



**For Immediate Release**

## **CAEFS Statement re: Recent Reporting on Sexual Violence in Federal Prisons Designated for Women**

OTTAWA, ON (March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021): Today, the **Globe and Mail published an article** exposing Correctional Services Canada (CSC) for their failure to collect data reporting sexual violence perpetrated by staff against prisoners in Canadian federal prisons designated for women.

Through our decades of advocacy work monitoring conditions of confinement in Canadian federal prisons designated for women, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) has observed considerable indifference on behalf of CSC with respect to prisoners' experiences of sexual violence from CSC staff. CAEFS has consistently noted that CSC has failed to create an environment that is supportive for survivors or conducive to the reporting instances of sexual violence from staff.

While sexual violence in any context is egregious, the impact of sexual violence within prison is amplified. Many prisoners have already experienced sexual violence prior to their incarceration. Prisoners are isolated from external systems of support and must contend with the power imbalances between CSC staff and prisoners. Prisoners' accounts of their experiences are often disbelieved by CSC administration, who instead trust the accounting of their colleagues. This silencing of prisoners is facilitated by an absence of witnesses, and CSC's lack of documentation and tracking of reports over time.

CAEFS advocates have been made aware of and documented multiple allegations of sexual violence involving CSC staff. These incidents have included: unwelcomed comments of a sexual nature and sexualized looks from CSC staff; sexual assault wherein the survivor was discouraged from disclosing details of the incidents; demeaning and intrusive strip searches; CSC officers inappropriately viewing prisoners while they are using the toilet in their own cells.

One of the rare cases that has received media attention took place at the Nova Institution for Women (Nova) where multiple women reported being sexually assaulted by a CSC Correctional Officer. These women cared for one another, advocated for change, and called for trauma-informed support. The bravery that this took cannot be understated given the potential for, and fear of, retaliation that is so often expressed by prisoners who have experienced sexual violence. In early 2019, at the request of these women, advocates from the Atlantic Elizabeth Fry Societies joined their efforts and worked with them to forward their concerns.

The occurrence at Nova, and the other allegations outlined above, are indications of a far reaching and systemic issue. CAEFS is confident that there are many more incidents of sexual violence that remain underreported and under-investigated.

"Wherever there are vulnerable people who are institutionalized, there is a high risk of them being harmed, as we have seen in many of Canada's institutions over the years. In the case of CSC, the harm is intensified by existing cultures of disbelief." – Emilie Coyle, CAEFS Executive Director.

Now, during the COVID-19 crisis, with visits prohibited and significantly reduced access to external accountability mechanisms, there is less oversight than ever within CSC institutions, making prisoners even more vulnerable to all forms of abuse.

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**We renew our calls for:**

- (1) An end to the practice of strip searching in all federal prisons.
- (2) Access to external counselling and treatment - Given the lasting emotional and psychological impacts of sexual violence experiences, CAEFS recommends that incarcerated people be able to readily access free, community-equivalent, confidential counseling and treatment options for trauma and abuse that are independent and external to CSC.
- (3) The implementation of increased oversight and accountability measure of and for CSC to ensure that incarcerated people in CSC's care are better protected against future sexual violence.
- (4) A reduction to the number of people in prisons through legislative reform.
- (5) The redirection of funds away from CSC and towards communities and services working to prevent and repair harm;
- (6) A continued focus on the specific issues faced by people incarcerated in the federal prisons for women.

**And, given the lack of data that is available from CSC on this issue, we call for:**

- (7) an Independent, Public Inquiry that focuses specifically on the issue of staff-to-prisoner sexual coercion, violence and abuse - including the state sanctioned sexual violence experienced by those subjected to strip searches. This is necessary to understand the full scope of the issue and to prevent the harm from continuing.

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