



April 4th, 2022

Press Release:

The Courage of Formerly Incarcerated Women leads to Former Correctional Officer at Nova Institution Pleading Guilty to Sexual Assault and Breach of Trust

Ottawa, Ontario: Today, a former correctional officer at the Nova Institution has pled guilty to three counts of sexual assault (s.271 cc) and three counts of breach of trust (s.122 cc). This plea comes many years after multiple women, who were then incarcerated at the Nova Institution for Women, came forward to share their experiences of being sexually assaulted.

“We continue to live in a culture where women are not believed and are desensitized to report sexual violence. All the factors that prevent people from reporting experiences of sexual violence in community are compounded for women and gender diverse people who are, or have been, in prison,” said Emilie Coyle, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS). “Survivors of sexual violence are often confronted with the societal expectation of being “the model victim”. Too often, people who come forward are questioned and their credibility unduly scrutinized. For people who are or have been incarcerated, society already views them as less credible.”

In addition to overcoming the stigma against people in prison, incarceration creates additional disincentives for reporting: loss of liberty, particularly when the violence is perpetrated by someone in a position of authority (like a Correctional Officer). Indeed, Correctional Officers and other Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff wield incredible power over the liberty of incarcerated people. Coming forward with a claim against a CSC staff could result in retaliation that could jeopardize one’s chance of being granted parole when eligible. Despite this, these women still chose to share their stories. And they are not alone: In fact, in recent years, three of the six federal prisons designated for women have seen sexual assault charges brought against staff members.

“The women who have come forward, and were prepared to testify, did so despite considerable risk and despite the likelihood of re-traumatization. The decision to come forward points to the considerable bravery and tenacity of these women and a desire to prevent other people from being harmed,” commented Coyle.

Sexual violence in federal prisons goes beyond individual acts of violence: sexualized violence is part of the fabric of Correctional Service of Canada’s culture. Earlier this year, a class action lawsuit was started by female correctional officers against CSC alleging that their workplace is **“rife with gender-based harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination and assault”**. Given that their ‘workplace’ is the prison, the claims of these CSC staff also speak to the conditions facing incarcerated women.

In 2020, the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) – who is the legislated ombudsman for people in federal prison – released a report on their national investigation into sexual violence and coercion in federal prisons. Their investigation echoes the claims made by the female correctional officers: **“sexual violence is a systemic problem that exists in Canadian federal prisons”**. Moreover, the OCI found that CSC has demonstrated an ‘organizational indifference’ to the problem,

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evidenced by the fact that they do not collect, record, track statistics, or conduct research around sexual violence in the prisons.

Sexualized violence in the prisons designated for women is a persistent individual and a systemic problem. Inherent to the persistence of the problem is that CSC is not bound to act upon the recommendations of any external bodies – and there have been extensive recommendations to end this violence, including from CAEFS and OCI.

Coyle concluded by saying that “It is morally and legally incumbent on the Correctional Service of Canada and on the Federal Government to act to finally address this persistent systemic issue - an issue that impacts incarcerated people and CSC staff alike”.

For Comment

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About CAEFS: Since its inception in 1978, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) has worked to address the persistent ways in which women and gender-diverse people impacted by criminalization have been denied humanity and excluded from community. CAEFS advocacy utilizes a feminist rights-based approach and recognizes that, to create substantive equality, unique attention and approaches are needed to respond to incarcerated equity-deserving groups.

