

June 2, 2021

By Email

OPEN LETTER

TO: The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies
190 Bronson Ave.
Ottawa, ON K1R 6H4

Dear CAEFS Executive Director and Members of the Board of Directors,

In May 2019, your organization, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), held its annual conference. Women with lived prison experience were invited to attend this conference, though the majority of attendees did not have histories of criminalization. At your Annual General Meeting of the board, one of our sisters, with the support of a select few members, decided to speak. Despite the risks of unearthing one of the worst parts of her incarceration, she told the story of her traumas and sexual harassment while in prison. She explained that a male incarcerated with her in the mental health wing, a male pedophile with hundreds of girl victims, began targeting and victimizing her, and she was particularly triggered due to her past traumas. She explained how the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) had dismissed her complaints, threatened to isolate her, and labelled her calls for help as bigotry.

In a room of more than 60 women, our sister was met with total silence. Our sister was ushered from the room in tears. Once she was out of the room, the silence was broken by a buzz of comments: "I'm sorry for what happened to her, but you don't need a vagina to be a woman;" and "I am concerned about the transphobia in this room." Of course, transphobia is not a generalized "in the room" kind of airborne contagion, and we can only assume that she was referring to our sister as "the transphobia." The conversation reverted to all of the reasons that trans-women required the full support of the Elizabeth Fry Societies and CAEFS, as though our sister had not spoken at all. That day CAEFS adopted a blanket position of trans inclusion that, among other things, would come to mean supporting the transfer of any transgender identifying males from men's prisons to women's prisons.

"It's easy to pass policy that doesn't affect you."

~ Our sister

For a time after the 2019 CAEFS conference we hoped that CAEFS' lack of concern around transferring male-bodied individuals to women's prisons was due in part to a lack of information. We assumed that CAEFS might have dismissed our sister's story as bigotry because there was a lack of data around the transfers to women's prisons. Since that time, however, CAEFS and EFRY staff have repeatedly silenced criminalized women's reports, questions and input when they challenge CAEFS' transgender position – a position that was decided on by a large majority of women *without* experiences of criminalization.

"Nothing about us without us."

We, the criminalized women you purport to represent, are writing to you now to address how you have silenced us and ignored the urgent threats of violence to criminalized women and girls – threats which you have refused to acknowledge or address in favour of popular politics. Some of us have put questions and comments to you about these threats, only to have them instantly deleted from the chat sections of your webinars. Some of us have reached out in letters to inform you about sexual assault in the prisons and have received no response. Some of us have been dismissed by you as "TERFs." Some of us have entrusted you with our traumas, traumas which you have ignored, denied, or dismissed. We write to you now collectively as a group of women each with lived prison experience, and each with concerns about this situation and reports about how CAEFS has been neglecting us and our sisters inside.

Each one of us who writes to you now has witnessed severe and harmful issues with the numerous and increasing male transfers to the women's prisons. We know there are many more of us still who are too afraid to speak up. Every one of us knows a woman who has either been harassed, sexually harassed, assaulted, or sexually assaulted by a male transfer to a women's prison. For some of us, that woman *is* us.

We have friends, our sisters inside, who are currently struggling with harassment from male transfers. We have friends, other sisters inside who have been sexually assaulted by male transfers, some over extended periods of time. And we have friends, our sisters on release, who are currently struggling with harassment and assaults in halfway houses. We think back to the situation for women in the 1930s when a tunnel was built between P4W and Kingston Penitentiary so that women could be carried underground, to be sexually abused by male prisoners. What has changed? The tunnel is now ideological, and all it takes is a transfer.

Each one of us supports the rights of transgender people to live free from violence. A life free from violence is the fight we continue to wage for ourselves and for our sisters inside. We understand it all too well. We know that today's issues around male transfers did not exist in the same way before men began exploiting the self-identification policy. And while we cannot support the placement of any male people in women's prisons (including guards), we feel that trans-women should have their own, separate accommodation, outside of any women's prison, and one that is uniquely equipped to meet their needs – needs which are different from our own.

Some of us, and many of our sisters with lived experience, have been silenced, not only by male abusers but then again by CSC and by your organization. We know women inside and others who are out, who have been told both by CSC and by CAEFS that *any* complaint against a transgender person is transphobia. Knowing your position, many of our sisters inside are silent about ongoing abuses for fear that EFRYs and CAEFS will withdraw the only halfway house support available to them; contracts without which they cannot be granted parole. It is clear that you do not believe us and that you do not believe women.

