



PRESS RELEASE | Monday, November 25, 2024

## Statement From the Ontario Indigenous Women's Advisory Council on Declaring Intimate Partner Violence an Epidemic

**In response to municipalities declaring an epidemic of intimate partner violence, and the introduction of Bill 173, *Intimate Partner Violence Epidemic Act* in Ontario:**

The Indigenous Women's Advisory Council (IWAC) stands in solidarity with the families and loved ones of Carol Culleton, Anastasia Kuzyk and Nathalie Warmerdam and those working to end violence against women.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last several decades, Indigenous women, leadership, organizations and communities have been raising the alarm about the high levels of gender-based violence perpetrated against Indigenous women and girls, including intimate partner and family violence. Indigenous women, together with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leadership and international human rights bodies, have continued to call for immediate action from all levels of government to improve Indigenous women's safety. Violence against Indigenous women in Canada is a systemic issue, rooted in colonial policies and institutions that have devalued and disrupted the identity, rights, and inherent leadership roles of Indigenous women, and created social and economic conditions that perpetuate discrimination and violence. Indigenous women's experiences of violence are shaped and compounded by their multiple social identities – their Indigeneity, gender, and sexuality, for example. Violence against Indigenous women is also generational – it impacts generations now and for generations to come because of the roles that Indigenous women play in their families and communities.

As municipalities and the government of Ontario take action to address the epidemic of intimate partner violence in this province, consideration must be given to the disproportionate rates of intimate partner violence experienced by Indigenous women and the multiple barriers they face when seeking help. To effectively address the violence experienced by Indigenous women, the solutions must come from Indigenous women, our organizations, and our communities. Municipalities and other jurisdictions must work with, and support, Indigenous women, their organizations, and communities to end the unacceptable levels of violence against Indigenous women.

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that women have many social identities. When referring to women and Indigenous women, we are referring to women in all their diversity and intersections, including but not limited to gender identity, sexuality, ability, social location, etc. This is inclusive of trans and Two-Spirit individuals.



## Moving Forward: Our Recommendations

1. Ontario legislates its Pathways to Safety Strategy to ensure Indigenous women's safety remains a priority for future governments, in the same way that Ontario has legislated a response to human trafficking (Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy Act, 2021), racism (Anti-Racism Act, 2017), and poverty reduction (Poverty Reduction Act, 2009).
2. Any provincial and municipal declarations and responses to intimate partner violence explicitly recognize the disproportionate rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls, their unique and intersectional experiences as Indigenous and as women, and the root causes of this violence.
3. Indigenous women's safety be prioritized at all levels of government in all policies, plans, and strategies that impact, or have the potential to impact, the lives of Indigenous women.
4. Indigenous women be involved in the development of all legislative, policy, program and service responses to the issues that impact them, including gender-based violence. This will assist with the inclusion of Indigenous women's world views, the unique intersectionality of their experiences, and their specific safety needs. All actions to address violence against Indigenous women and support Indigenous women who are survivors of violence should be directed, designed, implemented and led by Indigenous women.
5. Increased and sustainable investments from all levels of government into new and existing community-based culturally grounded programs and services that improve Indigenous women's safety and promote family and community healing, including funding for violence prevention, education, and awareness; culturally relevant shelter services, transitional housing and affordable housing; community-based child welfare prevention; Indigenous-specific mental health, addictions and wellness programs; and programs that support Indigenous women's leadership. This includes capital funding for critical infrastructure for programming and safe spaces for Indigenous women.
6. Additional and separate investments for Indigenous men and boys to support healing and restoration of balance in communities.
7. Implement a community development approach to ending violence against Indigenous women. This approach recognizes the distinctiveness of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women, and the different experiences and challenges faced by Indigenous women living in urban, rural, remote, and Northern communities. It enables solutions that are varied and unique to each community. Solutions are based on and respond to the needs identified by Indigenous women in the community and are led by or co-developed with Indigenous women and their community. A community development approach supports Indigenous women's leadership and builds community capacity to end violence and create safety for Indigenous women.



## Our Truth:

Indigenous women, like all women, have a fundamental right to live in safety, free from violence and discrimination, and to enjoy good health and wellbeing. Yet, Indigenous women in Ontario and Canada continue to face among the highest rates of violent victimization of all population groups in Canada, and intimate partner violence is one of the most pervasive forms of violence against Indigenous women.<sup>2</sup> Six in ten Indigenous women report experiencing intimate partner violence in their lifetime, compared to four in ten non-Indigenous women.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous women and girls also make up 21% of all gender-related homicides of women and girls in Canada, despite comprising only 5% of the female population.<sup>4</sup> In Ontario, Indigenous women are three times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women.<sup>5,6</sup> The proportion of femicide victims who are Indigenous in Ontario has steadily increased since the 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, from 5.4% in 2019-20 to 8.1% in 2022-23.<sup>7</sup>

We also know that the compounding effects of intersecting forms of discrimination and inequality place some Indigenous women at even greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence. For example, 86% of Indigenous women who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ report experiencing intimate partner violence,<sup>8</sup> and 74% of Indigenous women with a disability report experiencing violent victimization in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup>

Indigenous women's experiences of violence, including intimate partner violence, and the context in which it occurs differs greatly from that of non-Indigenous women. Indigenous women's experiences must be understood through the intersectional racism, sexism, and discrimination they face both as women and as Indigenous peoples. The violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls is an intersectional issue rooted in the legacy of colonialism and targeted assimilation policies in Canada, as well as systemic racism, discrimination, sexism, and the dismissal of Indigenous women's safety.

