

# Canada Needs a National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

In February 2014, the body of 26-year-old Loretta Saunders, an Inuit woman from Labrador, was found dumped on the side of the Trans-Canada highway in New Brunswick. Saunders was three months pregnant and was set to graduate from Saint Mary's University in May. In a sad twist of fate, she had been writing her thesis on missing and murdered indigenous women at the time of her death.

In June 2014, Marlene Bird, a 47-year-old member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation, was found unconscious in a mall parking lot in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. She had been burned, sexually assaulted, mutilated and left to die. In the end she survived, but had to have both her legs amputated and facial reconstruction surgery as a result of her injuries.

In August 2014, Tina Fontaine, 15, from the Sagkeeng First Nation was found dead one week after she had been reported missing. Her body had been stuffed into a plastic bag and dumped in Winnipeg's Red River.

In November 2014, 16-year-old Rinelle Harper from the Garden Hill Nation in northern Manitoba was beaten and sexually assaulted and then thrown into the icy waters of Winnipeg's Assiniboine River. Battered and freezing, she pulled herself out of the water only to be attacked and beaten again by the same two men, who then left her to die, police said. A passerby found her the next morning barely breathing. She was rushed to hospital in critical condition.

There are disproportionately high levels of violence against indigenous women in Canada. In May 2014 the RCMP released the results of a national survey of police data that confirmed there were 1,181 cases in Canada of missing and murdered indigenous women between 1980 and 2012. Indigenous

women make up 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population, yet they account for 16 per cent of female homicides and 11.3 per cent of missing women in Canada.

The report states that according to the 2009 General Social Survey on Victimization, nearly 67,000 indigenous women reported being a victim of violence in the previous 12 months. The rate of victimization among indigenous females was close to three times higher than that of non-indigenous females.



Marchers demand justice for missing and murdered indigenous women. Photo by Flickr user glassghost, CC-BY-NC 2.0

Indigenous women are five times more likely to be murdered than non-indigenous women.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is trying to change things. The organization works to achieve equality and end discrimination against indigenous women in Canada. In 2005, the group launched Sisters in Spirit, an initiative aimed at raising awareness about and finding solutions to the crisis of violence against indigenous women in Canada. As part of the campaign, NWAC created a comprehensive database of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. In March 2010 the Sisters in Spirit released research that recorded 582 indigenous women and girls who went missing or were murdered in Canada between 1960 and 2010.

"There are so many stories here in Canada – the list is long – too long for us to accept one more young girl, or mother, or sister on that list. Here in Canada every month there are between one and seven [indigenous] women missing or killed," said Michele Audette, President of NWAC in a recent speech.

The Sisters in Spirit database helped build much-needed public awareness and outrage and led to calls for a national inquiry into the systemic violence suffered by indigenous women. It has also played a key role in spurring the RCMP's investigation and recent report.

The Sisters in Spirit's work was cut short in October 2010 when the Harper government cut federal funding to the project, transferring these funds back to several government departments.

The federal government also continues to reject calls from indigenous and social justice groups – including the Council of Canadians – unions, premiers and federal opposition parties for a national inquiry.

“If Prime Minister Harper can call an inquiry into sockeye salmon why don't my niece, my friends, my colleagues across the country – why don't we deserve the same as the salmon?” asked Audette. “If the same Prime Minister is capable of financing an inquiry to find a 200-year-old ship in the arctic, why don't my sisters deserve the same treatment?”

“We won't stop standing up and saying that we, as aboriginal women – mothers, grandmothers, sisters, friends, neighbours – we deserve justice,” she added.

## Sources

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## A societal pattern

It is clear there are many societal issues that contribute to violence against indigenous women such as colonialism, racism, systemic poverty and lack of quality educational opportunities. Residential schools, where indigenous children were taken from their homes and placed in church-run schools where many faced physical and sexual abuse, have also been cited as a root cause of systemic issues.

Responding to questions about an inquiry following the murder of Tina Fontaine, Prime Minister Stephen Harper dismissed the idea, saying the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women was a crime problem, not a “sociological phenomenon.”

The time has come for Canada to recognize and act for indigenous women. There must be a thorough and wide-ranging examination of how – and why – indigenous girls and women face a violent crime rate higher than all others in Canada.

**The Council of Canadians supports and stands with indigenous women in their call for a national inquiry.**