

# RED WOMEN RISING

Indigenous Women Survivors in  
Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Carol Muree Martin  
and Harsha Walia

Downtown Eastside  
Women's  
Centre





We gratefully acknowledge that our work takes place on the unceded territories of the x̣ṃəθkwəỵəm, Skwxwú7mesh, and Səlilwətaʔṭ nations. We honour and thank the stewards of these lands and waters.

## Dedication

*This labour of love and service is dedicated to all women whose courage and kindness inspires us every day. Those whom we have lost continue to live in our hearts and will never be forgotten.*

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Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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Carol Muree Martin (Nisga'a – Gitanyow) and Harsha Walia, 2019





The Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) is an organization which works collectively amongst Indigenous Nations in B.C. and acts as an advocacy body to provide a cohesive voice regionally, nationally, and internationally in support of Indigenous Nations and communities, and to promote and protect each Nation's exercise of Sovereignty within their traditional territories.

We write in support of the work of the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre on documenting and reporting on the horrific and systemic violence faced by Indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. This report is comprehensive and compelling. It is based on direct input from over a hundred Indigenous women through dozens of focus groups, and it details the narratives of Indigenous women on the layers of colonial gendered violence that they have faced since birth. DEWC is one of the few safe spaces in the DTES exclusively for self-identified women and their children, and thus uniquely positioned to author this groundbreaking report, and to ensure that its findings are acted on with the urgency that is required.

**On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS**

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip  
President

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Secretary-Treasurer



The Yellowhead Institute strongly endorses the research presented in this report. Our institute was founded in order to analyze the structures of domination in Canada affecting Indigenous lives and to support Indigenous governance and self-determination through accessible information, collaborative research, and education. This report embodies our core principles by contributing a rigorous and powerful assessment of the role of gender-based violence in a colonial context—and its impacts—as theorized by survivors.

There would be no Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry without the dedicated advocacy of organizations like the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. This collective record of members is an invaluable contribution to broader national efforts to diagnose the underlying causes of violence against Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people in Canadian society and therefore the tangible roots of oppression to address. We stand behind this excellent report and the Indigenous leadership it provides on the elimination of gender-based violence on these lands.

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# ABOUT



The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC) is located in the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). The DTES is a neighbourhood with disproportionate levels of manufactured and enforced violence, poverty, homelessness, child apprehension, criminalization, and fatal overdoses. Established in 1978, DEWC provides support to women and their children through a drop-in centre and a low-barrier emergency night shelter for all self-identified women who face homelessness and violence. DEWC provides basic necessities such as hot meals, laundry, phone access, bathrooms, and showers. DEWC also offers specialized advocacy through victim services, housing outreach, health teams, and legal advocates. Finally, DEWC supports long-term skills development and political advocacy through a peer-driven volunteer program, Indigenous elders council, healing circle, and a social justice Power of Women project.

Five hundred women and children come through DEWC every day. In a DTES women's safety study, DEWC was named by 54 percent of women in the DTES as the place they feel safest. This is because while there are hundreds of service providers in the DTES, there are only three women-only spaces. While other



agencies operate some women's programming, DEWC is the longest-running low-barrier women-serving agency in the neighbourhood.

Over 70 percent of women who access DEWC identify as Indigenous. A vast majority of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the DTES accessed DEWC. Indigenous members are powerful voices in advocating for an end to violence and calling for a national inquiry for the past thirty years. As far back as the 1980s, DEWC provided police forces with names of women who had gone missing. Ten years ago DEWC files showed 129 women missing from the area over nine years, while police statistics were fewer than 50 names. Women and elders at DEWC established DEWC's emergency night shelter, help organize the annual February 14 Women's Memorial March, sit on a number of City of Vancouver committees, and participate in the SisterWatch program to draw attention to women's safety. DEWC has also participated in several United Nations reviews of Canada on the issue of violence against Indigenous women.

Last year DEWC began a participatory process within our membership to gather input for the National Inquiry for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Over a period of five months and hundreds of hours, Indigenous women peer facilitators and DEWC staff gathered input from 113 Indigenous survivors of violence. Many are also biological family members or families of the heart of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. All 113 Indigenous women are quoted in this report, however individual quotes are anonymized to maintain safety and confidentiality. In addition, we gathered input from 15 non-Indigenous women who are friends or street families of Indigenous women who are missing, have overdosed, or died from violence in the DTES.

These 128 members of DEWC are the backbone and key contributors to this report. While the DTES is a heavily researched neighbourhood, this report is undoubtedly unique. Women are not anonymous research subjects; they created and drove the process, incorporated diverse Indigenous methodologies in the research design, and are the central knowledge holders. This report, and the 200 recommendations contained within it, is based on their leadership, lived experience, and expertise as Indigenous women in the DTES. This report is also the first comprehensive project with Indigenous women survivors in the DTES at the very center of community research, rather than as a secondary statistic. This difference drastically shifts the research lens from pathologizing poverty to illuminating and amplifying resistance to colonialism.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside



## We are CD and Sandra

*We have been together on and off for 13 years. Our family is down here in the DTES. We don't judge people because we have been there and done that. We've done it all. We have experienced it all and we give back to our community as best we can. We want an end to violence against women, end to homelessness, and end to the opioid crisis.*

**Sandra:** I blame MCFD for why so many of us are down here. I was six years old when I ran away. I ran away because dad used to beat me up. When I ran away, I was sleeping outside and I lit a fire to keep myself warm. The fire spread and they caught me and put me in the shrink ward as a six year old. They kept sending me back home to my dad till I was 12 years old and they finally believed me because my dad beat me up so bad and there was blood everywhere. Then they put me in foster home after foster home. All these families would take me for the extra money. Once I was placed on a reserve with a chief and he would take foster girls and send them out on the street. I refused to do it and he kept me on the couch with a Doberman so I wouldn't move. MCFD is right there to grab kids like me but they didn't believe me when I told them what was happening. I was sexually abused so much and I had my first drink when I was eight years old. I always felt I was doing something wrong without even trying.

**CD:** I was sexually abused as a kid too. I came down here when I was 22 years old. I am 52 years old now. I have seen it all. I have been homeless. I have been in jail and served prison time. I am a street vendor and I keep getting tickets for vending. I have seen so much violence from stabbings to knife fights. You see men beating up women on the street. You hear the ambulance sirens every day. We see so much



**I blame MCFD for why so many of us are down here.**

down here. Nothing surprises me anymore. I seem to be stuck down here, but when I go away I miss it down here.

**Sandra:** The way the police treat us, I really have to keep my cool. I've done jail time too. I've been homeless down here. All these condos going up that we can't afford. And everyone dying all the time. These politicians are always making promises about the DTES but nothing changes. It's getting worse over the years. And these White people and tourists who come down here to stare at us and make comments about us. It's like we are some sideshow.

**CD:** The poverty is getting worse down here. Everyone is trying to survive. The street vendors are trying to sell their stuff but the police will bother them and the City workers toss out their livelihoods. If you try and stop the City workers or the police, you will get arrested. A lot of vendors do the drugs they do in order to stay awake and watch their stuff. I have gotten so many vending tickets. If you vend something with a price tag that you got from a place where it was donated, the cops assume it's shoplifted and ask you for a receipt. If you say you don't have a receipt, they will confiscate the item.

**Sandra:** There are so many things we experience that most people who aren't poor don't think about. Once the cops fined me for public urination. I threw the ticket out and the cop told me he would give me another fine for littering. It's so ridiculous! It's not my fault there are no public bathrooms and we have to pee in the alleys.

**CD:** Yes and not just police, even private security down here is getting worse. I get followed in stores all the time. I know I am always being watched. I hear them say, "There's an Indian, drug addict, rubbie." I have to hold my cool because if I retaliate then I will be the one who gets in trouble. And even hospitals treat you so badly when they know you are from the poor part of town. The racism at St. Paul's Hospital is so obvious. As soon as they see your face and you tell them you are from the DTES, they treat you much worse. They send you out at 3 am even if you don't have anywhere to go. They don't take blood properly and don't ask you if you are ready or anything. They stick needles in right away because they assume you do needles and won't care. And if you ask too many questions, like how long it's going to be, they call security on you. It's worse for First Nations women accessing healthcare than anybody else.

**Sandra:** It's all connected down here. Police, private security, hospitals, housing, everything.



**There are so many things we experience that most people who aren't poor don't think about.**



**It's all connected down here. Police, private security, hospitals, housing, everything.**



**CD:** Housing is another huge issue. When you get decent housing, your whole life changes. When you get housing you can get work and your health gets better. Your whole perspective changes. I can keep my toilet seat down. Small but important things like that. And decent housing means housing that is safe and no shared bathrooms or other amenities. Housing that I am responsible for and I can keep clean for myself. Not other people's junk and trash everywhere. These politicians have to keep their promises for housing. Like Mayor Robertson who promised 100 percent social housing for 58 West Hastings and even signed a contract for it, and now we still don't have that housing. I hope the new Mayor keeps his promises.

**Sandra:** I got evicted from women's supportive housing. I got into an argument with a staff member and they told me to go for a walk to cool down. I came back and they wouldn't let me back in. It was a total illegal eviction. Another time, I got put into a room of someone else who was in the hospital at the time. They told me I could have the room. I had no idea it was someone else's room. The person came back from the hospital and was like, "what the fuck, who are you?" They took money from welfare for me staying in that room and money from welfare for the other person too, but I didn't actually get the room and had to leave. Another place had huge rats. Like massive rats. We would be in my room and hallucinate about rats, it was so awful. One time my sink was plugged and their solution was to tell me not to wash dishes in the sink. Where else am I supposed to wash my dishes? These housing agencies get millions of dollars in contracts and this is how we live.

**CD:** I was homeless for more than two years. I have slept outside. I was in every shelter down here where I constantly lost all my stuff. I had

to line up two hours before shelters would open to get a spot. Everything was a line up. I have been in SROs down here. I was in SROs for eight years. I have been in the Savoy, Gastown, Brandeis. Those SRO rooms are tiny and make you more crazy. There is just a bed and you have to share bathrooms and kitchens. My door was broken down so I never felt safe. You never want to go home when you live in those rooms. Even the new SROs are not great. The rooms are cleaner but it's more institutional and there is so much security. And the condos going up everywhere are taking our community away. There are so many homeless people. I got a place eventually but I had to go through mental health services to get a place.

**Sandra:** One of the problems with getting housed is you are no longer considered a priority for good housing. They stick you into whatever kind of bad housing to get you housed and they tell you its temporary, but then you are stuck there and you go to the bottom of the housing priority list. My time was ending in a women's shelter and they wanted to shove me into the Dominion but I said no. They kept telling me how much it costs them to house people. I didn't budge and complained and refused to move until they found a better room for me. I always tell women not to just accept anything the housing workers or BC Housing offers them. The housing workers are half my age and have no experience about being down here. They say "I know how you feel," but that's absurd. They have no idea what I feel!

**CD:** Grief down here really affects me. I knew a lot of women from the Pickton farm who were murdered. The biggest issue we are facing right now is the opioid crisis. I have lost so many of my friends to overdoses. Their deaths really affect me. One of my closest friends died of an overdose. People in my building have died of overdoses and they shouldn't have. They died because of inadequate staff and health checks. Giving out harm reduction supplies isn't enough. People need holistic health checks. I work at Spikes for Bikes and I do overdose trainings for others as a peer worker. The worst is when someone is already deceased and you are desperately trying to give them Narcan. And there are so many deaths they don't even bother covering the dead bodies anymore. There are so many overdoses now, especially of First Nations. Every culture is affected by the opioid crisis but especially us First Nations.

**Sandra:** I am proud of my work down here to get people to take the opioid crisis seriously. I have done outreach for the BC Centre for Substance Use for the past three years. Before you had to pay for Narcan kits and you would only get kits if you were trained. I helped to get more funding for overdose prevention sites and longer hours at those sites. It's terrifying to always see your friends dying. You feel scared to go read the posters on the memorial boards. Like the death of Tracey Morrison, who cared about everyone. They think our lives are disposable. This opioid crisis is a new form of genocide.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**It's terrifying to always see  
your friends dying.**



**My cousin was murdered in the Roosevelt in the DTES. My cousin left behind three kids. It's still an open case.**

## **I am DJ Joe**

My name is DJ Joe. I have lived in the DTES for 29 years, and I am a friend and street mother to many young girls.

I came in 1989 from Tacoma. My cousin was murdered in the Roosevelt in the DTES. My cousin left behind three kids. It's still an open case. I came to identify her body and I stayed here ever since. This is home now. I am in my 50s and I have had two strokes. My two street moms have already passed away.

Around the late 1980s and early 1990s, I got a job at the old WISH building as a peer worker. One night I remember serving dinner to a young girl who was probably 15 years old and she was going on a date. Then we heard yelling and screaming in the back. The guy was raping her behind the building. "Help me, help me," we heard. We ran out and he ran away. She survived, but I will never forget that voice of hers. I always hear it in my head. She was someone's daughter.

I have fought for those women and myself ever since. I know hundreds of women who have died in this neighbourhood. I can't keep count now.

I have worked the streets for many years. It is not my choice but what am I supposed to do? I have a Grade 12 education and no resume. No one hires me once they see I



am a Native woman. Instead of focusing on 'choice' or 'no choice', I focus on safety and make changes on the street so we know where everyone is and they are safe in what they are doing.

Once a guy central-locked me in. I couldn't get out. He beat me and shot me twice. I survived. You have to pay attention to everything around you. Child-proof doors, power locks. If you're using and work through that, it's the most dangerous. I thought I was going to be okay when I used and went to work, but I wasn't. I always tell the girls, "Wait an hour after you use before you get out. You feel the drugs are making you okay, but you aren't alert enough. Pay attention to your surroundings." A lot of young girls think they know, but we learnt the hard way and we've been through the time of the farm.

Our buddy system is the only thing that works. We help each other on the street when we work. We use the buddy system on the corner to track cars and models of the cars. Spotters discretely check how long women will be and what time they will return. And everyone comes back to where they started. Spotters have clear line of sight but no one knows we are all together. If a woman has been too long and doesn't return our calls, we call the outer circle and text everyone working that night to keep an eye out. We know who is working and when. If we are working indoors, we put something out the window. We cover each other.

Everything is setup against Indigenous girls. I always try to get young girls to go back home, but it's so hard and then they slip through the cracks. I went through the same thing as the younger girls. I got beat up a lot. There are programs for women as victims, but none for men to stop beating us up. So many of us are getting beat up real badly and we are supposed to get services to feel better, but who is telling them to stop? We need to have circles for men and women to come together to end violence against women.

On Monday, a young girl came in and had bruises. She said her father slapped her and pushed her down the stairs and took her money. She was maybe 14 years old and came in for harm reduction supplies from the Washington where I work. That's a huge thing for a conscience to bear. To give a young girl supplies for using drugs, or not give it to her and know she will use anyway? It's not about harm reduction or not, it's about our conscience and care. These children should matter to everyone. What are we doing to stop all this madness? The debates about harm reduction or not, legalize or not—all this talk isn't about our actual lives, our whole lives, and what we are going through.

I have lived in the DTES for thirty years, and this is the first time I don't feel safe. Even when I have money, I don't feel safe to buy things from the stores or to go to a restaurant. I can't go into the stores without security watching me, especially the Dollar Store security. I always keep my hands out so they don't think I am taking



**Instead of focusing on 'choice' or 'no choice', I focus on safety and make changes on the street so we know where everyone is and they are safe in what they are doing.**



**Everything is setup against Indigenous girls.**



**You feel it in your body that you are being targeted.**

anything. I have had restaurants and coffee shops ask for payment before serving my food. You feel it in your body that you are being targeted. When I sleep, there is no rest. The sirens, the yelling, and screaming outside. And the nightmares never stop.

The drug trade has also gotten more intense. Street culture has changed. No one listens to street elders no more. The pressures to survive especially in the drug trade are more intense now. Women's debt to dealers is getting worse and dealers are going after groceries. They didn't use to do that. Debt collectors are shaving heads and women are forced to strip and run naked. The last three years there are lots of changes on the streets and younger dealers. These younger and newer dealers are collecting with no honour code, like collecting from pregnant women. I got beat up from a truck driver once because I scored him a bad supply. People don't intervene to stop violence anymore because they are afraid of getting beat up. It didn't use to be like that. Sometimes outsiders try to intervene on the street, but they have no idea what they are doing and make it worse.

And the opioid crisis. There have been two overdoses in my building. No one is checking on people to make sure they are okay. There was one incident where the building ran out of Narcan. That's not acceptable. Everyone in the DTES has started to accept this as normal and saying "This is how it is."

I am a crackhead. Now I mostly only use to handle the pain. The doctors are the biggest pushers of drugs. Doctors are so judgmental. They are the ones who got so many people hooked on opioids in the first place. I've been trying to get my doctor to check me out for three years. He won't run tests and says he can't find anything. He says its probably drug-use related or from alcohol, but I don't even drink anymore.

Everyone wants to judge us as 'junkies' or 'working women' but we are losing our lives. Homelessness, drug crisis, violence on the street is all getting worse. And the police don't intervene when they should. A lady was getting beat up by her boyfriend on the street and I ran to the officer on the corner and he said, "Call 911." I said "What are you doing here then?" and he did not respond and did not come back with me.

The police don't protect us; they harass us. There is too much police brutality down here. This weekend there was eight cop cars after one guy in the back lane. And when the police show up to our housing buildings, the staff doesn't intervene or do anything to stop the police. The police also make racial tensions and gang wars more intense. The new police recruits look like 18 or 19 years old and they don't

know anything about us or this neighbourhood. So I am with SisterWatch to try and make a difference. We try to accompany women so they are not alone on the streets or trains. Native women face so much violence but no one believes a Native woman when she reports violence. And women don't want to report to police because if they are in the drug trade then they don't want to be seen as snitching. Women risk our lives to report, and even then we aren't taken seriously. We get attacked by drivers and strangers in the shadows and no one does anything.

I lived in the Balmoral SRO for 20 years. It was an awful SRO with bedbugs and rats everywhere, shit on the floors, mold, no working doors on the bathrooms. Last year, the City evacuated us all out saying it was dangerous for us because the building might collapse from rot because there was no maintenance for all these years. Why didn't they do anything for all these years? It was a shithole. And we weren't compensated properly when we were forced out. I hope the slumlord Sahotas are in there when they demolish this building.

I hear stories from everywhere, and this is the hardest place. They bring kids down here to 'scare them straight'. We are like a show for them. But if we can keep kids out of here I guess that's good. People here have lost hope to help themselves. Especially when your children are apprehended, you get depressed and lose hope. People come from other places thinking there are many more services here, but life is hard. Yeah, you can get free clothes and never starve but there is no housing and no real help. And the violence is so bad.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**Native women face so much violence but no one believes a Native woman when she reports violence.**



Aboriginal women and girls are treated poorly out of ignorance by racist and patriarchal society.

## Summary of Participatory Research and Literature Review

Violence against Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people is the most pressing human rights issue in Canada today. Numerous international bodies have pushed Canada to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls. Indigenous women and girls in Canada have been murdered or have gone missing at a rate four times higher than the rate of representation of Indigenous women in the population in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous women’s rate of violent victimization is double that of Indigenous men, nearly triple that of non-Indigenous women, and more than triple that of non-Indigenous men.<sup>2</sup> Two-spirit and trans people are violently victimized nearly five times as often.<sup>3</sup>



We can’t get out of the DTES if we want to. Everything is setup for us to remain here. We can’t get housing or services or jobs anywhere else. And then staying in the DTES, we are marginalized and stereotyped as ‘from down there’.



Trauma and hurt makes us stuck. The first step is talking about violence against women and for us to learn to speak and not to be afraid. We have to teach our children to be open, and support them to let out their truths.



**INDIGENOUS WOMEN & GIRLS IN CANADA**

**HAVE BEEN MURDERED OR HAVE GONE MISSING**

at a rate **4X** HIGHER

**THAN THEIR RATE OF REPRESENTATION IN CANADA**

The gruesome murder of a Coast Salish mother in 1992 catalyzed the annual Women’s Memorial March, which continues years later to honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and all women’s lives lost in the DTES. Many homicides and disappearances are still unsolved, including the recent murders and disappearances of DEWC members Lisa Arlene Francis, Angeline Pete, Ashley Machiskinic, and Verna Simnard. In the DTES, where approximately 8,000 women live and work, incidents of violence are double the rates of the rest



of the city and 16 percent of reported sexual assaults in the whole city occur in this one neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> In a DTES women's safety audit, 87 percent of women reported feeling unsafe and 48 percent of women experienced violence within the last two years.<sup>5</sup>

Remediating the causes of and institutional responses to violence against Indigenous women in the DTES requires disrupting the pattern of talking about women without their expertise and leadership. This report uses a participatory approach where Indigenous women in the DTES are treated as experts on their own lives. Our report and 200 recommendations are based on direct collaboration with 113 Indigenous women in the DTES, and include 25 in-depth narratives that detail how the gendered colonialism of family trauma, child welfare, homelessness, policing, the welfare system, and the opioid crisis all contribute to targeted insecurity and violence.

