



October 3, 2008

No More Stolen Sisters: Open letter to all candidates in the 2008 Federal election

Dear candidates,

Tomorrow, vigils across Canada will honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

On October 4, at a demonstration on Parliament Hill and at events in nearly 40 other communities from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, Indigenous women's organizations and their supporters will demand urgent action to stop violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Our organizations are calling on all political parties to confirm that they are prepared to act by establishing a comprehensive national action plan to fully address the severity of the threat faced by Indigenous women and girls.

According to a 1996 government statistic, young Indigenous women with status under the Indian Act are five times more likely than all other women to die as a result of violence.

Last year, a joint committee of the Saskatchewan government, Indigenous peoples' organizations, police and community groups reported that Indigenous women make up 60 percent of the long-term, unresolved cases of missing women in the province.

Saskatchewan is the only province in Canada where such statistics have been compiled and made public. It is also the only province where the RCMP and municipal police forces have collaborated to make public a combined listing of all current missing persons cases in the province.

This illustrates two issues that are of critical concern to our organizations. First, information vital to community safety is not being systematically collected and made public. There is still no guarantee that police will record the Aboriginal identity of victims of crime or that this information will ever be made public. Second, the way police respond to threats to Indigenous women's lives – from the handling of missing persons reports through all stages of investigation – varies widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Only a few police services

have addressed the specific situation of Indigenous women in their missing persons policies and many don't even make these policies public.

The federal government has an obligation to demonstrate leadership in stopping violence against Indigenous women and girls. The seriousness of the threats they face demands nothing less than a comprehensive national action plan. Such a plan of action must:

- Uphold and promote the rights of *all* Indigenous women and girls whether they live on reserve or in other communities.
- Ensure effective coordination of federal, provincial, and territorial policies, programs and services impacting upon the lives and well-being of Indigenous women and girls.
- Address long-standing and deep-rooted patterns of discrimination and impoverishment that put so many Indigenous women in harm's way.
- Ensure that police in every jurisdiction have clear guidance on effective and appropriate responses to threats to Indigenous women's lives and safety, including missing persons protocols based on clear recognition of the heightened risk faced by Indigenous women and girls.
- Help Indigenous women escape from abusive relationships and dangerous situations by ensuring adequate, sustained funding to shelters and frontline organizations providing culturally appropriate services.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Alex Neve
Secretary General

Amnesty International
Canada



Mary Corkery
Executive Director

KAIROS: Canadian
Ecumenical Justice
Initiatives



Beverley Jacobs
President

Native Women's
Association of Canada

Background

In March 2004, the Native Women's Association of Canada and KAIROS launched the Sisters in Spirit campaign to draw attention to the high levels of violence faced by Indigenous women in Canada, especially the largely unacknowledged pattern of racialized sexualized violence faced by Indigenous women in Canadian cities.

On October 4, 2004, Amnesty International issued the report *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to discrimination and violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*. The report had three central themes:

- The role of racism and discrimination in fuelling acts of extreme brutality targeted against Indigenous women.
- How historic and continuing marginalization and impoverishment of Indigenous women has pushed many Indigenous women into environments such as unsafe urban areas and the sex trade, where violent predators feel they can attack and murder women with impunity.
- The failure of the Canadian government and society to respond adequately to the frequency and seriousness of this violence, including by ensuring consistent, thorough investigation into reports of missing Indigenous women.

Our organizations' concerns over violence against Indigenous women have been widely acknowledged and endorsed in public statements by government officials, international human rights experts, Members of Parliament and high-ranking police officers.

- In November 2004, Canada acknowledged the severity of the violence and discrimination faced by Indigenous women in a presentation to the United Nations.
- In 2005, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concern that "Aboriginal women are far more likely to experience a violent death than other Canadian women" and called on Canada to address this violence.
- In 2006, a resolution passed by annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police acknowledged the high levels of violence experienced by Indigenous women and called on all police services across Canada to adopt missing persons policies that include specific measures to address the circumstances and needs of Indigenous people.

In recent years, governments in Canada have undertaken a number of welcome initiatives to address violence against Indigenous women, including providing funding for research and community education through the Native Women's Association of Canada's Sisters in Spirit Initiative. However, our organizations firmly believe that initiatives to date fall far short of what is required to address the scale and severity of the violence faced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada.