

## IFSW STATEMENT ON THE CRISIS OF MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)

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*The 5th of May is an international day that honours the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. On this day the IFSW Indigenous Commission has issued the following statement:*

The Indigenous Commission of the International Federation of Social Workers would like to bring attention to the global crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Colonial diminishment of Indigenous people in general and Indigenous women and gender nonconforming people in particular, creates a heightened risk of violence around the world, yet much of what has been documented about MMIW comes from North American contexts. Thousands of Indigenous women have gone missing or have been found murdered, although precise numbers have not been adequately documented. Reported numbers are believed by many activists and Indigenous community members to be a significant undercount. These disappearances and deaths are directly linked to structural, colonial risk factors common to many Indigenous Peoples, such as poverty, racism, exclusion, discrimination, marginalization, social injustice, violations of human and social rights, as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic that deprived women of support and due care and leaving them vulnerable to their aggressor's abuse.

Around the world, women typically play strong, central roles in Indigenous societies. For the tangata whenua of Aotearoa the place of women is pivotal to the continuation of whakapapa. Women are the holders of the whare tangata therefore essential to the continuation of uri or generations. Women are descendants of Papatūānuku the earth Mother and her daughter Hineahuone, who according to many traditional narratives, gave life to human form and then through Hinetitama, who became Hine-nui-te-pō, awaits to greet us as we journey into the next life. Thus, the role of women, in the traditions of tangata whenua, is not only pivotal to life but also essential to the journey to the next life. Women are navigators of waka. The name Aotearoa was coined by Kuramārōtini, the hoa rangatira of Kupe. Women are enshrined in the names of ancestral homes and their deeds in narratives that inform the richness of the past and the present. Like in other Indigenous cultures, Sámi women have a long tradition of being respected in their communities as leaders, authorities, and at the same time, equals, holding family, home, land, and the community together. When their land was colonized, they experienced an escalation of violence, marginalization, and loss of respect for their self-determination from colonizers, both men and women. The centrality of Indigenous women in societies around the world, is illustrated by the Native American saying, *a nation cannot be defeated until the hearts of its women are on the ground*.

The importance of women in Indigenous societies led colonial powers to deliberately undermine women's roles as a core aspect of colonial subjugation. Contemporary violence against

Indigenous women is an outgrowth of the devaluation inherent in colonization. The values of heteronormative patriarchy imposed on Indigenous People make women and girls particularly vulnerable. This vulnerability is created by colonial structures that foster risk factors for violence including marginalization, poverty, and racism. Colonization creates a relationship of domination and subjugation, codified in federal policies such as the Indian Act in Canada that diminished the status of women. Historical and contemporary marginalization and power imbalance is reflected in disproportionate policing, mental health challenges, addiction, and socioeconomic fragility that all heighten the vulnerability faced by Indigenous women.

Highway 16 in British Columbia, Canada is known as the Highway of Tears because so many Indigenous women have disappeared or have been found murdered there. Lack of employment opportunities, transit infrastructure, or personal transportation lead some women to leave their communities and hitchhike along this road to get to a larger community where they can earn an income. Women are often targeted by attackers on this highway and there is minimal law enforcement response when women go missing. Indeed, the women themselves are often blamed for participating in risky behaviors such as hitchhiking, deflecting attention from the structural issues that leave women with few choices.

Disappearances and violence against Indigenous women and girls are also a significant problem in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recently in Panama, women and children were beaten by religious extremists. Likewise, a 2020 massacre took place in the remote Indigenous region of Ngäbe Buglé during an alleged exorcism, in which six children ages 1, 3, 8, 9, 10 and 17 years old and the mother of five of them, a 32-year-old woman who was pregnant, were killed.

In Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and other Latin American countries there is also violence, abuse, and discrimination against Indigenous women and girls, as well as disappearances and killings of community leaders who challenge injustice. This violence often goes uninvestigated or unpunished, frequently because those affected do not report it out of shame or thinking that they will not be heard, or that reporting will put their lives at greater risk.

Extractive industries and the “man camps” associated with them also produce a heightened risk for violence against Indigenous women. The correlation between resource extraction and violence against Indigenous women has been documented around the world. Oil pipelines and extractive industries often occur on or near Indigenous territories. Indigenous people have long experienced disproportionately high rates of violence and those who perpetrate violence against Indigenous women often are not held accountable due to jurisdictional issues and legal loopholes. The “man camps” that house workers for these industries are frequent sites of rape, domestic violence, and sex trafficking where Indigenous women are targeted due to a belief that men who assault them will not be prosecuted and governments will ignore the ongoing violence.

When Indigenous women go missing, law enforcement agencies and governments are often unresponsive, leaving families with no closure or understanding about what happened to their loved ones, and perpetuating the harms that Indigenous women have experienced for centuries.