Indigenous women in the DTES are stigmatized as having 'high-risk lifestyles' and blamed for violence committed against them when, in fact, colonial poverty and patriarchy are the highest risk factors in Indigenous women's lives. Our report explores how individual experiences of violence are inseparable from state violence including loss of land, forced poverty, homelessness, child apprehension, criminalization within the justice system, and health disparities.

Settler-colonialism intentionally targets Indigenous women in order to destroy families, sever the connection to land-based practices and economies, and devastate relational governance of Indigenous nations. Indigenous women's and two-spirit people's role as decision makers and holders of traditional knowledge, and their role in matriarchal governance through house groups and clan systems in many nations was disrupted through colonization. The doctrine of discovery



I started walking for justice for our murdered and missing women and girls when I was 73 years old. I am 84 years old now.



I have survived all these years. We have lost a lot of women. I am a cousin of Cheryl Anne Joe who was cruelly murdered in 1992 on Powell Street. I have so much pain and anger. Thank you to all those who keep fighting.



No one deserves the violence and pain we go through. Nothing changes because our lives are not valued and because people think violence against us is 'normal' and 'how it is'.



Rich White people need to pay a Native reparations tax that is part of property tax and goes to Indigenous people.

and the myth of *terra nullius* are racist legal-political frameworks that still underpin Canadian institutions through, for example, the false assertion of Crown Title over Indigenous lands.

Over the past 150 years, structural injustices—ranging from the *Indian Act* to forced removal of Indigenous children - have denied Indigenous women their Title to their lands, and civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights to self-determination. Indigenous people were forced off their territories in order to solidify the settler-colonial project, and lands were fragmented into small and chronically underfunded reserves. Multiplying socio-economic oppressions within colonialism, such as loss of land, legislated sexism, over-crowded housing, food and water insecurity, family violence, child apprehension, inadequate services, and lack of educational opportunities and jobs, displace Indigenous women and children from their home communities. Sixty-four percent of women with status now live off reserve,<sup>6</sup> and the impoverishment of Indigenous women in inner city neighbourhoods like the DTES is glaring when juxtaposed to the revenues generated by multinational and Crown corporations extracting resources from Indigenous lands.

**42%**  
OF WOMEN  
HOUSED ON  
RESERVE  
LIVE IN  
HOUSES  
THAT NEED  
MAJOR  
REPAIRS

**NEARLY**  
**1/3**  
OF HOMES  
ON RESERVE ARE  
**FOOD**  
**INSECURE**

A persistent barrier in the DTES is the lack of access to safe spaces for women. While there are hundreds of agencies in the DTES, there is not a single Indigenous women's drop-in centre operated by and for Indigenous women. In addition, a paternalistic relationship often defines the nature of service provision. Indigenous women report feeling the need to perform politeness and gratitude in order to receive services, which actively undermines Indigenous women's rights and political mobilization. The construction of Indigenous women as 'victims in need of help' is a continuation of the civilizing/saviour mentality that deliberately marginalizes Indigenous women.

## THE NATIONAL POVERTY RATE

FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN  
IS NEARLY DOUBLE  
THE RATE OF NON-INDIGENOUS WOMEN

36%

INDIGENOUS WOMEN

17%

NON-INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Indigenous women's poverty in the DTES is one of the main factors magnifying vulnerability to abusive relationships, sexual assault, child apprehension, exploitative work conditions, unsafe housing, food insecurity, poor health, and social isolation. The national poverty rate for Indigenous women is 36 percent, which is more than double the rate of non-Indigenous women.<sup>7</sup> In a DTES women's safety audit, 57 percent of women said that they had felt forced to do something they were not comfortable with in order to survive and make ends meet.<sup>8</sup> In a separate study, one-third of women on welfare reported staying or returning to an abusive partner for financial reasons, and one-fifth of women reported engaging in the survival sex trade due to welfare rules.<sup>9</sup>

Income assistance and disability benefits in B.C. are low: \$710 per month for a single person on income assistance and \$1133 plus a \$52 transportation subsidy per month for a person with a disability.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the average lowest rent in Single Room Occupancies (SROs) in the DTES is \$687 per month.<sup>11</sup> For someone on income assistance, this leaves \$23 per month to meet all other living costs including food, clothing, and transport. Eligibility criteria for income assistance are also a barrier including the three-week work search, the two-year independence test, and low asset thresholds. Employable single parents are expected to work when their youngest child is three years old, which is unrealistic for many Indigenous single mothers especially in the absence of affordable child care. Recipients of income assistance cannot attend postsecondary education without losing all their income assistance benefits, and must instead apply for student loans. This means that Indigenous women on income assistance are more likely to enter into cycles of short-term, low-wage work or limited training programs.



Everyone says Natives need to get educated, but we already know the history of this place. It's the non-Natives who need the education, not us.



One of the things about living down here is that we can never relax. This is a high stress and high pressure neighbourhood with emotional and sensory overload. I just want to be able to relax.



I was on the strip since I was seven years old. I was homeless for eight years 'by choice' because the only other options were overcrowded shelters or infested SROs. I did a lot of shitty things and still do shitty things. I don't hide anything. I'm a crackhead and an alcoholic. I steal but not from people. I steal from stores who have insurance and can afford it. When I steal, I sell my stuff on the street and I give the money to homeless people when I can.



If you are an Indigenous woman, there are all these programs and services supposed to be available to you but landlords, legal aid, employers, welfare, and educational programs all deny you.



If you are poor, you can't get good housing. If you can't get good housing, then your health and addictions deteriorates. And without good health and without a bus pass, you can't get a job. It's all related.

For Indigenous women who are seeking work, the primary barrier is discrimination by employers. Indigenous women in the DTES are stratified into low-wage work, and the \$12.65 per hour minimum wage in B.C. leaves Indigenous women living far below the poverty line. Work is part-time, casual, shift-based, or seasonal with no employment benefits including no sick time and no long-term job security. Indigenous women are also vulnerable to workplace violations including racist and sexualized harassment, wage theft, unpaid training, and overtime hours of work without pay. A particular challenge for Indigenous women in the DTES is that their work in nonprofit agencies is often considered 'volunteer hours' and compensated with free meals or gift cards, even though they are expected to show up for full four to eight hour shifts and undertake primary job responsibilities.

Enforced poverty means that Indigenous women are more likely to suffer from a lack of safe and affordable housing. The DTES rate of change of new unaffordable housing units (condos, market rental, and social housing with rents above social assistance-shelter rate) to units affordable to those on social assistance or pension is 2:1.<sup>12</sup> In the DTES, 1 in 18 people are homeless.<sup>13</sup> The average life expectancy of a homeless person in B.C. is between 40 and 49 years old, and homeless people are also twice as likely to die by accident, suicide, or homicide.<sup>14</sup>



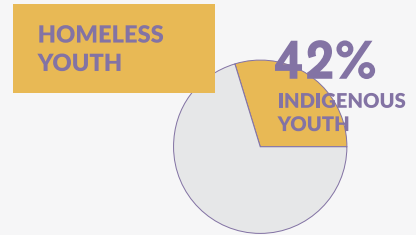
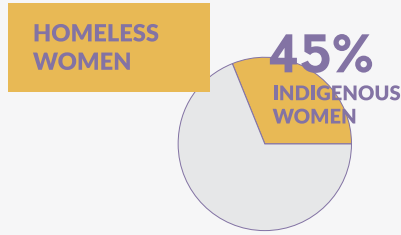
**1 in 18 people are  
homeless in DTES**

**AVERAGE LIFE EXPECTANCY  
OF A HOMELESS PERSON IN B.C.**

**40 to 49 years old**



# HOMELESSNESS IN METRO VANCOUVER



Indigenous women represent 45 percent of homeless women in the Metro Vancouver region, and all Indigenous members of DEWC have been homeless at some point in their lives.<sup>15</sup> Indigenous women with children are the most likely to experience ‘invisible homelessness,’ such as staying temporarily with a family member or friend. Indigenous women often have to make the impossible decision between staying in an abusive relationship, or becoming homeless and having their children apprehended. Indigenous trans youth are also particularly vulnerable to homelessness with one-third of trans youth reporting rejection from shelters as a result of policies that police gender presentation.<sup>16</sup> Finally, single Indigenous women elders are a fast growing demographic amongst Metro Vancouver’s homeless, with all seniors representing 23 percent of the homeless population.<sup>17</sup>

In a DTES women’s survey, one-quarter of women reported feeling unsafe in their place of residence.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous women report a number of issues with their private landlords or government-funded housing providers: discrimination by landlords who refuse to rent to Indigenous women on social assistance; illegal rent increases; substandard or no maintenance; negligence from staff and management; building staff who extort sex in exchange for maintenance services; constant bedbug, mold, and rat infestations; shared bathrooms and kitchens with no privacy; poor sanitation; illegal entry into suites; illegal rules such as not being allowed to use the backyard or not being allowed to have guests; room checks and curfews; requiring guest identification; being reevicted or demovicted; refusal to return security deposits; and evictions without cause.

Every Indigenous woman in the DEWC membership has also been embroiled in the child welfare system at some point in her life. Today there are three times more Indigenous children forcibly removed from their parents and placed into foster care than at the height of the residential school era.<sup>19</sup> Indigenous children and youth in B.C. are 15 times more likely to be in the care of Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>20</sup> The rate of investigations of Indigenous children is 4.2 times the rate of non-Indigenous investigations<sup>21</sup> and Indigenous families are investigated for poverty-related ‘neglect’ at eight times the rate of non-Indigenous families.<sup>22</sup> One hundred and twenty youth died in or receiving services from the provincial child welfare system in the year 2016.<sup>23</sup> The provincial Representative for Children and Youth’s office



A landlord will agree to meet you, and then they see you and say the place is taken. There is no question that they are all racist landlords. I haven’t met one who hasn’t been racist towards me.



My housing building has so many rules. I can’t even have my family visit where I am right now. It’s so unfair.



Instead of condos and fancy businesses going up in the DTES, we need more housing for our people.



The governments don’t give a shit. They all promise housing just to get elected. I have no money left after I pay rent, and my boys live with me too. The government owes us housing for taking our land.



We need to keep families together. Colonization and missing and murdered Indigenous women has broken families. The children left behind by missing and murdered Indigenous women are mostly in foster care and then when they age out they end up on the street. The violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women continues with their children who are also violated and made vulnerable.

receives 200 critical injury and death reports for children and youth in care every month.<sup>24</sup>

The connection between the child welfare system and violence against Indigenous girls is stark. Indigenous girls in the B.C. child welfare system are four times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than non-Indigenous girls.<sup>25</sup> Over 60 percent of children and youth who report sexual violence in government care are Indigenous girls.<sup>26</sup> When they become adults, Indigenous survivors of childhood sexual abuse are 10 times more likely to be sexually assaulted.<sup>27</sup> Every year approximately 1000 youth across B.C. age out at the age of majority, and are therefore cut off from supports. Youth in and from the foster care system make up 60 percent of homeless youth across Canada,<sup>28</sup> and two-thirds of all Indigenous people in prison have been involved in the child welfare system.<sup>29</sup> Youth in care in B.C. graduate high school at less than half the rate of their peers, and 40 percent have to rely on low rates of income assistance to survive.<sup>30</sup> Young people in or leaving MCFD care die at five



times the rate of the general population of young people in B.C, and Indigenous youth and young adults account for 34 percent of the deaths.<sup>31</sup>

Another barrier to ending violence is the failure of the entire criminal justice system to take violence against Indigenous women and girls seriously. As detailed in the Final Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) failed to prevent and protect Indigenous women from violence, and failed to diligently investigate violence when it occurred.<sup>32</sup> One recent attempt by the VPD to improve relations is the SisterWatch program. While it is significant that several agencies now have greater organizational trust with the VPD, an independent evaluation found that the program is not successful in building trust between the VPD and DTES women residents.<sup>33</sup> In a DTES women's safety audit, only 15 percent of 157 women said they would go to the police if they felt unsafe.<sup>34</sup>

Many Indigenous women enter the criminal justice system because of their experiences as survivors of violence. Rather than receiving protection, the criminal justice system constructs Indigenous women as 'risks' to be contained, makes Indigenous women unsafe, and exacerbates Indigenous women's inequality. Compared to non-Indigenous women, Indigenous women are more likely to be violently attacked by their abusers and are then more likely to be counter-charged by police.<sup>35</sup> Most serious charges, like murder, that Indigenous women face are in relation to defending themselves or their children from violence.<sup>36</sup> Indigenous women in the federal correctional system are, on average, younger than non-Indigenous women. Ninety-one percent report histories of physical and/or sexual abuse<sup>37</sup> and 90 percent report using drugs or alcohol the day they offended.<sup>38</sup>

Indigenous women and girls are not only denied support from the police, they are also subjected to police harassment and brutality. Members of DEWC recount routine street checks (Indigenous women account for 21 percent of all VPD street checks of women<sup>39</sup>); detentions, arrests, and search and seizure; being issued frivolous bylaw tickets; use of force; extortion of information; use of police dogs; escalation during a mental health crisis (a majority of police-shooting deaths in B.C. involve individuals experiencing a mental health crisis<sup>40</sup>); entry into their homes; and 'catch and release' as a form of intimidation and often without legal cause. It is also noteworthy that private security in the DTES has dramatically increased in the past decade and, due to presumed authority, illegally move people off public property, seize property, issue tickets, or use force.<sup>41</sup>

Once Indigenous women are arrested, they are more likely to be charged and held in pre-trial detention, to rack up further charges from violations, to plead guilty, and to be sentenced to prison. Indigenous women are also the least likely to have full and appropriate legal representation. Gladue report programs remain underfunded, and Indigenous women are nine times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be sentenced to prison.<sup>42</sup> During sentencing, the use of mandatory minimum sentences has increased and has removed judicial discretion to deliver sentences, for example for minor drug-related offenses, that reflect the unique circumstances of Indigenous women.<sup>43</sup>



Guys are raping people and they get away with it. People who murder our mothers don't get arrested.



I was so upset when cops, the judge, and even the Native court workers assumed I was the one charged when I went to support my partner who was charged and looks White.



The police and judicial system don't charge offenders because the victims are Indigenous women.



When Native people get criminal records, it forces us more into low-paying jobs and welfare and more crime to survive. It's meant to keep us down.

Pacific & Prairie Regions

**INDIGENOUS  
WOMEN MAKE UP**

**50+%**

**FEDERALLY  
INCARCERATED WOMEN**

**41%**

**WOMEN IN  
PROVINCIAL CUSTODY**

In the Pacific and Prairie regions, Indigenous women make up more than 50 percent of the federally incarcerated female population.<sup>44</sup> In the provincial custody system, 41 percent of women are Indigenous women.<sup>45</sup> Approximately 75 percent of women in provincial prisons are sentenced for administrative crimes or fraud, possession of stolen property, and theft—all of which are essentially poverty-related offenses.<sup>46</sup> Discrimination against Indigenous women in the prison system is a series of compounding discriminations. Indigenous women serve disproportionately more of their sentence behind bars before first release and are more likely to remain in prison until their statutory release date or warrant expiry date; are over-classified in maximum security institutions and under-represented in community supervision populations or Healing Lodges; are disproportionately placed into segregation; have less access to rehabilitative and culturally-relevant programs in prison; are generally excluded from the Mother-Child Program; are more likely to return to prison on revocation of parole; and are often labeled ‘dangerous offenders’ or ‘hard to manage’ because of offenses in resistance to prisons.

A final and critical factor in ending violence against Indigenous women in the DTES is the urgent need to address Indigenous women’s wellness. The life expectancy of First Nations women is five years shorter and the life expectancy for Inuit women is 10 years shorter than the average life expectancy of the total female population in Canada.<sup>47</sup> Suicides are seven times higher among Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women.<sup>48</sup> Indigenous women’s health in the DTES is inseparable from the intergenerational trauma of colonization overlapping with the specific health challenges that are concentrated in the neighbourhood. Indigenous women in the DTES report a number of barriers to accessing healthcare: having no family doctor; illnesses going untreated; being denied pain medication because of ‘drug-seeking’ narratives; fear of judgment, child apprehension, and forced institutionalization if personal information such as abuse, substance use, or mental

health challenges is disclosed; and routinely having security and police called on them by hospital staff.

The municipal government declared a mental health crisis in the city in 2013 and the Provincial Health Officer declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency in 2016. There is a correlation between the mental health crisis and the opioid crisis. According to findings of a September 2018 report by the BC Coroner's Service, more than half of the people who died as a result of drug overdose in the province

## INDIGENOUS WOMEN EXPERIENCE

**8X** MORE  
OVERDOSES

**5X** MORE FATAL  
OVERDOSES

THAN NON-INDIGENOUS  
WOMEN IN B.C.



My daughter overdosed. I left her in my room to get her food. When I came back she had overdosed. I did CPR while waiting on 911 for the ambulance. She died in my room. My family blamed me for my daughter's passing, and I felt alone after her death. Then I lost my home and became homeless on the streets and slept on park benches. My daughter's nine children got apprehended and they are now in Ministry care. The residential school agent is now the MCFD social worker. Those grandkids are my life. We used to go swimming or to the movies. Now I am alone and I walk around the town by myself in deep depression.

during the years 2016 and 2017 had a clinical diagnosis or anecdotal evidence of a mental health challenge, and 79 percent who died were in contact with health services in the year prior to their death.<sup>49</sup> Indigenous women are disproportionately impacted by the opioid crisis and are experiencing eight times more overdoses and five times more fatal overdoses than non-Indigenous women.<sup>50</sup> A recent study found that less regulated drug use settings, like the street, increase predatory drug scene violence against women.<sup>51</sup>

In conclusion, Indigenous women's over-representation in statistics on poverty, homelessness, child apprehensions, police street checks, incarceration, opioid overdose fatalities, and health inequities are part of an infrastructure of gendered colonial violence. Colonial state practices target women for removal from Indigenous lands, tear children from their families, enforce impoverishment, and manufacture the conditions for dehumanization.

**The 200 recommendations in this report to end state and societal violence are based on three core principles:**

- 1** Violence against Indigenous women and girls is a violation of inherent, constitutional, and internationally protected Indigenous rights. Implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) at all levels of government, assertion of Indigenous Title over lands and jurisdiction over law-making, and restoration of collective Indigenous women's rights and governance is the only meaningful way to end this violence.
- 2** Increased state enforcement alone cannot eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls because structural violence is connected to individual acts of male violence. A comprehensive plan to end violence against Indigenous women must address socio-economic factors including equitable access to and self-determination over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and physical, mental, and spiritual health.
- 3** Indigenous women in the DTES are not silent victims or stereotypes. Indigenous women in the DTES come from diverse nations and families, and have unique stories and dreams. Indigenous women in the DTES are all leaders who contribute countless hours to the community and will never stop fighting for justice. Any policies, services, and solutions must be based on Indigenous women's collective input and leadership.

*"We are red women rising!"*

## I am Theresa Dolores Gray

I am grateful to be on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh lands. I am Tsimshian from Lax Kw'alaams, which is below the Alaska-B.C. border. There are no roads to get to our community; you have to come in by boat or fly in. I was born and raised in and around Vancouver's DTES my whole life.

My grandmother went to an Anglican residential school. She was taken away from her family when she was about six or seven years old until she was a teenager. She suffered violence and abuse in residential school. There was no education provided in school; the children were doing forced labour and the church was a slave-master. Her experience in residential school had impacts on her children and grandchildren. Even though she was a fluent speaker, she never taught her children our Smalgyaxw language because she didn't want them to get beaten the way she was beaten in residential school for speaking her language. If her grandchildren didn't do as they were told, they were hit and faced physical violence. Some of my older siblings, in turn, bullied me.

Violence was normal around us. Every day we would see kids with bruises at school. My grandmother and mother got hit. I would say 90 percent of families around us dealt with violence, and most violence towards women was from their male partners or husbands. Even if you didn't have an abusive boyfriend, it was still all around you with your family and friends. I knew so many family members and friends who had to flee for their lives from abusive partners, and often they went back to the same partners because they had no other options. Women never called the cops on their husbands because no one wanted to deal with racist cops. They also didn't want their husbands to go to jail and lose work. As children, we were told to go out in pairs. We never went out alone because of violence against Native kids in the city from non-Native people. We always kept tabs on each other. We also learnt young about men abusing Native girls in the city. Young women would get groped in back alleys. Most of my women relatives died young or had short life expectancies because of residential schools or violence against women. I was really oppressed as a kid and really angry.

