Is Canada Peaceful and Safe for Aboriginal Women?

ANITA OLSEN HARPER

Les femmes autochtones du Canada subissent de sérieuses violations des droits humains, en particulier d'un taux de violence inacceptable. Cet article décrit comment l'extrême violence raciale envers les femmes autochtones les fait disparaître et même les assassine. L'auteure a étudié le travail de la Coalition nationale pour nos sœurs enlevées qui travaille activement à dénoncer ces attaques raciales et qui appuie l'initiative des Sœurs d'esprit en aidant les familles des victimes à se familiariser avec la justice et autres systèmes analogues.

Aboriginal women in Canada are the victims of very serious human rights violations. One blatant example is the legislative gap in both federal and provincial law in protecting a spouse's right to equal division of matrimonial real property on-reserve. All other Canadians are protected by provincial laws regarding this matter, but the same laws are not applicable on-reserve because only the federal government has jurisdiction over "lands reserved for Indians" and this includes real property on-reserve. There has never been a law enacted by the Canadian Parliament to address how real property, including matrimonial homes, will be divided when a marriage or common-law relationship breaks down. Aboriginal women and their children who reside on-reserve directly bear the brunt of this serious legislative gap. Further, because almost all reserves in Canada suffer from a severe lack of adequate housing, women who cannot remain in the family home are forced to go elsewhere with their children. This is only one example of the rights of on-reserve women remaining unprotected; a parallel situation concerning non-Aboriginal women does not exist in Canada.

These facts remain in spite of the fact that for most of the decade up to the year 2001, Canada was ranked number one among 175 countries in the world as being the best country in which to live. The United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) makes this determination through its Quality of Life survey which examines the health, education and wealth of a country's citizens by measuring life expectancy, educational achievement, secondary and tertiary enrolment and standard of living.[1]

These findings would make one think that almost all Canadians citizens do quite well, and perhaps this is the case. For the Aboriginal people who have been living *ab initio* on these lands, this is simply not true. The disparity in health, educational attainment, accumulation of wealth, life expectancy and standard of living is a noticeably wide gap in comparison with the life experiences of most Canadians. Aboriginal women, in particular, suffer from inequality of status compared to both Aboriginal men and, especially, their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

In this and other respects, and mostly because Canada as a nation does not make it a priority to address issues such as these, it cannot "look in the mirror" and see a truly civilized and liberated nation.

Other countries in the world might have a difficult time comprehending that Canada hosts serious human rights problems. These beliefs and perspectives, though, do not take away from, or diminish the reality faced by many Aboriginal women in this country because of these violations. For example, Aboriginal women in Canada are subject to high rates of violence in all forms. In particular, racialized violence targeting Aboriginal women is especially disturbing because these experiences are passed on intergenerationally to children and youth in other violence-related forms such as through involvement in street gangs and other "street" misbehaviours. In far too many instances, extreme racialized violence against Aboriginal women leads to their disappearances and even murder. The life destroyed in these circumstances is not only the victim's, but those whom she has left behind: grandmothers, parents, sisters, aunts, children, other relatives and friends. Could the long-standing general lack of awareness within Canada about the extreme violence against Aboriginal women mean that the public simply does not want

to know? Does the public think that these "uncomfortable" issues will perhaps just somehow "go away?"

Representation of Aboriginal People in Canadian History

The way Aboriginal people have been represented in Canadian history plays an important part in how Aboriginal people, including Aboriginal women, are perceived in today's Canadian society. In these times of rapid technological and other change, any statements about the importance of history seem almost naïve; modern western societies appear to self-define according to their future plans, not from their past or history. Nonetheless, such perceptions do not take away from the validity of understanding the past in order to understand the present. Only by thoroughly comprehending the paths that have been leading to the present can appropriate and timely steps be taken to solve long-term problems, such as those faced by Aboriginal women in Canada. Incidentally, Aboriginal tradition places a high importance on expending time and effort in teaching youngsters their family and tribal history because they believe that youth with a solid understanding of the past is a youth that values its own individual and collective identity.

Extreme racialized violence against Aboriginal women leads to their disappearances and even murder. The life destroyed is not only the victim's, but those whom she has left behind.

There are many examples that demonstrate the reality that historical representation and its subsequent presentation is not necessarily trustworthy. In Canada, most recordings of the European-Aboriginal relationships have been preserved, presented and accepted according to the values, perceptions and general life philosophies of the prevailing Euro-Canadian society. Even within the relatively short span of that society, historiography points out an interesting phenomenon: narrations over time are recorded, shaped, and fixed according to prevailing Eurocentric societal attitudes (Blaut 10). Paralleling any change in the view of the present is a change in the view of the past.

