



## FOREVER LOVED

Exposing the Hidden Crisis of Missing and  
Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada

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## 11.

### Sisterhood on the Frontlines

The Truth As We Hear It from Indigenous Women

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APPLYING A FEMINIST ANALYSIS to men's violence against Indigenous women involves a critical examination of the power imbalances between men and women, between white people and Indigenous peoples, and between the wealthy and the poor. It compels us to understand how those in power maintain their power and control over the oppressed. All systems of oppression—sexism, racism, colonialism and capitalism—intersect in the lives of Indigenous women who experience men's violence.

#### THE COLONIAL CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN

From the 1870s to the late 1980s, the government of Canada stripped Indigenous women of their rights through the implementation and enforcement of the *Indian Act*. By 1850, there were already laws in place that defined an Indian, and the state had created reserves as a way to dictate where Indians could live. These laws shaped the *Indian Act* of 1876, which inserted a belief in the racial superiority of white colonizers into federal law and legalized the assimilation and eradication of the Indigenous population. The *Indian Act* contained particular implications for women; it entrenched patriarchy by transmitting Indian status through the male line, which, simultaneously, eroded women's traditionally held roles.

Under the act, Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men or Indigenous men from other nations had their Indian status

taken away. Loss of status meant that these women lost the right to live in their own communities. This sexist policy resulted in the uprooting and displacement of thousands of Indigenous women and damaged the ties to their families by denying Indian status to their children and grandchildren. Isolation from their communities, and the resulting loss of kinship support networks, forced Indigenous women to depend on their husbands. Sadly, for many Indigenous women this forced dependence meant staying with their male partners even in the face of abuse. The *Indian Act* was only partially corrected in 1985 and again in 2010. Indigenous peoples are still governed by this *Indian Act*, which continues to perpetuate racist and sexist discrimination.

Part of the intergenerational devastation of colonization for Indigenous peoples was the residential school system, which was operated by the church and state in co-operation. In 2015, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada opens by highlighting residential schools as a crucial element of colonial policy:

For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Indigenous policy were to eliminate Indigenous governments; ignore Indigenous rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Indigenous peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide." (1)

Indigenous children were forcefully removed from their families and communities and placed into residential schools, where their cultural teachings and practices were prohibited, they were denied the right to speak their traditional languages, and they were deprived of their traditional foods, clothing, and protocols. The children were often physically abused and sexually assaulted. Many did not survive.

The colonial legacy of forced child apprehension continued through the Sixties Scoop, which started in 1961 and continued into the 1980s. The common practice of the child welfare authorities

during this time in Canada was to "scoop" almost all Indigenous newborns from their mothers who lived on reserves. At its peak, one in four status Indian children were forcibly and without consent taken from their parents and communities and remained in the "care" of the state. Records show that in 1951, twenty-nine Indigenous children were in provincial care in British Columbia; by 1964, the number jumped to 1,466. Indigenous children, who had comprised only 1 percent of all children in care, came to make up just over 34 percent (Bennett and Sadrehashemi). Federal initiatives, such as the Adopt an Indian Métis program, aggressively advertised Indigenous children to white adoptive parents. It is estimated that between 11,000 and 28,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed with white families in Canada, the U.S., and Europe during the "scoop."

Raven Sinclair, a university professor, describes how the Sixties Scoop continued the colonial policy and practice of aggressive assimilation through child apprehension: "The white social worker, following on the heels of the missionary, the priest, and the Indian agent, was convinced that the only hope for the salvation of the Indian people lay in the removal of their children" (67). It was not until 1980 that the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* required social workers to notify the band council if an Indigenous child was removed from the community. During this time, the government changed the child welfare laws so that bands could run their own social service, yet problems similar to those seen during the Sixties Scoop persist.

A 2008 report from the auditor general of Canada shows Indigenous children to be vastly overrepresented in care, citing that 51 percent of all children in care in British Columbia are Indigenous, even though Indigenous people comprise 4 percent of the province's population. The report further states that Aboriginal children in British Columbia are "six times more likely to be taken into care than a non-Aboriginal child" (2). In this context the term care is ironic, as the appalling lack of care given to Indigenous children apprehended by child welfare systems is now widely accepted. These examples are only just part of the devastating evidence of state-sanctioned discrimination against Indigenous peoples. Racism, poverty, displacement, child apprehension, and the dismal failure

of the child protection authorities—all brutal legacies of colonization—conspire to make Indigenous women disproportionately vulnerable to men's violence.

