

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ABORIGINAL WOMEN
RAMPANT IN FEDERAL PRISONS
CLAIMS THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

OTTAWA—(May 14, 2003)—“Discrimination against Aboriginal women is rampant in Canada’s federal prisons,” says the Native Women’s Association of Canada. The national organization representing Canada’s Aboriginal women coast-to-coast condemns the Government of Canada for their oppressive tactics against Aboriginal female prisoners. It was the disproportionately large number of suicides in prison by Aboriginal female offenders that led to the closure of the notorious Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, and to the opening of five new regional women’s prisons. At this time many of our women are still serving oppressive time in men’s prisons or are locked away in maximum security cells, unable to access the necessary programs and services related to their increased potential for successful reintegration and timely release back into the community. “Aboriginal female offenders have always been subjected to the harshest treatment imaginable and it is in part the treatment of Aboriginal women prisoners at the Prison for Women that led to the *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston* by Justice L. Arbour [Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services, Canada, 1996].

While making up less than 2 per cent of Canada’s population, Aboriginal female offenders make up 27 per cent of all women serving federal time. Aboriginal women are further oppressed when you consider that they make up 50 per cent of women who are classified as ‘maximum security’ prisoners.

Being classified as 'maximum security' means federally sentenced women have no access to core programs and services which may be designed for females under federal law. Not only are these Aboriginal women prisoners denied women's programming and services, but they are also denied specific programs designed for Aboriginal offenders.

Aboriginal women's sexual and racial equality rights guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* have been denied, and their human rights continue to be violated by the Government of Canada.

Not only does the maximum security classification deny Aboriginal female prisoners programs and services they need to rehabilitate themselves, but the fact that many are serving time involuntarily in men's prisons also serves to deny them equal access to programs and services.

Aboriginal women should be released from federal prisons and put into the care and custody of Aboriginal communities under section 81 & 84 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, according to the NWAC.

Changes to the federal corrections legislation were intended to allow Aboriginal communities to take custody of their own offenders including women who are serving long-term sentences. The Correctional Service of Canada is in contravention of its own legislation by not allowing the Aboriginal communities to arrange release of federal Aboriginal prisoners to their care and custody. The NWAC suggests to make this happen, the Correctional Services needs to put some money into developing full custody facilities on Aboriginal lands within Aboriginal communities instead of spending billions of dollars to warehouse Aboriginal offenders—both male and female. Fiduciary responsibility to the Aboriginal community is essential in order to build capacity within Aboriginal communities thereby providing the ability for us to take care of our Aboriginal women offenders states the NWAC.

Aboriginal women in prison often go into federal facilities on lesser charges and commit infractions in prison that lead to longer sentences. "The oppression of Aboriginal female prisoners has to stop, or we will never get them

home and successfully reintegrate them to Aboriginal and Canadian society,” says NWAC Justice Co-ordinator Ellisa Johnson.

The maximum-security classification of Aboriginal women makes them ineligible to take part in private home placements (PHP), which continues the discrimination against them by the Correctional Service of Canada.

The punishment for Aboriginal women serving federal time is their imprisonment and lack of freedom, but the Government of Canada discriminates against these women by keeping them locked in men’s prisons, in men’s psychiatric wards, by utilizing the maximum-security classification. All of this results in their denial of Aboriginal programming, and female programs which should be established to assist their reintegration into Aboriginal and Canadian society.

“We are going to do what we can to loudly protest the harsh treatment of Aboriginal women in federal prisons and we support any action to bring the Government of Canada to account for the race, disability and sex discrimination of our women,” says NWAC Justice Co-ordinator Ellisa Johnson.

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