

February 6, 2003

Kim Pate
Executive Director
Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS)
#701, 151 Slater Street
Ottawa, Ontario
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CANADA

Dear Kim,

Re: Canadian Systemic Human Rights Review

We are extremely disappointed to not be with all of you in person to register our heartfelt support for the systemic human rights review that you have initiated in relation to the conditions of women prisoners across your country.

This review is relevant to all women prisoners, no matter in which country they are held and we thank you for the undertaking such an internationally significant action. The significance of this review to all women prisoners is not mere rhetoric, because in our country too the condition of women prisoners your submissions document and the increasing criminalisation of women, poverty and race are issues that could well describe our women's prisons. In Australia too, women's prisons are experiencing skyrocketing increases in numbers. The relentless forced march into prison of indigenous women, women with mental health issues and women with drug addictions, are the issues that we too face.

The access of women prisoners to lawyers in Australia to deal with internal complaints, disciplinary and classification issues is virtually non-existent. Sure, women have the 'right' to see a lawyer, but how does a woman prisoner pay to see one. Legal aid is not funded to do it. For the state to provide such a so-called 'right' but provide no funds to enable the most structurally powerless women to exercise that right is abusive and hypocritical.

Women prisoners in Victoria have only recently emerged from the horrors of four years in a profit-making private prison run by the Australian subsidiary of Corrections Corporation of America. Let none of you be fooled that private prisons deliver anything different from the state system, which is already so adept at failing to provide humane conditions for women prisoners. The priority of profit resulted in our women prisoners enduring the highest levels of self-harm and violence between women ever seen in this country. The smooth sales people from those corporations, who are always touting for a new dollar and new prison will never tell you this.

So sisters, we stand side by side with you. We have no doubt that the example you are taking in this systemic review is one that will ripple throughout the world of women's prisons. We honour your organization for taking this on, we honour the strength of women prisoners who at great risk to themselves speak out. The courage of women inside to do this work with you is an inspiration to us all. Thank you all.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda George
Federation of Community Legal Centres
Victoria, Australia