#### THE TRUTH AS WE KNOW IT: FRONTLINE FEMINIST RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In 1985, an Indigenous woman, who was a member of Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter at the time, wrote the article "The Truth as We Know It" on behalf of the collective. The article states:

It is overwhelmingly white men born into rich families who hold the positions of most power in this society. They make the rules and social policy for the rest of us, including the large numbers of the poor, women and people of colour. There is overwhelming evidence that men rape within the same class or race and down. Although we know that violence against women is perpetrated by men of every race and class, the jails are disproportionately filled with native men and poor and working class men.

Thirty years later, based on our frontline work with women, in particular with women of colour and Indigenous women, this statement is still very much the truth as we know it.

In Canada, Indigenous women—who are at the bottom of the sex, race, and class hierarchies—are victims of all men's violence. They are raped and beaten by their fathers, their domestic partners, and other men in their communities. Outside of their communities, they are raped, beaten, forced into prostitution, and killed by men of every race. Wherever Indigenous women turn, they are subjected to horrifying, and sometimes deadly, attacks from men, frequently white men. A sobering statistic reminds us that Indigenous women between the ages of twenty-five and forty four who do have status under the *Indian Act* are five times more likely than all other women of the same age to die as the result of violence (NWAC 14).

Exposing men for their violence against women is one of the most important achievements of the feminist movement. Starting in the late 1960s, women came together in consciousness-raising

groups to reveal to one another their individual experiences of oppression. As Carol Hanisch explains "Consciousness-raising was a way to use our own lives our combined experiences to understand concretely how we are oppressed, and who was actually doing the oppressing. We regarded this knowledge as necessary for building such a movement." Through these discussions, women realized that violence against women is a collective experience that affects all women. Women also realized that this collective experience creates and reinforces the power relationships between men and women. This understanding was the catalyst for the creation of anti-violence feminist services, and it has been deepened and reinforced by the knowledge accrued by frontline workers from rape crisis centres, transition houses, and women's centres.

The accumulation of stories told by hundreds of thousands of women to frontline workers all over the country and in other parts of the world has created an invaluable knowledge on how men use their relative power as men—and often the relative power of their race and class—to attack women. It also exposed and crystallized how different patriarchal institutions, such as the church and the state, collude with men's violence by increasing women's vulnerability and by refusing to hold men accountable for their sexist attacks on women.

Since 1973, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter, where we work, has been available to women who call the confidential crisis line to report and resist men's violence, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Every day, women call our crisis lines to reveal their experiences of incest, rape, prostitution, harassment, and wife assault. Women tell us about violent attacks by men. We connect these individual women's experiences to one another and to our own, in a feminist anti-violence praxis that understands that no woman is free from men's violence or the threat of men's violence. Men's violence against women is a force that exploits and enforces all women's inequality.

We know that we cannot adequately respond to a woman who calls us until we understand the particular power of the man who has attacked her. We understand that sexism and racism reinforce each other, and, therefore, we ask every woman who calls us to tell us if her attacker is a white man or not and what her race is.

Because we ask about race, we know that Indigenous women are disproportionately represented among our callers and residents. In 2015, more than a third of the calls we received were from Indigenous women and more than a third of the women and children we housed were Indigenous. Indigenous women are subject to the violence that all women experience, and they suffer at the hands of men of all races, from all communities, in all locations.

In 2015, we heard from Indigenous women who were raped by their uncles, fathers, stepfathers, and grandfathers. One woman told us that she started sleeping with a hammer under her pillow when she was twelve. We heard from a grandmother whose granddaughter was raped by the adult son of the foster family that the Ministry of Child and Family Development placed her with. Battered women called us after they were criminally charged after defending themselves or after the children were apprehended when the police were called. Women assaulted by police officers have called us. One woman told us about being kidnapped from one province, brought to Vancouver, and raped. We heard from another woman lured from her northern community to Vancouver by an internet lover; she was then trapped and forced into prostitution in his downtown single-room occupancy hotel.

When Indigenous women tell us about the attacks that they have experienced from white men, it is very clear that these acts are a result of both racist and sexist hatred. Indigenous women battered by their white husbands have told us these men make it explicit that they are attacking them because of their race; one man frequently told his wife to “go back to the rez”; another called his partner a “piece of garbage”; and another told the mother of his child that she deserves his attacks because “native people are stupid.” An Indigenous girl adopted into a white family had to endure racist slurs screamed at her during beatings. An Indigenous woman in street level prostitution was told by a john, while he was raping her, that she was “not the first pretty little native girl” he had chosen to attack.

