Violence Against Aboriginal Women:
A Social Phenomenon
Vancouver Island University
Abstract

“Dawn Crey. Ramona Wilson. Daleen Kay Bosse. These are just three of the estimated 500 Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada over the past thirty years” (Finding Dawn, 2006). Sadly, Indigenous women remain the targets of racist and sexist crimes, because of entrenched post-colonialist views in Canadian society. Despite the United Nations’ plea to resolve the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper refuses to lead an inquiry into the matter. As a result, Indigenous friends and families of the victims have joined together to increase public awareness in hopes of bringing justice to the loved ones they tragically lost. This paper will demonstrate how colonialist views continue to oppress Aboriginal women today, and what initiatives are helping to correct this social bias.
Violence Against Aboriginal Women, a Social Phenomenon

**Embedded Racism in Post-Colonial Canada**

Some scholars agree that contemporary Canadian society fails in providing a safe and egalitarian environment for Aboriginal women, because of its colonial past: “In Canada, the best-known instrument for excluding indigenous women from political governance is to be found in the Indian Act (1876) and its subsequent amendments up to 1951” (Emberley, 2007, p.46). Hence, Aboriginal women continue to be discriminated against, because modern-day Canadian culture is still deeply rooted in patriarchal, racist, and sexist ideologies. In her book entitled *Defamiliarising the Aboriginal, Cultural Practices and Decolonisation in Canada*, Julia Emberley (2007) says that “colonial policies were implemented to regulate the bodies of indigenous women by controlling their sexual, reproductive and kinship relations” (p. 46). Colonialists wanted to conquer First Nations people to guarantee the supremacy of their race, by owning the rights to Aboriginal women’s sexual intimacies and procreation. If Indigenous women were officially degraded and marginalised since the late 19th century, could a history of colonialist prejudices still negatively affect their livelihoods today?

In *Stolen Sisters, Second Class Citizens, Poor Health: The Legacy of Colonisation in Canada*, Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton (2009) argue that “the health of Aboriginal women is lower than any other group of women in Canada,” because it “is directly linked to their colonised, racist, sexist and patriarchal past” (p. 19). Assimilationist policies disempowered and
objectified Aboriginal women, which systematically impoverished their living conditions. Kubik et al. (2009) argue the following:

> For example, under Section 12(1) (b) of the Act, Indian (First Nations) women could lose their status if they married a non-Indian (First Nations) man. Women could not own property, and once a woman left the reserve to marry she could not return because non-Indians could not reside on the reserve even if a divorce had occurred. (p. 21)

Legally controlling the conduct of Aboriginal women, and limiting their rights to land ownership, cruelly cast them out of Canadian society. As a result, harmful stereotyping of Indigenous women, initially introduced by the colonialist settlers, also encouraged the dominance of Aboriginal men over Aboriginal women (Kubik et al., 2009, pp. 24-27). Therefore, The Indian Act made sure that Indigenous women would not only lose their privileges in white culture, but also in their own. While post-colonial Canadian society may appear less openly racist today, discrimination against Aboriginal women remains apparent in the media.

In an article entitled: *Never Innocent Victims: Street Sex Workers in Canadian Media Print*, Strega et al. take a look at how the media treats sex workers as “vermin” leading “risky lifestyles” (2014, pp. 12-18). Sexist and racist stereotypes can sometimes be noticeable in news headlines, which discriminate against sex trade workers, by making such labels sound mundane. The press easily fails to mention why some Aboriginal women end up in the sex trade, which has everything to do with Canada’s colonial past. Resolved to socially include Indigenous women, “families and friends have inserted themselves into media discussions and circulated alternative readings of their stories” (Strega et al., 2014, p.6). This private attempt to value the lives of
Aboriginal women has met the support of other organisations who seek to empower First Nations women in Canada.

