



Anglican Communion Office
at the United Nations

Missing Aboriginal Women in Canada

The many aboriginal women in Canada who have gone missing or been murdered has gained public interest and concern over the last several years. According to some sources, 520 aboriginal women have been missing or murdered since 1970. Others argue, however, that this number is actually much higher, but due to the lack of reporting and police involvement, many cases are not even acknowledged. The problem of missing and murdered women is a complex issue involving longstanding violence, health issues, housing issues, economic security, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, racism and other social issues.

The perceived status of aboriginal women as “backwards,” childlike and highly emotional as well as drug addicts and sex workers prompts the government and society to turn a blind eye, ultimately silencing and ignoring these women. In media reports, the lifestyles of these missing women, such as their drug and alcohol abuse are harped on, somehow suggesting that they “deserved” their fate. Often the police do not take the time to find the bodies of the women, and even if the bodies are found, little effort is made to bring the killers to justice.

This human rights issue is incredibly important to address as aboriginal women continue to be objectified, disrespected, dishonored, ignored, and killed often without impunity.

The pattern looks like this:

- Racist and sexist stereotypes deny the dignity and worth of Indigenous women, encouraging some men to feel they can get away with violent acts of hatred against them.
- Decades of government policy have impoverished and broken apart Indigenous families and communities, leaving many Indigenous women and girls extremely vulnerable to exploitation and attack.
- Many police forces have failed to institute necessary measures – such as training, appropriate investigative protocols and accountability mechanisms – to eliminate bias in how they respond to the needs of Indigenous women and their families.

Organizations involved in helping to solve the problem:

- Sisters in Spirit Initiative- a five-year research, education, and policy initiative supported by the Status of Women Canada- to address the root causes, circumstances and trends of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls:
http://www.nwac.ca/files/reports/2010_NWAC_SIS_Report_EN.pdf
 - Important to note that some people have criticized this organization for questionable integrity of their database. Article can be found here:
http://www.genuinewitty.com/2013/02/26/sisters-in-spirit-the-native-womens-association-of-canadas-forgotten-missing-feat-status-of-women-canada-10-million/?doing_wp_cron=1375108478.5153748989105224609375
- Aboriginal Healing Foundation
 - Key Findings of recent reports:
 - Disproportionately high number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women
 - Majority of disappearances and deaths occurred in the western province of Canada
 - More than half the women were under 31
 - Most of the women were mothers; 88% of women and girls left behind children and grandchildren
 - 17% of those who murdered women were strangers
 - Half of the murder cases remain unsolved
 - Majority of cases occurred in urban areas
- Amnesty International - along with other organizations, call for a comprehensive national action plan to stop violence against women
- Native Women's Association of Canada- help empower women by being involved in developing and changing legislation which affects them, and involving them in the development and delivery of programs promoting equal opportunity for aboriginal women:
http://www.nwac.ca/files/reports/2010_NWAC_SIS_Report_EN.pdf

Domestic violence:

- May contribute to some cases of missing and murdered women
- Culture of violence that is rapidly being infused into the fabric of almost every aspect of social life, and is increasingly pervasive.
- Less to do with the individual, and more to do with community history and present day dynamics

Media Stereotypes:

- Media and TV news coverage often supports the stereotypes of aboriginal women as sex workers and drug addicts
- Media depiction supports “the view that many of these missing women were located beyond the pale of civilized society—peripatetic wanderers forever in search of the latest fix and with no sense of responsibility” (Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 898).
- Part of problem is the longstanding belief that aboriginal peoples are “backwards,” childlike, unreasonable, and highly emotional people (Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 899).
- Women are also silenced as victims (Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 899)
- Women oscillate between invisibility and hypervisibility: invisible as victims of violence and hypervisible as deviant bodies (Jiwani & Young 2006, p. 899).
- Sex workers are particularly at risk: “Mothers, wives, and daughters, or traditionally “virtuous” women—are worth saving. Sex workers, however, are set up in opposition to these women within the television narratives...As runaways and throwaways of society, these women are not worth saving” (Jiwani & Youth, 2006, p. 900).

Suggestions for further change:

- Increase resources to provide assistance to victims and foster economic independence, the supervision of abusers, and measures aimed at breaking the cycle of violence (Man, 2005, p. 3)
- Access to appropriate programs for: prevention, targeting youth, shelters both on and off reserve, transition homes, skills and building capacity within Aboriginal organizations (Man, 2005, p. 3)
- Provide better funding and more independence to Aboriginal organizations that seek to facilitate women’s involvement and provide leadership training (Man, 2005, p. 7)
- Improve health services, including mental health

Helpful resources:

Jiwani, Y., & Young, M. L. (2006). Missing and murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31. Retrieved from <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/1825>

- Scholarly article which highlights findings from a study that examined the newspaper articles that focused on the stories of missing women in Canada

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series: Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada. (2003). Retrieved from <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/domestic-violence.pdf>

- Sheds light on Domestic Violence and in general attitudes toward aboriginal women, which may contribute to some missing cases

What Their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters in Spirit Initiative. (2010). Retrieved from Native Women's Association of Canada website:

http://www.nwac.ca/files/reports/2010_NWAC_SIS_Report_EN.pdf

- Examines missing and murdered women and explores the idea that a disproportionate amount of these females are aboriginal women

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2011001/article/11439-eng.htm>

- Statistics about the violent victimization of Aboriginal Women in the Canadian provinces, 2009

<http://missingpeople.net/home.html>

- Victims of the Vancouver Downtown Eastside murdered and missing women; included are pictures and brief biographies of the women

Dara Culhane. "Their Spirits Live within Us: Aboriginal Women in Downtown Eastside Vancouver Emerging into Visibility." *The American Indian Quarterly* 27.2 (2003): 593-606. Project MUSE. Web. 29 Jul. 2013. Retrieved from: <http://muse.jhu.edu>

- Scholarly article concerning the Vancouver Downtown Eastside murdered and missing women

Status of Women Canada. (2005, August). *Aboriginal Women: An Issues Background* (M. Man, Author). Retrieved from <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/SW21-146-2005E.pdf>

- Highlights difficulties Aboriginal women face, many of which may contribute to the prevalence of missing and murdered women