

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: Truth Telling towards Reconciliation

In December of 2022 the stories in our papers and on our nightly news focused on 4 murdered Indigenous women. Morgan Harris, Mercedes Myran, Rebecca Contois and Mashkode Bizhiki'ikwe (Buffalo Woman). The daughter of Morgan Harris, Cambria Harris, has been fighting for action ever since.

When 15-year-old Tina Fontaine's body was found in the Red River in 2014 Cambria was in a march in Winnipeg carrying a sign that read "I will not be next". She was 13 years old at the time. No one could have foreseen that she would be at a vigil for her own mother 8 years later. Her fight for justice has taken her to Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was released in June, 2019. The Inquiry was officially launched in August, 2016. It is over 1200 pages long and contains 231 individual Calls for Justice. More than 2,380 family members, survivors of violence, experts and Knowledge Keepers shared their stories during the 2 years of cross country evidence gathering and hearings. Not surprisingly multigenerational and intergenerational trauma along with marginalization due to poverty, insecure housing or homelessness and barriers to education, employment, healthcare and cultural support and acceptance have played a major role in the violence that Indigenous women and girls have experienced. Knowledge Keepers and experts spoke to the colonial and patriarchal policies that took away their traditional roles and leadership in their communities thereby diminishing their status in society. This has left them vulnerable to abuse and violence.

The response by Winnipeg police to the discovery of the 4 women and the possibility that their remains are in landfill sites on the outskirts of the city has left many of us shaken. How many of us would tolerate the idea that this would be our mother's, sister's, aunties or other loved ones resting place? How after the 2 years of agonizing testimony and a final report did this still happen in 2022?

The truth is that Indigenous women who were status between the ages of 25 and 44 are 5 times more likely to die of violence than all other women in this age group according to a 1996 government statistic and reported by Amnesty International. More recent statistics reveal that First Nations women are 12 times more likely to go missing or be murdered than any other woman in Canada according to the Canadian Woman's Foundation in December, 2022.

These are mere statistics. But these women are our sisters. They are not just a story. They are our people. The history of colonization has severed their connections to their culture, to their kinship. All of the policies from residential schools to the sixties scoop and any other attempt at assimilation

form the foundation to the violence faced by our Indigenous women and girls today.

Colonial violence that ultimately affected cultural practices related to health and well being, to family and community relationships increased interpersonal violence and other forms of violence because of the impacts on the physical, emotional and spiritual health of Indigenous Peoples across our country. The right to health is paramount to decreasing the violence that our First Nations sisters face daily.

Indigenous women and girls live with the threat of physical, emotional, economic, social and cultural insecurity. It is a constant daily reality for many. Security and safety must be addressed according to the National Inquiry.

The right to justice and Indigenous women's encounters with the justice system is another facet in the Inquiry. The stories told by the families and survivors told of basic disconnect between a justice system created by the colonial powers that compromised the women's basic right to justice that are afforded to most Canadians. Most families spoke to the ways in which they felt the police services, as they currently exist, failed to properly investigate the crimes committed against their loved ones. This led to a lack of closure and a feeling that justice had failed their loved ones.

Firstly, I believe that we must address this as a systemic failure for all of us. Each woman, from Helen Betty Osborne in 1971 to Tina Fontaine in 2014 to the women of 2022 deserve more than our condolences to family and friends. They deserve our demands for justice. They deserve all of us to commit to truth finding. They deserve our love, respect and compassion as do their families and loved ones.

Remember that we are all a Treaty People.