**Aboriginal Women are Kin**

Although the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDW) recommended carrying out an inquiry on the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, Stephen Harper disagrees with human rights experts, and wants to continue to solve these murders and disappearances solely as crimes. Consequently, Indigenous organisations, with the help of families and friends of the victims, wanting to give a public voice to their deceased family members, have come together to make sure that their Aboriginal sisters, daughters and mothers are not forgotten. “The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) maintains that the word “missing” inappropriately diminishes the active role of male perpetrators in disappearing most of these women and implies that women played a role in their own disappearances” (Strega, et al., 2014, p. 7). Indeed, “missing,” often implies that people who get lost, do not want to be found. This steals away the destructive nature of post-colonial views by victimising the innocent person who suffered the crime. Again, victim blaming shows how racist Canadian society continues to be. Additionally, Aboriginal women are barbarized by the misconception that they have gone missing because of their own poor choices. Restoring the notion of victims as people, who were unfortunately at the wrong time in the wrong place, is how relatives have been trying to change the public’s opinion.

Comparable to newspaper articles, the film documentary *Finding Dawn* tries to paint a fairer picture of disappearing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Christine Welsh,
Indigenous woman and film producer, says: “I need to put a human face to what has happened to so many of my sisters” (Finding Dawn, 2006). In fact, relatives and social groups have rectified the identities of their unaccounted for loved ones, by reminding the public that they were also mothers, daughters, sisters, aunties, and granddaughters. And, it is unfortunate that up until now, Canadian society has shared in a biased view of Indigenous women. Efforts to dignify victims reduce post-colonial values that seek to oppress them. To decrease the marginalisation of Aboriginal Women, the NWAC and Amnesty International have come up with educational programs, shrinking social inequalities.

“In March 2004, NWAC launched the Sisters in Spirit (SIS) campaign to raise awareness of the extremely high rates of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women in Canada” (Kubik et al., 2009, p. 28). Amongst other programs, this campaign offers a great number of vigils to honour the victims, organises community awareness and youth violence prevention workshops, all of which attempt at decreasing the discrimination against Indigenous women. Also in 2004, “Amnesty International released a report documenting how the social and economic marginalisation of Aboriginal women within Canadian society has led to a heightened risk of violence, particularly Aboriginal women living in poverty or the sex trade” (Kubik et al., 2009 pp. 27-28). The report showed how government policies contributed to the social, economic and political exclusion of Aboriginal women in Canadian society. Amnesty International’s research also stressed that the social and economic factors marginalising Indigenous women, further ripped them apart from their families and communities, forcing them into dangerous situations of poverty, homelessness, and prostitution (Kubik et al., 2009, p.28). Although, non-profit organisations and relatives seek to alleviate violence against Aboriginal women by publicly depicting them as kin, the Harper government remains stoic to the cause. Despite this lack of
parliamentary action, the Indian Act explicitly contains too many laws that clearly classify the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women as a social phenomenon.

**Rejecting an Inquiry Violates Indigenous Women’s rights**

As long as the Prime Minister of Canada considers the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women as a crime, the chances of seeing an inquiry that exposes the root causes of their oppression remain slim. Without hesitation, I believe that by avoiding an inquiry into the subject, Mr. Harper perpetuates post-colonialist beliefs that intensify the oppression of Indigenous women in Canada. The recent attempts of families and friends to civilise the victims, understand what it is like to be discriminated against on the basis of gender, and race, because they are Aboriginal people too. Unless Canada consults, empowers and listens carefully to First Nations people, Indigenous women will see their fate unchanged. Oppression is more easily understood by the people who are oppressed, and less evident if experienced as the one who actively oppresses.

The key to resolving the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women lies in the hands of those who can relate to them through similar experiences of power struggles. The United Nations has reminded Canadian officials of the importance of progressive politics, and demanded that social justice be reinstated for Aboriginal women. While the government ignores these calls, the NWAC, Amnesty International, documentary film makers and scholars have understood that giving Aboriginal women a voice is the only way to undo the social injustices against them. My hopes are that Indigenous women will keep going public with stories about the discrimination they experience, and that the media will increasingly cover their testimonies. For
my part, I vouch to explain, over and over again, to those who ignore the facts, that colonialist views set in the Indian Act are the racist and sexist beliefs that so violently have stolen the lives of vulnerable Aboriginal women. Hopefully, one day, we can put behind us the disheartening stories of disappearing and murdered Indigenous women who, like us, are mothers, daughters, and sisters.
References