The culture of violence was really pervasive even as I got older. The violence was from White society and it trickled into our Native families and personal lives.





**All of this is a direct result of colonization and the evil colonizing British queen who is still on our money. She has taken our Native land and says its Crown land under the British monarchy. This isn't Crown land; these are Native lands.**

Around the 1990s I was visiting my relative to help her with her kids, and I had to save her life from her ex-husband. She had just had a C-section and he punched her in the head. If he had beat her any lower on her body she could have bled to death. I had to take him off her. Another time, when I was approximately 21 years old, a friend of mine and her partner were fighting. Her three kids were sleeping and he began swinging an axe at her. I had to deescalate him and get him to give me the axe. I didn't even have time to call the cops because I had to do an immediate intervention. People say things like "don't hit women" but patriarchal culture is embedded in our world. I face violence from strangers on the street who call me "Native hoe" or "bitch." Men of all colours verbally abuse me on the street. This is rape culture and I have to up my energy levels and tell them to fuck off. I feel like my voice is one way to respond to the violence. I am angry and outspoken, but never violent unless attacked.

All of this is a direct result of colonization and the evil colonizing British queen who is still on our money. She has taken our Native land and says its Crown land under the British monarchy. This isn't Crown land; these are Native lands. Anthropologists have found that our villages existed 5,000 years ago. The European monarchies didn't even help their own peasants who were dying of famine. Different countries have gotten rid of British colonialism, and we have that right too as Native people to kick out colonialism and be on our own land. Abolish the evil monarchy on Native Land. If we—as Natives—owned our own land, we could take care of ourselves and the planet. Climate change will destroy the planet. According to the United Nations, we have 12 years to get our planet on track or billions could die of mass starvation. We need to transition from fossil fuels to green technologies like wind or solar homes, but the government and industry are addicted to oil!

There also wouldn't be homelessness if we were on our own Native land. I have been homeless. I was homeless on and off for seven years from 2002-2009. When I wasn't sleeping on the street, I would couch surf and I was in shitty SRO rooms for two years. Being homeless, I became even more concerned about violence. I slept on park benches and never in back alleys. I was afraid of cops and perverts in the back alleys. When you are a homeless Native woman, the racist cops and White johns really target you. I would sleep in Victory Square Park and warm up in Tim Horton's or McDonald's. I never want to experience homelessness again. There is nothing more terrifying than the fear of getting hit in your sleep, like by cops kicking me awake and telling me to leave. So many Native women on the street turn to street drugs because of the cycles and fear of violence and homelessness. Then they become forced into drug dealing, debt extortion, and forced prostitution to pay off drug debts. I hope the legalization of cannabis gets people off dangerous street drugs like heroin.

When I was homeless, the cops assaulted me. Then they put me in jail and threatened me because I told them they were being racist and white supremacist. My arrest was in the lead up to the 2010 Olympics, shortly after a protest march.



The cops gave me death threats in jail. During the Wood Squat, militarized cops evicted us from the squat and arrested some of us like Ivan Drury. It's meant to keep us down. All our stuff was also thrown out by the police officers. Many of my friends got beaten up and arrested by the cops just for trying to save their stuff. They have life-long injuries now. The cops do not help women; they give rape threats to women. I was not helped for my social and political work in the DTES. Since 2002, I have been staying and volunteering at tent cities and squats with DEWC, Carnegie, and VANDU.

The police are racist. I have met so many relatives of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and the police do nothing to help them. The police should be held criminally responsible for not taking violence against women seriously and for not doing their job. We need our own private investigators. I think each band should have it's own team of private investigators that works on cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The government and bands should fund, train, and hire Native women to become private investigators to start looking for our band members. I would like to be trained as a private investigator. We also need to fund our own tribal policing systems, although I know that tribal police can be a problem too which is why we need traditional Tsimshian justice system without jails. When Native people get criminal records or go to jail, it forces us more into low-paying jobs and welfare and more crime to survive.

There is so much extreme racism against our people. My mother died at the age of 40 years old. The doctors at St. Paul's Hospital wouldn't let her go. They kept her against her will and she died on October 2, 1977. The doctors murdered her. I will never forget. My mother was a heavy drinker and when they kept her against her will, her body went into shock. It is now policy that heavy drinkers get a little bit of alcohol every few hours to prevent their bodies from going into extreme shock. I was orphaned. My older brother took care of us so we wouldn't end up going into child welfare. If I had gone into foster homes, those families would have received more money than my siblings did to take care of us.

I believe that most racist people in Canada are so hateful against Native people so they don't have to feel guilty or responsible for the amount of injustices against us by White Canadian supremacist society. My day-to-day experiences of violence are felt on my body and on the land and parks I walk on. Native people need to have control over our own land. On the west coast, we used to have good living. We had three months of potlatching and we prepared well for the winter with hunting, fishing, and berry picking. We need to end the poverty of Indigenous women. I feel everybody in Canada deserves a home; there is plenty of land. We should revolutionize welfare and social housing. There should be tiny homes for every homeless person in Canada so people can live independently and grow their own food, and not be controlled or dependent on these government systems of oppression. We are all god's children and we can find solutions. Good government should be like natural law that flows together.

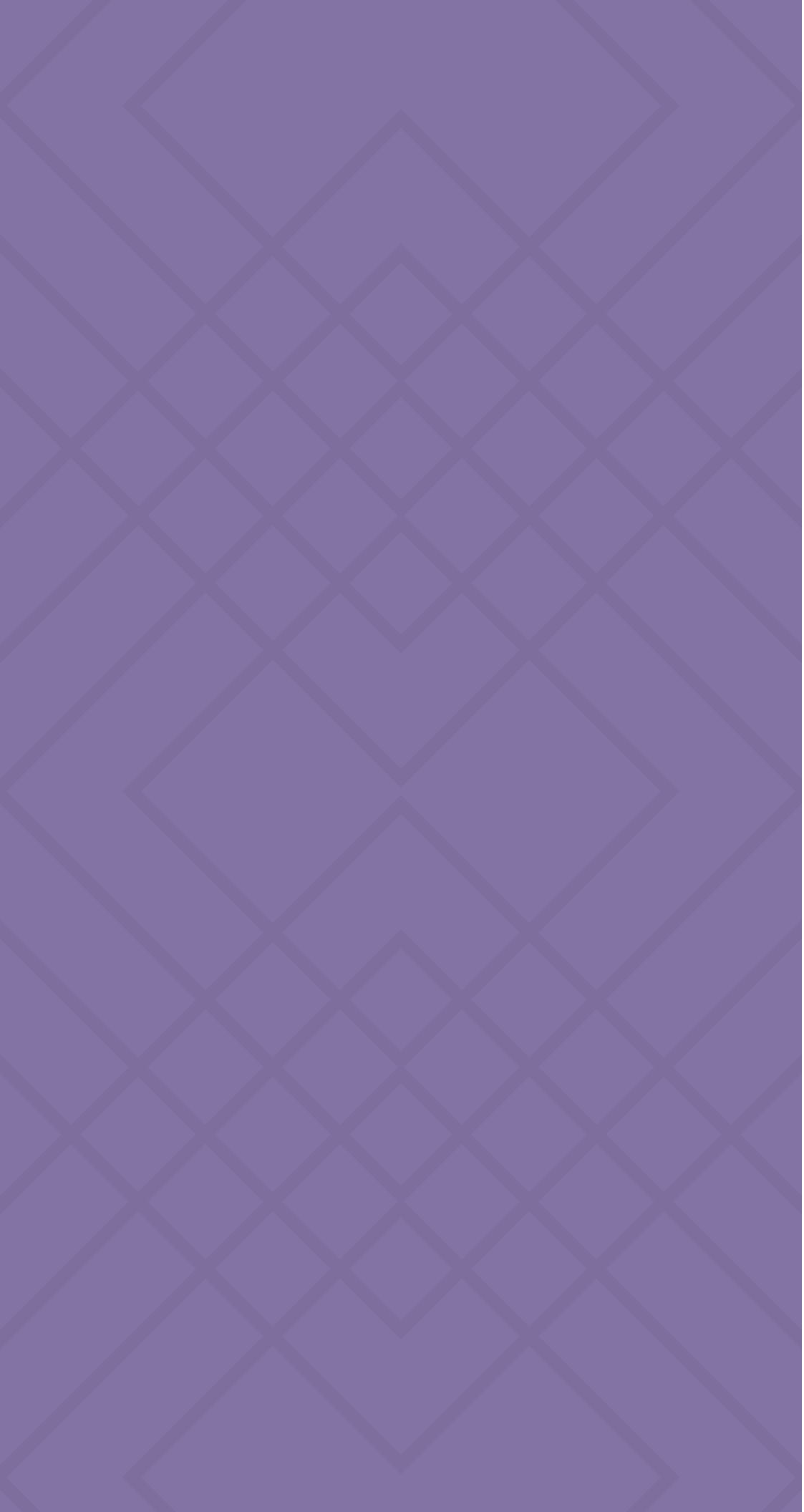


**I believe that most racist people in Canada are so hateful against Native people so they don't have to feel guilty or responsible for the amount of injustices against us by White Canadian supremacist society.**

**My Reality 101 poem aka  
Politic\$ 101 poem:**

*The sun is the law of the land  
With the moon in the sky  
In the universe  
Until the sun burns out.*

- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



# VIOLENCE AND SAFETY



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

**Government doesn't care about us**

Street fights are unpredictable

More young white men dealers on the corners who are more threatening and disrespectful

Constant negative media stereotypes



Service provision does not connect or empower

**Poverty and homelessness**



**Police violence and fear of police**

Need warrior societies and elders to work with men to prevent violence

Need more lights and Indigenous community patrol on the streets



**Daily racism and ignorance from services, authorities, and businesses**

**Everyone thinks they are better than us**



**Need Indigenous women workers in the DTES who live our issues**

I am invisible and there is no acknowledgement by others.

**Need more Native-run centres**

No repercussions for offenders against Indigenous women



**Lack of support, resources, or care**

**It's all around and violence is normalized on the street and in my family**

Lateral violence and street violence between Native women

**More funding for anti-violence programs and victim services advocacy**

People automatically assume I am a sex worker, drug user, or on welfare

**No late-night drop-ins or shelters**



**Dealers prey on Native women and debt extortion is more violent now**

**Feel powerless and controlled by men, white supremacy, and government**

# MY EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

There are no Indigenous women survivors groups to come together



Housing and transit is unsafe



Kidnapped from our parents and now kidnapping of our children

Violence as a sex worker from johns, police, and criminalizing laws

Legacy of residential schools



Male violence and misogyny

Dependent on different abusive men for survival

Work late hours and unsafe to get home

No safe space for Indigenous women only in DTES

All services are in DTES and no other areas with services

Tourists taking photos of our women down and out on the street

Need street accompaniment for women drinking or using to get home safely

Learnt behaviours that make me unaware of controlling behaviours by abuser

The DTES agencies are not integrated or coordinated



Agencies have unreasonable policies and no complaint process

Undervalued and don't have a voice

Store owners and workers follow me and assume I don't have money

Family separation and isolation

Service providers have favouritism of clients and discriminate against Indigenous women

Traumatized from my friends being killed or overdosing



## I am Corinne Ducharme

I am Cree and have been in the DTES since 1973. I grew up in a really violent home. My dad was really violent and my mom had black eyes all the time. We used to be really scared of him especially when he drank. My mother died when I was 17 years old, when I really needed her. My father died in 2005. Only five years ago did I find out that my father went to residential school. We had no idea.

My experience in the DTES as an Aboriginal woman is that we face so much violence and are stigmatized when we do face

violence. One time in the bar, when I was about 30 years old, this non-Aboriginal man asked me if I wanted to have a drink. He was such a creepy looking guy. He put GHB date-rape drug in my drink because I don't remember anything that happened. I wasn't drunk because I only had that one drink and I completely blacked out right away. I was probably raped that night. I woke up naked from the waist down and didn't have my cellphone on me or my glasses. I was in an abandoned car that had no tires. I looked around for clothes and found some pants but no shoes. I had no clue where I was and my purse and IDs were all gone. I got out and saw a house nearby and a big field. I started walking in that direction with no shoes. I was crying all the way as I was walking. I asked someone to use a phone and I called my sister's friend's number that I remembered. She told me to take a cab to her place in New Westminister. She paid for the cab and gave me food.

I didn't tell her or anyone what happened. I was afraid to tell anyone. I felt that people would blame me or tell me I deserved it if I told them what happened. I was also scared to report to the police because I knew they would do nothing. I went home, showered up, and called to get new glasses like nothing had happened. I had two children in foster care at the time who were 10 years old and 6 years old. I was afraid to visit them or talk to them in such a chaotic state of mind. I kept everything in and felt frustrated and angry. I didn't even get counselling.

This is the first time I am ever telling anyone this story.

I had abusive relationships before that too. In the 1990s my youngest son's dad was so abusive and always jealous. One time he tried to shove a chicken bone down my son's throat. I had a fork and I wanted to use it on him. The final straw was when I had a friend over in the basement and my friend was doing heroin down there. My partner broke through the door. I called the cops but they didn't do anything. I had a knife in between the mattress and bed. He grabbed it and stabbed me seven times in my heart, my lungs, and my diaphragm. I was kicking away at him and he kept stabbing me. I almost died. He got two years for that. I was in the hospital for three weeks and then sent home for a long recovery and was sedated for much of it. I still have scars all over my body.

I came back to Vancouver and found out I was pregnant with my second son. I was also told that I was HIV positive. I had unknowingly contracted HIV from my ex, who eventually died in Matsqui prison from AIDS. I felt like running into a bus. I wasn't offered any medication at the time or any counselling to deal with it. I didn't want to tell my family. When they found out I was positive, they had no contact with me. They cut me off for 10-15 years. We have some communication now, but not really. I started retrovirals only 10 years later and it took me a long time to understand this is a disease like any other. There is still so much stigma against HIV. I had my son and younger daughter while I was positive and they both tested negative.

My kids are grown now but they are angry with me. They were in and out of foster homes. I have no communication with my oldest son who is so angry and hasn't gotten any counselling to deal with our issues. My youngest daughter lives with her father and just graduated from high school. That's great, but I feel like my whole life is one disaster after another. I don't know when it will end.

- *Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**My partner broke through the door. I called the cops but they didn't do anything. I had a knife in between the mattress and bed. He grabbed it and stabbed me seven times in my heart, my lungs, and my diaphragm.**



## I am Sophie Merasty

I am Denesuline and Woodlands Cree from a remote northern community, Brochet. My mother lost her Indian status after marrying my non-status father. This was a discriminatory act. I was later reinstated through Bill C-31

and have been able to attain status for my oldest son, though not for my grandsons. When my mother was pregnant with me, she contracted TB. After I was born she was moved into an Indian TB Sanitorium, where she was isolated from me, our family, and the community for three years. She was abused there. She only spoke Dene and didn't understand the doctors and medical staff. Later in life, she suffered great anxiety and stress during hospital visits and often refused to go to the hospital. This, as well as poor healthcare services in northern Manitoba, contributed to her delayed diagnosis of fatal lung cancer.

I came to the DTES when my sister was killed. My sister Rose was 35 years old. Rose was murdered in Blood Alley on August 21, 1981. She was invited to drink beer in a man's house. According to the VPD report, "An attempt was made to have sexual intercourse that failed." What does that mean? That's rape. They should say rape. That's what failed attempt at sexual intercourse is. He punched her. She jumped on to the windowsill and as he approached her, she fell to her death. There were several witnesses who saw her hanging onto the window ledge until she could not hold on any longer. She died of a fractured skull. She also had other injuries that the pathologist identified as not being a result of the fall. She had cuts inside her mouth, bruised right eye, and a broken nose.

The man who murdered her was charged with manslaughter, which was then brought down to aggravated assault. He pled guilty on the charge of assault causing bodily harm and his remaining charge of manslaughter was stayed. His 30 days in pre-trial counted as time served. Because he was a young Native man and was raised in foster homes, section 718.2(e) of the *Criminal Code* that gives consideration to Aboriginal status ended up reducing his sentence. After he was released he did something else horrendous in a different incident and is now serving a life sentence. I think in the specific instances when Native men are charged with harming Native women, Gladue should not be used as a mitigating factor. It feels like a 'let them kill each other' attitude. I don't know how effective restorative justice is, but I have recently been in touch with restorative justice services because I want to write to the person who murdered my sister.



**I think in the specific instances when Native men are charged with harming Native women, Gladue should not be used as a mitigating factor. It feels like a 'let them kill each other' attitude.**



Her next of kin were not immediately notified when she died. I only just got my sister's updated VPD report and forensic file last year through the National Inquiry's family liaison unit. That's how long it's been. When I first tried to get information from the VPD, I was told that only parents, a spouse, or children can get information. My sister did not have a spouse, and her children were either apprehended or being raised by relatives. It just wasn't possible for anyone else to get the information and they wouldn't give it to me. I was and am the only family member who is gathering this information about Rose. The VPD made it clear to me that they didn't care about Rose or our family. When the VPD came last year to give me the information, the officer apologized on behalf of the police for their insensitivity. It was too late, but I am glad they at least recognized their lack of sensitivity and care towards families.

My sister left behind her children. Her oldest child was apprehended and taken out of the province. Her youngest son was apprehended at birth and raised in a foster home. He was raised in a Native foster home, but they were still strangers. He recently posted on social media about experiencing childhood abuse. Another son was also apprehended and we don't know where he is in the system. We have no information and he is essentially missing to our family. Two of the kids were raised by their grandmother on the other side who is non-Aboriginal, and so they are not raised to know or be with their Indigenous family or culture. One of her daughter's died in Kitchener, Ontario from a fentanyl overdose two months ago. When my niece died, it was devastating. She looked so much like my sister Rose. She grew up with her non-Native father who used to give her drugs as a kid. Now she has left behind her own daughter—my sister's granddaughter—who is going down that path too.

My sister's life was not valued in life or in death. She was seen as a drunk, addict, and all these other victim-blaming stereotypes. If it was a non-Indigenous person, they wouldn't point fingers on the 'life style' of victims. I always feel guilty about not being there for Rose, but I was trying to stay clean myself. I have my own traumas and did not have support for myself. It's hard for families to intervene in each other's addictions. It was hard to live with a fragmented family because of the impact of colonization. We all suffered sexual abuse, rape, emotional abuse, and physical abuse growing up. My siblings went to prison and suffered from addictions from the intergenerational trauma of our grandmother being in residential schools.

So many of my family members have passed on due to alcohol or substances. My two brothers died, one from AIDS and one from pills. My sister died in a car accident. Another brother was killed at a party and no one was charged. My youngest brother died last year from injuries sustained in an assault. The police never investigated his death properly either. The assault happened in broad daylight and there were many witnesses, but the police said the witnesses were not credible even though they all said the same thing. I am really skeptical about the police because there is a two-hour gap between when my brother was taken by the police after he was assaulted and when he was brought to the hospital. What did the police do with him for those two hours? That is three of my siblings that died without any justice. I have four sisters left and one brother left. We had really hard lives and suffered lots of abuse.



**My sister's life was not valued, in life or in death. She was seen as a drunk, addict, and all these other victim-blaming stereotypes. If it was a non-Indigenous person, they wouldn't point fingers on the 'life style' of victims.**

I am 54 years old now. My earliest memory of abuse that I recall is when I was five years old by older boys in the community. There really was no safety anywhere. I was violated constantly. Then as a teenager when I was 13 years old in 1977, I was violently raped with a knife held to my throat by an older man who threatened to kill me if I told anyone. He raped me again a few months later. I felt trapped in the community and in my life. I was an A student prior to the assault. After the assault, I became depressed, suicidal, and lived in fear. I started missing school and I started drinking and drugging at the age of 13 years old.



Those early years really set a precedent for the rest of my life. I attracted terrible abusers in my relationships, including my first relationship when I was 16 years old with a White man who was much older than me and later got custody of my child who was two years old. Why didn't anyone say anything about this older white man fucking around with a 16 year old? Then there was another guy, who also got custody of my other child. One of the most devastating losses of my life, amongst all the losses and deaths in my family, is the loss of my children from my care. I feel so empty and lost without them. As a young 17-year-old mother who hadn't finished high school and was Native, I received no support to keep my children. One way to deal with all these traumas and losses was using drugs and alcohol. It took me a long time to come out of my addictions, though I still live with the guilt.

It was also hard for me to finish school because I could not get funding due to the discriminatory *Indian Act* that made me non-status. Because I could not receive funding for my education, I eventually had to apply for a student loan to attend the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College at the University of Regina. However, I was unable to pay back the high-interest loan. I attended the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre School in Saskatoon and have worked in theatre arts, film, television, and radio drama since 1983. I have been in *The Strength of Indian Women*, *Lady of Silences*, *Out the Silence*, *Shattered*, *Anna Mae's Movement*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Rez Sisters*, *Vagina Monologues*, *Bearing*, and *Unnatural and Accidental Women* for which I received a Leo nomination.