Historical presentations then, have many serious limitations. One of their functions is as a tool for propaganda to encourage thought and motivation into predetermined outcomes. The "battleground for the public mind" has always had many different fronts to serve certain specific purposes. For example, within their own societies at the time of contact, the roles of Aboriginal women were vastly different from those of European women. The latter held a status that was shared with minors and wards of the Crown; they were perceived as property—in their early lives, their father's property, and later when they married, the property of their husbands. Aboriginal women, on the other hand, headed family line,[2] exerted a great deal of power such as the authority to choose and oust their nation's chiefs, and were a vital part of consensus decision-making. Nevertheless, Canadian history presents these Aboriginal traditions in a negative light; the *Indian Act* of 1876 created the elected chief and council system thereby removing Aboriginal women's political powers by stipulating that only men could be elected as chiefs and councilors.

Canadian history shows that stereotypical images were serving a purpose for those who endorsed them. The primary overall opinion of the first Europeans was cautiously optimistic for they relied on the First Peoples for all their basic livelihood needs. They condescendingly acknowledged that these "primitive" peoples needed civilizing, but were fully confident that this could be accomplished through educational processes that they themselves would predicate. Times began to change. The true imperialist ambitions of the colonialist powers began to emerge, and the fairly balanced early relationship began to crumble to give way to the birth of the interpretation of Aboriginal people as wretched and barbaric, even demonic. Many history and children's books of the nineteenth century were based on this imagery (Francis 159-164).

Settlement in Canada's "wild west" increased, but not because from invitation by the First Nations themselves, who due to decimation from foreign diseases, increasingly found themselves on the fringes of their own territories. These times saw rampant theories of Native racial inferiority for these provided a rationale to the Europeans for indiscriminately taking lands that were not rightfully theirs (Hawkins 62). Newcomers willingly listened to academics who predicted the disappearance of the entire Indigenous peoples as God's way of using nature to weed out an inferior group in favour of a superior one (Le Conte 359-361). In the meantime, the First Peoples were being further marginalized into the undesired hinterlands and their suffering, if it was known at all, was treated with indifference by both the Canadian government and general public who were too busy and apathetic to involve themselves in any meaningful way.

Inequalities Lead to the "Sisters in Spirit" initiative

People treated with inequality by government are fair game for societal discrimination, and racism if they belong to a different ethnic group. Aboriginal people, meeting these conditions, are both discriminated against and suffer the consequences of racism. Further, because of the patriarchy of Canadian society, Aboriginal women are subject to even more inequality than Aboriginal men. There are

many different arenas in "everyday Canadian life" in which Aboriginal women do not fare well at all.

Looking at Canada's Aboriginal women from an economic perspective, we see that, in one province (Manitoba), 42.7 per cent off-reserve live in poverty (Donner, Busch and Fontaine). The corresponding figure for non-Aboriginal women is half that number. Aboriginal women's average annual income was $13,300; Aboriginal men's was $18,200 whereas that of non-Aboriginal women was $19,350 (NAPO 2). This synopsis is a prime example of Aboriginal women's inequality in relation to both Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal women in the area of earning power for meeting basic livelihood needs.

Canada's child welfare system continues to be disastrous for Aboriginal families. Provincial government policies target Aboriginal children for transition into various agencies and adoption into non-Native families. While these practices are now being lobbied against by Native women's and other groups, policy changes are painstakingly slow. A significant but undesirable result is that, very often, the traditions and practices of most of these children, as grown adults, are not recognizable as Aboriginal and their connections to birth families tends to be weak at best. In 2004, a large proportion—30,000 out of a total of 76,000 children in care—is Aboriginal; this is an astonishing 39.5 per cent (Blackstock and Trocme 1). More disturbingly, this large number of children has all but lost its true identity; searching out family roots and ties is problematic and traumatic for most.

In the area of education, there is a particularly large gap between the rates of non- and Aboriginal women with university degrees: in 2001, seven per cent of Aboriginal women over 25 years of age had a university degree, compared with 17 per cent for non-Aboriginal women within the same age group (Statistics Canada). While two-thirds of Aboriginal graduates are women, equal access to employment opportunities is still lagging; this is because gendered racism obstructs Aboriginal women's access to a fair share of the labour market (Jacobs). In the same year, 40 per cent of Aboriginal women over the age of 25 had not graduated from high school compared with 29% among non-Aboriginal women. (*Women in Canada 2005* 196).