We assure the women who trust us enough to call us, and tell us about the violence they have experienced that we are confidential and independent from the state. It is crucial that we can make and keep this promise because women are overwhelmingly reluctant to

engage the state, particularly the criminal justice system, in their fight against the man who attacked them. Since the 1970s, 70 percent of women have consistently chosen not to report the men who attack them to the police (Lakeman 148, 153).

Women who engage with the state agencies responsible for protecting women from violence and for holding violent men accountable experience systemic, sexist discrimination. For Indigenous women, the colonial legacy of institutionalized racism exacerbates the state’s failure to intervene or respond on her behalf.

Often, men who attack Indigenous women know and explicitly say that because she is an Indigenous woman, the police will believe him when he blames her for the attack or he says she is lying about it, especially if he is a white man. We also tell Indigenous women that we understand their particular reluctance to report to the police. We know from our own crisis work and from reports from the Highway of Tears in British Columbia and Val D’Or, Quebec, that police have been exposed for far worse than institutional indifference when it comes to their treatment of Indigenous women.

This past year, we supported a woman to make a police report about a white man who was using drug treatment meetings as a way to gain access to and rape Indigenous women who were struggling with addiction. This man has since been charged. We assisted her the way we assist all women who are considering reporting to police.

First, we are honest with her and tell her that, statistically, men rape women with no consequences or accountability from the criminal justice system (Johnson 632). Then, we tell her that despite this grim reality, we will call the police with her, wait with her for them to arrive, and sit beside her while she gives her initial report. We will advocate for a timely, adequate, and thorough investigation resulting in criminal charges. If the charges go to court, we will be with her when she is called to testify. We explain that we have made a deliberate decision to ally with every woman who chooses to make a police report about sexist violence and to claim her right to be equally protected under the law.

Often violent men face no criminal charges. The Vancouver Police Department failed to take a full statement when a woman who had been assaulted by a john reported at the hospital. She

later decided she wanted to provide a full, detailed statement, but she did not know who was assigned to her case and did not have any success getting the attention of someone with the power to move the investigation forward. We used what we know about navigating the bureaucracy and the chain of command to get a direct line to the investigating detective and to argue that he ought to pay attention to this case, reminding them of their failure in the investigation of Robert Pickton. We argued that he should pay attention to this case of a white man attacking Indigenous women in prostitution in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The police's tendency to dismiss women by labelling them as "uncooperative" or "unreliable" is exactly what men count on. Although police officers were willing to take a statement about one assault, they dismissed the possibility of investigating and charging him for buying sex, for exploiting the poverty and desperation that drove this woman into prostitution. After taking her statement, the police recommended charges, but the Crown declined to prosecute the case, as it characterized her as uncooperative and her evidence as unreliable.

We fought with an RCMP detachment for three days to take a statement from a woman who managed to get her abusive husband out of their home and wanted to get a peace bond under section 810 of the Criminal Code of Canada. Officers attended to the home three times in three days, and each time, they told her that no crime had been committed and that her case was a matter for family court. The Crown has since approved the peace bond, and he can no longer contact her or be present at the home. However, paying for rent, food and other basic necessities on her own applies constant financial pressure, which is leading her to consider letting him back into the home.

Women who call our crisis line reveal that abusive men's threats to call the child protection agencies are an effective way to keep Indigenous women trapped and under their control, as we are all fully aware of the long history of the state-sponsored removal of Indigenous children from their homes. To counteract this threat, we raised money to pay for a lawyer to represent a young Indigenous mother who was charged with assault when she defended herself against her batterer, a much older white man.

Crown counsel wasn't asking for jail time so despite meeting the financial criteria, she was not eligible for a legal aid lawyer. She would have had to defend herself in court or bow to the pressure to plead guilty in order to avoid a trial, a potential conviction and a criminal record for domestic violence. As long as the charges were on the record, he continued to have access and control over her. He exploited her fear of losing her child by threatening to drag her into a custody fight that he claimed she would not win. Recently, after almost a year since her arrest, these charges were dropped and she can start to consider using family court to gain custody and a protection order.

We intervened to have a woman's children returned to her after they had been apprehended because she, apparently, "failed to protect them from their father's violence." We arranged for safe transportation to our transition house when the Ministry of Children and Family Development would not.

We took collect calls from a women's prison. The caller was a young woman who was apprehended from her family, raped in foster care, and ended up criminalized and jailed. When she was released at age nineteen, she was dropped off in the Downtown Eastside and prostituted out of a harm-reduction shelter for at-risk young women. We managed to arrange for her release to a treatment centre and accompanied her to have an abortion because she was pregnant as the result of a rape.

