human Rights Education and the President of the Heads of Schools of Social Work in Australia to take part, as a panel member, in the "Peoples Inquiry into the Mandatory Detention of Asylum Seekers." The Australian government has had a policy in place since the early 1990's of detaining all asylum seekers in detention camps around the country. There have been numerous calls asking the government to hold a Royal Commission into the treatment of asylum seekers but to no avail. Australia has been widely criticized by the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other rights seeking organizations for its treatment of those fleeing their homelands. It is the only country in the world that has signed the United Nations Refugee Convention (1951) and treats asylum seekers in this way. In 2002 the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights described the situation facing detained asylum seekers as "offensive to human dignity".

The hearings were held around the country and I sat on the panel when the hearings were held in Perth. It was an opportunity for the asylum seekers to tell their story and have them recorded. It was heart wrenching. Apart from the horror and shame they all felt, the overriding impression I was left with was the permanent mental

harm caused to them by their experiences. Prior to me leaving Australia an eleven year old boy, Shayan Badraie, was awarded, as part of an out-of court settlement with the government of John Howard, \$400,000 as compensation for the psychological scars he has suffered as a result of his detention. While in detention he witnessed attempted suicides, self harm and abuse and was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder when he refused to eat, drink or talk. I understand he still does not talk. His is one story out of thousands.

I was invited to speak at a seminar hosted by the Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University, "Human Rights and Women Prisoners in Canada" (November 30, 2005). I again spoke about the human rights process and noted that a similar action was being undertaken in Australia based on our work. As a result of that session, Debbie Kilroy and Kim Pate were invited to Perth to meet with other interested persons to discuss the human rights process and the situation facing women prisoners in both countries. Their visit was co-sponsored by the Centre for Human Rights Education and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. Kim and Debbie Kilroy joined us in Perth February 13th & 14th. We spent the first day visiting two prisons. The first was the Berona House, a minimum security prison located across the street from Curtin University and the second was Bandiup Prison situated outside Perth. We visited with a number of Aboriginal women at Bandiup as they were taking part in an arts program and we were invited to take part.

On Feb 14th we organized a public event at which Kim, Debbie and others spoke. We had expected about 30 participants but eventually had to move the venue as the final enrolment was around 200. Some of those at the session are working together on how best to provide better services to the women in the prison system.

Kim was in Australia at the time as she was one of the keynote speakers at the joint conference of the Australian New Zealand Society of Criminologists (ANZOC) and the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) in Hobart, Tasmania (February 7-11, 2006). Kim, Deb Parkes, Vicki Chartrand and I all took part in the conference. I presented a paper, the aim of which was to examine and deconstruct the process of denying human rights protection to one group (children) on the basis that if this was done, another group (parents and teachers) could/would be construed as 'criminal.' This may sound familiar as it was the discussion around a resolution I submitted to CAEFS for presentation at the 2005 AGM seeking endorsement of the *Joint Statement on the Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*.

Since my return home I participated in a seminar held in Saskatoon on mental health and the criminal justice system (May 12/06). I submitted an op ed piece on mandatory minimum sentences that was published in our local Saskatoon Star Phoenix (copy attached). I also worked with Kim and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) on the joint media conference and media release surrounding the anniversary of Madam Justice Arbour's report into the role of Correction Services Canada in regards to the treatment and strip searching of women at the Prison for Women in April 1994. As you may have seen, former Justice Arbour was interviewed by the Globe and Mail and she expressed disappointment at the lack of progress saying "[w]hat has not happened is fundamental change in the culture that would have squarely addressed the real, discriminatory nature of women's incarceration . . . I don't see much that has been done to address the multiple layers of discrimination women face when incarcerated."¹

I am sure none of us is surprised by her comments, we see the lack of any real change and at times run the risk of accepting 'what is' as the best there is. It is for this reason that I hope you find renewed strength in what she said. CAEFS is committed to confronting the barriers placed in the paths of women prisoners by the Government of Canada through Correction Services Canada (CSC). We have no intention of pulling back from the work we are doing. Having said that, we know that the political climate we are working in has changed. The current federal government campaigned on a 'law and order' agenda – a distressingly easy and unthinking reaction to very complicated issues. This is similar to what I saw and heard in Australia. The government there is, as we have recently witnessed, a close ally with the current Canadian government. Indeed, John Howard's Liberal Party federal director Brian Loughnane, worked with Steven Harper during his recent successful campaign.

We must all become experts at the 'quick retort' when dealing with the government and public on the 'law and order agenda'. We must be seen front and centre rebutting the misconceptions, misinformation and half truths. The CAEFS website is a storehouse of information on issues we are asked to speak about at public meetings, in the classroom and with the media. Ensure that the messages you provide fit with what we as the collective of Elizabeth Fry Societies across the country have agreed upon.

¹ Kirk Makin, "Decade after inquiry, prisons still failing women, Arbour says" (Saturday, May 13, 2006 Globe and Mail) A9.

Our Mission Statement directs us to take seriously the situation facing criminalized women locally, nationally and internationally. Our international work has been instrumental in having Canada sanctioned for its treatment of women prisoners in particular Aboriginal women and women with mental health issues. The human rights committee looking into Canada's record on Political and Civil Rights took the unusual step of requiring Canada to report back to them within one year rather than five years regarding the implementation of the CHRC report and Arbour's recommendations. They have also taken the unusual step of granting CAEFS special consultative status despite the fact we receive funding and often work closely with the government. This status enables us to present directly to the United Nations when their Committees are reviewing Canada's record in regards to their compliance with international human rights documents. I want to make special mention at this time of the work Kim has done in expanding our international work. The common touchstone available to all of us through international human rights documents binds us globally and provides the means of capacity building around the world. The international human rights documents provides another means of support to us for the work we do and acts as a watchdog of government in their attempts to weaken our work and the rights of prisoners. It is in times like these, with a government elected on neo-conservative promises, that our international work is especially important. As we've seen already, it can facilitate external pressure when the national and provincial governments fall despairingly short of upholding their international obligations.

I look forward to the direction we have been given through the revisions to the strategic plan. It has been a means of revisiting our commitment to the principles that guide our work and has provided us the opportunity of renewed commitment to the mission and values of CAEFS.

I have come to the end of four years as President of CAEFS. As I have 'grown into the role' I have become even more committed to the policies and positions we have taken as a national organization. Our vision of a Canada without prisons is not an easy sell but presented with the facts of the impact of prisons on the prisoners helps us think about 'what might be' with an increased sense of urgency. Prisoners deserve our collective cooperation to keep each other informed, work to protect their rights and speak with one voice.