Federal, provincial and territorial justice systems are other areas that discriminate against Aboriginal women on the basis of their race, gender and class. The systemic racism of all police forces albeit some "better" than others, and not applicable to every single member, is one way of explaining this. For example, most police officers need a fair and open attitude towards those working in the sex trade and must learn to treat street people as human beings—with dignity and respect. Another area that needs serious revision is the Court system. Court personnel often fail to either recognize or acknowledge the unique forms of injury that Aboriginal women suffer when they report being sexually assaulted or raped or any number of violations. Many Aboriginal women and girls are ostracized by their families or reserves when they go through with criminal charges; often, they themselves are blamed for their situations. This is especially harmful when so many live in the northern, more isolated areas of the country; a general lack of counseling and support services in many reserve communities does little to help and encourage these women.

The "Stolen Sisters" report by Amnesty International (Canada) made the following statements about the way in which police treat or relate to Aboriginal people:

The inquiry concluded that police had long been aware of white men sexually preying on Indigenous women and girls but "did not feel that the practice necessitated any particular vigilance."

- Most disturbingly, the inquiry concluded that police had long been aware of white men sexually preying on Indigenous women and girls in The Pas but "did not feel that the practice necessitated any particular vigilance." (1)

- The inquiry explained that many police have come to view Indigenous people not as a community deserving protection, but a community from which the rest of society must be protected. (30)

- Many Indigenous families told Amnesty International that police did little when they reported a sister or daughter missing and seemed to be waiting for the woman to be found. (32)

- … few police forces have specific protocols on actions to be taken when Indigenous women and girls are reported missing. (33)

Amnesty International's report concluded that Canadian authorities and most police forces do not protect Aboriginal women from violent attacks (including murder) but, instead, tend to disregard these violations when they occur and are reported.

These long-standing realities, faced by all Aboriginal women in Canada, remain mostly unaddressed and given a low priority for change by governments. The *status quo* continues to place Aboriginal women at a much greater risk of social and economic marginalization, laying fertile ground for higher risks of victimization from all types of crimes—but most likely physical and sexual crime at the forefront. So far, all levels of government have not implemented the necessary legislative action and policy direction to decrease the risks that would help protect Aborigi-

nal women from being targets of violence and other related criminal activity.

The Sisters in Spirit Initiative

In the meantime, not awaiting government policy and legislative change to address what became known as "racialized, sexualized" violence[3] against Aboriginal women, many began working with unrelenting perseverance in lobbying and involved advocacy efforts. This was taking place at both the grassroots and organizational levels in the Native community; one of those was the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and its Board of Directors who were Provincial/ Territorial Member Associations (PTMAs). Many others were Aboriginal families and women themselves; they were helped by non-Aboriginal women's individuals and groups. Some of these were Amnesty International (Canada), KAIROS Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives; the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Frye Societies, and the United, Anglican and other churches.

The year 2002 saw national momentum building up. Those involved pooled their efforts to raise awareness of the racially-motivated attacks on Aboriginal women. This group was known as the "National Coalition for our Stolen Sisters" and adopted a red heart-shaped logo with an inscription commemorating February 14 for "a day of love and hope and memory for our Stolen Sisters." This was the beginning of Aboriginal women's voices being heard at the national level in an area that so long was a source of trauma for them.

The Coalition, spearheaded by NWAC, was simultaneously working to cultivate federal government allies; these were Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the Department of Justice, Canadian International Development Agency, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (part of which is the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), Foreign Affairs Canada and Status of Women Canada (SWC). Only one department made a formal agreement with NWAC. In November 2005, SWC committed five-year[4] funding for Sisters in Spirit and this moved the campaign into a full research, education, national-awareness and policy initiative. Qualitative research in the form of life histories will be undertaken with the victims' family members and friends in order to gain a better understanding of the circumstances, root causes and trends that surround these cases. The terms of the funding agreement provide NWAC with the fiscal and human resources to work in collaboration with other non- and Aboriginal women's organizations and with various federal government departments to improve the human rights of Aboriginal women in Canada, and to target the racialized and/or sexualized violence directed at this particular group.

Sisters in Spirit's update includes an exegesis of the recent history of violence against Aboriginal women. From the 1980s through to the 2000s, concern for the safety of Aboriginal women was steadily increasing and posters of missing women were becoming a common sight anywhere Aboriginal people congregated—in community halls, stores and band offices, for example. Websites began to appear, listing the names of missing women, many being Aboriginal. Families of those missing and/or found murdered were starting to voice the pain, isolation, and trauma they were experiencing, and talked about the lack of support from police and other authorities when they tried to report on status of their loved ones.