Intergenerational trauma is compounded by the trauma of losing a mother, sister, or daughter, accompanied by the dismissive and victim-blaming attitudes prevalent in settler societies.

Raising awareness is an important step toward bringing about change. Too few people recognize the magnitude of this crisis. Both Canada and the United States commemorate May 5 as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women awareness day, with some places taking a week or a month to highlight this issue. With this statement, the Indigenous Commission of the International Federation of Social Workers seeks to 1) ensure more people are aware of this issue, and 2) sound a call to action for social workers.

### **The magnitude of the problem**

The numbers of MMIW are deeply contested but it is clear that Indigenous women face disproportionate rates of violence. A 2014 Canadian report identified 1181 Indigenous women and girls who went missing or were murdered between 1980 and 2012, although Indigenous groups estimate the number at around 4000. In Canada, Indigenous women are less than 5% of the population but constitute 24% of female homicide victims. MMIW is an international human rights crisis of gender-based and racialized violence. This crisis is perpetuated by indifference to the humanity of Indigenous women and inadequate responses from law enforcement.

National acknowledgements of MMIW began with Indigenous advocates and allies advocating for change and creating ceremonies to remember and honor those lost. In Canada, Indigenous communities, women's associations, and human rights groups called for an inquiry into MMIW for years before Amnesty International issued a 2004 report bringing international attention to violence against Indigenous women and calling for action on the issue. In 2012, Sheila North Wilson, an Indigenous leader and journalist, coined the hashtag #MMIW with others later expanding the focus to include Indigenous girls and two-spirit people. It was only in 2021 that the United States followed Canada's lead in acknowledging Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day and creating a Missing and Murdered Unit within the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services.

Although most countries have yet to initiate inquiries or recognition at the federal level, the risk factors for violence against Indigenous women are consistent across the globe. For example, in Africa, Indigenous people face significant risk factors for violence that include poverty, landlessness, malnutrition, and illiteracy. Likewise, in Northern Europe, Sámi women continue to face domestic and colonial violence. In Malaysia, although they have no specific inquiry into MMIW, they do have women's groups dealing with gender-based violence and human trafficking.

### **Activist efforts**

Activist efforts have emerged around MMIW including marches and protests. The first MMIW march was held in Vancouver, Canada in 1992 and has been held annually since then.

Similar marches have expanded across Canada and the United States. In addition to MMIW, some protests and activist events use the slogan No More Stolen Sisters. Recognizable symbols of these movements have emerged including a red or black hand painted over the mouth of supporters. Métis artist Jaime Black's use of red dresses in her work has also come to symbolize the MMIW crisis and was inspired by women in Bogotá, Colombia who wore red dresses to raise awareness for missing family members.

Some of the activists who call for attention to this issue are social workers, but the social work profession has not had an organized response or coordinated efforts in this area. To ignore the crucial significance of Indigenous women who are missing or have been murdered is to decimate the pivotal role women play in the preservation of life and nurturing in death. As per the global definition adopted by IFSW in 2014, "Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work." To uphold our values, it is essential to raise awareness of MMIW and challenge the societal conditions that perpetuate the vulnerabilities experienced by Indigenous women.

The People's Charter for an Eco-Social Work is a living document developed at the 2022 Global Summit that, among other things, emphasizes co-building reciprocity, co-building peace, co-creating social justice, and co-realizing equality. It talks about finding a way forward to a peaceful world while recognizing that thus far our efforts have failed. The Charter notes that "sustainable change has resulted from mass movements where diverse populations have worked together for common interests." It is in all our interests to stop dehumanization and violence facilitated by colonial structures such as those that allow the crisis of MMIW to go unrecognized and unchallenged in many parts of the world. Social workers are equipped to confront injustice and facilitate societal change.

## Conclusion

The time for action is now. As social workers we must speak out and work for a day when there will be no more Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

- IFSW stands with the Indigenous communities and families who have lost loved ones.
- We call for and will work with others for the prevention of violence and follow-up when violence does occur against Indigenous women and girls. All members of societies must be valued and not considered disposable.
- We must challenge colonial structures that create and perpetuate vulnerabilities.
- We call for and will work with others end to human trafficking and attention to situations of particular vulnerability such as the man camps associated with extractive industries.

To learn more about the MMIW movement, the anthology *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* is an accessible and moving collection edited by Kim Anderson, Maria Campbell and Christi Belcourt that includes essays reflecting on the historical context, personal stories, and activism. For information on current activist efforts and statistics consult

resources such as National Indigenous Women's Resource Center and the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women or read Amnesty International materials at <https://www.amnesty.ca/what-we-do/no-more-stolen-sisters/>.