When I was 38 years old, I made a statement to the police about the man who raped me as a teenager. When it was time for the trial, I received a summons to appear. I worked with an excellent victim services worker who helped me so much. She was so kind, gentle, and helped me get through the court process. She instructed me, "If there is anything you are not sure about, you can ask for things to be repeated." That seems so simple but it was so helpful. During the trial, the defense lawyer was so manipulative and suggesting

that me and the man who raped me were in a relationship and that I was not raped. I was 13 years old at the time! Then they suggested I had the guy wrong because it was too dark to see properly. Thankfully the judge was a woman and my family came to support me during the trial, even though before that they didn't know what had happened. During the trial the offender denied everything, but once he was found guilty he acknowledged doing wrong during the sentencing.

Life comes full circle in strange ways. This week my nephew went missing in our home community. Him and his friends were partying and took the wrong road. It was really scary because it's -31 degrees in our northern community. We were worried with every passing minute that he would freeze to death. The person who ended up finding my nephew was the man who raped me. He knows the land like the back of his hand. I feel he went out of his way to find my nephew in order to make amends. I told my niece to tell the man, "Thank you for finding my nephew. I forgive you."

For me, going to court and speaking my truth was healing. I needed to be heard and not be a victim anymore. So many women, like my sister Rose, don't have that opportunity. I will believe any woman who charges her rapist. I think about my granddaughter and I never want her to experience what I went through. I can't stand toxic patriarchy in our communities. Even in the DTES there are predators walking around. In cultural spaces and recovery spaces that are supposed to be safe, there are men with histories of abuse. How do men continue to think that's okay? It is up to men to stop the violence. The burden shouldn't be on women to end the violence. Men need to be stopping men and holding each other accountable. Men should call each other out but I don't know how many men are willing to do that. Like the recent assault history of Duane Howard that has come forward, but all the men and actors around Duane are quiet. Why are they quiet?

Patriarchy is also institutional. DTES community agencies with institutional power are abusive to women too. I was evicted and had the police called on me by a women's housing provider. And staff at some drop-ins act like prison guards. Hospitals mock me when I am sick. And when I was on the street and got in trouble with dealers who wanted to catch me for taking their pictures, no workers or police believed me because I was an Indigenous woman using drugs.

I keep thinking about my sister Rose and how alone she must have felt in her life. This is why one of our biggest needs is a safe space that is run by and for Indigenous women. Spaces for women to come together and be heard and believed, like a centre that is open to all First Nations women and open 24/7. We need access to healing supports, victim services, and counselling regularly and more easily. We shouldn't have to suffer major trauma before being able to access counselling and mental health supports. We also need Indigenous women's detox. We need stronger advocates who believe Indigenous women and their stories, whether or not we are using drugs. Just because we are poor Native women doesn't mean we should accept lower standards of treatment. I won't accept this and refuse to be victimized!



**Just because we are poor Native women doesn't mean we should accept lower standards of treatment. I won't accept this and refuse to be victimized!**

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



The root cause of Indigenous women’s violence is colonization. When colonizers came, they started murdering our women. That’s the root of violence. Assimilation is genocide against our women, and they treat us as not worthy. Nuns told me I should have never been born.



I knew a lot of women who went missing or were murdered. It is really hard losing them and not seeing them. It has a huge traumatic impact on me. But even worse is that nothing changes.



I was raped at age three. I had venereal disease at age five. I was a ‘squaw’ so no one was charged. I kept going through it for so much of my life. I didn’t get past Grade 5 and became an alcoholic at age 11. I know how it is to not be heard and not be seen. And that put hardship on my family and children. But today I am alive and making it! And my daughter is my little elder.



I knew most of the missing and murdered Indigenous women in the DTES. I used to feed the women bannock every Friday and we were like family to each other. Women here are my family more than my own family.

## Participatory Research and Literature Review

### Violence is Human Rights Violation

Violence against Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people is the most pressing human rights issue in Canada today.

Numerous international bodies have pushed Canada to end violence against Indigenous women and girls. This includes statements, reports, and recommendations by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Committee on the Elimination of Violence against Women, Committee Against Torture, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, and United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

### Infrastructure of Violence

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights points out that “Canada’s history of colonization, long standing inequality, and economic and social marginalization are the root causes of violence against Indigenous women.”<sup>1</sup>

Settler-colonialism intentionally targets Indigenous women in order to destroy families, to sever the connection to land-based practices and economies, and to devastate the relational governance of Indigenous nations. Indigenous women’s role as decision makers, keepers of tradition, holders of oral knowledge, and matriarchal governors in many nations through house groups and clan systems was disrupted through colonization. State violence and settler political economies aimed at assimilation have denied Title to Indigenous lands, and repudiated civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights to self-determination.

For over 150 years, unjust laws and policies have created an infrastructure of violence that includes:

- » Theft of lands and resources, forcing Indigenous peoples onto reserves, and false assertion of Crown title over Indigenous lands and waters.
- » Biological warfare, forced starvation, and destruction of Indigenous food security.

- » Denial of basic rights such as voting rights, right to political organization, and access to legal representation.
- » Implementation of the pass system that prohibited Indigenous people from leaving the reserve without permission from an Indian agent, as well as the permit system designed to limit and control Indigenous trade.
- » Imposition of the foreign band council system that displaced traditional governance systems.
- » Legislation of the racist and sexist *Indian Act* that continues to govern the status and lives of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women.
- » Prohibition on practicing Indigenous linguistic, cultural, and spiritual practices.
- » Christian civilizing missions that forced cis-hetero-patriarchal norms onto many matriarchal, matrilineal, gender-diverse, and extended Indigenous kinship networks.
- » Forced removal of an estimated 200,000 Indigenous children, including into residential schools and through the Sixties Scoop.
- » Medical violence such as coerced sterilization that continues today, coerced abortions, compulsory and segregated hospitalization, and experimentation without consent.

## Sexism in the Indian Act

The 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples states that “If Indian people generally can be said to have been disadvantaged by the unfair and discriminatory provisions of the *Indian Act*, Indian women have been doubly disadvantaged. This is particularly so, for example, with regard to discriminatory provisions on land surrender, wills, band elections, Indian status, band membership and enfranchisement.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Indian Act* deprived Indigenous women of their status when they married non-Indigenous people, and of their band affiliation when they married an Indigenous man from another band. Children born from an Indigenous woman married to a non-Indigenous man were not recognized as Indigenous. As a result, between 1876 and 1985, approximately 25,000 Indigenous people lost status and had to leave their communities.<sup>3</sup> Many of these Indigenous women and their families were displaced into urban areas: far from home, removed from their land base, isolated from support networks, forced into impoverishment, and therefore, more vulnerable to violence.

While legislative amendments in the years 1985 and 2011 address some of these gender discriminatory provisions, the requirement of declaring the father's identity and the ongoing complications of passing down status through hierarchical classifications of Indian status continues to fall short in ensuring equity for all Indigenous women. And even though many Indigenous women and their children have regained their status since the amendments, the impacts of cultural disconnection, political disempowerment, increased dependence on male spouses, and amplified vulnerability are irreversible and reverberate through the generations.



From land theft to residential schools to introduction of alcohol and Sixties Scoop, our whole life is a history of discrimination against our people.



I feel powerless. I never got slapped around but my sisters did. It's all connected to all the violence we face everywhere on the land and in the school system and on the streets.



There is racism and discrimination everywhere. Bus drivers, store clerks, hospital staff, social workers, lawyers, food banks. Everywhere.



All Indigenous women's children should be status Indians automatically and get their ID for free and without so many hassles.



Residential school was like a concentration camp. Our punishment for speaking our language was being kept in isolation in a dark room for the whole day. Often we would be fed food from the garbage and be forced to drink raw cow milk. We were strapped and beaten until we were too sore to stand.



I was born and raised in residential schools. My oldest sister has been missing for decades.

## Legacy of Residential Schools

There is also an undeniable connection between the legacy of residential schools and the violence that Indigenous women and girls experience.

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states that “For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide.’”<sup>4</sup>

From 1879 to 1996 the Canadian government established a mandatory residential schools policy for Indigenous children as part of the government’s objective to assimilate Indigenous peoples. Indigenous children were removed from their homes and families by force.

Indigenous children were separated from their siblings, not allowed to communicate in their languages, malnourished, and denied healthcare in residential schools. Indigenous children received an inferior education, faced extreme punishment for alleged transgressions, and were routinely subjected to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Two-spirit children were particularly impacted by the enforcement of a strict gender binary, and were more vulnerable to violence and abuse.

An estimated 4,200 Indigenous children died in residential schools.<sup>5</sup> The genocidal impacts of the residential schools include social and cultural dislocation, breakdown of families and communities, intergenerational trauma, and continued impoverishment and hardship.

## Cumulative Impacts of Gendered Colonialism

These cumulative impacts of gendered colonialism mean that, as the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women puts it, “Aboriginal women in Canada continue to live in impoverished conditions, which include high rates of poverty, poor health, inadequate housing, lack of access to clean water, low school-completion rates and high rates of violence.”<sup>6</sup>

The following sections explore how the violence that Indigenous women face is connected to loss of land, impoverishment, homelessness, child apprehension, criminalization, and health disparities. Solutions to ending violence against Indigenous women and girls must, therefore, reduce Indigenous women’s

manufactured vulnerability by ensuring equitable access to and self-determination over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and overall health and well-being.

Indigenous women and girls in Canada have been murdered or gone missing at a rate four times higher than their rate of representation in the population.<sup>7</sup> Indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be murdered or missing than non-Indigenous women.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous women's rate of violent victimization is double that of Indigenous men, nearly triple that of non-Indigenous women, and more than triple that of non-Indigenous men.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous women between the ages of 25-44 are five times more likely to die from acts of violence than other women the same age.<sup>10</sup>

Indigenous women make up 24 percent of homicide victims, and are seven times more likely to be murdered by serial killers than non-Indigenous women.<sup>11</sup> Homicides involving Indigenous women are also more likely to go unsolved. Only 53 percent of murder cases in the Native Women's Association of Canada Sisters In Spirit database have been solved compared to 84 percent of all murder cases across the country.<sup>12</sup>

Among Indigenous women, the self-reported rate of sexual assault is three times higher compared to non-Indigenous women.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous women are eight times more likely to suffer abuse than non-Indigenous women, and 87 percent of Indigenous women who report abuse have been physically injured and 57 percent have been sexually abused.<sup>14</sup>

Indigenous two-spirit and trans people face the added jeopardies of homophobia and transphobia. Two-spirit and trans people are violently victimized nearly five times as often.<sup>15</sup> There is, however, a lack of national data regarding violence against Indigenous trans and two-spirit people, and reports of violence against two-spirit peoples are likely skewed from underreporting due to mistrust of the consequences of disclosing gender and sexual identity to the police and justice system.<sup>16</sup>

Forty three percent of 433 trans Indigenous people reported experiencing physical or sexual violence in an Ontario-based report.<sup>17</sup> A Vancouver-based study found that 23 out of 25 Indigenous two-spirit people experienced domestic abuse at some point in their lives, and 19 out of 24 people experienced intimate partner violence.<sup>18</sup> Another study noted that 73 percent of Indigenous trans and two-spirit women wanted to know how to protect themselves from abuse; however, 60 percent did not know where to access safe and appropriate support services for gender-diverse and sexually-diverse Indigenous women.<sup>19</sup>

## Safety for Indigenous Women

B.C. has been devastated by a number of high-profile murders of Indigenous women including the Alley Murders, the Valley Murders, the Highway of Tears, and the gruesome violence committed by serial killers Clifford Olson and Robert Pickton.

Each sister taken had a unique story and her own dreams. Each sister taken was a sister, mother, daughter, auntie, or cousin. Each sister taken had her inherent, constitutional, and internationally protected Indigenous rights violated. Each sister taken was loved and valued. Each sister taken is now remembered.



I got my first peer job in WISH in the 1980s and that's where I met and knew most of the missing and murdered Indigenous women.



Being a trans person, I deal with every kind of mockery. I get subjected to racism, misogyny and transphobia. I am always unsafe and when I am working the street, the johns always low ball and manipulate Native trans sex workers.



My daughter Karissa Koks has been missing since October 2017.



I have lot so many friends who were murdered. They were so young. It hurts so much.



Us women in the DTES are treated with no respect. We deserve housing, jobs, and opportunities for a new life. I carry bear spray to stay safe, it shouldn't be like that. We deserve respect and safety.



Most of the services are in the morning or scheduled around 9 am to 5 pm jobs. But street life and the DTES means we need services and support all day long. Our struggles don't end at 5 pm. We need more evening services in the DTES.



We need more services for Native women, and services need to be more coordinated. Even though there are so many agencies, Native women still fall through the cracks.

The gruesome murder of a Coast Salish mother in the DTES in 1992 catalyzed the annual Women's Memorial March that continues years later in order to honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and all women's lives lost in the DTES. Many more homicides are still unsolved, including the recent murders and disappearances of DEWC members Lisa Arlene Francis, Angeline Pete, Ashley Machiskinic, and Verna Simnard in the DTES.

Approximately 8,000 women live and work in the DTES, and incidents of violence in the neighbourhood are double the rates of the rest of the city and 16 percent of all reported sexual assaults in the city occur in this one neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> In a DTES women's safety audit, 87 percent of women reported feeling unsafe in the community at some point, with 48 percent of women experiencing violence within the last two years of the survey.<sup>21</sup>

Indigenous women in the DTES are stigmatized for having 'high-risk lifestyles' and are victim-blamed for violence committed against them when, in fact, colonial patriarchy is the highest risk factor in Indigenous women's lives. Ongoing colonization makes Indigenous women more vulnerable to violence through forced dispossession from land and impoverishment in inner cities like the DTES.

A persistent barrier in the DTES is lack of access to safe spaces for women. Given immense levels of poverty and violence, access to safe spaces for Indigenous women in the DTES is an immediate necessity. There is not a single inclusive Indigenous women's 24/7 drop-in centre operated by and for Indigenous women in the DTES.

In the same DTES women's safety audit referenced above, 69 percent of women said they felt most safe in women-centered and women-only spaces, with 54 percent specifically naming DEWC.<sup>22</sup> Safety concerns are magnified for Indigenous trans and two-spirit women who face even greater barriers and discrimination when accessing welcoming and appropriate care especially sexual health services, housing, counselling, victim services, and drop-in programs.

## Paternalistic Service Provision

While Indigenous women-only spaces are required, it is also essential that all service providers and funders prioritize Indigenous women's safety.

A high-profile example of the failure to consider the relationship between service-provision and violence against women occurred when a series of sexual assaults were reported in the First United shelter in the year 2011. At the time, the church's Executive Minister offensively victim-blamed women by saying, "Some women put themselves at risk because of the way they dress or undress or move around



We need an Aboriginal healing centre that teaches men through anti-violence programs to respect women. We need holistic healing to end violence. Violence against women is so normalised we can't even imagine a life outside it. That has to stop.



the building, they draw attention to themselves.”<sup>23</sup> He also normalized violence by suggesting, “The issues that are out on the streets will, from time to time, show themselves inside our walls.”<sup>24</sup>

Other service providers and housing advocates in the DTES publicly and tacitly supported his position. Indigenous women should not have to choose between the indignities of homelessness on the one hand, and violence within publicly funded service providers on the other hand.

Furthermore, an inherently paternalistic relationship defines the nature of service provision. Indigenous women are ‘clients’ in this hierarchical model that maintains the power of those providing services over those who are on the receiving end of charitable services. Indigenous women report feeling the need to perform politeness, civility, and gratitude in order to receive services, which actively undermines Indigenous women’s access to services as a fundamental right.

Service provision and social work also tend to focus on individual strategies of healing and advocacy, which depoliticizes Indigenous women’s shared mobilization and resistance to colonialism. The construction of Indigenous women as ‘victims in need of help’ is a continuation of the civilizing/saviour mentality that is deliberately marginalizing and disempowering.

Indigenous women also routinely report discriminatory practices in agencies and consequently are barred for being ‘unruly’ or ‘unmanageable’. All of this treatment is exacerbated by the fact that Indigenous women are rarely in long-term advocacy, management, or governance roles in any of the major agencies in the DTES.

## Failure of Police Forces

Another barrier to eliminating violence against Indigenous women and girls is the abject failure of police forces to take violence against Indigenous women seriously.

The UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) investigation into violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada found rampant police bias against Indigenous women that is “reflected in the use of demeaning or derogatory language towards aboriginal women and in stereotypical portrayals of aboriginal women as prostitutes, transients, or runaways and of having high-risk lifestyles.”<sup>25</sup>

This systemic and widespread police bias influences whether police take complaints by Indigenous women seriously, and further influences whether Indigenous women turn to the police for assistance.

Robert Pickton, for example, was first arrested and charged in 1997 for assault involving a knife and attempted murder of a woman on his property. However, the prosecutor decided to stay the charges and Pickton was released. It took many more years for him to be arrested, and during that time many more women went missing and were murdered.

As detailed in the Final Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, police in the DTES failed to adequately prevent and protect Indigenous women and girls from violence, and failed to diligently investigate violence when it occurred.<sup>26</sup> Instead there has been a long history of dismissive and racist attitudes from police,



Agencies in the DTES serve Indigenous people but are not led by Indigenous people. We are not charity, we are capable of working and volunteering and leading these agencies. This paternalism is another kind of colonial violence.



Even the DTES agencies disempower us. They have policies that are unfair or discriminatory against us. But we cannot complain and have no recourse because we are reliant. We have to be ‘good little Indians’.



Women like me get labeled as troublemakers when we stand up for our rights to stop discrimination. Even nonprofits and agencies that are supposed to help us are stereotyping, labeling, and blacklisting First Nations women.



My sister Rose Leana Merasty was murdered 25 years ago in the DTES, and I only got the full investigation report from the VPD last year.



Call 9/11 and say a Native person is a suspect and they will be right there. Call 9/11 and say you are a Native person who needs help, and they might show up in an hour. The police will always cuff Native people, but never help us when we need them.

a lack of proper investigations and adequate resources allocated to cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, insensitivity and offensive treatment towards family members, and jurisdictional confusion and lack of coordination between police forces.

## **SisterWatch Project**

A police-community project to combat violence against women named SisterWatch was born out of the long-standing confrontations between women and the VPD for their ongoing failure to properly investigate cases of missing and murdered women in the DTES.

In October 2010, three women that included two staff of DEWC were arrested at the VPD offices for protesting police mishandling in the death of 22-year-old Cree woman Ashley Machiskinic. Ashley died when she fell out of her SRO window and her death was almost immediately ruled as a suicide without a full investigation. The arrests at the VPD offices and ensuing media attention led to the creation of the SisterWatch program.

While it is significant that several DTES agencies now have greater organizational trust with the VPD as a result of this project, an independent evaluation found that the program is not successful in building trust between the VPD and women residents in the DTES.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in the DTES women's safety audit referenced above, only 15 percent of women in the DTES said they would go to the police if they felt unsafe.<sup>28</sup>

## **Under-Protected and Over-Policed**

Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people are not only under-protected but also over-policed and violated by officials in the justice system.

Reports by Human Rights Watch in B.C. and Saskatchewan uncovered not only police negligence, but also overt police physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous women. In Val d'Or, Quebec, Indigenous women went public about dozens of incidents of abuse and sexual assault by provincial police officers between the years 2001 and 2015, but no charges were laid.

This follows on a number of appalling public stories including about RCMP Constable Kevin Theriault who arrested an intoxicated Indigenous woman near Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, then released her from her cell and took her to his personal home. According to CBC, fellow officers teased and goaded him by text message to see "how far he would go" and a senior officer said, "You arrested her, you can do whatever the f--k you want to do."<sup>29</sup>

This means that not only are Indigenous women and girls denied full and adequate support from the police, but they are also subjected to sexualized violence, physical intimidation, and harassment by police. As described in greater detail later in this report, Indigenous women are also more likely to be charged, sentenced, and incarcerated even when reporting violence, which further contributes to manufactured vulnerability and violence.



In another example involving gross judicial abuse, B.C. judge David William Ramsay pled guilty to sexual assault, sexual assault causing bodily harm, and breach of trust against young teenage girls in Prince George in 2004.