CAEFS has repeatedly denied any knowledge of the violence against us. You deny being aware of the upcoming criminal trial against one transgender identifying male who committed multiple sexual assaults while in a women's prison. We have heard these reports, and so many others. If *you* have *not*, then you have not been listening to our sisters inside.

While you have been hosting conferences to teach your staff and others to complete, support and *ensure* transfer requests from the men's prisons, our sisters inside are being sexually assaulted by the male transfers aided by your efforts. Transgender self-identification is automatically believed without question while you continue to deny the violence against women that is taking place. The damage done by neglecting, dismissing, and negating women's accounts of violence, especially sexual violence, cannot be understated – we should never be made to suffer in silence and shame on top of the violence we have already endured.

At CAEFS, again and again, you talk of all of the vulnerabilities of criminalized women and girls. You say you are feminist and cite statistics easily because these statistics are not about you – they are about us. You list the ways we have histories of victimization and abandonment, but you do not listen to us, to the aftermath of our traumas. The aftermath is messy. It is uncomfortable. It isn't politically convenient. When you don't listen to us, you can't meaningfully connect the dots from our histories to our present. And you can't represent us or our interests.

We are here to tell you now - every one of us, and so many of our sisters inside, inherently understands that the presence of males in a prison that is already damaging and oppressive is triggering for us. We *are* the women with severe histories of trauma, most often at the hands of men. Some of us and our sisters inside were and have been unable to complete programming for fear of being triggered by the presence of males. We understand how these males will take advantage of the system to hold power over us. We know these men too well already.

For 25 years, CAEFS was under the leadership of Kim Pate, who visited with us and our sisters. She sat with us, listened to us, and hugged us. She meaningfully connected the dots, and in return we entrusted her with our histories – histories which we knew she would bring with her to every fight against our oppressors.

Today that trust is gone. When we and our sisters have tried to entrust you with our histories and our experiences you have silenced us, covering up our accounts with your own narrative of trans-inclusion. For decades CSC, too, has tossed women into systems made for men. In this 'new' fight for inclusion, we have once again been excluded.

The issues that are happening to imprisoned and criminalized women are personal to us and personal to our sisters. We understand that a number of CAEFS staff have family members who are transgender and that their personal sentiments around this issue may be informing CAEFS' denial of the violence happening to women inside. As CAEFS members, if you cannot value the experiences and the voices of the women you say you represent, opting instead to prioritize

your own personal issues, then you are in no position to be leaders. You are not in any position to represent criminalized women and girls.

At this point, the rift between CAEFS and criminalized women is vast. We urge you to take urgent action to listen and learn from the women you presume to “co-conspir[e]” with. We urge you to do what is necessary to reach out to women inside who are now largely without feminist supports because your positions and your politics have taken sides against them, blanket denying their accounts of violence and labelling them transphobic. We urge you to join the urgent push for an investigation into the issue of male-bodied transfers to women's prisons and to ban all male-bodied individuals from women's prisons. Lastly, if you cannot adequately represent us, then we urge you to recognize your privilege, your lack of expertise and step down from the positions you hold over us.

Sincerely,

Heather Mason	Natasha Barbe	Krystal Gilbert	Stephanie Martin	Tanya Bogdanovich
Alia Pierini	Elizabeth Rubec	Jill Gignac	Ashley Young	Beverly Fullerton
Jacob Birtch	Stephanie Martin	Chantal Hubick	Sabrina Whiting	Tara Sanderson
*Anonymous	Desiree Gamblin	Brittany Hulan	Jenny Lariviere	Mariam Nouri
*Anonymous				

cc: Salma Ataullahjan, Chair, The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights
ridr@sen.parl.gc.ca

Ivan Zinger, Correctional Investigator of Canada, Office of the Correctional Investigator
org@oci-bec.gc.ca

Marie-Claude Landry, Chief Commissioner, Canadian Human Rights Commission
fiona.keith@chrc-ccdp.gc.ca

Angela Arnet Connidis, Deputy Commissioner for Women, Correctional Service Canada
angela.connidis@csc-scc.gc.ca

Bill Blair, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness,
Bill.Blair@parl.gc.ca

Shannon Stubbs, Shadow Minister for Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness,
Shannon.Stubbs@parl.gc.ca

**Some women have participated anonymously for fear of repercussions.*