We have offered these women our empathy and our alliance, connecting them to us, and to each other. We provide peer-counseling, safe shelter, advocacy for the state to respond and, when necessary, for the state to back off. The increased impoverishment of women and the systematic dismantling of social welfare systems means that the remaining, unfunded independent women's centres, like our rape crisis centre, are pressured to tend to all the effects of women's desperate inequality including hunger, homelessness, addiction, and mental health.

#### PROSTITUTION AS SEXIST AND RACIST VIOLENCE

In addition to operating the twenty-four-hour rape crisis line and the transition house, we monitor media coverage and court cases

related to male violence against women. Two striking and highly publicized cases of white men perpetrating deadly, horrific violence against Indigenous women are the cases of Robert “Willie” Pickton who preyed on and murdered women from Vancouver’s downtown eastside, and Bradley Barton who was acquitted in the murder of Cindy Gladue. Less known, is the case of Martin Tremblay, a man with a lengthy record of violence against young Indigenous women in the lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Martin Tremblay is estimated to have assaulted 103 Indigenous girls between his releases from jail in 2001 until 2014. His past criminal convictions included

Five convictions for sexual assault arising from incidents which occurred between the spring of 2001 and October 2002. [Wherein] Mr. Tremblay pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting five First Nations teenage girls on December 4, 2003. The convictions were based on videotapes made by Mr. Tremblay which depicted the assaults. The victims appeared to be drugged or passed out at the time of the assaults. (1, *R. v. Tremblay*)

In 2013, Martin Tremblay was charged with two counts of failing to provide lifesaving measure and two counts of administering a noxious substance in the death of two young Indigenous girls in Vancouver. In December of 2015, after continuous pressures from community groups and women’s organizations, the Supreme Court of British Columbia classified Martin Tremblay as a dangerous offender and sentenced him to an indeterminate period of incarceration. The judgment described his targeting of young, Indigenous girls:

He was a drug dealer and offered his home to at-risk youth, primarily female First Nations teenagers, for the purpose of partying. He was well known to [one of the victims] who referred to him as her “street dad.” He provided gifts, alcohol, drugs, and a cell phone to her. She in turn, invited her friends to his residence where he gave them free alcohol and drugs. (1, *R. v. Tremblay*)

This description of Tremblay’s modus operandi is strikingly similar to what we hear from Indigenous women who call our crisis line and describe how they were lured into prostitution as girls.

In Canada, most prostitutes are Indigenous. We believe that prostitution exists because men believe that they have the inherent right to access the bodies of women and girls. Men’s privilege, power, and entitlement to Indigenous women’s bodies keep Indigenous women oppressed. People label Indigenous women as “survival” prostitutes. This is of no surprise to Indigenous women because no matter what Indigenous women do, they are always operating in a desperate state of survival mode. The brutal forces of poverty, racism, and inequality effectively negate women’s ability to freely consent to engage in prostitution.

In Vancouver, prostitution is far worse for Indigenous women, now more so than ever. Harm reduction strategies have created a warehousing system for Indigenous women, which force them to reside in unsafe locations, where men access their bodies in exchange for money or drugs. We understand these strategies as enforcing and protecting the male demand to keep women in unsafe, unliveable conditions, which allows men to continue to commodify and objectify women.

Young women and girls of Indigenous descent are forced, trapped, tricked and entrenched into street-level prostitution in numbers grossly disproportionate to any other group. The intergenerational histories of having families torn apart by colonial state policies have forced a disproportionate number of Indigenous women and girls into extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution. In Vancouver, where Indigenous peoples make up approximately two percent of the city’s population, studies estimate that 30 percent of women in street prostitution in Vancouver are Indigenous (Cunningham and Christensen). Often Indigenous women experience brutal and deadly violence in prostitution.

Between 1991 and 2004, 171 women involved in prostitution were killed in Canada; 45 percent of these murders remain unsolved (Shingler). Those who support the legalization of prostitution suggest that indoor prostitution will protect women from violent johns. We argue that this is false because violence is intrinsic to prostitution. Therefore, we believe that changing

the location does not and will not alleviate the violence women in prostitution experience and that legalizing or decriminalizing prostitution will further increase the sexual violence that has contributed to the murders and disappearances of over 1,200 Indigenous women and girls across Canada.

Any attempt to move prostitution indoors creates a hierarchy based on race within prostitution itself. This hierarchy abandons Indigenous women who have little to no opportunity of exiting prostitution; they experience levels of violence that are hard to fathom, violence that is perpetuated by men, not only because she is a woman but because she is an Indigenous woman.

