



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-seventh session

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by Native Women’s Association of Canada, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## **Statement**

### **Each a cherished daughter**

The Native Women's Association of Canada works to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of aboriginal women within aboriginal communities and Canadian society. Forming a network of native women's organizations throughout Canada, we are proud to speak as a collective voice for aboriginal women. The Association believes that aboriginal women's human rights include the right to live free from violence.

The Association actively works with those affected by violence — aboriginal women and girls and their families — and has conducted research into the violence that they experience. The Association completes annual needs assessments to identify gaps in programmes and services and to obtain information on the best path forward to address those omissions.

### **Our knowledge**

Some statistical information on the extent of violence against aboriginal women and girls exists in Canada, including the Association's database of occurrences and Statistics Canada surveys. The Association is concerned that funding has been withdrawn from research activities such as our database and that the federal Government is dismantling the collection of national statistics (e.g. through the termination of the mandatory long-form national census). Although the Government points to the movement of funds into a national Royal Canadian Mounted Police database as an ongoing activity, in reality this has not yet occurred. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police database is not operational, two years after the funding was announced; it may not record or track the aboriginal status of victims; and it will track all missing persons cases, without a specific focus on women and girls. This raises concerns that there is deliberate intent to obscure the ongoing extent and nature of violence against aboriginal women and girls and to remove the basis for evidence-based decision-making by removing the ability of organizations to conduct research, analyse policies and evaluate programmes and services using gender and aboriginal lenses.

Addressing violence affecting aboriginal women and girls requires that the factors causing it be correctly identified and that those individuals, processes and policies responsible for maintaining the status quo — and the subsequent harm to aboriginal women and girls — be remedied. The starting point must be the broad range of recommendations already developed by aboriginal women at conferences and workshops on this topic. These recommendations include measures to improve the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional well-being of aboriginal women, their families and their communities. The Association notes that the consistency evident in the themes and the specific actions among recommendations from a variety of sources suggests several points. This convergence indicates that there is an emerging agreement on the path forward among aboriginal women. The repetition of themes and actions also suggests that existing programmes and services — or the structures underlying the current provision of support and measures — are not adequately or appropriately addressing existing needs. The Association suggests that each recommendation be considered within an analytical framework and that groupings of common themes and actions be created to ensure the retention of the richness of

detail and texture of the recommendations as they have been expressed by aboriginal women.

### **What we must remember**

Several considerations unique to the situation of aboriginal women and girls in Canada must inform the path forward. First, aboriginal women and girls may, or may not, live, work or study within autonomous First Nations communities where jurisdiction and authority rest with the First Nations governance structure. Their place of residence affects which level of government is responsible for providing programmes and services to them, as well as the availability of such support.

Second, our database of occurrences of violence, our research on causal factors and lived experiences and our work with families who have lost a loved one to violence have documented that aboriginal women and girls affected by violence are not restricted to only one occupation, income level or lifestyle. While many were struggling with poverty or issues of personal health or wellness, others were healthy and leading active and engaged lives.

Third, stereotypical views and oppression of women must be understood as colonial constructs that have been forcibly applied to aboriginal communities, not beliefs inherent in aboriginal cultures. This is not a situation where a simple approach of “traditional views of women and men must be dismantled” is appropriate; instead, it is one where respect for traditional cultural values and beliefs requires that harmful colonial values be dismantled. Implementing this approach will be challenging within the context of forced assimilation of First Nations people to Canadian values and the as-yet uncompleted process of decolonization and building a new understanding of traditional culture in the twenty-first century.

Finally, violence against aboriginal women is rooted in systemic discrimination, meaning that issues of gender, race and cultural exclusion must be considered in designing appropriate interventions. All activities to address violence against aboriginal women and girls must be directed, designed, implemented and controlled by aboriginal women and the organizations that represent them. We are the experts on our lived experiences and sustainable, lasting change will be possible only to the extent that we define our values and interests. Anything less will continue the cycle of disempowerment and in itself constitute a form of violence.

### **What we must do**

The creation of a framework to contain and direct this work — a national action plan — will substantially improve the response to this crisis by identifying systemic, coordinated, multi-sectoral, holistic and sustained measures to address the underlying poverty, discrimination, sexism and colonization perpetuating this situation. A national action plan on violence, which should include as one component a national inquiry into occurrences of violence, will substantially improve Canada’s response to this issue.

The complexity of inter-jurisdictional and intra-jurisdictional issues associated with addressing violence against aboriginal women and girls owing to the overlapping responsibilities of federal, provincial, territorial, municipal and First Nations governments for their safety, health, income, education and well-being

makes it unlikely that a less structured or less formal approach would be successful. Key components of a national framework need to encompass both indigenous and Western world views and values. Some measures within a national framework will of necessity address the non-aboriginal community and their interactions with aboriginal women and their families. A national framework could also encompass accountability mechanisms, provide a means of monitoring results and support adapting approaches, as necessary.

Putting a national framework on a sound footing through the acquisition of full knowledge through a national inquiry process will be more effective than proceeding on the basis of partial understandings. In the long term, conducting one comprehensive inquiry will be more cost-effective than implementing a piecemeal approach in which multiple investigations and plans include only some regions of Canada or a partial investigation of causes and factors.

A comprehensive inquiry would increase public awareness and provide assurance to aboriginal peoples that the severity of the issue is understood, that systemic barriers and harm caused by racism and sexism have been identified and that appropriate recommendations for remedial action have been made. An inquiry would help to address the crisis in confidence felt within the aboriginal community in relation to Government and justice system responses to violence against aboriginal women and girls. This lack of confidence is increasingly understood and shared by the general Canadian public, as evidenced by their support of Sisters in Spirit vigils, the National Day of Action and related activities.

The real or perceived failures of governmental agencies to adequately respond to this issue make it imperative that a thorough, unbiased, independent and public investigation be undertaken using a national inquiry process. The Association stands united with First Nations leaders, communities, families and individuals who insist that this ongoing tragedy of violence be addressed in a comprehensive, meaningful and serious manner. Only by understanding the true nature of violence against aboriginal women and girls will we achieve the knowledge to act with wisdom, to create meaningful change and to take action that will prevent aboriginal women and girls from continuing to face the pain and horror of a personal experience of violence in the future.

#### **What we must work on next**

The Association's research shows that many aboriginal women lost to violence were mothers, leaving children to mourn. Those children may be irreparably harmed by the trauma of their mother's death. The effects of violence on children and grandchildren, and the gaps in the provision of services to them, require immediate intervention. The Association further suggests that attention to the intergenerational impacts of violence on aboriginal families and communities is an important element to be included within the framework of a national action plan. Finally, evidence from the Association's database suggests that more information is needed about the needs of and gaps in support for aboriginal girls under the age of majority or the age of consent, especially those who are involved with the child welfare system or who are about to age out of that system.