



Native Women's Association of Canada

More than Invisible, Invisible to Real Action

NWAC's response to the Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women (SCVAIW)

Invisible Women, A Call To Action.

A report on missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

"This would have been an opportune time for the Government to demonstrate to all Canadians, and to our International colleagues as well, that it truly is committed to ending all forms of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. This report fails to show the needed commitment and resources to adequately address this ongoing tragedy – a tragedy that is a reflection on Canada as a whole." NWAC president, Michèle Audette (March 2014).

Founded in 1974, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national organization representing Aboriginal women with the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well being of First Nations and Métis women within First Nation, Métis and Canadian societies. The NWAC is the only national Aboriginal organization with a department solely focussed on addressing violence prevention and safety for Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.

The NWAC and its Provincial and Territorial Member Associations (PTMAs) has worked tirelessly with Aboriginal women and girls from all walks of life all over Turtle Island with the premise of supporting and ensuring the continuation of our Nations, seven generations into the future. This dedication and commitment to family and community is now forty years strong and carries with it the respect, devotion, and integrity that can only be gained through relationship building, trust, and shared experiences.

NWAC has been addressing the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada for many years and remains deeply concerned that this issue is far from being resolved. NWAC documented 582 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada through the *Sisters In Spirit* project, which ended in 2010; however, we continue to hear of "new" cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls from various regions in Canada. Just recently, research carried out by an Ottawa University Doctoral candidate, revealed that number to be well over 800. NWAC is the only organization to have systemically collected data on this issue and in doing so, was able to identify the many factors and commonalities that put these women and girls at risk.

The ground-breaking work undertaken by NWAC has led to much needed attention right across Canada on the issue of missing and murdered people in general. This has resulted in an increased awareness right across the board, added political will and new initiatives that led to key justice actions such as the National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains. It has also led to specific responses to issues such as trafficking of people in Canada, a topic that had previously not been addressed.

The NWAC has been and continues to support all initiatives and actions that address the safety and victim needs of all Canadians, regardless of ethnicity. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the resulting Government actions are not specific to Aboriginal women and girls, who, it has been proven, are at a greater risk of experiencing all forms of violence, including being murdered. This government has been quite adamant that they are well aware of the root causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, yet they have cut funding and resources for initiatives that specifically serve this vulnerable population.

On February 14, 2013, Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Member of Parliament for St. Paul's, presented a Motion to the House of Commons to strike a Special Committee on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. This Motion was unanimously passed in the House of Commons on February 26, 2013. At this time, NWAC supported the concept of a committee to begin addressing the issue as an important first step in laying the ground work and foundation that would naturally have led to the recommendation of a National Public Inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls or a National Action Plan to address violence against Aboriginal women and girls. NWAC did not see the establishment of the committee as a replacement for a full-scale national public commission of inquiry and a national action plan for Aboriginal women. It is unfortunate that these two key elements were not presented as recommendations when the Committee tabled its report on March 6, 2014.

The NWAC was concerned from the onset that without the expressed and complete inclusion of Aboriginal women and the expertise that could only be provided by National Aboriginal Organizations (NAOs) representatives, notably the NWAC, the committee would fall short of its' mandate. The socio-economic issues in conjunction with the racialized and sexualized violence experienced by Aboriginal women and girls is a complex and challenging issue that is best addressed and known by those who directly experience it.

Early on, the NWAC offered its' expertise and full involvement throughout the Committee's deliberations. The NWAC sought ex-officio, non-voting membership status such as that given with the Penner Commission. The Penner Commission¹ enabled non-parliamentary members to participate fully in the parliamentary committee, and provided them with the ability to participate in the committee work plan, witness list, questioning of witnesses, travel with the committee members, and develop the final report.

This request was denied. Instead the Committee responded by way of a motion in November 2013 granting NWAC "expert advisor" and "expert witness" status; but failed to provide NWAC with the necessary materials to action the motion. It is important to note that the Committee had already held 9 out of 20 meetings it had planned and was working on the final theme of the work plan before the preparing the final report. The NWAC was not provided with the SCVAIW work plan, witness list, committee budget, or other internal documents or resources to facilitate real engagement, inclusion and participation.

