



Addressing violence against Aboriginal Women, the Elderly, and Children

A Policy Paper

**Prepared for The Second National Aboriginal Women's Summit II
Native Women's Association of Canada
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Background

This policy paper provides background information for the Second National Aboriginal Women's Summit (NAWS II) to be held from July 29th to 31st in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Specifically, the paper examines the topic of the breakout session entitled "Addressing Violence Against Aboriginal Women, the Elderly, Youth and Children", which follows the plenary session entitled "Partnerships, Approaches & Programs that address violence against Aboriginal Women, the Elderly, Youth and Children" under the theme "Health, Safety & Wellness."

The goal of the breakout session on violence is to focus on identifying strategic action items aimed at implementing the following recommendations from the First National Aboriginal Women's Summit (2007) held in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador:

Current Conditions

The incidence of violence against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada has been, and continues to exist at unacceptably high levels. The statistical analysis of census and other survey data, as well as qualitative research and consultation reports clearly demonstrate that Aboriginal women experience higher rates of violence and more severe violence than those experienced by other women in Canada. Aboriginal women also experience higher rates of violence, and more severe violence than Aboriginal men. For example, statistical analysis and research have shown that:

- Aboriginal people are three and one half times more likely to be victims of spousal violence than non-Aboriginal individuals. One survey found 24% of Aboriginal women said that they have suffered violence from a current or previous spouse or common law partner in the five years prior to the study.¹
- Aboriginal women are more likely than non-Aboriginal women to have suffered a physical injury (51% versus 42%), taken time away from their daily activities (44% compared to 27%), or experienced ten or more separate incidents of violence from the same perpetrator (27% versus 18%).²
- The proportion of Aboriginal women who reported that they were the victims of stalking was almost twice as high as the number of non-Aboriginal women (21% as compared to 11%).³

¹ Statistics Canada, The Daily, 6 June 2006

² Statistics Canada, Measuring Violence Against Aboriginal Women: Statistical Trends 2006

³ Statistics Canada, Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006

The root causes of violence against Aboriginal women and girls have also been researched and analyzed. The effects of colonialism and discriminatory federal legislation and policies on Aboriginal women and girls have been severely negative and have weakened their role and position in both Aboriginal and Canadian society. This degrading of Aboriginal women's role and responsibilities in society increases their vulnerability in a number of areas, including their vulnerability to being targeted for violence.

There is also a well-documented body of research on the poverty, lack of education and employment opportunities, sub-standard housing, and generally lower socio-economic status experienced by Aboriginal women and girls. For example, statistical analysis and research demonstrate that:

Aboriginal women and girls find that their poor socio-economic experiences as outlined above combine with the effects of racism and sexism they experience in Canadian society. This limits their ability to achieve economic well-being in Canadian society as it is currently structured, which subsequently impacts negatively on their ability to express preferences or make real choices between options for housing, employment, income generating activities, and other life decisions.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) understands that Aboriginal women and girls may experience violence from a wide variety of sources. They may experience what is variously known as family violence, spousal violence, child abuse, elder abuse or intergenerational violence. This issue is grounded in the experience of individuals with poverty, overcrowding, intergenerational effects of trauma such as that generated by attendance at residential schools, substance abuse, or other root causes.

Aboriginal women are often targets of violence as a result of their perceived lower status – with these circumstances commonly described as racialized and/or sexualized violence. In these situations, the victims of violence are being targeted because of their sex and their Aboriginal identity. There is a well-developed body of literature that has identified the negative stereotyping that may be applied to Aboriginal women and girls by other individuals that 'permits' or normalizes identifying them as targets for abuse or violence. This stereotyping is supported by the societal and systemic indifference that has existed towards the issue of violence against Aboriginal women in the past, and that continues in some areas today, as demonstrated by inadequate investigation by police and the failure of courts to prosecute with sufficient vigor. A growing body of research confirms that the combination of racist and sexist attitudes towards Aboriginal women and girls and the failure of the justice system to respond adequately to their needs has created and fueled a unique pattern of violence from strangers or individuals only slightly known to them. This form of violence is the focus of the Sisters in Spirit Initiative, a multi-year research, policy development, education and communications undertaking.

The extent of the systemic violence facing Aboriginal women and girls is finally being well documented: what is necessary now is to implement actions, recommendations, policies, measures and legislation that will address this issue. The Native Women's Association of Canada holds that violence against anyone, and specifically against Aboriginal women and girls is completely unacceptable. There are no tolerable levels of violence that should exist in Canadian society, and active measures, policies and legislation must be instituted so that Aboriginal women and girls no longer suffer violence at the hands of family members, acquaintances and strangers. All levels of government must make the elimination of violence against Aboriginal women and girls a priority in all areas.

