

## More Promises to Women not Kept

**March 8, 2005 (Ottawa)** – The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) and Strength in Sisterhood Society (SIS) are alarmed at what they consider to be tacit acceptance by the Canadian Human Rights Commission of the relative inaction of the Correctional Service of Canada. Four years ago today, CAEFS and NWAC, supported by more than 25 other national and international organizations, urged the CHRC to conduct a systemic review and issue a special report regarding the discriminatory treatment of federally sentenced women at the hands of the Canadian government.

The complaint was filed on behalf of all women serving federal terms of imprisonment, on the grounds that the manner in which the women prisoners are treated is discriminatory, contravening s. 3(1) of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. “On January 28, 2004, when the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) released its special report regarding the systemic discrimination and human rights violations experienced by women prisoners in Canada, entitled, *Protecting Their Rights: A Systemic Review of Human Rights in Correctional Services for Federally Sentenced Women*, we commended the Commission for its work and welcomed their demand that CSC act immediately to accommodate women's needs, rather than continuing to treat women like men ‘based on ‘stereotypes and perceptions’,” explained Dr. Ailsa M. Watkinson, President of CAEFS.

“We are all concerned about women prisoners’ experience and the discrimination they face on the basis of sex. We are also concerned about the discrimination on the basis of race for Aboriginal and other racialized women, especially those classified and segregated in maximum security units,” continued Beverley Jacobs, President of NWAC. “It seems that at every turn we are seeing the Canadian government continuing a shameful legacy of ignoring and further devastating our sisters. They ignore us when we are victimized and they ignore those who are criminalized as a result of their resistance to the same authority that furthers their victimization.”

“We cannot imagine on what basis Chief Commissioner Mary Gusella determined that the CSC’s ‘Action Plan’ could actually be interpreted as addressing the human rights violations chronicled in the CHRC report”, challenged Gayle Horii of Strength in Sisterhood. “This time last year, we were still incredibly optimistic. We believed that the Commission clearly understood the urgency of the need to address the human rights violations experienced by women prisoners. We are now left to wonder whether or not there was any intention by the CHRC to accept the submissions of the hundreds of national and international testimonials that their report had seemed to respond to.”

“We feel betrayed. This is simply not right. This is the year of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the implementation of section 15, we are approaching the 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Madam Justice Arbour’s scathing indictment of CSC’s treatment of women prisoner, and for the umpteenth year, the Correctional Investigator has challenged CSC’s assertions. Is the Chief Commissioner reneging upon the Commission’s agreement to monitor protections for this minority group of women? Is the CHRC simply a puppet body with no desire to challenge the status quo? They did not even consult with us; it looks like a back room deal to stymie the hard won fight for women prisoners in Canada,” declared Ms. Horii.

“Nobody from the Commission has visited the women’s prisons since they released their report publicly last January. They have obviously relied on what the Correctional Service of Canada says they plan to do. Surely there have been enough reports and enough inaction on the part of

Corrections to date to explain why they are not to be believed...” challenged Ann Hansen of Womyn4Justice and Strength in Sisterhood.

“The Commission's report clearly identifies the discrimination experienced by women prisoners. Last year, we welcomed the opportunity to work with CSC, as well as the Ministers of Public Safety and Justice, to help implement recommendations that are vital to improving the lives of some of Canada's most vulnerable women,” summed up Kim Pate, Executive Director of CAEFS. “Ever since Louise Arbour, who is now the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, issued her report in 1996, women within Canada and internationally have anxiously awaited Ministerial action.”

“We had hoped that the Canadian Human Rights Commission would demonstrate more commitment to remedying the discriminatory treatment, human rights, and other legal and policy violations, as well as the lack of oversight they chronicled in their report. We were heartened and held out hope last year when the Commission acknowledged the urgent need for fundamental changes to the way women prisoners are dealt with, especially Aboriginal women and women with mental health and /or cognitive disabilities. This year,” continued Kim Pate, “they appear to have not only applauded, but also seem to have adopted CSC’s practice of decision-making on the basis of biased and incomplete information. We call on the Commission to rethink its February 17, 2005 message and insist on Ministerial action now!”

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Contact:

**Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS)** is a federation of 25 local, community based service providers who work with and on behalf of victimized, criminalized, and imprisonment women and girls. On International Women's Day, March 8, 2001, CAEFS and NWAC launched the human rights claim on behalf of all federally sentenced women.

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**Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC)** has been the premier national Aboriginal women's organization since its inception in 1974. The mission of the NWAC is to achieve political, social and economic equality for all Aboriginal women in Canada whether they are First Nations (status and non-status), Inuit and Métis.

Beverley Jacobs, President or Sherry Lewis, Executive Director – 613-722-3033, ext. 221

**Strength in Sisterhood (SIS)** is a network of former federal women prisoners working in conjunction with other equality-seeking groups promoting the rights of federally sentenced women. Incorporated in 1995 for the purpose of advocating for supports and services for federally sentenced women.

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**Womyn 4 Justice** - A group of women ex-prisoners working collectively to both support women and children in and out of prison as well as working with other equality seeking women's groups to change the social conditions that are the root cause of crime.

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