It is not hard to make the connection between being socially, economically and politically marginalized to being targets of hatred and violence. This is exactly the plight of Aboriginal people in Canada, particularly Aboriginal women.

In the early 1990s, sex trade workers in Vancouver's downtown east-side were noticing that, for at least the past decade, many of their peers were simply vanishing, never heard from again. For those friends and family members trying to get help from police, interactions were generally not fruitful. For example, in April 1999, there was a move to get police to offer a reward for information leading to information on the missing women, but instead the City of Vancouver[5] suggested offering $5,000 to any of the missing women to come forward. This offer reveals that authorities did not believe that the women were indeed missing, but had perhaps simply had gone off somewhere. Then, the media became knowledgeable, and curious and involved. Journalists began to ask the same questions that family members had been asking for years. The eventual result was the formation of a joint Vancouver City Police/ RCMP Taskforce; more than 70 women were listed as missing. An arrest was made in early 2002 and Robert Pickton was charged with 27 murders. It is believed that at least one-third of his victims were Aboriginal.

Statistically, Vancouver's Aboriginal population is about seven per cent (Vancouver/Richmond Health Board 7). There is a high prevalence of prostitution in the city's downtown east-side where many Aboriginal women go missing. Aboriginal women are significantly overrepresented in Vancouver's sex trade and this "reflects not only

their poverty but also their marginalized and devalued status as Canadians" (Farley, Lynne and Cotton 256). Victoria, the capital of BC, reports a similar overrepresentation: 15 per cent of women in escort prostitution are Aboriginal, although the Aboriginal population is only around two per cent (Benoit and Millar 18).

Vancouver is not the only "hot spot" in the province, however. Another area is now known as the "Highway of Tears" because of the large number of missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women along this nearly 500-mile stretch between Prince Rupert and Prince George. These murders starting coming to light around 1994/ 1995 when three 15-year-old Aboriginal girls were found, in three separate instances, murdered in Prince George and Smithers. In March 2006, concerned community and family members held the "Highway of Tears Symposium" to address the urgent issue of the missing and murdered women along this highway. Nine families were officially listed as having members of their family go missing—including an entire family. Only one young woman was non-Aboriginal.

The Symposium made four broad recommendations: [6]

- •Emergency readiness must include an enhanced "amber alert" program which fast-tracks a public alert when someone goes missing, and preparation of an inventory of violent offenders for release into communities.
- •Prevention programs must involve both families and communities as advocates for policy change in the area of regulations regarding missing persons; installing well-lit emergency telephones along this stretch of highway; creation of a hitch-hiker tracking system that would work somewhat like a block watch program; and, development of youth awareness programs such as "street smarts" and "stranger danger."
- •Community development to address racism and oppression; identify "safe homes" along Highway 16; and, placing coordinators in Prince George and Terrace to move identified action plans.
- •Counseling and support services that offer an Aboriginal focus on spirituality; advocates working with the RCMP in victim services.

Sisters in Spirit works to support initiatives like the Highway of Tears Symposium. NWAC President, Beverley Jacobs, speaking at various functions, articulates the integral connection of colonization to the displacement of Aboriginal women in this country, and that an undeniably strong example is the missing/murdered in this region. She also mentions the need for collaboration among all those working to draw national, regional ,and local attention to the missing women and how awareness itself can help guard against further disappearances and murders. Ms. Jacobs always speaks of hope and words of encouragement to all those families who suffer from losses of loved ones.

The Sisters in Spirit initiative has other related objectives that are directed at cultivating strength and support for Aboriginal families and entire communities. These include helping to mobilize the caring power of the family and community; providing tools accessible by Internet to help the families of victims familiarize themselves with the justice and other related systems; and providing links to community organizations for front-line delivery service (such as grief counseling, therapy, Legal Aid and discussion circles).

The strategic outcome for Sisters in Spirit is gender equality for all Aboriginal women in Canada, and their full participation in the economic, social, cultural and political arenas that are available to all other citizens in this country.

Conclusion

The Sisters in Spirit initiative works to reduce the risks and increase the safety and security of all Aboriginal women in Canada, regardless of where they work or where they live. The initiative also works to draw attention, recognition, and dignity to those Aboriginal women and girls who are still missing and those already found murdered. While this number is still unknown, most Aboriginal people, both men and women, would say that they know at least one person who simply disappeared from sight; some would know at least one who was murdered.

It is not hard to make the connection between being socially, economically and politically marginalized to being targets of hatred and violence. This is exactly the plight of Aboriginal people in Canada, particularly Aboriginal women. The effects of Canada's historical grounding are proving to be, without a doubt, disastrous for Aboriginal women. The way and means of Canadian history being interpreted and presented in educational and other fundamental institutions portrays a "logical rationale," convoluted and pejorative as it is, that allows and perpetuates Aboriginal women continuing as targets of violence and death just because of their gender and racial identity.