When Ramsay was a provincial court judge, he assaulted young Indigenous girls aged 12-16 years old. Over a nine-year period, at least four of the young girls he assaulted had appeared in front of him in court and Ramsay was aware of their vulnerable histories including histories of sexual abuse, suicidal ideation, and life on the street. According to the statement in court, “He picked the girls up on the street on different occasions, drove them to a rural area near the jail and paid them for sex.”<sup>30</sup> A CBC report on the trial described, “When one girl asked him to use a condom he slammed her head on the dashboard until she bled, then chased her when she ran away. He slapped her, sexually assaulted her, called her a whore and smiled. Another girl was left naked near the highway and threatened with death if she told anyone.”<sup>31</sup>

## Eliminating Violence

A lack of police and judicial protection overlapping with criminalization reproduces violence against Indigenous women and girls. Therefore, increased criminal enforcement alone cannot resolve violence precisely because state neglect and complicity is connected to individual acts of male violence.

Violence against Indigenous women and girls is not an aberration; rather, it is a continuation of the colonial gendered violence that has targeted Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people with impunity since contact.

It is for this reason that, while individual support for survivors such as healing programs is necessary, a fundamental transformation of the colonial relationship, assertion of Indigenous laws and jurisdiction, and restoration of collective Indigenous women’s rights and governance is the only meaningful way to eliminate violence.



**My sister Dion was killed on Seymour Street. We were addicts and hookers, so no one cared. This was happening to Native women and trans women, and those like me who are Native and trans. We got no media, no investigation, no police help.**

## I am Suzanne Kilroy

I am from the Okanagan First Nation and part Japanese too. I came to the DTES when I was 17 years old. I came from residential schools in the 1960s on to streets across Canada and the US. I have done sex work my whole life. I am 49 years old now.

I started working on Seymour Street when they moved sex workers over to Davie Street. There were lots of murders back then. Women were killed and left in dumpsters. My sister Dion was killed on Seymour Street. We were addicts and hookers, so no one cared. This was happening to Native women and trans women, and those like me who are Native and trans. We got no media, no investigation, no police help. I kept working though because all men cared about was sex and I needed the money. I kept myself in school at the same time. When I got tired of sleeping with men, I would deal drugs.

We endured so much violence. What happens to Native sex workers is a result of a world where we teach women they can't say no. We didn't think we could say no and we had to fight to protect ourselves. What has society come to? Where is the voice for two-spirit people, for sex workers, for addicts? I was 80 pounds from my addiction, sex work, spousal abuse, abuse from johns, abuse from police. I felt displaced my whole life and got no help for so many years. The women's shelters and men's shelters didn't let me stay there.

The police put me in danger when they kept charging women and giving us fines in the 1980s and 1990s. The cops used to park their cars way more on the streets where First Nations and two-spirit women were working. The cops would hold warrants over working women's heads and get sexual favours. One of my friends slept with a cop once not to get arrested. Now we still face communication charges and criminal charges.

During the Olympics, I was raped and beaten. I had the license plate number and gave it to a police officer but nothing came of it. Another time I got hurt in Indian Arm and walked out of the forest in only my bra and underwear. The cops made me

fill out all these papers but they didn't help me and nothing came of that either. I think, "Fuck the police, fuck them all." It hurts my feelings when I see certain officers who are liaisons and are supposed to be helping us. I trusted some officers who are so glorified in the community and in the news for helping Native women and helping sex workers, but they didn't help me and it really messed me up. One cop told me, "Stop being so angry. Let it go." I told him, "I am so angry because nothing was done to catch the guy who raped me." As trans women, we are less likely to be seen as victims. I feel the officers hurt me as much as the men who raped me.

People on the street are afraid of the police. At best, the police do nothing. At worst, the police brutalize us. Even some of the agencies down here tell us to trust the officers, but we can't put our blind faith into this system. I have seen elders get arrested on the street. Last year I was arrested by the police in Kelowna during a march. It had been a long time since I was arrested and put in cuffs. They said I was breaching the peace during the march. My husband and kids had to come get me out. It was weird being sober in jail!

I am surprised I am still alive. Out of seventeen of my friends who came from the Okanagan, I am the only one who is still alive. All the rest are dead from being murdered, or overdosed, or got real sick. I am alive today because of places like DEWC, PACE, WISH, and Megaphone. I had one-on-one support, which we need and not just drop-ins. I have liaison workers and counsellors. I also have my family, which a lot of people don't have. We all need more chances especially in peer employment. We need safe housing for women where we have our own bathrooms. When I was getting clean, I had a terrible place and it was hard to live there.

If I wasn't as strong as I am and have people around me, I know I would not have made it. I am grateful to be alive. I am mostly off drugs and have cleaned up, but I am still angry at everything me and my sisters have endured. I think of Dione whose throat was slashed. She was taken from us, and so many others are gone too. When will the government see that our lives are important? Fuck the police and fuck the government. Everyone is still dying down here from the opioid crisis. This is genocide. There are generations of women who are suffering. I know a family with a grandma, mother and daughter who are living together down here in awful housing. Last week I saw a woman getting robbed and nobody helped her. I grabbed the guy's ear and wouldn't let go till he returned her purse. I see the children of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. They are on the street. Who is watching over them?

I see my sisters hurting down here all the time. When will we be able to walk the street and feel safe? I am here to hold hands with all my sisters and to raise our voices together. I don't say I am a survivor. I say I am a 'live-r'. I live for all my sisters who died and I stand up for all the women who can't stand up for themselves. The DTES is our family, our people, our reserve. I am never going to be quiet. I am never going anywhere. We, the First Nations women in the DTES, will always stand up for what we believe in and for our sisters and the memories of the sisters we have lost. When I die, I know my sisters will stand in my memory.

- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



**As trans women, we are less likely to be seen as victims. I feel the officers hurt me as much as the men who raped me.**



**When will the government see that our lives are important? Fuck the police and fuck the government. Everyone is still dying down here from the opioid crisis. This is genocide.**



## I am Marlene Jack

I am from Cheslatta Carrier nation, which is on the south side of Burns Lake. It's Mennonite country and I was born with the help of Mennonite midwives. Our father was in residential school. Him being strict and an alcoholic was a result of his time in residential school. He would beat us up out of the blue sometimes. When I was older I got beat up in my community and no one helped me. I tried to stay with my mother in Quesnel but she didn't really want me around. One night I woke up from a party I was at in Prince George and somehow I ended up in a vehicle in Vancouver. A guy dropped me off at the bridge on Hastings and gave me \$20 and directed me to the DTES. He said I would probably run into someone I know in the DTES. He was right; I saw my cousin at Main and Hastings.

I was homeless in the DTES for 2.5 years. The winters were brutal. In the winter all I had was a jean jacket. Sometimes I did not have shoes. One night, a guy reported me to the police because he saw me on the street and I had almost frozen. I was shaking and very cold. The

cop came to me but he said he can't do anything and I had to help myself. It was all so hard because I was so young and I had nothing and had nobody. I couldn't get into any shelters. The women's shelters especially were always full. I slept at bus stops or parks. I had to constantly make sure I was alone and no one was coming towards me. I had to fight a lot on the street to keep myself safe. I was hungry. I survived on fries and gravy, if I was lucky to get it. I would drink alcohol a lot to keep warm. I was under age but they still served me at the bars.

I had a couple of men rape me while I was on the street and staying in the park. Once a guy was hitting me on the head and said, "Give me a blowjob." I said "fine," and I bit him so hard and I jabbed him with a sharp object. I ran fast because I was afraid of retaliation. Around that time it was also common for men to poison women with alcohol. One night a guy told me to come to his room. He pulled out a huge bottle of vodka. It disgusted me how huge it was. He wanted to keep me there till I finished the bottle. He said, "If you open it, you have to finish it." I didn't want the whole bottle; I wanted a bit to stay warm on the street. He tried to keep me there but I fought him until he let me go. There also used to be guys from the



**I had a couple of men rape me while I was on the street and staying in the park.**

ships and dockworkers who would lure women in. Once a guy offered me money and I really needed money because I was hungry. So I agreed to go with him. But when we started walking down towards the docks, I got scared and turned around and walked away.

Another time while I was on the street, a White guy, a White girl, and a First Nations woman asked me to go to a party. They said it was free drugs and free booze. I said "sure," and got in the car. They gave us drinks in the car, and started driving to somewhere. I don't know where we ended up. I know it was a farm and I could see farms around us. Looking back, I think I was on the Pickton farm because when I see photos it looks the same and those two guys that I saw look like photos of the Pickton brothers.

When I woke up in the morning I saw three White guys standing around a First Nations girl. She was passed out. I was scared. I found smokes on the table, picked them up and left. I was on a muddy farm driveway; that's all I knew. I followed the skylights and hitchhiked back towards town with three White guys. The driver of the vehicle started going full speed and I got scared and asked to be let out. Then I got picked up by another White guy, who drove me to a park and raped me. He tried to run me over with his car after. There was another car parked next to the park, and I could see that they saw everything, but they just kept watching and didn't do anything. I finally staggered up and asked a taxi driver to help me. The driver said "What are you going to do for me if I do this for you?"

My whole life men ask me what I will give them in return for help. Even if I ask for a can of pop, they ask, "What are you going to do for me?" So I decided to steal instead of asking for help from men. I would steal food, pop, and cigarettes from stores, or eat and dash from restaurants. I would be on the run from cops too. Once my heel broke while I was running from the cops. I was arrested and I told the cops that I had nothing to eat and no place to sleep. They joked and said, "Well then it's better you are locked up then."

After those first 2.5 years, I met a guy in the DTES. He was First Nations and Chinese and helped me get off the street. We separated but we stayed in the same place so we could keep a roof over our heads. Eventually, I went to school and finished my education. I worked a lot as a bartender and waitress.

Around that time, in August of 1989, my sister Doreen went missing. She was four years older than me. Her and her family, Ronald Jack and their two children Russell and Ryan, ages nine and four years old, are all still missing. They were headed to a logging camp from their home in Prince George and never made it. It's been 30 years and they are still missing and I just want to bring them home. It's been a long time.



**My whole life men ask me what I will give them in return for help. Even if I ask for a can of pop, they ask, "What are you going to do for me?" So I decided to steal instead of asking for help from men.**





**I have now stopped the circle of trauma and violence for me and my daughter.**

My sister Doreen went to residential school in the 1970s. I joined her when I was 4.5 years old. Because my sister was already there, I always wanted to stay beside her but the nuns would pull us apart. They would pull me from the ears and it was so painful. Doreen would always look out for us. At a young age she started smoking cigarettes and would make us find her smokes. She was under a lot of stress. Even at home, my father would party a lot and we constantly had men touching us. Because Doreen was older, she got the worst of it with them grabbing her chest and rubbing their private parts on her. She was always pushing them away but they were like octopus and another hand would come out after she pushed one away. Both of us went through that, and after stopping them for so long you just give up.

When she was older she went to Prince George College. She became pregnant. I asked her who the father was and she said, "He got his way." She hadn't wanted to but he said, "Don't worry it will only be a minute and you will be okay." It was rape. When our dad found out, he kicked her out. The social workers got involved, and then the cops got involved. Four months later, dad let her home. She wanted to come back home because she was getting bullied in school during her pregnancy. When she told other students who the father of the baby was, she got threatened to keep quiet at the college. She was afraid to be in college and she was afraid to be at home. When she finally came back home, she was really quiet. She gave birth in 1980. Our dad was so worried during the birth and made us help her. Dad was really happy to meet baby Russell when he was born. He would keep them in the room to keep them away from the drunks. He stopped drinking around that time too.

A few years later she had her younger son, Ryan. My family used to tell me she was always broke during that time. She would steal food and diapers for her kids. It was also an abusive relationship but it was a safe place from other men. When she was with Ronald, the exploitation from other men stopped. She told me, "When I am with Ronnie, I don't have those other assholes trying to get their way with me."

I remember one time in Prince George, these two older White guys offered Doreen and I money to have sex with them. I was ready to go but Doreen kept asking them a bunch of questions. Then she started yelling, "All my life we dealt with men like you." She ripped up the \$200 one of the guys had offered up front. I was shocked and they were upset. I told her "We really needed that money" and she said, "We don't need it. Don't worry we will survive." That's what she was like. And she always found a way to turn bad situations into good. I would tell her something upsetting and traumatizing and she would say something funny to make me forget about it.

I have now stopped the circle of trauma and violence for me and my daughter. She did experience some abuse, but not to the extent that I did. She has a good heart. Residential school made me hateful, angry, and racist. Sometimes I don't realize what I am saying, and my daughter reminds me. She knows about everything that I went through and she is helping me on my healing journey. The violence of men and the system stops with me and my daughter. And I know she will be even better with my grandchildren; if I ever get any!

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



# DISPLACEMENT FROM LAND



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Reserve still has to follow Canadian laws

Not enough services or programs but more drugs on reserve

My mother lost her status



Indian land is now called Crown Land



Water is being polluted



Broken treaties



Lots of children being apprehended on reserve

Everything is underfunded on reserve



Animals and fish are dying



Disappearing traditional foods like salmon and moose

Violence is normalized and no anti-violence programs or shelters

Chief and council are corrupt and don't equally represent people

No prevention or education on violence against women and two-spirit people

Losing our plant medicines on the land



High food prices

More funding given to French languages than to First Nations languages

Indian Act laws are racist and sexist



Not enough spots in school for our children

Hard to get money for school from my band

# MY EXPERIENCES IN MY HOME COMMUNITY

Cycles of child abuse and family violence from residential schools

Industry is ruining the land and displacing people

Deforestation

No consent for development projects like mining and fossil fuels

Forced out of my community because I am two-spirit

Canada still controls our services and institutions on reserve

Indigenous rights not respected by Canada



Poor conditions of housing on reserve

Band Councils are set up by *Indian Act* and White colonial government laws

Land is being stolen

High rates of suicide

Not enough housing on reserve

Loss of language and culture

Stigma from own community against Native women on the street

Off reserve members have no help from band council

Lots of cancer and diabetes on reserve



No clean drinking water on reserve



## I am Teresa (Tia Maria) Perrault

I grew up on Garden River First Nation till I was 18 years old. Garden River First Nation, which we know as Gitigaan-ziibi Anishinaabe in the Ojibwe language, is in the Great Lakes region between St. Mary's River and Highway 17. We are near the city of Sault Ste. Marie and state of Michigan in the U.S.

My mother Lillian McCoy was born in 1918 and raised on Sugar Island, which includes Bay Mills and Sault Tribe of Chippewas. My mother's tribe is Sault Tribe of the Chippewas. Sugar Island is really interesting because it's in what is now Michigan in the U.S. and Ontario, Canada. It is right in the middle of the U.S. and Canada border. There were disputing colonial claims on the island, and it eventually became part of American soil through the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842. In the 1940s and 1950s, my mother and her sister would rowboat to the other side of St. Mary's River to Garden River Ojibway Reserve. They would go to a Canadian Anglican church on the northern side to square dance. That's where she met my Ojibway father, Ed Perrault. So they would basically boat from an American reservation to a church in Canada to square dance! The waterways were the highways for the Ojibway. They didn't see or recognize those artificial boundaries.

We were all related as one tribe, until the border came in the 1800's and villages got divided.

On the U.S. side, tribes got richer in the 1970s as they had the autonomy to run casinos on their land. On the Canadian side, we had bingo halls. But on both sides of the border we, as Asnishnaabe and Ojibway around the Great Lakes region, take seriously our roles as sacred stewards of the land. We are Mother Earth land stewards. The Great Spirit bestowed this responsibility on us to protect the region, which is the heart of the planet with much ecological and biodiversity in the lands and waters.

Before my mother met my father, she had children from her first marriage with Robert Day. She was worried about her children being forced into boarding schools in the U.S., which were similar to residential schools in Canada. My mother and Robert had four children together. The army was brutal to Natives in the U.S. at that time and the family fled over the river and came to their mountain hunting camp in the late 1930s. They lived up in the mountains, near moose and rabbit and streams. They lived off the land, and then in an accident my mother lost her husband and three children. Her older son, my brother Bob Day, survived and ended up in residential school.

My mother remarried and her second family was with my father, whose Ojibway reserve was on the Canadian side of the border. When my half-brother Bob would get out of residential school, he would love seeing us. He was traumatized from the experience of residential school though. Then he got recruited into the U.S. Army, where his trauma issues worsened and he would drink from the PTSD he suffered. As we got older he would tell us horrifying stories about what he called 'the big school.'

My parents grew our own food on the land. We would keep potato seeds and grow and plant and harvest through the growing season. My father was a hunter and fisherman in the community. He was 6 feet and 2 inches tall and fished the rapids and the bay created by Lake Superior. My brothers would take out the fish and clean it up. We shared fish with the community and we even had cows. We were self-sustaining. We hunted all year round, but now MNR controls our hunting grounds and we need permits. My dad was a great hunter and would haul his back sack with meat. We had no skidoos or four wheelers back in the day. For Easter, we would get a pig.



**My brothers would take out the fish and clean it up. We shared fish with the community and we even had cows. We were self-sustaining. We hunted all year round, but now MNR controls our hunting grounds and we need permits.**



As Anishnaabe, we were taught at a young age about being stewards of the land and water. In the 1950s and 1960s our reserve blockaded St Mary's Pulp and Paper Company and Algoma Steel plant that were dumping waste downstream and creating pollution. Our band was also upset because our land was scattered, like the Squamish Nation is here in the west coast. For example, the current Algoma University (Shingwauk University) on Queen Street resides on land that was part of Garden River Anishnaabe territory. We were being allocated parcels of land that were scattered and the City would encroach onto it. But our band is also strategically located. We have a highway through our community, bridges over three rivers, and a rail line that goes through the community. So the government has to deal with us if they don't want us to shut it all down!

In the early 1900's, the Algoma Advisory Union wanted to expropriate our whole reserve. Chief George Shingwauk went to Ottawa and managed to prohibit the municipal expansion onto our land. We also refused a plan to build a prison farm on our territory during World War I. The Shingwauk family has a long history in our region. The first residential school in the region

was built in late 1800's and was kind of different because our Chiefs Augustin and Buhkwujjenene Shingwauk and their father Shingwaukoons, who was an Anglican convert, petitioned the government in England to build a residential school in the Garden River area. Our Chiefs envisioned an Anishinaabe school that also learnt the 'Queen's ways'. But their vision was turned around and, like other residential schools, the Shingwauk Residential School became a school where children were physically and sexually assaulted, starved, and mistreated.

I left Garden River when I turned 18 years old because as a woman at the time you got married and stayed in the community. As Indigenous women, our rights are still not solidified. Many of our women have to leave the community because of domestic violence or losing their house upon break up from their partner. If women separated from their husbands, the man would always get the house. We don't have property rights on reserve and there is not enough housing. There is also not enough support for raising children and available child care. Although even in urban communities women are still raising the kids and doing all the work! The good thing



**We have a highway through our community, bridges over three rivers, and a rail line that goes through the community. So the government has to deal with us if they don't want us to shut it all down!**

is that in our home community, single mothers can go to school and get free day care. Education is a priority in my home community. Two of my nieces have PhD's, and women in our community are excelling in postsecondary education. We have an Adults-in-Motion program for mature students to take evening classes.

But even with an education, our Indigenous women are so displaced from the land. There is so much destruction around us with the land, water, and trees being destroyed. There are many Cree from James Bay area in Sault Ste. Marie. They had to relocate to the cities because of mining and logging on their territory, and government and industry have totally poisoned their water. Your land is destroyed and then you have to survive in an urban environment, while still fighting the government to have a homeland. Just this summer, the Missanabie Cree First Nation finally won reserve status from the federal government and they are reclaiming their homeland.

Our waters are all connected—the Great Lakes region, the Detroit River, even the Salish Sea and the Burrard Inlet here on this coast. All water is connected and we have to protect it. All these pipelines and LNG up the B.C. coast are all unacceptable. To me, it's all another Oka that is brewing. But I believe we can beat it. We fought back against Enbridge and we fought back against Kinder Morgan, and we will stop all these dirty projects.

Many people think that those of us in the DTES don't know about or understand these issues. But the women in the DTES are very educated about what is happening around us. We march on February 14<sup>th</sup> for our women and we march against Kinder Morgan too because women's rights and land rights is all about fighting displacement. It all undermines us as first peoples of this land. We are entrusted with the sacred responsibility to take care of the lands, waters, and each other. Violence against land and violence against women is part of the genocide. They see our land as commodities and our women as objects. Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is all across Canada. From the DTES, to the Highway of Tears, to northern Ontario, our women are going missing but there is blatant racism from the police—whether it's VPD or OPP—who call it 'unresolved' and don't do anything. The genocide is not in the past; it is going on now. The destruction of land, the missing and murdered women, the children in care are all how genocide is happening now and it has to stop.

- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



**Our waters are all connected—the Great Lakes region, the Detroit River, even the Salish Sea and the Burrard Inlet here on this coast. All water is connected and we have to protect it.**



**Violence against land and violence against women is part of the genocide. They see our land as commodities and our women as objects.**



We aren't accepted in our own country and on our own land. People look at me like I am a foreigner, but this is my land and I belong here. I am looked at like an intruder in my own country. They want to get rid of us.