Recommendations identified at NAWS I

NAWS I focused on recommendations in three theme areas: Health, Safety and Wellness; Equality and Empowerment; and Strength, Balance and Honour. As the root causes of violence are far reaching, many of the recommendations can be considered to be relevant for this paper. However, the following seven recommendations were specifically identified as important areas to be addressed in the breakout sessions under the topic of "Addressing Violence Against Aboriginal Women, the Elderly, Youth and Children including Underlying Causes of Violence".

Recommendation #1 – Federal/Provincial/Territorial governments must provide financial resources for the family violence initiatives and abuse prevention programs; provide more national financial and policy support for enhanced programming regarding family violence and abuse for prevention, care, healing initiatives/treatment and support; and increase resources for child sexual abuse and Elder abuse programs and services.

Recommendation #2 – Make violence against Aboriginal women and girls a priority in all areas. In health, this includes providing sexual and reproductive health services, particularly sexual health education programs, HIV/AIDS awareness, education and health prevention and promotion services. In education, particularly post-secondary education, provide supports that meet the unique needs of Aboriginal women, such as child care and housing, to decrease their vulnerability to violence and increase their opportunities for economic opportunities. In housing, this means ensuring that emergency shelters, second stage housing and transition shelters are adequately funded in areas where these services are currently not accessible to Aboriginal women.

Recommendation #3 – Ensure that resources be available to address all issues that negatively impact on Aboriginal women's well-being, including poverty, lack of housing, sexualized, racialized violence, employment, education, single parent families, healthcare, urban and remote issues etc

Recommendation #4 – Ensure economic opportunity strategies consider all the socio-economic conditions that are required to create the right environment for Aboriginal women to participate in the economy. For example, child care, adequate housing, strategies to combat gendered racism and ensuring that the right and fundamental freedom to live free from violence are all factors to be considered. Existing inequities facing Aboriginal women must be removed in all sectors. This requires the application of a culturally relevant gender-based analysis.

Recommendation #23 – All levels of government in partnership with all Aboriginal organizations should take the necessary steps to address the root causes leading to the over-representation of Aboriginal women as victims and offenders within the criminal justice system.

Recommendation #24 – All NAO's work in partnership with all levels of government, mainstream organizations and each other to ensure:

- a) that existing victims services are adaptable to needs of Aboriginal victims of crime
- b) that existing services and structures are respectful of traditional approaches to justice. Police officers, judges and lawyers must learn about the legislative and policy- related history that impact only Aboriginal peoples in Canada, especially Aboriginal women and the key factors which lead Aboriginal women into the justice system.

Recommendation #25 – A strategic approach to minimize the growth and impact of gangs in First Nations communities and urban centres, as well as to minimize the continued recruitment of Aboriginal youth into gangs must be developed

Relevant Action Items

The NWAC Board of Directors has identified that a fundamental problem with the approaches to reducing violence against Aboriginal women and girls to date is that they focus on the symptoms of the issue, but do not sufficiently address the root causes. In the short and medium term, the symptoms of this societal evil must be addressed, in order to provide immediate assistance to Aboriginal women and girls who are experiencing violence now. In the long term, however, there must also be a focus on resolving the root causes so that in the future Aboriginal women and girls do not continue to experience violence.

Short to Medium Term Action Items – Protection for Aboriginal Women and Girls

a) Action item – Urgent action to address immediate needs

Not only is it clearly established that Aboriginal women in Canada experience higher levels of violence, Aboriginal women themselves have repeatedly identified immediate and crucial measures necessary to close the gap in protection that they experience. For example, in the MRP consultation, Aboriginal women suggested the needs for measures such as increased access to emergency shelters, transitional housing for Aboriginal women and families and enforcement of court and band protection orders. The NWAC Sisters in Spirit Initiative has called for concrete reforms in the way that police handle and respond to missing persons complaints. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments, as well as public institutions, need to support Aboriginal women's calls for necessary measures. This will prevent further denial and delay of measures that are obvious gaps in protection for Aboriginal peoples in this country.

b) Action item – Accountability review

The ability of Aboriginal women, girls and their families to access government processes, programs and services must be reviewed, and corrective measures implemented where access is found to be constrained. There must also be accountability reviews of programs and services to determine if they are efficient and effective. Included in this review must be increased research to identify gaps in services for persons with disabilities, student housing & daycare, and supporting leadership development, both at the individual and community level. In addition, issues around jurisdiction must be examined and address to remove barriers and increase the access of Aboriginal women and children to the programs and services they need.

c) Action item – Commitment to reduction of violence

Stakeholders must commit to a clear and unequivocal reduction of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. All levels of government must demonstrate this commitment through the provision of resources for family violence initiatives and abuse prevention programs; by providing more national financial and policy support for enhanced programming regarding family violence and abuse for prevention, care, healing initiatives/treatment and support; and by increasing resources for child sexual abuse and Elder abuse programs and services. Support for programming, youth camps, theatrical groups, cultural and artistic camps is also required. These resources must be established as adequate, long term budgets that ensure staff salaries are competitive with government salary ranges for comparable work.