Clearly, Aboriginal women's self-interpreted concerns must be allowed in all modalities of expression within Canadian society. Aboriginal women need their distinct voices heard in re-defining a better society in which they are included in positive and meaningful ways, ones that elevate their historic positions as significant decision-makers, choosers of chiefs, and land-owners. Indigenous truths, as a whole, need to be communicated everywhere in this country; worldviews and cosmologies must be known in educational institutions and political establishments, for example; no longer should room be made for the kind of cultural bigotry that sees Aboriginal women's thoughts and concerns as unsophisticated, undeveloped, or simply unapplicable in a contemporary highly-technological global society. Historically, the "Fathers of Con-

federation" deliberately excluded Aboriginal people, both men and women, from vital nation-building processes, and now there is a crucial need to restore the contributions of Indigenous people to an honourable and rightful place, and to recognize the enormous challenges they still face because of Canada's continuing discriminatory laws and practices.

Sisters in Spirit, striving to eliminate the objectification and dehumanizing activities that Aboriginal women have been subjected to since European contact, has a definite and significant role in helping to change the attitudes, practices, policies and awareness levels of everyday Canadians. Undoubtedly, Canada still manages to maintain a relatively high global image—but for this country's Aboriginal women, continuing to suffer from large scale inequalities, this has little meaning and no relevance.

Anita Olsen Harper is the Team Lead, Research and Policy for the Sisters in Spirit initiative at the Native Women's Association of Canada. She is Ojibwaa from the Lac Seul First Nation ON and will be starting Ph.D. studies in Education at the University of Ottawa in September 2006.

[1]Real Gross Domestic Product per capita based on Purchasing Power Parts exchange rates (PPPs are the ratios of the prices in national currencies of the same goods or services in different countries).

[2]They were matrilineal and matriarchal, generally speaking.

[3]This is violence directed at a person because of their gender and race.

[4]The initiative ends in 2010.

[5]Vancouver, meanwhile, was being placed high on the annual Quality of Life survey. Other major Canadian cities were honoured for high levels of "personal safety and security" ("Vancouver 3rd in world in quality of life survey").

[6]The broad recommendations were fleshed out on the second day of the Symposium. The full report was released to the public on June 21, 2006.

References

Amnesty International (Canada*). Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Aboriginal Women in Canada.* Ottawa: Amnesty International (Canada), 2004.

Benoit, C. and A. Millar. "Dispelling Myths and Understanding Realities: Working Conditions, Health Status and Exiting Experiences of Sex Workers." 2001. Online: http://web.uvic.ca/~cbenoit/papers/DispMyths.pdf. Accessed May 13, 2006.

Blackstock, Cindy and Nico Trocme. *Community Based Child Welfare for Aboriginal Children: Supporting Resilience Through Structural change.* First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare, University of Toronto, Oct. 9, 2004.

Blaut, I. M. *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*. New York: Guilford Press, 1993.

Donner, Lissa, Angela Busch and Nahanni Fontaine. "Women, Income and Health in Manitoba: An Overview and Ideas for Action." Women's Health Clinic website, 2002. <http://www.womens healthclinic.org/resources/wih/wih.html. Accessed June 2, 2006.

Farley, Melissa, Jacqueline Lynne and Ann J. Cotton. "Prostitution in Vancouver: Violence and the Colonization of First Nations Women." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 42 (2) (June 2005): 242 - 271.

Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995.

Hawkins, M. *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

"Highway of Tears" Symposium Broad Recommendations. Online: http://www.highwayoftears.ca/recommendations.htm

Jacobs, Beverley. "Review of Beijing from an Indigenous Perspective; Secretariat Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues." Paper presented at the Secretariat Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. New York, March 3, 2005.

Le Conte, J. "The Race Problem in the South." *Evolution Series No. 29: Man and the State*. New York: Appleton and Co, 1982.

National Anti-Poverty Organization. (NAPO). *The Face of Poverty in Canada: An Overview* (updated January 2006). Online: www.napo-onap.ca/en/issues/2006POVERTYinCANADA.pdf

Statistics Canada. "Aboriginal Women in Canada." *Women in Canada 2005.* Catalogue No. 89-503-XIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005.

"Vancouver 3rd in world in quality of life survey." CBC News, Sun. 13 March 2005, 17:56:35 EST.

Vancouver/Richmond Health Board. *Healing Ways: Aboriginal Health and Service Review*. October 1999.