



Sisters Inside Inc.

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Sisters Inside Inc. is an independent community organization which exists to advocate for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system

February 7, 2003

Kim Pate
Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies
701, 151 Slater Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5H3

Dear Kim,

Re: Systemic Review of Human Rights Abuses in Canada

Please forward this message to the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the women who have survived human rights abuses whilst in prison. Such experiences in prison impact them while they are inside and after they are released into their communities.

These women are to be commended for their bravery. I am overwhelmed at their courage to come forward and share what will no doubt be the worst examples of such abuses in prison. I hope that the Canadian Human Rights Commission recognize that these women who have survived the prison system, need to be respected and listened to as experts and the best chroniclers of what the real practices are in Canadian prisons.

As the Director of Sisters Inside, a community based organization that advocates for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system in Australia, alongside women in prison. We commend CAEFS for ensuring that women who have lived the experiences of Canadian women's prisons are promoted to the Canadian Human Rights Commission as they proceed with the systemic review of the human rights abuses experienced by federally sentenced women.

When I traveled Canada and visited many of the federal women's prisons in June last year, I was expecting to view and experience the most innovative practices in all areas of women's prisons in the world. The tremendous amount of publicity and propaganda from Canada that is promoted and distributed here in Australia certainly has led many of us to believe that Canada has a stellar reputation in terms of human rights and legal protections of prisoners. The reality was so very different than the image for which Canada is known.

We would very much appreciate it if you could submit the following information on behalf of Sisters Inside. The systemic human rights abuses that I witnessed as I visited women's prisons across Canada included:

- ♦ opposition and obstruction of prison officers in relation to women having access to their legal rights; for example, I witnessed that there were no forms to make complaints in many of the prisons I visited; women also spoke of the fear they lived in if they made a complaint about the prison or prison officers, the fear of repercussions was horrendous so many choose not to complain through legal processes;
- ♦ a majority of women clearly had mental health needs that seemed to not be addressed by professionals; and, even when there was 'help', women had no choice about getting community-based services to meet their health needs;
- ♦ degrading strip searching practices that constitute sexual assault by the state; a majority of women in prison have experienced sexual abuse and to continue such practices as strip searches and internal searches in prisons subjects women to state-sanctioned systematic abuse practices;
- ♦ the process of how and where women were imprisoned, some in the most disgusting prison cells and environments I have witnessed in my life - dungeon style cells that had little natural light, where women were locked in for 23 hours a day for many years; made all

the more disgusting as a result of exculpatory statements of wardens justifying such practices;

- ♦ lack of training, education or relevant trades/work placements or releases, despite repeated statements of prison officers in support of prisoner rehabilitation; I witnessed only one program being offered on my visit through Canadian prisons;
- ♦ lack of family and community support including regular contact visits with children, other family and community supports; the women expressed a desire and need for telephone contact, transportation to and from the prisons and accommodation for family members;
- ♦ institutional racism with the prison system was quite obvious as was the blatant racism towards individual women; I witnessed Aboriginal women being treated and spoken to differently and women who did not speak English as a first language. I was appalled at the over representation of Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons;
- ♦ the ongoing struggles women faced upon release, as a result of the lack of suitable accommodation and finances to be able to establish themselves in the community; further, there was a decided lack of specialized services available to support women, their children and families once they are released.

I understand that this is only a snap shot of what I witnessed whilst visiting Canadian women's prisons. If at all possible I would have traveled to Canada to provide this evidence to the Canadian Human Rights Commission in person. With great sadness this has not been possible, but we wish to ensure that the Commission knows that Sisters Inside Australia fully endorses the submissions tabled by Strength In Sisterhood (SIS) and CAEFS to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Finally, to all the women who have provided their information for these submissions, please advise them that Sisters Inside supports their efforts totally and unashamedly. I wish I could be there to provide direct support throughout the hearing, so take care, stand proud, and we hope that your efforts will bring such courage to the Commission that there will be decisions made to ensure the systemic human rights abuses in Canadian women's prisons are stopped.

Yours truly,

Debbie Kilroy O.A.M
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Director
Sisters Inside, Australia

C. Ms. Mary Gusella
Chief Commissioner
The Canadian Human Rights Commission