Structural and systemic barriers, such as racism and discrimination, not only increase the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence among Indigenous women, but they also prevent many Indigenous women from seeking help. Indigenous women's experiences of violence and the barriers they face are also distinct and diverse – for example, urban Indigenous women may experience violence

<sup>2</sup> Conroy, S. (2021). Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2019. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00001-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Heidinger, L. (2021). Intimate partner violence: Experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada, 2018. *Juristat*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00007-eng.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Sutton, D. (2023) Gender-related homicide of women and girls in Canada. *The Daily*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002-X. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00003-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. (2023). Table 35-10-0156-01 Number, percentage and rate of homicide victims, by gender and Indigenous identity. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510015601>

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. (2015). Table 8: Total female victims of homicide, by Aboriginal identity, Canada, provinces and territories 2001 to 2014. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14244/tbl/tbl08-eng.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Data derived from Ontario Association of Interval Houses (OAITH) Annual Femicide Lists and Reports.

<sup>8</sup> Heidinger, L. (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Heidinger, L. (2021).



differently than First Nations women residing in their home communities. The experiences of Métis and Inuit women will also differ from First Nations women. Disparities exist in the support services available to Indigenous women depending on where they live. For example, Indigenous women living in Northern and remote communities face unique challenges and do not have access to the many of the services available to Indigenous women living in First Nations and urban centres in Southern Ontario. Indigenous women who live in rural communities may also find it more difficult to access services and supports when compared to Indigenous women living in larger and urban centres.

We recognize that all Indigenous women and girls are strong and resilient, despite the violence that they have been subjected to and the multiple barriers they experience when seeking help. Solutions imposed upon us without our input or leadership will fail to understand our realities or meet our needs.

The Renfrew County Inquest and subsequent declarations of intimate partner violence as an epidemic has sparked local efforts to address gender-based violence. We support these efforts to end violence against women in Ontario and stand in solidarity with the Violence Against Women (VAW) sector organizations that have been working tirelessly to effect systems change.

We are saddened, however, by the differential response to the murders of Indigenous women. Our communities have been calling on governments to recognize violence against Indigenous women as a national crisis for decades. In 2014, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples reported that the rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada are “epidemic”.<sup>10</sup> The National Inquiry determined that violence against Indigenous women constitutes a “deliberate race, identity and gender-based genocide.”<sup>11</sup> Close to 1,200 Indigenous women were reported missing or murdered in Canada between 1980 and 2012<sup>12</sup> – that is more than 37.5 a year, without any level of government calling for an inquest or declaring an epidemic. This differential response is rooted in systemic racism and the normalization of violence against Indigenous women. Societal and government inaction – across all levels – allows for the violence to continue, and this inaction can be seen as a form of systemic and structural violence against Indigenous women and girls. A critical part of reconciliation with Indigenous women is recognizing and reflecting on this differential response and the underlying causes.

Ending violence against Indigenous women requires community-based healing to disrupt the cycle of violence and systemic solutions that address the root causes of violence and assist Indigenous women in reclaiming our identities and leadership roles within our communities and Nations. Violence is cyclical and inter-generational, and often those who harm were themselves impacted by violence earlier in the cycle. Indigenous men and boys are part of the solution, and prevention efforts must include healing for families and the community as a whole. All the issues that Indigenous women strive to overcome are interconnected and must be responded to in relation to one another. Improving Indigenous women’s safety also means addressing the lack of safe, adequate and affordable housing both on- and off-reserve;

<sup>10</sup> Anya, James. (2014). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Addendum: The Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada*. A/HRC/27/52/Add.2. Retrieved from: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/777907?ln=en&v=pdf>

<sup>11</sup> National Inquiry into MMIWG2S+ (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S+, Volume 1a*. p. 5. Retrieved from: <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

<sup>12</sup> Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2014). *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/wam/media/460/original/0cbd8968a049aa0b44d343e76b4a9478.pdf>



**GRAND COUNCIL  
TREATY #3**  
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE SASKATCHEWAN NATION IN TREATY #3



Métis Nation  
of Ontario



the over-apprehension of Indigenous children into the child welfare system; high rates of poverty and income insecurity experienced by Indigenous women; lack of culturally responsive mental health and addictions services and treatment programs; underfunding of Indigenous women's shelters; inequitable access to healthcare and other critical services; and the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous women and their families by policing and the justice system as well as multiple other systems.

We honour the lives of all Indigenous women who have been taken from us. We stand together in solidarity with all the families and loved ones impacted by violence against Indigenous women. We recognize and honour the continued advocacy of Indigenous women, their families, and their communities to raise public awareness of this violence so that collectively we can work towards a future where all women and girls are safe. We thank them for their bravery in speaking their truth.



## About the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council

The Indigenous Women's Advisory Council ("The Council") in Ontario was established in 2020 to amplify the voices of Indigenous women in policy development and provide accountability to Indigenous women and their communities. The Council brings together First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women leaders to provide culturally relevant guidance, advice and expertise to the Ontario government on violence prevention and other issues impacting their communities and Indigenous women's safety, including human trafficking, child, youth and family well-being, and economic empowerment. The Council was convened to address the alarmingly high rates of violence against Indigenous women in Ontario and support Ontario's response to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

### Current members:

- Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians, Chief Laurie Carr
- Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Deputy Grand Chief Anna Betty Achneepineskum
- Ontario Native Women's Association, Cora McGuire-Cyrette (Co-Chair)
- Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services, representing Six Nations of the Grand River, Sandra Montour (Co-Chair)
- Anishinabek Nation, Rebecca Timms
- Chiefs of Ontario, Nancy Johnson
- Grand Council Treaty #3, Debbie Lipscombe
- Independent First Nations, Lyndia Jones
- Métis Nation of Ontario, Jennifer St. Germain
- Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, Niki Hashie
- Tungasuvvingat Inuit, Paige Kreps