## Participatory Research and Literature Review



Non-Indigenous people should pay an Indigenous reparations tax.



Abolish the evil monarchy on Native Land.



Why do we have to buy our own land back? It's not Crown land; it's our land. And I should be able to fish and hunt from my lands and water whenever I want. What are those permits and quotas?



They have to stop taking and contaminating our land.

### Settler-Colonial Displacement from Land

Settler-colonialism in Canada forcibly displaces Indigenous people from their lands and territories, destroys autonomy and self-determination within Indigenous governance, and attempts to assimilate Indigenous cultures.

Settler-colonialism is an ongoing structural project designed for settlers to permanently occupy and assert sovereignty over diverse Indigenous nations through the imposition of foreign government and legal systems. Establishing jurisdiction over Indigenous lands can only be accomplished through the dismantling of Indigenous nationhood and elimination of Indigenous people through genocide, dispossession, and assimilation. Settler-colonialism intentionally targets Indigenous women in order to destroy families, sever the connection to land-based practices and economies, and devastate the relational governance of Indigenous nations. The doctrine of discovery and the myth of *terra nullius* are racist legal-political frameworks that still underpin Canadian institutions through, for example, the false assertion of Crown Title over Indigenous lands.

Indigenous peoples were forced off their territories, and lands were fragmented to solidify the settler-colonial project. Indigenous peoples were then settled onto small reserves by successive colonial administrations.

There are over 2,600 reserves across Canada today.<sup>1</sup> As Arthur Manuel writes, "Our Indian reserves are only .02% of Canada's land and yet Indigenous peoples are expected to survive on them. This has led to the systematic impoverishment of Indigenous people and the crippling oppression that Indigenous people suffer under the current colonial system. The .02 land base is used to keep us too poor and too weak to fight back. It is used to bribe and co-opt the Indigenous leadership into becoming neocolonial partners to treat the symptom of poverty on Indian reserves without addressing the root cause of the problem, which is the dispossession of all of the Indigenous territory by Canada and the provinces."<sup>2</sup>

The most important right recognized in the UNDRIP is the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination over land and governance, which includes the right to free, prior, and informed consent. Article 3 of the Declaration states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. This guarantees the right to freely determine their political condition and the right to freely pursue their form of economic, social, and cultural development."<sup>3</sup>



While federal governments talk about reconciliation and nation-to-nation relationships, they refuse to fully implement free, prior, and informed consent and Indigenous decision-making power over Indigenous lands and resources. The federal Justice Minister has recently said that certain provisions of UNDRIP are at odds with the constitutional and legal contexts of Canada and that UNDRIP can not be incorporated “word for word.”<sup>4</sup>

## Extraction without Consent

Across Canada, billions of dollars of investments are going towards mining, fossil fuel extraction, and hydroelectric dams on Indigenous lands.

There are currently 22 proposed hydro projects in the country and every single one including Labrador's Muskrat Falls, British Columbia's Site C, Manitoba's Keeyask, and Quebec's La Romaine project is within 100 kilometres of Indigenous communities.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous resistance to resource extractive projects continues to grow against, for example, the Trans Mountain pipeline in B.C., Noronto mines in the “Ring of Fire” in northern Ontario, tar sands extraction in Alberta, and Plan Nord in Quebec. What these different resource extractive projects across the country have in common is that they permanently scar the land, poison the surrounding waters and animals, impact Indigenous food sovereignty, and are imposed by federal and provincial governments without collective Indigenous consent.

## Criminalization of Land Defenders

The federal government is well aware that resource extraction is a key source of antagonism with Indigenous peoples. In 2011, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, INAC) stated that the vast majority of hot spots of “Native unrest” are related to lands and resources, with most conflicts “incited by development activities on traditional territories.”<sup>6</sup>

Part of the government strategy to dispossess Indigenous lands is to criminalize Indigenous land defenders, and the use of the RCMP (and in some cases, military and paramilitary forces) and criminal justice system to arrest and charge Indigenous land defenders with trespass, obstruction, unlawful assembly, and criminal contempt for violating civil injunctions has actively undermined Indigenous rights.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples notes, “The rapid expansion of development projects on Indigenous lands without their consent is driving a drastic increase in violence and legal harassment against Indigenous peoples. I've been alerted to hundreds of cases of ‘criminalization’ from nearly every corner of the world. These attacks—whether physical or legal—are an attempt to silence Indigenous peoples voicing their opposition to projects that threaten their livelihoods and cultures.”<sup>7</sup>

## Gendered Impacts of Development

Resource extraction and mega-development projects also have a particularly gendered impact.

Indigenous women are often the primary land stewards and knowledge keepers of the territories, more reliant on traditional food and medicinal systems, less likely than men to benefit from wage-jobs associated with resource extraction, and affected by the social changes that development projects bring. Higher wages for



My community is benefiting from LNG and my children are in the workforce. It was my grandson's first job. But I know that other communities are opposed to it. And even when money flows in, it brings problems into the community.



Our family is not just our immediate family; it's our extended family, our relatives, our animal relations, the earth. These are all our family in our culture. We have to look after the health of the land. If the land isn't healthy, then Native women won't be healthy. When we say we need to take care of our families, this is what we mean. Western society is not a healthy way to live. White people need education to understand about our ways.



I don't agree with the new gas and oil pipelines and resource extraction in our home communities. It is good jobs with quick money, but it destroys our souls and our lands. And the fast quick money increases violence against women. It isn't worth it even though we are impoverished.



We need housing and clean water on our reserves. The land is polluted and the water isn't clean, but the church is still there. How can we live in our home communities with no homes, no water, no schools, and no jobs? We need chiefs to stand up to the White government and not sell our land and rights away.



My chief and council never help me. I waited for eight years for a home on reserve but they gave my home away. They are also selling our land away. Chief and council has become a family business.

resource sector workers also drive up overall food and housing prices, which pushes Indigenous women into even more economically insecure positions and increases their dependence on male partners and precarious work.<sup>8</sup>

One of the immense social changes that mega-development projects bring into communities is the huge influx of mostly male workers living in man camps, in some cases more than doubling the local population.<sup>9</sup> DEWC is a signatory to the Women's Declaration against Man Camps because extractive violence on Indigenous lands is connected to violence against Indigenous women.<sup>10</sup>

The former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples writes, "Indigenous women have reported that the influx of workers into Indigenous communities as a result of extractive projects also led to increased incidents of sexual harassment and violence, including rape and assault."<sup>11</sup>

Amnesty International also notes how gendered violence is tied to resource development in the northeast of the province: "In actively promoting intensive development in the northeast, federal and provincial officials have emphasized benefits, while largely ignoring serious—and sometimes deadly—unintended consequences for wellness and safety that disproportionately impact the lives of the Indigenous peoples who live there, particularly Indigenous women and girls."<sup>12</sup>

## Dispossession Creates Deliberate Impoverishment

The appropriation of Indigenous lands and resources has subsidized and generated wealth for the Canadian political economy, while dispossessing, criminalizing, and impoverishing Indigenous people and their economies.

Dr. Pamela Palmater writes "The failure of Canada to share the lands and resources as promised in the treaties has placed First Nations at the bottom of all socio-economic indicators -- health, lifespan, education levels and employment opportunities. While Indigenous lands and resources are used to subsidize the wealth and prosperity of Canada as a state and the high-quality programs and services enjoyed by Canadians, First Nations have been subjected to purposeful, chronic underfunding of all their basic human services like water, sanitation, housing, and education."<sup>13</sup>

Chronic under-funding of reserves, coupled with the loss of traditional land and destruction of subsistence economies, means that Indigenous women on reserve face extreme inequities. Canada ranks 3 out of 177 on the United Nations Human Development Index but the ranking drops to 63 out of 177 if we include Indigenous people.<sup>14</sup> Four out of every five reserves has a median income that falls below the poverty line.<sup>15</sup>

First Nations women living on reserve experience the highest unemployment rate (20.8 percent) of any demographic, with a median income of \$14,513.<sup>16</sup> The suicide rate of young women and girls living on reserve is 26 per 100,000, which is more than double the national average.<sup>17</sup> Critical infrastructure, especially affordable public transportation for rural and northern communities, continues to be sorely lacking. As a result, many women in northern communities are forced to use unregulated forms of transportation, like hitchhiking, that amplify vulnerability to violence.

## Legislated Disenfranchisement for Women On Reserve

The *Indian Act* regulates women's conditions on reserve. As referenced in the previous section, the Act disrupts gender roles and imposes racist, colonial, and patriarchal policies upon Indigenous families. The legislation historically stripped women and their children from their status if an Indigenous woman married a non-Indigenous man. Women were not permitted to live on their home reserve and were transferred to their husbands' bands upon marriage, losing any income from annuities from their former bands and, consequently, their economic independence.<sup>18</sup>

Despite amendments for Indigenous women to regain status, there are multiple barriers to obtaining legal status due to hierarchical classes of status that continue to categorize women into various subgroups depending on complex rules regarding patrilineal and matrilineal lines. Legislated gendered colonialism, therefore, still has lingering and detrimental impacts on women and their rights on reserve.

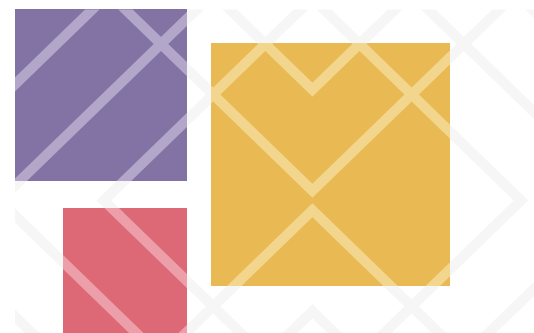
In addition, many Indigenous women on reserve had no right to their property in the event of a marital breakdown if the property was listed in their partner's name. Rather than empower First Nations to draft enabling legislation to close this regulatory gap, the Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act (FHRMIRA) imposed interim federal provisions, which Indigenous women's groups unilaterally condemned. These federal provisions, for example, dictate the rights of non-Indigenous people on reserve lands in the case of spousal separation, and grant the Minister of Indigenous Affairs the right to authorize such applications.<sup>19</sup>

First Nations can also write their own matrimonial property rights (MPR) but, as of March 2018, only 13 First Nations have passed their own MPR and another 37 have passed laws under the First Nations Land Management Act codes. To complicate matters, Indigenous communities that have implemented their own laws do not necessarily have to adhere to a minimum standard of protection for women, nor are there any consistent definitions of relationships to protect same-sex couples. Inequities also exist within FHRMIRA, such as unequal rights between communities that have Certificates of Possession or Occupation compared to those with custom allotted land.<sup>20</sup>

Such legal inconsistencies and confusions result in gaps in legislated protections, and many women and children fall through the cracks and are forced to leave their homes in search of alternative accommodations.

## Conditions of Systemic Inequity On Reserve

For women who are housed on reserve, 42 percent live in homes that need major repairs and over-crowding is four times higher for women and girls living on reserve than Indigenous women and girls living off reserve.<sup>21</sup> Half of all homes on reserves are contaminated with black mold, boil water advisories occur frequently, and water-borne diseases often surface as a result.<sup>22</sup>





We are already forced onto small reserves and now we don't even have homes on reserves.



We need housing on reserve and we need to end favouritism in housing provision on reserve. The band council can't just be one family.



I left my home community because of lack of housing.



I was raped on my reserve and no one did anything. I will never go back.



What happens in our communities brings us down here, whether it is because we were apprehended or faced family violence, or our addictions. We have to take care of all these issues back home.



I haven't been to my reserve in eight years and I don't go there much. This is my home community now. And that is true for so many of us who spend our lives here and our sense of home is here.

The lack of permanent, safe, and appropriate housing affects children. Poor housing conditions and overcrowded homes often lead to a number of health problems such as the spread of infectious diseases and respiratory tract infections in infants, as well as increased stress and anxiety.

Nearly one-third of all on reserve homes across Canada, and in some northern communities as many as 90 percent of homes, are food insecure due to the disruption of traditional food systems coupled with high market food prices.<sup>23</sup> There are 81 long-term drinking water advisories affecting more than 50 Indigenous communities across the country.<sup>24</sup>

Lack of adequate housing and food also intensifies child welfare investigations. The most commonly reported cause for child apprehension on reserves is 'neglect' resulting from failure to supervise and meet basic needs.<sup>25</sup>

This can be directly linked to the overall impoverishment of Indigenous families as well as the lack of affordable child care services on reserve. Less than one-third of children receive child care from someone other than a parent or guardian, and 78 percent of those who do receive child care do not have access to licensed regulated child care services.<sup>26</sup> This systemic resource gap unjustly escalates child welfare investigations based on allegations of neglect or lack of appropriate care, which are apprehensions due to enforced poverty.

In addition, a lack of adequate healthcare for children with chronic health conditions traumatically separates families by forcing parents to move to urban areas or place their children in foster care in cities where the necessary services are available.<sup>27</sup>

These systemic inequities on reserve tend to exacerbate family violence and abuse due to trauma stemming from residential schools, the imposition of colonial patriarchal norms that have forcibly restructured many Indigenous societies, and high stressors associated with immense levels of poverty and family separation.

In a report focused on northern B.C., the predominant reason that surfaced for why Indigenous women left the reserve was to escape violence.<sup>28</sup> In another Vancouver-specific study, one-third of Indigenous two-spirit respondents said they were forced out of their communities because of their sexual or gender identity.<sup>29</sup>

Seventy percent of northern reserves do not have safe houses or emergency shelters for women escaping violence, and services for two-spirit people are nearly non-existent.<sup>30</sup> The lack of anti-violence services on reserves frequently forces women and two-spirit people to choose between remaining in an abusive dynamic or leaving their communities.<sup>31</sup> Even when services are available on reserve, safety can be compromised in small communities if client privacy and confidentiality is not maintained.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to determining Indigenous women's status, the *Indian Act* authorizes the federal government to directly deliver healthcare services and programs on

reserves, while provincial and territorial governments provide healthcare elsewhere in Canada. This arrangement has led to truncated, sporadic, or absent healthcare services that are often slowed down by jurisdictional disputes at the physical, emotional, cultural, and financial expense of Indigenous people living on reserves.

Additionally, the historic criminalization of traditional birthing practices coupled with the absence of Western prenatal care on reserves has forced many Indigenous women to be removed and isolated from their communities and ceremonies in order to give birth.<sup>33</sup> Many women are still evacuated from their communities to birth, and the infant mortality rate for babies of women on reserve remains between three to seven times higher compared to non-Indigenous babies.<sup>34</sup> Safe services, proper delivery of care, and privacy are added concerns for two-spirit and trans people when accessing healthcare in smaller communities.<sup>35</sup>

Indigenous women living on reserve also face many barriers to receiving formal education, which inhibits access to formal employment and an adequate income. Some northern and rural communities do not have any secondary or postsecondary schools, pushing young people out of their communities to receive their education. Thirty-seven percent of women living on reserve have postsecondary education compared to 52 percent of Indigenous women living off reserve.<sup>36</sup>

The majority of Indigenous two-spirit respondents in one study reported that their education was interrupted because of lack of social safety around their sexual or gender identity.<sup>37</sup> Due to the stress and lack of safety at school, two-spirit students are more likely to face mental health challenges, attempt suicide, and drop out of school.<sup>38</sup> According to the McCreary Centre Society, 34 percent of two-spirit youth they spoke to seriously considered suicide, and 30 percent attempted suicide in the past year.<sup>39</sup>

## Ending Forced Displacement

All of these compounding colonial socio-economic injustices such as loss of land, legislated sexism, poverty, over-crowded housing, food and water insecurity, family violence, child apprehension, inadequate services, and lack of educational opportunities and jobs, displaces Indigenous women and their children from their lands and home communities.

According to Statistics Canada, 64 percent of all women and girls live off reserve, and many live in urban Aboriginal communities like the DTES of Vancouver.<sup>40</sup>

To end the forced displacement of Indigenous women from their lands, every woman on reserve must have immediate access to clean water and nutritious food, critical infrastructure including roads and sanitation systems, and essential health, education, child care, housing, transport, recreational, cultural, and emergency services.

More substantially, Canada must uphold Indigenous jurisdiction over all areas of law-making that impact on reserve and off reserve nation members. The UNDRIP must be fully implemented including the right to self-determination and the right to exercise free, prior, and informed consent.



## I am Louisa Starr



**We ate all Native traditional food that my mother would cook for us. Most of what we ate was seafood: salmon, halibut, red snapper, lingcod, flounder, sea cucumbers, crabs.**

I grew up in Kitasoo, which is the First Nations community of Klemtu in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest. When I was small, my father had a broken house. There were holes everywhere, including the doors and the windows. Our house was cold all the time. We had only one bedroom with a wooden bed that my father made for five of the kids. My older siblings and parents slept in the living room. We had a wood stove in the living room. We had no kitchen, no bathroom, no running water, no heat, no lights, no electricity. It was always so cold, so we used the wood stove to heat up coffee or tea to stay warm. There would be ice hanging down from the windows. My mother would ask me to go to the river with a pickaxe to break the ice and get water. This was about 70 years ago.

My parents kept me safe and hidden from residential school. We used to live off the land. My brothers would go hunting and fishing. We ate all Native traditional food that my mother would cook for us. Most of what we ate was seafood: salmon, halibut, red snapper, lingcod, flounder, sea cucumbers, crabs. Sea urchins straight from the water are so good! We would also dig for clams, hunt for deer meat and seal meat, and bake or fry bread. We ate all Indian food, no White food at all. When we were older, my father went trapping. He would trap in order to make money for the house because we could not get a new house on the reserve. My father would go trapping for 10-15 days at a time and trap for beavers to sell the beaver mink. My older brother would look after us. Eventually my father got the house. He paid to get materials from the sawmill, and then built the house himself with my brothers. I was around 10 years old at the time and I remember sitting there as

my father was building. He showed me how to level, nail, and build. But I couldn't get the level; it was too hard!

As I grew older in Klemtu, there was lots of drinking. Everyone in the community was drinking home brew. I wasn't drinking at that time. One day when everyone was getting drunk, my ex and I took off with our kids on someone's gas boat. We wanted to get abalone for the kids to have food. Him and I were out on the skiff and the kids were on the gas boat, but the current got too strong and we tipped over off the skiff. We got out but we never got the abalone!

Around the 1970s, the government prohibited fishing. Commercial fisheries started doing business in our territory and they put a stop on our Aboriginal fishing rights. This led to a huge battle for our fishing rights. Even now, they limit our fishing and put quotas on how much each house can fish. They don't stop those commercial fishers but they tell us we have to limit our fish, why? There is no more open fishing for the community. In addition to commercial fishers, we also have sport fishers coming in. We get lots of White Canadians and Americans who are fishing our waters. They take totes of fish and fly out on the floatplane. The sport fishers impact our whole local economy and community. They get angry and aggressive towards us. We have our own monitoring system where we monitor our waters to make sure no non-Native boats come and fish in our waters. Sometimes non-Native boats try to sneak in at night, so we have a night watch too.

One hour from our reserve is Roderick Island, which is part of our territory. The lumber industry is cutting down the trees on Roderick Island. All the jobs in the industry go to White people and we get no benefits. The White people also run the fish farms and are mostly the ones working in fish farms. Our whole territory is being taken over by these commercial fisheries, sport fishers, logging, and fish farms. Our waters are contaminated. We can't eat the clams anymore. We can't catch flounder or abalone anymore. Even our band council doesn't say much because they have financial agreements. If the band council hears any dissent, then you can get asked to leave the community for a few months. It happened to two of my nephews, who came to the city when they were asked to leave and now they are here and won't go back home. It also happened to a prominent nurse and a teacher in our community. So we all tend to keep quiet. When I am home, I am very careful what I say.

I left Klemtu in 1975. I lost my parents and I felt lost without them. They were so helpful to me and my kids. I couldn't sleep at night and felt alone and confused. So I decided to leave with the kids and my ex. My youngest daughter was three months old at the time. We went to Port Hardy first, and then came to Vancouver. When I arrived in Vancouver, I was sitting at Main and Hastings with all my kids with nowhere to go. A Native woman named Janice asked me if I was okay. She didn't know me but could see that I was sitting there with all my kids. Janice directed me up the street to get connected to a social worker. The social worker was good and put us up in a small hotel for the week. Then she drove me around every day to look for a rental home. We found a big house on Marine Drive. It had four bedrooms and



**Our whole territory is being taken over by these commercial fisheries, sport fishers, logging, and fish farms. Our waters are contaminated. We can't eat the clams anymore. We can't catch flounder or abalone anymore.**

was \$400 a month in rent. The social worker gave us \$400 in rent and \$1000 for groceries for the first month. She was a very good social worker. We stayed in that place for five years until we were renovicted. I see all this construction happening everywhere in Vancouver, but there is never any housing for our low-income people. We need housing for our people on the street and we need a safe drop-in for women that is open all day and all night.

