

# MMIW: Relationship and reconciliation

## COLONIAL LEGACIES

The missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) phenomenon is a legacy of colonialism and represents the dark reality of racism that has banished Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> people to the margins of Canadian society. Although Canada's Indigenous<sup>2</sup> people are the fastest growing and youngest population in the nation, there is a lack of respectful relationships with settlers and government. Aboriginal people have been aware of the violence against Indigenous women for over a century and the issue has only recently been brought to light in the Canadian consciousness. Media coverage of MMIW and government responses to calls for action are the impetus for public education and reconciliation through new relationships with Indigenous peoples. Indigenous cultural practices and values include the storytelling tradition, and as Indigenous people tell their stories and are listened to, respectful relationships are possible. However, it will be years before we can come to terms with and heal from our shared history; this is a necessary part of the change process for creating positive future outcomes in Canadian society.

The statistics about MMIW are stark and staggering. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police report on MMIW in Canada (RCMP, 2014) examined 1,181 cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women between 1980 and 2012 and showed that Aboriginal women were at a higher risk of being victims of violence than non-Aboriginal women. The report stated that Aboriginal women make up 4.3 percent of the Canadian population but account for 16 percent of female homicides and 11.3 percent of missing women (RCMP, 2014, p. 3). Statistics Canada (2016) reveals population data demonstrating that Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal women in particular, are suffering from intergenerational trauma

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and marginalization, as evidenced by poverty and education inequities and family system and health disparities. Media reports (television, news websites, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter) abound with unsolved cases of MMIW. The stories of the women, their families, and communities are touching and shed light on the insurmountable pain of loss and unresolved grief that Aboriginal peoples are continuing to experience.

## THE CANADIAN RESPONSE AND ACTION

As national and international bodies, and Aboriginal communities and organizations, continue to voice concerns for the safety of Aboriginal women in Canada, federal and provincial government actions have been stimulated. Forums and inquiries have brought attention to this issue, including the seminal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996), Amnesty International Canada's *Stolen Sisters* report (2004), and the report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in British Columbia, Canada* (2014).

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) released a report called *What Their Stories Tell Us*, presenting five years of research by the Sisters In Spirit initiative (NWAC, 2010). In 2015, NWAC released a framework, developed from a national round table, to prevent and address violence against Indigenous women and girls. The NWAC report (2015) notes that various jurisdic-

tions and Indigenous communities have responded with a range of activities and that a number of cross-jurisdictional efforts are under way to address the violence. NWAC launched the Faceless Dolls Project in 2012 and the Traveling Exhibit in 2013, which carries forward the visual representation of strong and beautiful Aboriginal women who have become "faceless" victims of crime. Every time a statistic is used to explain the marginalization of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada, NWAC wishes to remind all Canadians that: "We remember that a beautiful Aboriginal woman is represented by every number shared, that each statistic tells a story" (NWAC website).

The Walking With Our Sisters (WWOS) memorial and art exhibit was launched in 2012. Over 1,700 pairs of moccasin vamps (the tops of moccasins) are included in a pathway within the exhibit to represent the unfinished lives of missing or murdered Indigenous women. One hundred and eight pairs of children's moccasin vamps are dedicated to children who never returned home from residential schools. The WWOS memorial is being hosted at various North American locations and is currently booked through 2018 in more than 30 locations (WWOS website).

Government initiatives at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels demonstrate interest in forging a relationship with Aboriginal people (United Nations, 2007; RCAP, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015a, 2015b; Government of Canada, 2008). In 2013, the Canadian Parliament established the Special Committee of the House of Commons on Violence Against Indigenous Women, which heard testimony from numerous witnesses, including representatives of national and regional Aboriginal organ-

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izations, government officials, front-line service providers, and the family members of missing or murdered Aboriginal women.

In 2014, the city of Winnipeg erected a monument to honour MMIW (CBC News, 2014). The site is the first of its kind in Canada to provide a place for families to mourn their loss. The monument also stimulates self-reflection and critical awareness of the issue among all Canadians. Recently, the city of Winnipeg also launched a business signage campaign in the downtown area to welcome Aboriginal peoples. The signs are in Ojibwe, Cree, Dene, Michif, Dakota, and Inuktitut, as well as French and English (CBC News, 2016). Another related project is currently under way in the city of Toronto.

A Government of Canada action plan (2016) highlights federal actions for the next five years to address violence, support victims, and protect Aboriginal women and girls from family violence and violent crimes. Communities are acknowledged as being in the best position to lead in developing solutions to violent crime, by taking measures to ensure the safety of women and girls, providing access to services for victims, and raising awareness within communities that violence is unacceptable. Provinces and territories play a key role in collective efforts for change.

## RECONCILIATION WITHIN RELATIONSHIP

A movement toward cultural resurgence, healing, and wellness is under way in Canada and there is talk of “reconciliation.” Aboriginal languages, values, and world views are supportive factors recognized in the healing and reconciliation movement. Traditional elders play an important role in the process because they possess the cultural wisdom to guide *bimaadiziwin* (“a good life” in Anishinaabemowin). Elder Reg Crowshoe told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that “Indigenous peoples’ world views, oral history traditions, and practices have much to teach us about how to establish respectful

relationships among peoples and with the land and all living things. Learning how to live together in a good way happens through sharing stories. . . . [R]econciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the earth” (TRC, 2015a, pp. 17-18).

Healthy and balanced individuals are capable of establishing and maintaining good relationships. The Canadian public is becoming aware of the historical contributions that Aboriginal people have made to society. As a result, healing from our shared history progresses and new relationships are forged. The MMIW phenomenon is being interrupted by education and societal discourse based on mutual respect and understanding so that negative attitudes and violent behaviours can become a thing of the past. The shared actions of Indigenous people and Canadians to create respectful relationships in Canadian society will bring reconciliation to the next seven generations. 🍁

## NOTES

1. The term “Aboriginal” is commonly used in Canada and is used in this context to refer specifically to the Indigenous people in Canada (Helin, 2006). “Aboriginal” is the word used in Canada’s Constitution and includes “Indians, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.”
2. “Indigenous” is used within the context of global terms to refer to Aboriginal people, or native people. Indigenous people are groups protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their linguistic and historical ties to a particular territory and their cultural and historical distinctiveness from other populations.

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## SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS

Facebook, Missing & Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada. This page provides a space for family members to honour the lives of their loved ones through personal stories, photos, or other important aspects of

someone's life. It is hoped that this memorial space will balance the death-related details the media focus on by celebrating the life and value of each Indigenous woman or girl. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/pg/mmiwg2s/about/>

Native Women's Association of Canada, Faceless Dolls Project. This site provides a toolkit for hosting a doll-making event for education and commemoration of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and information on the Traveling Exhibit. Available at <https://www.nwac.ca>

No More Silence. This community-run database documents the violent deaths of Indigenous women and two-spirit and trans people in collaboration with Families of Sisters In Spirit and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, and with the assistance of Dr. Janet Smylie (Métis) and Conrad Prince of the Well Living House at the Keenan Research Centre. Available at <http://www.istartswithus-mmiw.com>

Walking With Our Sisters. Learn about the hosted locations for the memorial and art exhibit installation. Available at <http://walkingwithoursisters.ca>

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