The NWAC believes that the SCVAIW's offer to appear before the committee as an "expert advisor" and "expert witness" was meant to pacify NWAC and reduce negative public and media criticism. It is unfortunate that in the Committee's final report NWAC is accused of

¹ Penner Commission also known as the *Special Committee on Indian Self-Government*, 1982.

failing its role, when the NWAC had offered its' expertise and full participation in every aspect of the Committee's work but this was relegated to that of being an expert advisor/witness by the Committee. NWAC fully expected, in the very least, after the passing of the motion to enable NWAC's role of "expert advisor" and "expert witness" that meetings would be held to strategize on how best to address the issue of violence against Aboriginal women and girls in relation to the mandate of the SCVAIW. As indicated, no sharing of information to NWAC was provided which placed NWAC in the precarious situation of appearing to "rubber stamp" the work and final report of the committee without having fully been engaged.

The SCVAIW met for the first time on 26 March 2013, and organized its study along three main themes: violence and its root causes, front-line assistance, and preventing violence against Aboriginal women and girls, and shortly thereafter developed their witness list based on these themes. The NWAC and other Aboriginal organizations were not asked to provide input into the development of the Committee's work plan or witness list, nor was any information provided that outlined how and why these particular themes were developed.

The SCVAIW held 20 meetings in total, hearing from 62 witnesses, 15 of which were family members. Through NWAC's commitment and effort, the Committee was able to hear from family members of murdered Aboriginal women the special session held on December 9, 2013. By coincidence, the NWAC had convened its annual Family Gathering on that particular weekend, bringing together dozens of family members of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to Ottawa. The SCVAIW wanted to hear from family members about their personal experiences and requested NWAC's assistance in this regard. Even though NWAC felt shut out to the Committee process, NWAC assisted in organizing the dialogue session between the Committee and the family members.

The SCVAIW membership included seven members from the Conservative Party, four members from the NDP, and one member from the Liberal Party. All members from the Conservative party were Parliamentary Secretaries, except for the Chair. While the use of Parliamentary Secretaries can be beneficial in many ways, it can also be problematic for a number of reasons; such as that Government witnesses would be less likely to speak critically about their department's work and would opt instead to highlight the current government initiatives. In addition they would be less likely to oppose the current government's stance on a National Inquiry on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and national action plan on ending violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

The SCVAIW's final report and its recommendations did not include the call for a National Public Inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and a National Action Plan to address violence against Aboriginal women and girls. Of the 16 recommendations provided by the Committee, only five refer specifically to Aboriginal women and girls. The recommendations are primarily general in nature and support existing initiatives and actions that correspond to current Government priorities. Further, there are no concrete actions that will immediately respond to the needs of Aboriginal women and girls who are most at risk and to families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls who need access to support services and resources. Indeed, one may perceive that the overall flavour of the report places the onus and blame on Aboriginal people alone.

It is interesting to note that within the SCVAIW report, there is no mention of the impacts of colonization and the need for real and comprehensive reconciliation. Healing cannot be a one sided affair, as it leads to victim blaming, discrimination, and racism. The systemic issues and root causes that impede healthy life-sustaining progress for Aboriginal people needs to be fully recognized. It could be said, that the SCVAIW itself has demonstrated how these systemic issues and root causes present themselves by virtue of their interactions with the NWAC and its paternalistic approach to engagement. It is a great shame that the Committee convened to undertake such important work would be the same Committee that acted as the barrier to the success of its own work. The most natural conclusion to this work should have been a call to real action by way of a national inquiry and action plan. The NWAC is fearful that the SCVAIW's report is simply that, another report to collect dust, another year of non-action by this Government, and how many lives have been lost during this time? Where are the real solutions, the real actions promised when this committee was first established? Why are there more general actions offered – but none specific to addressing our real needs as Aboriginal women? What do these recommendations offer the families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls?

NWAC Recommends:

- That a National Public Commission of Inquiry be held on the issue of Missing And Murdered Aboriginal Women And Girls In Canada;
- That a National Action Plan to Address Violence Against Aboriginal Women and Girls be established;
- That a yearly forum be held to inform and educate Canadians, service providers, educators, policing agencies, policy and program managers, directors, leaders, and politicians on the issue of violence against Aboriginal women and girls and missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Further that a special segment of this forum include convening family representatives of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to ensure their voices are heard and that solutions to address their unique circumstances be developed;
- That Special Ministerial funding is set aside to revive and update the NWAC Sisters In Spirit Database and that funding be allocated for research on the incidence and prevalence of violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

The SCVAIW report included dissenting reports from both the NDP and Liberal parties. The NWAC supports the dissenting reports as tabled.