I raised my kids in Vancouver. I used to drink, but then I stopped. When I stopped drinking, I did it on my own. I did not use treatment or counselling. I did try detox a few times for a few hours, but what got me to stop was when I would think about my grandchildren. I used to think that my grandchildren probably want to spend more time with me. I also didn't like that I would go to the bar right after church. The other thing was that my arthritis got worse with drinking. I couldn't move my neck or hands. My daughter would have to comb my hair. I would turn to alcohol for my arthritis pain, but the drinking made my arthritis worse. So I took it day by day until I stopped counting the days that I was sober. I ended up

in the hospital a few times from my poor health, but that made me make up my mind even more. When I was sober for two years, I finally felt that I had done it. I say prayers every morning and every night to make me feel strong. When I quit my habits, I never turned away from the young people who are drinking or using. I always help the homeless young people. I feel good when I reach out to young people who need support. One thing I noticed is that the homeless on the sidewalks are mostly all White people and the Natives are the ones who get pushed around and pushed out more.

I lost three of my older kids over alcohol. Two of them died here in Vancouver and one died on the reserve. I also took the remains of one of my nieces back home after she

passed away down here. It was really hard on me but I managed to be strong. I had to think about my children and grandchildren who were still around. Three of my children were addicted to drugs. It was hard and long but I stood with them and looked out for them. I would walk around the DTES till two or three in the morning to look for them and check on them. I would walk around and sit in the rain. Sometimes a whole month would go by and I wouldn't see or hear from them. I drank but I didn't do drugs, so I did not know what to do. One of the young girls who was using on the street taught me that one thing I can do is to have food, especially fruit, ready for my kids. So when my kids would come home I would always have fruit ready for them and then we would see each other and talk. One day I had to go to the doctor, who told me that the stress from worrying about my children was really bad for my health. When I came home my son asked me "What's wrong?" and when I told him what the doctor said, I think that woke him up and he slowly started using less. My kids are doing good now; they either stopped or do it in moderation. I am so proud of them.







## I am Marge Humchitt

I left my Heiltsuk community in Bella Bella almost 40 years ago. I was outed as a lesbian when my family found out about an affair I was having with a woman. My sister told me, "The community is all talking about this. Maybe you should leave or go on a holiday." I was basically told I had to leave. I was working in the cannery at the time and Bella Bella is a small place. As people started talking, I started losing friends and pals that I used to hang around with. People started spreading rumours like "She hit on me." I thought, "Fuck this shit." I told my dad that I was leaving and I left. I was so hurt and it took me a few years before I went back home.

I came to Vancouver when I was 19 years old and bumped into the biggest party of my life with the gay and lesbian scene down here. I found myself and partied for months straight. We were a big gang of street workers on Davie street. It was good money. It was like gold rush money and we used to look out for each other's safety. I was also in the biker crowd and I hitchhiked across Canada. There was a lot of sex in that crowd too. I would go to bars where the bikers and drugs were. It was fun.

I became pregnant in Winnipeg while I was out there. We were both players and I knew it wasn't going to work between us. I hitchhiked back to Vancouver and my sister adopted my daughter at birth. I knew I couldn't keep baby with me with the way I was living. I continued partying on. I mostly used to snort cocaine, but I never worked while I was on drugs. I worked the street too and after awhile I became an escort which was really good coin. I lived with my girlfriend at the time and I was able to buy her expensive clothes and take her out. It was an interesting time. In one evening I would go from playing basketball at the Friendship Centre, to getting into my hooker gear and making money, then coming home and hitting the gay bars with my girlfriend.



**On December 1<sup>st</sup> 1993, my sister Cheryl Humchitt was murdered in her apartment in the DTES. It was a double-murder of my sister and her common-law boyfriend Trang Lam over a drug debt.**



It was also rough. I have been beaten up, been knifed, been raped, and spent time in jail. I have also had negative experiences with the police. I remember contacting them after a violent incident and it took them hours to show up. When they did show up, they did not take me seriously. They didn't even write down my name or the description of the guy or the car. They basically said, "Good night. This is your profession and this is what you can expect." I was so angry and pulled another date and beat the guy up. I have also been in abusive relationships. One of my girlfriends and I used a lot of drugs together. We ran each other for drugs and there was also physical abuse in our relationship. One of my girlfriends hit me during our 13 years together. Me and my girlfriend right now have been on and off together for 20 years. I acknowledge we have had good times and also hard times where we have been abusive to each other and really played each other psychologically. And drugs and alcohol really messes us up.

On December 1<sup>st</sup> 1993, my sister Cheryl Humchitt was murdered in her apartment in the DTES. It was a double-murder of my sister and her common-law boyfriend Trang Lam over a drug debt. Cheryl saw Sheldon Williams murder Trang, and then Sheldon strangled my sister to death too. Sheldon was from Bella Bella too, and I remember seeing him at a house party up in Bella Bella afterwards and felt that he was the one who had killed my sister. I went to the police with a picture of him. It wasn't easy because I did not have good experiences with the police and I knew they wouldn't take me seriously. Eventually Sheldon was arrested and convicted of first-degree murder of my sister and manslaughter for the killing of Trang Lam. He only did 10 years for those murders. I think that is sick. The whole thing really ripped our home village apart.

When my first granddaughter was born, I started to change things around. I've also stopped partying as much. I've partied myself out. I still use drugs sometimes and pull dates, but I'm focused on other things. I want to get healthy. My body and movements have changed as I get older. The drugs now are more dangerous. You never know what's in them and they are really messing people up. My mother and father died of alcoholism, and my brother too, and now my sister is in the hospital because of it. I am not fucking around anymore. I told my alcohol and drug counsellor that I know I won't quit drinking ever, but I am not a drunk anymore. I'm trying to work on myself and how to feel less on-edge all the time. I know violence is a learnt behavior, and I am trying to work on that too.

For the past year I have been an outreach worker and I am proud of myself for being in a better place every day. I also have better relations with my family in Bella Bella now. It's kinda funny because it turned out there are so many two-spirit, gays, and lesbians in Bella Bella now!

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*

# POVERTY AND ECONOMIC SECURITY



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Working wage is not enough

Not enough employment or training programs for Indigenous women to get jobs

Can't get a good job if I don't have child care



Can't afford to go to college or university to get higher paying job

Different categories are degrading

Can't afford transit, medication, or clothes



Residential school survivors shouldn't be suffering in poverty

Native women are capable but underemployed

**We are poor because they are rich from taking our land**

Finding free food while on welfare takes time away from finding job

It's a cycle that never ends

No one helps Indigenous women get out of poverty

**Can't live on my pension**



Worked my whole life but people assume I won't be a good worker

Our families are kept poor so they can apprehend kids

We only get hired as volunteers to work for free or \$2 an hour

Poverty cycles and racism keeps us in street work

**Disability assistance process is long and complicated**

# MY EXPERIENCES LIVING IN POVERTY

Transit is too expensive



Long wait on the phone to speak to Ministry

Too hard to get on welfare

Keeping us poor is colonial strategy

More vulnerable to sexual violence

No one hires Native women



More dependent on male partner

No money to live

Triple oppression as poor Indigenous woman

Cannot eat healthy food I need for my diabetes



No more individual caseworkers

I wouldn't be poor if I could live like my ancestors

Sometimes my kids go to school without lunch



Not enough money on welfare

DTES agencies discriminate against hiring Indigenous women

They should allow us to make more money on welfare and disability

Disability assistance is too low



## I am Mary Speck

I was born in Alert Bay, Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. We had no electricity and used a woodstove. My father was the cook in our house. My father beat my mother and my uncle tried to rape my mother when he was drunk. We witnessed a lot of violence. I was the second oldest and looked after my siblings. Sometimes I would take my siblings out to sleep in an abandoned pink car to get away from the violence. I also faced sexual abuse from family members. Later in my adult life, I saw someone who abused me at the Friendship Centre. He looked at me and he was startled. He died a few years later. I forgave him, but I did not forget.

We had fun times growing up too. I remember when we picked fruit from the bushes and clams from the beach. We looked like little ducks down on the beach! There was no bus from the reserve to the school and our walks to and from school were usually pretty fun too.

Later, I was placed in residential school. My oldest sibling went with our grandparents where she learnt the language. Residential school was more violence too. I was 13 years old and was smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. There were some Native staff there from Alert Bay, and one of them really looked after me in the kitchen. She would even let me catch naps in the back. I was in residential school

for seven years. We used to stay awake at night. I was really protective of the girls in the school, and I hurt a couple of staff members and chased watchmen away who were looking to harm the girls. Because of that, I got moved to Port Alberni Residential School. I was there for 10 months and placed with older girls. Kids died in that school. But for me, it was a bit better because the older girls took care of me.

When I went home, I was 13 years old. I became homeless on the reserve and was couch-surfing. I ended up in a relationship and the guy had his own children to look after and I was with my niece. He would drink and beat me. No one intervened. I suffered that abuse for six years. One night we were both drunk and I grabbed his artificial leg and started hitting him with it. I took off. I left my niece at my dad's, and my mother got me a ticket to Vancouver where she was at the time.

In Vancouver I met my son Jonathan's father. He was abusive too. He was okay for awhile but never helped out with Jonathan. Jonathan was an infant when I told his father to leave. When he wouldn't leave, I pushed him out the door. As I was pushing him out he said, "Wait you ripped my pants!" So I let him in just to change. He left and I saw him only once after that. He was not a present father. I did not have day care, so I stayed at home with Jonathan. Over time, I discovered Kiwassa Neighbourhood House and volunteered there while Jonathan would hang out with the other kids. I also started volunteering at Indian Homemakers' Association. Indian Homemakers was made up of Indian women who would come together to improve the conditions for women, fight discrimination, and establish political recognition for Aboriginal women and Aboriginal peoples. I was hired as the coordinator of Indian Homemakers until it shut down.

Things have really changed in Vancouver and the DTES from those days. There is so much more poverty. And it's more violent now. I am scared to walk down my own block. There are people chasing each other. The lateral violence also really triggers me. All the yelling and screaming all day long. People don't recognize each other on the street anymore. Every one is stressed right out, especially before welfare cheque day, and desperate to make money however they can. The poverty is everywhere. One time in my building 12 police officers broke down the door to get to some stolen bikes. That was scary too. I usually feel safe in my building though. It's a coed building and couples have separate rooms, which is good for women in the building to have a safe place. There are addictions issues but not violence within the building. I have been lost in my addictions before too, so I understand. My son Jonathan was in care because of that. They just took him though, which wasn't right. At the time I didn't have a voice. I received no support from MCFD; instead they just took him away. Only after I got him back did I learn that I had the right to place him with a family member.

I hope things change for the better for all of us soon and people aren't living in so much poverty.



**Every one is stressed right out, especially before welfare cheque day, and desperate to make money however they can. The poverty is everywhere.**

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**Although they took advantage of us sexually, we stayed with the two men because we felt it was safer than the alternative of being alone on the streets or back in our abusive home.**

## I am Debra Leo

When I was about 15 years old I ran away from my parents' home in Burnaby. My parents were alcoholics and there was a lot of abusive behaviour and yelling in our home. This is common in a lot of Native homes, but I think this is because our parents are mimicking the behaviours of abuse that they learned in residential schools. My dad used to get beat up badly in the residential school that he was in, and so he behaved the same with us.

One night my sister and I decided we had enough of our parents' drinking and fighting. We jumped out of the window and took nothing except the clothes on our back. I remember thinking, "What are we going to do and where are we going to go?" We hitchhiked all the way from Burnaby to Main and Hastings.

Once we got to Main and Hastings, we ran into two older guys who allowed us to stay with them and they introduced us to pot and alcohol. But of course, we could not stay with them for free. We had to have sex with these two men. They would get us drunk and then force themselves on us. Although they took advantage of us sexually, we stayed with the two men because we felt it was safer than the alternative of being alone on the streets or back in our abusive home.

The police were often looking for us because we were reported as missing by our family. Until we became legally recognized as adults, the police would track us down and drag us back home, where we would get locked into our rooms. Because the abuse did not stop at home, we kept running away. The police never asked us



why we kept running away; they just kept dragging us back to the same situation at home that we were running from.

At the age of 16 years old, I started hooking in the DTES. I learned how to talk to guys, how to ask for money, and how much to charge. But I did not know much about safety, such as using condoms to protect against STI's and pregnancy. I had four abortions while working on the street. Working the street was also very dangerous because you never knew if you would come back alive. A guy could beat you, rape you, or murder you. I feel lucky that I wasn't one of serial killer Robert Pickton's victims, though I know that I easily could have been. I remember hearing that he was driving around the area where I was working and I knew three of the women who were murdered on his farm.

One night a guy picked me up in his van. He grabbed me by my hair while I was in the back seat and tried to rape me. I was screaming so loudly that someone walking by knocked at the van door. The guy opened the back door, pushed me out, and drove away. I never reported this incident because I was too scared and I believed that the violence committed against me was my own fault. Also, I do not trust the police. They judge those of us who live in the DTES, particularly the working girls. My friend once tried to report an incident and was told by the police, "You are a hooker. What do you expect?"

Working the street was the only way to make enough money to support myself and to get my own place, away from those two men. I was also addicted to drugs by then, which I did to forget the violence of my parents' home and the pain of the streets. I started by snorting cocaine and then I started smoking crack in a pipe. Doing drugs is fun at first. It helps ease the every day pain of just wanting to end your life. But over time, I started to realize how dangerous it was. Three of my friends overdosed and died. And people are often trying to steal your drugs. If you have a drug debt with your dealer, they show no mercy. Women have all of the hair on their heads shaved off, are kidnapped and tortured for days, or are pushed out of their windows. I knew a woman who was raped all night by several different men because she owed money to the drug dealers.

After 15 years, I realized I wanted a better life for myself and I believed that I deserved a better life for myself. I learnt patience. Even though I had a drug habit and needed money to survive, I decided to get out. My boyfriend at the time helped me realize that I could take better care of myself. So I started volunteering and worked on furthering my skills. I am proud of myself now. I mostly stopped using crack cocaine for two years. I use when I get triggered and it makes me feel guilty. I am scared because of fentanyl. I could be dead. I am also helping my sister to quit and we are helping each other. I am 52 years old now. I really wish my life had turned out differently back then, but I had few options.

There are things that can be done so that no one else has to go through what I had to go through. I believe there should be housing available for young girls so they



**I never reported this incident because I was too scared and I believed that the violence committed against me was my own fault. Also, I do not trust the police. They judge those of us who live in the DTES, particularly the working girls.**



**The government should make it easier to get on welfare and raise the welfare rates so women do not have to work the streets to survive. It's so hard to survive on welfare.**



**Our society should also make it easier for people who live in the DTES to work because no one is willing to hire people who have the DTES as their address or who have no address at all.**

do not end up homeless or in an unsafe housing situation. The government should make it easier to get on welfare and raise the welfare rates so women do not have to work the streets to survive. It's so hard to survive on welfare. Welfare is so low that you have to work to supplement welfare, and it's often different kinds of dangerous work. We need to increase welfare and make it easier to get on disability assistance so we have more money to live.

Whenever I see the younger generation on the streets, I always acknowledge them and say hi. They need someone to talk to and not feel alone. I believe it is important for young girls to know how the street can be disappointing and dangerous. I tell them how to be able to scan the streets for safety. They only have seconds to scan for safety and decide whether to get into a car or not because of the communication laws. This needs to change so women aren't worried about breaking the law. The girls working the street are also getting younger and younger, like 14 or 15 or 16 years old, to get access to their drugs. We need investigations into where the bad dope is coming from. We need high-level not low-level busts. You never know when you get a bad batch and you could die.

Our society should also make it easier for people who live in the DTES to work because no one is willing to hire people who have the DTES as their address or who have no address at all. I got my first job recently as an outreach worker at WISH. I talk to girls on the street and help them get connected to resources. This job helps me get money and not be back on the street. We need more resources like PACE to exit if and when we want and are ready. We need employment resources, finding alternative income sources, how to eat healthy, finding good healthcare and dentists.

Finally, I think people should have more understanding and compassion towards us. We should not be judged for who we are or what we do for trying to support ourselves when no one else even seems to care whether we live or die.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



I'm living and being kept in poverty.

## Participatory Research and Literature Review

### Economic Insecurity for Indigenous Women

The median income for Indigenous people in Canada is 30 percent lower than the median income of Canadians.<sup>1</sup>

Despite certain gains in access to education and training, the unemployment rate for Indigenous women is nearly twice that of non-Indigenous women.<sup>2</sup> The poverty rate for Indigenous women is 36 percent, which is more than double the percentage of non-Indigenous women.<sup>3</sup> The average child poverty rate for all children in Canada is 18 percent, but the average child poverty rate among status First Nations children is 51 percent and up to 60 percent on reserve.<sup>4</sup>

B.C. has Canada's second highest poverty rate, and until this year B.C. was the only province in Canada without a poverty reduction plan.

Using the Market Basket Measure, more than 557,000 people in B.C. live below the poverty line, of whom nearly 99,000 are children and 54,000 are seniors.<sup>5</sup> Using the Census Family Low Income Measure, the senior poverty rate is 8.8 percent in B.C.<sup>6</sup> This is the highest of any province or territory in Canada, and poverty amongst senior women is twice the rate of senior men.<sup>7</sup>

Using the Low-Income Measure, 51 percent of children in families headed by single parents in B.C. live in poverty, and 82 percent of those single-parent families are women-led.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous women are twice as likely to be single parents than non-Indigenous women, with 17 percent of Indigenous women being lone mothers.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous child poverty rates in B.C. are 44.1 percent on reserve and 30.9 percent off reserve, compared to 18.4 percent for all children.<sup>10</sup>

### Racialization of Poverty

Indigenous single mothers and their children as well as Indigenous women elders are most impacted by deep levels of poverty in the province. While Indigenous women's poverty is often explained through either narratives of racist poor-bashing that blame individuals or through pathological narratives that victimize and manage Indigenous women's poverty through band-aid solutions, the reality is that Indigenous women's poverty is systemic, ubiquitous, and intergenerational.



As a poor Native woman in the DTES, I have been called a dirty dog so many times and even my children are threatened. It happens in grocery stores, transit, everywhere. And everyone who witnesses it doesn't say anything. I remember being on the bus number 20 and people yelling at the bus driver to get us 'ugly wet dogs' off the bus.



They take oil and resources from our lands and territories but we get none of that money they make. We still live in poverty with no food, no housing, and no education.



Welfare cuts us off when we get money from the band. That's not right; that's our money from our band for compensation for land the government stole from us.

The racialization of poverty, as described by Grace-Edward Galabuzi, is a result of state policies, economic restructuring towards austerity and precarious work, and labour market discriminations that operate together to predetermine the disproportionate concentration and reproduction of poverty among racialized communities.<sup>11</sup>

## Colonial Impoverishment

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples commissioner stated in 1996 that “Current levels of poverty and underdevelopment are directly linked to the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their lands and the delegitimization of their institutions of society and governance.”<sup>12</sup>

Indigenous women’s poverty stems from ongoing colonialism that deliberately targets Indigenous peoples for removal from lands, children for forced family separation, and women and two-spirit people for racialized gendered subjugation and dehumanization. Discriminatory state policies and societal practices create the conditions for Indigenous women’s systemic impoverishment.

The colonial impoverishment of Indigenous women is even more glaring when juxtaposed with the revenues and profits generated by multinational and Crown corporations extracting resources from Indigenous lands.

## Poverty Magnifies Gendered Violence

Indigenous women’s poverty and economic marginalization is connected to the violence that Indigenous women face. Indigenous women’s poverty magnifies vulnerability to abusive relationships, sexual assault, child apprehension, exploitative work conditions, unsafe housing, food insecurity, poor physical and mental health, and social isolation.

Many Indigenous women in the DTES may stay in or return to abusive relationships, or labour under dangerous conditions in order to survive. Indigenous trans and two-spirit women are more likely to stay in abusive relationships when their financial insecurity is layered with isolation or disconnection from community supports.<sup>13</sup>

In a DTES women’s safety audit, 57 percent of women said that they had felt forced to do something they were not comfortable with in order to survive and make ends meet.<sup>14</sup> In a separate study on the impacts of low and restrictive welfare, one-third of women reported staying or returning to an abusive partner for financial reasons, and one-fifth of women reported engaging in the survival sex trade due to welfare rules.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Indigenous women are disproportionately criminalized for poverty-related crimes such as theft. Finally, higher stressors associated with living in systemic poverty such as drug dependence and participation in street economies are used against Indigenous women in order to apprehend Indigenous children, thus perpetuating the colonial cycle of trauma and impoverishment.

