

OpEd Requested by Citizen re: Police Actions

Fri Jul 29th, 2011 1:23 PM EDT

Insist police answer for their actions

BY KIM PATE, OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 29, 2011

Human rights violations are supposed to occur in other countries, aren't they? So why do we keep seeing alleged cases of abuse of citizens denied and covered up, only to be exposed by video? This seems to be now routine in Canada. How can it be? Why do we allow this to continue?

Why are those with such power and authority permitted to wield it with virtually no accountability? Why is the official justification believed over that of the women who are treated in this manner? Why do the women, such as Stacy Bonds and Roxanne Carr, have to repeatedly fight to be revictimized by the public display of them being assaulted on video, in order to be believed?

Strip searches are sexual assaults that are sometimes sanctioned by our laws to allow police and correctional authorities to search for contraband or weapons. Although weapons and contraband are far less likely to be found on women, women are much more likely to be strip-searched than are men. We know this is true in prison settings, and the fact that it is also a reality in police lock-ups and detention centres was recently exposed during the trials and investigations into the G20 arrests and detentions.

Sadly, what happened to Stacy Bonds and Roxanne Carr has likely been the fate of many other women in Ottawa.

We may not want to believe it and we will certainly likely have trouble accessing similar videotaped recordings in the future. The videos of Bonds clearly showed her being strip-searched. The videos of Roxanne show her clothes being thrown out of a cell, but not her naked body. The police would have us believe what? That she was somehow magically re clothed in that cell, and was not left naked for hours?

What will the next video show; or, will we ever get access to the next one?

My first experience with these sorts of issues arose in the prison context. In 1994, I was in the Prison for Women in Kingston, shortly after eight women had been assaulted, stripped, shackled, and left naked, by a male emergency response team. Everything the women told me that day was eventually confirmed via the videotapes created by their captors.

The video showed that there was no emergency or riot in progress.

It showed the women being roused from sleep, their clothes being forcibly removed by men; that they were assaulted and subjected to body cavity searches while shackled; left naked in their cells with only a paper gown tied around their necks; glasses smashed; medication denied. It was all captured on videotape. It was clearly aimed at degrading and humiliating women - all of whom had histories of sexual abuse, yet correctional authorities repeatedly denied and tried to conceal what had actually occurred.

When the staff at the prison chided me for my naiveté for believing what the women said, and then alternately chided and scolded me for thinking I actually saw women shackled - which I observed directly, I knew that they believed two things: 1) that they had complete control of the information that they held; and 2) no prisoner, nor a prisoner's lawyer or other advocate, would be

given credibility in the face of alternate information from prison or police officers.

This sentiment continues in police cellblocks and prison lock-ups everywhere, despite the reality that we now have so many examples of proof to the contrary.

So what needs to happen?

Not all police officers abuse prisoners, but it is the rare officer who will stand up to the bullies in their midst. We should reward and promote officers who demonstrate high professional standards and commitment to human rights. We should encourage community access and transparency, as well as truly independent oversight of the police. And, as Louise Arbour, former UN Human Rights High Commissioner and Supreme Court judge, has recommended, prisoners who allege human rights and Charter abuse should have immediate and unfettered access to external investigation and judicial oversight.

In the meantime, each time we hear police defending the indefensible, we must demand accountability.

Kim Pate is executive director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and part-time professor at the University of Ottawa Faculty of Law.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen

Read

more: <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/Insist+police+answer+their+actions/5176389/story.html#ixzz1TW3WncOdKimPate>