Male violence against Indigenous women is motivated by racism and enforced by societal indifference to the safety and welfare of Indigenous women. This indifference allows men to continue to escape accountability for criminal acts of violence against women. This increases the vulnerability of Indigenous women and has been exploited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous men who continue to carry out acts of extreme violence against Indigenous women and girls. Indigenous women face life threatening, gender-based violence, compounded by hatred and racism at disproportionate to any other race group in Canada. Denying Indigenous women the protection they are entitled to allows men to escape responsibility and accountability for their acts, which only perpetuates and reinforces their racist misogynistic violent behaviour and male entitlement. The cycle of male violence against women never ends for far too many Indigenous women and girls.

#### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CANADIAN STATE

When it comes to violence against women, three federal and provincial mechanisms are directly liable: the criminal justice system, the welfare system, and the ministers responsible for status of women. We need an immediate and effective transformation of how these systems treat women.

The criminal justice system consistently fails women who look to the state for protection from violent men. Both the police and Crown prosecutors are to blame for the low number of men who

ever face a judge for their assaults on women. We have adequate laws on sexual assault. Men know that they can commit violence against women with impunity, and they definitely know they will get away with their violence against Indigenous women.

We require the criminal justice system to exercise due diligence when responding to all reports of male violence against women. Men who attack women must face consequences. Men need to know that they will be stopped and that they will be held accountable for their violence by the state.

The welfare system all over the country controls people's lives while keeping them impoverished. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women wrote in its concluding observations of Canada:

The Committee is also concerned at reports of cuts in social assistance schemes in many provinces and at the resulting negative impact on the rights of vulnerable groups of women, such as single mothers, Indigenous women, Afro-Canadian women, immigrant women, elderly women and disabled women, who rely on social assistance for an adequate standard of living. (3)

In British Columbia, a single person on welfare receives 610 dollars per month. Women's poverty is a key factor of their vulnerability to men's violence. Women stay with abusive male partners because they have no prospect of economic independence. Women tell us they resort to prostitution sporadically or permanently to pay for rent and other basic needs they and their children have. We call for a provision of guaranteed livable income as a means for women to secure economic independence and to provide for themselves and their children without barriers or hoops to jump through.

The elimination of some of the provincial status of women ministries and the erosion of any meaningful substance at the federal status of women ministry level means that there is no entity in some provinces or at the federal level that is committed to the advancement of women, to women's equality and to the support of the independent women's movement in its fight to end violence against women.

We want independent, women-controlled transition houses, rape crisis centres, and women's centres in every community, including in remote and isolated areas. There are nearly 3,100 reserves in Canada alone; many of these reserves are not funded to provide any form of transitional houses for women and children escaping male violence. Women's services are a proven and effective method to offer women genuine safety, support, and advocacy, and they must be available to any women at any given moment. We also know that "Working to aid women after sexist violent attack is not enough. We must end the inequality of women and the use men make of it" (CASAC).

#### FEMINIST SOLIDARITY WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN

In 2012, the largest-ever global study on violence against women concluded that "The autonomous mobilization of feminists in domestic and transnational contexts—not leftist parties, women in government, or national wealth—is the critical factor accounting for policy change" (Htun and Weldon 548). The women's movement is a crucial force in the efforts to eliminate violence against women. Since independent women's groups are the backbone of the women's movement, the Canadian government must provide core funding for national and local women's groups, including Indigenous-only women's groups.

Our solidarity with Indigenous women must be explicit and tangible. Non-Indigenous feminists must use their relative privileges of race and class to fight for substantive equality for Indigenous women. We need to promote Indigenous women's membership and employment in women's groups and services through affirmative action and a proven commitment to fight racism within ourselves and others. We are obligated to expose male violence against Indigenous women, to support with concrete means Indigenous women's survival, escape, and resistance, and to relentlessly demand fair treatment and full protection for them by all state agencies.

Indigenous women around the world are rising up, and we need to listen. We will continue to stand with and support our Indigenous sisters while they fight the system's intentional and cold-hearted

destruction of them. Until women of all races and classes see our struggle as one—no women will be free.

*As feminist anti-violence workers who understand prostitution as violence against women, we deliberately use the term prostitution and reject the term "sex work." For further discussion see: "Over 300 Human Rights Groups and Anti-Trafficking Advocates Worldwide Weigh in on "Sex Work" Terminology In Media," Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 4 Nov. 2014. Web.*

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