Aboriginal leaders and individuals must also be supported to lead by example in working to reduce violence. Activities and programs that support the development of personal health and wellness, the promotion of healing and

wellness, and traditional approaches and activities enhancing cultural restoration must be developed and supported.

d) Action item - Culturally Relevant Aboriginal Anti-Violence Action Plan

A culturally relevant Aboriginal Anti-Violence Action Plan (AAAP) must be established in regional resource centre supports. Aboriginal women must be engaged and be integral to the development of these action plans. This Anti-Violence Action Plan (AAAP) must address priorities of families, prevention, and healing. These priorities must address education, community participation, legislation reform and service delivery (including housing, health services, etc.) Action plans could include: Regional toll free numbers of support; circles of support; addictions support; mental health support.

Local service providers should be supported to form community committees or working groups to address the issues of violence. Activities should include linking elders and youth, establishing culturally trained Ombudspersons, developing holistic approaches to violence, and addressing root causes. Best practices should be shared, and analysis of these best practices and the characteristics/approaches of communities who successfully address violence should be conducted and shared.

Long Term Action Items – Addressing Root Causes of Violence

e) Action item – Research and analysis

Research and analysis to identify the root causes and appropriate solutions such as that undertaken by the Sisters in Spirit initiative must be supported. The collection of disaggregated data is needed to expose barriers that prevent Aboriginal women and girls from enjoying equitable engagement in Canada's socio-economic systems. This work will assist in the identification of issues associated with the over representation of Aboriginal women as victims of violence and as offenders as well as issues associated with the criminalization of Aboriginal women.

f) Action item – Health services

The reduction of violence against Aboriginal women and girls in the field of health would include providing sexual and reproductive health services, particularly sexual health education programs, HIV/AIDS awareness, education and health prevention and promotion services. Service providers and the regular medical services infrastructure must also review programs and services to ensure that Aboriginal women are not marginalized, discriminated against or made the targets of inappropriate stereotyping when they do attempt to access medical services through the mainstream service providers.

g) Action item – Education

Addressing the root causes of violence in relation to education will require that appropriate supports, such as child care and housing, are available to Aboriginal

women and girls, especially to those who are enrolled in post-secondary education. Aboriginal women and girls must also be supported to increase their ability to access or benefit from available economic opportunities.

h) Action item – Housing

The provisions of measures that address the ability of Aboriginal women and girls to access safe, affordable, appropriate, accessible, uncrowded and secure housing will also assist in the reduction of violence. Emergency shelters, second stage housing and transition shelters are one part of the continuum of housing, and must be adequately funded and located in areas where these services are needed by Aboriginal women. These forms of supported housing, however, are not sufficient in themselves as they primarily address the symptoms of violence rather than the root causes of the problem. The availability of affordable and secure housing must be resolved, for Aboriginal women who reside in First Nations communities, in urban centers and in rural and remote areas.

i) Action item - Aboriginal identity

There are currently a number of outstanding issues around Aboriginal identity affecting Aboriginal women and girls that must be addressed as well as systemic discrimination contained in this and other legislation, policies and procedures instituted by all levels of government. These systemic issues must be examined and redressed to remove racism in Canada's legislative framework that increases the vulnerability of Aboriginal women and girls.

5. Conclusion

The issues that need to be addressed in order to eliminate the occurrence of violence against Aboriginal women and girls are complex and interrelated. It is well-documented that Aboriginal women and girls suffer great disadvantage with respect to the socio-economic conditions that are root causes of their vulnerability to experiencing violence.

All governments must ensure that Aboriginal women are fully involved in governance, policy development, and decision-making structures and processes. Further, governments and Canadian society as a whole must demonstrate new and monumental resolve to implement and properly resource the fundamental changes required to eliminate violence against women and girls in Canadian society. Aboriginal women's representative organizations must also be recognized for the central role they play in addressing the root causes as well as the symptoms of the current levels of violence against Aboriginal women and girls.