## Social Assistance Cements Poverty

Residents in the DTES have the lowest median income—\$13,691 per year—in the city.<sup>16</sup>

While public narratives about the DTES are dominated by myths of 'getting a free ride', most residents would rather have a well-paying and secure job than being on social assistance. Living on income or disability assistance as it is currently structured is stigmatizing, restricts personal autonomy, and further cements poverty. Neoliberal austerity policies for two decades have brought cuts to public services and forced an unjust reliance on the private market.

About four percent of people in B.C. rely on social assistance.<sup>17</sup> Social assistance is broadly divided into two categories, of which the first is the temporary income assistance category for people deemed employable. This is approximately 29 percent of all social assistance recipients and includes those who are expected to work, those who are temporarily excused from work mainly because they have young children, those categorized as People with Persistent Multiple Barriers to employment, and those who are expected to work but have a temporary medical condition.<sup>18</sup> The other broad category of social assistance is people on disability assistance who have a Person With Disabilities designation.

Income assistance and disability benefits in B.C. are low: \$710 per month for a single person on income assistance and \$1133 plus a \$52 transportation subsidy per month for a person with a disability.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the average lowest rents in SROs in the DTES have risen to \$687 per month.<sup>20</sup> For someone on income assistance, this leaves a paltry \$23 per month to meet all other basic living costs including food, clothing, and transport.

## Neoliberal Cuts to Social Assistance

There are significant barriers to accessing provincial income and disability assistance under the existing service delivery model.

Due to neoliberal restructuring, Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR) offices have closed or reduced their office hours and are no longer staffed by individual caseworkers. Instead, an inaccessible online system has been introduced. A more lengthy initial application process requires computer literacy, as well as assessments by physicians even though many Indigenous women do not have continuous care by a trusted physician. There are long telephone wait times on a centralized phone line averaging over 30 minutes.<sup>21</sup>



We need increased rates for welfare and disability assistance. And when rates do go up, then the prices of all the services and rents go up too. We need free transit, child care, and education too.



Social assistance rates being so low is turning us into criminals. We have to steal to survive.



I cut back my prescription because I don't have enough money. I need the medication but I can't afford it.



It took me almost three years to get on welfare. The first two years I didn't have an advocate and they kept giving me different information and telling me to go to different offices and fill out new forms. For two years, I was homeless and no welfare. I don't know how I survived that.



The thing about the DTES and living in poverty is we are always standing in line—line for laundry, line for food, line for clothing, line for showers, line to see social worker, line to see housing advocate, line for bathroom. We spend our whole day in lines. It's frustrating.



We need free education. We don't want free handouts or dependence on the government. We are responsible people but they don't give us or our children the opportunity to get out of poverty.



We need training and education programs. We need a pass for Native people for free bus fare and free access to recreation. That would help.



We need free transit with free bus passes for low income Native women. I have to ask bus drivers for free rides and they look down their noses at me. Without affordable transit, I can't see my doctor or get to food banks or go swimming.

Overall, the experience dealing with the MSDPR is a hard and humiliating one. Eighty percent of respondents in a survey said they disliked their experiences interacting with the Ministry, including being given contradictory or confusing information.<sup>22</sup>

Eligibility criteria for income assistance are also a barrier including the three-week work search, the two-year independence test, and low asset thresholds.

The three-week work search is a wait period before someone can apply for income assistance and during which they must demonstrate they are engaged in a 'reasonable work search'. This waiting period can be expedited under emergency circumstances but, in the absence of a legal advocate to secure an urgent eligibility interview, many Indigenous women face cascading stress and financial insecurity during that three-week wait.

Furthermore, the two-year independence test requires that, with some exceptions, new welfare applicants must have been financially independent for at least two consecutive years prior to applying. This rule particularly penalizes Indigenous women who are likely to face impoverishment through their lives, and delays or denies them income assistance despite financial need.

Taken together, as stated by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, "These two regulations have been instrumental in reducing the overall caseload, as they deny eligibility, delay receipt of assistance, and discourage individuals from accessing welfare."<sup>23</sup>

There are further hurdles even on income assistance. People on income assistance must develop employment plans including required work searches and trainings, and failure to abide by the terms of the plan can become grounds for suspension. Employable single parents are expected to work when their youngest child is three years old that, in the absence of affordable child care, is unrealistic for many single mothers.

People with disabilities often cannot directly apply for disability assistance. They must first get on basic income assistance and then wait to apply for disability assistance that can often take months.

Elders on disability assistance are required to apply for Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits (CPP-D) early at the age of 60 years, which then has the impact of reducing their pension payments when they reach the age of 65 years. Further, if their CPP-D payment is higher than PWD benefits and they become ineligible for PWD, they are no longer eligible for benefits such as diet supplements, monthly nutritional supplements, orthodontics, crisis grants, and moving supplements.<sup>24</sup>

## Surviving Poverty in the DTES

Due to the low rates of social assistance, most women and families on social assistance spend most of their day meeting basic survival needs including lining up for food and clothing at various DTES agencies.

The high costs of housing means many Indigenous women on social assistance are precariously housed or couch surfing with no fixed address and often no access to

a phone. In a survey conducted amongst people on social assistance, 39 percent of participants reported being without a fixed address and only 50 percent had a phone number in service.<sup>25</sup>

Meeting all these survival needs for food, clothing, child care, and safe housing becomes a higher priority over following an employment plan. Finding access to a computer, updating a resume, and looking for employment is almost impossible. Yet the MSDPR can deem someone to be employment-ready and expected to work, and then completely cut the person off from income assistance.

Finally, recipients of income assistance can no longer attend postsecondary education without losing all their income assistance benefits and must instead apply for student loans. This means that Indigenous women on income assistance are more likely to enter into cycles of short-term work and limited training programs that characterize low-wage work.

## Feminization of Poverty

Secure and dignified employment is both a means of financial security and a social determinant of health.

While paid employment should not be forced or become an imposed pressure, there are many Indigenous women in the DTES who are engaged in purposeful work. Despite being stereotyped as 'unemployed', many Indigenous women are working in a multitude of street economies such as vending and bartering, as well as traditional and undervalued economies such as carving, beading, crafting, and food harvesting.

Indigenous women in the DTES also work thousands of unpaid hours every year as child care providers, outreach workers, peer workers, community navigators, counsellors, janitorial staff, clerical workers, cooks, and gardeners.

The feminization of poverty describes the disproportionate burden of poverty carried by women as a result of multiple interlocking factors: the income gap between men and women and even more so for Indigenous women; that women are more likely to work part-time or temporary work; that women especially Indigenous women are more likely to work in low-wage jobs; that women must balance paid work with unpaid family and community responsibilities including child care, elder care, and domestic work; and that as a result of all the above, women are less likely to contribute to pension plans.



I can't live on my old age pension. It's so low. I've worked my whole life at the cannery and worked hard, and I just get \$1700 a month to live on. I'm 84 years old.



My senior income is not enough. I have to go and try to make a few more dollars to survive.



We need food delivery and groceries for elders who are unable to leave their homes and are isolated. Our elders need to be taken care of. What kind of society are we in now that our elders are alone and starving. This isn't our way.



We need community solutions. We as Native women should get jobs where we get paid to care for each other and the community like running community kitchens, gardens, and helping elders get to appointments. All this is how we take care of each other sometimes till four in the morning but we are never paid for this work.



Native women face so much discrimination getting jobs. They should guarantee jobs and living wage for all Native women who want to and can work.



There should be higher rates for welfare and pension and more access to free college. I would like to have a job placement.

## Barriers to Secure Employment

For Indigenous women who are seeking work in the formal economy, the number one barrier identified is discrimination by employers. There is also immense stigma for those with a mental health diagnosis on disability assistance. Ninety percent of people with serious mental illnesses are unemployed.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the associated costs of employment including transportation, clothing, and required work gear often makes access to certain jobs illusory. Finally, the current employment supports program through the Employment Program of British Columbia is a one-size-fits-all model with far less success, particularly for Indigenous women, than an Individual Placement and Support model.<sup>27</sup>

For Indigenous women in the DTES who are employed in the formal economy, work conditions under racialized gendered capitalism generally have a negative impact.

Women are stratified into low-wage work, and the minimum wage in B.C. of \$12.65 per hour leaves Indigenous women living far below the poverty line. Work is generally part-time, casual, shift-based, or seasonal with no employment benefits including no sick time and no long-term job security.

Even for those who do have secure full-time work, according to First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, a single parent with one child working full-time for the whole year on minimum wage would have only earned \$19,257, leaving them about \$10,000 below the poverty line.<sup>28</sup>

Indigenous women are also vulnerable to workplace violations including racist micro aggressions, sexualized harassment, wage theft, unpaid training, and overtime hours of work without pay. Many Indigenous women are denied bank accounts and are forced to rely on predatory financial companies that charge high fees for cashing pay-cheques. Enforcement of workplace labour rights, including health and safety standards, is nearly impossible for vulnerable workers. Most precarious work is non-unionized, leaving Indigenous women at the whim of their employers and the perception that any assertion of rights may lead to loss of the job.



A particular challenge in the DTES is that work in nonprofit agencies is often considered 'volunteer hours' even though women are expected to show up for full four to eight hour shifts and undertake primary job responsibilities.

These work hours are rarely compensated through money, and are more often compensated through free meals or gift cards calculated at an exploitative rate of \$2-10 per hour. When DTES residents attempt to apply for work that does remunerate them, they are unable to show prior work experience even though they have demonstrated a high level of skill, professionalism, and leadership on their 'volunteer' job.

## Surveillance of Child Poverty

The inability for Indigenous women in the DTES to meaningfully enter formal work structures is further compounded by the lack of adequate and affordable child care, including the lack of after-school care. There is only enough licensed child care space for 18 percent of children in B.C. and, after housing, child care is the second highest expense for families in B.C.<sup>29</sup>

In the absence of reliable and free child care, Indigenous single mothers and grandmothers are more dependent on precarious work including part-time positions, shift work, and work in informal or street economies.

The lack of affordable and appropriate child care is particularly concerning for Indigenous mothers who are criminalized for being poor and most at risk of child apprehension due to unjust and colonial interpretations of 'neglect'. As explored in detail in a subsequent section, Indigenous children and youth are much more likely to be in government care than non-Indigenous children and youth.

## Ending Forced Impoverishment

The cycles of poverty and precarity are an impossible trap. Contrary to poor-bashing theories about individual responsibility, it is evident that the five forces of colonial impoverishment, neoliberal austerity, feminization of poverty, racialization of poverty, and criminalization of poverty all overlap to structure the particular systemic conditions for Indigenous women's economic insecurity in the DTES.

Ending Indigenous women's forced impoverishment requires an end to dispossession of Indigenous women from their lands, and for all levels of government to coordinate on a specific poverty reduction plan that guarantees livable social assistance and wages, employment security, and universal public services including free public transportation, post secondary education, child care, and extended healthcare for all Indigenous women and their families.



We need free child care for single mothers. They pay so much in rent, and when they can't afford rent or child care then their children are apprehended.



**I remember every morning they would wake us up by saying, “You are not on the reserve; you are in White Man’s land. Indians are liars, filthy, and good for nothing. You don’t want to live like an Indian.”**

## I am Stella August

I was six years old when I was taken away from my parents and grandparents in Ahousat, B.C., and forced into a residential school. The Department of Indian Affairs came to our reserve every year in the 1950s, taking Native children away and placing them in residential schools to learn the White way of life.

I was forced to attend the Christie Indian Residential School and then the Mission City St. Mary’s Residential School. I felt like I was in a concentration camp. We were punished for speaking our language. Our punishment was being kept in isolation in a dark room for the whole day. Often we would be fed food from the garbage and be forced to drink raw cow milk. We were strapped and beaten until we were too sore to stand. In residential schools, under the federal policy of ‘aggressive assimilation,’ we were stripped of our language, our culture, and our customs. We had to scrub ourselves clean until we were White.

If we did not get up on time in the mornings, the nuns would drag us across the floor, beat us, and make us go without breakfast. I remember every morning they would wake us up by saying, “You are not on the reserve; you are in White Man’s land. Indians are liars, filthy, and good for nothing. You don’t want to live like an Indian.” When we were silent, they made us talk. But when we talked, they did not

like what we had to say and hit us while repeating, "God doesn't like you talking like that." We were too scared to do anything. We would often go without food and there would be no activities. At night we would often see the children taken out of their dorm rooms and they would come back crying and bleeding.

I was incredibly lonely. The priests and nuns did not like us making friends with each other. Even brothers and sisters were kept apart and forced to act like strangers with one another. From the time I was placed in residential schools, I did not have a single kind word said to me. No one appreciated me for the individual I was, or the culture I came from. All I remember is being punished for anything and everything. I still have horrible flashbacks. I grew up with a tremendous amount of shame and loss of dignity. I believe that residential schools were prisons for young children.

I managed to get out of residential school earlier than the other children because one day my brother managed to sneak a phone call to my grandparents and told them to come get me. The nuns had beaten me so badly across my head with a stick and a ruler that my ears would not stop bleeding. My grandparents got me out of the school for a special doctor's visit. The doctor determined that I had permanently lost my hearing in both ears. My grandparents were furious and kept me at home, refusing to send me back to the residential school. When the school called the Indian band office looking for me, my grandparents told the school and the Indian agents that the nuns had given me a severely damaged ear. The officials hung up the phone and did not try forcing me back.

When I was older, I moved to the DTES. I drifted here from the Island and found work at a fish plant. Since then, this neighbourhood has become my permanent home. Like me, most people here carry deep scars. It is hard to describe all the different experiences that women have—abuse, child apprehensions, residential schools, and grief. People who drive by us every day have no idea what nightmares we live with. My heart wants to shatter when I hear some of the stories about why people have turned to drugs and alcohol.



**I believe that residential schools were prisons for young children.**



**I think all the residential school survivors should be compensated for life. There should be no homeless residential school survivors. They gave us a settlement that was peanuts, and we don't have a regular income.**

The DTES is the poorest part of town. Low-income housing in the DTES is of such substandard quality that many prefer to sleep on the streets. In the DTES Power of Women Group, we support our people to get proper homes. The government should provide a living wage and a decent home for all people so that we have somewhere to stay and so that no one has to work the street if they don't want. And then there is the constant harassment on the street by police officers. I have seen officers walk by and kick people while they are passed out or sleeping on the street. Our people are not able to defend themselves against guns and tasers. It hurts me to see people slammed to the pavement by police officers just because they are poor and nobody cares what happens to poor people.

But the hidden truth of the DTES is that despite the poverty, criminalization, and trauma, we all care for each other and socialize with one another. Especially in the DTES Power of Women Group, where we are like one family and support the community on issues such as police brutality, child apprehensions, violence against women, and housing. Whether people are sober or high on drugs, we listen to each other's truths and dreams.

I think all the residential school survivors should be compensated for life. There should be no homeless residential school survivors. They gave us a settlement that was peanuts, and we don't have a regular income. A lot of our survivors aren't even alive from the weight of the trauma and poverty. We had no childhood, no family, no good memories. We are left in the dark with our pain. I miss my friends who passed on. So many had it worse than I did with all the beatings and rapes. I am just glad I can live to be a survivor at the age of 73 years old. I carry the burden and I will never forget the hell we had to go through in our childhood. Our truth has to be recognized and the public has to know what the government puts First Nations people through. They can never take the Indian out of our blood.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*

# HOUSING



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Supportive housing has unfair rules: no guests overnight, curfews, monitoring



SROs are unsafe: no doors on rooms, theft, sexual assault

We have to double or triple bunk in housing

Not enough assisted housing for seniors

Native women should not be homeless on Native land

Renovictions and demovictions



Private landlords won't rent to Native women on welfare

Lack of safety for two-spirit and trans women in housing

Fear of standing up for rights or face eviction



Not enough housing for families and then our kids get apprehended

Landlords and housing agencies don't select Indigenous women

See more homeless Indigenous women, youth, and elders

Not enough social housing outside the DTES



Rent is too high

Without housing I can't get a job and get stuck in poverty

Housing gets taken over by pimps or dealers in the building

Managers will evict without cause or extort sex to let you keep housing



Deplorable housing conditions: rodents, bedbugs, dirty, too small, no privacy



BC Housing process is complicated and intrusive questions

Housing is small, isolating, and they won't allow ceremony or gatherings

# MY EXPERIENCES OF HOUSING

Not enough women's shelters and transition homes

Supportive housing feels like an institution with rules and penalties

It is not safe for women to sleep on the street

Government always makes false promises to end homelessness



There is not enough Native housing

**I stayed in abusive relationships otherwise I would be homeless**

Money going into market rental supplements instead of social housing

Modular housing does not work for homeless Indigenous women

Not enough housing outreach workers or advocates

Homeless women use drugs more to feel less cold and hunger

DTES is full of slumlords



Not enough affordable housing

Cannot get physically healthy or mentally stable without housing

Long BC Housing waitlist

Theft in shelters means have to choose between keeping belongings and place to stay

Coed shelters are not safe for women

Lot of DTES housing is not self-contained

No enforcement against landlords

Gentrification is bringing rich people, rich housing, rich stores



**In Vancouver, I experienced that racist landlords wouldn't rent to me.**

## We are Pearl and Kim Baptiste

I am Pearl Baptiste. I am Saulteau and have been in the DTES for 30 years. This is my daughter Kim.

When my kids were young, I had pretty good housing in Winnipeg and my kids turned out pretty good. I never hit my kids even when I was drunk. My kids' friends would come to our home with black eyes and wounds. Our house was a safe house for all the kids in the neighbourhood who would come over and play in our home. Things changed later and it was hard to get housing, especially when I moved to Vancouver. I was first homeless when I moved to Vancouver in 1976 with my sister. I have been homeless five or six times in Vancouver. My kids have been homeless and in and out of shelters too.

In Vancouver, I experienced that racist landlords wouldn't rent to me. As soon as they saw my face they would say, "It's rented already" even though they still had the rental sign up. I experienced this a lot of times. I finally found one landlord who actually talked to me and I told him I don't drink anymore and that I was helping my daughter raise my granddaughter. He rented to me. But a lot of my housing has been inadequate. I had housing with no smoke detectors or no source of heat or no laundry facilities or cockroach infestations, but often those were the only options available because other places were too expensive or wouldn't rent to us as an Indigenous family.

I have been homeless too. Over 10 years ago, I was homeless with my boyfriend. We slept under a bridge and were homeless for 10 months. We slept outside because there is no safe and clean couples-only shelter. There is one shelter that allows you to stay with your partner but the conditions are horrid. A lot of couples end up sleeping outside for that reason. I have also been in SROs. I was in the Cobalt, which had bedbugs and cockroaches. We had to share bathrooms and a kitchen. I used to go somewhere else to shower. I didn't use the kitchen either. I used a slow cooker that my daughter bought me for my room. I didn't feel safe using the shared amenities. In the late 1990s, women were being thrown out the building at the Cobalt and dealers were extorting in our building. A young girl was thrown into the dumpster from the building. I didn't stay there too long after that.



More recently, I was homeless again. I was alone. I was so scared to be alone as a Native woman; there are so many violent racist people around. I didn't feel safe so I would walk around a lot to stay awake and alert. I didn't know what to do with myself either. I always had to find places to go and ways to keep occupied. I would sit and drink coffee all day and read my books. I could never rest or feel at ease. I used to sleep in the shelter and go to school in the Choices program at the same time. I didn't really like staying in the shelter because you lose so much of your stuff there. My friend Debbie Miller was the one who helped me out the last time I was homeless. She offered for me to stay in her home with her and her husband.

My daughter Kim has stayed in shelters too and had so much of her stuff stolen. One time someone stole shoes off my daughter's feet when she was sleeping in a shelter. This isn't only our experience. Many people won't stay in shelters because their stuff is not safe and only a few shelters provide lockers or bins to keep your stuff safe. My daughter stopped going to the shelter too when she was homeless and ended up staying in a tent in Crab park. Now my daughter is sharing housing with roommates but they are facing an illegal eviction for nonpayment of a hydro bill that isn't even in their name. It is the landlord's hydro bill but the landlord is evicting them and changed the locks on them.

My new housing is pretty good. There are desk clerks, which makes me feel safe. I can tell them when I want or don't want visitors. I like those rules but I know rules like no visitors or showing guest ID go outside the *Residential Tenancy Act* that many of these housing providers don't have to follow. I don't think that's right and women should have the right to choose what kind of housing they want. Women should be placed in buildings based on their own needs; whether they want those kinds of rules and protections or not.

We need affordable and safe housing. A lot of us as Native women stay in unsafe housing because of the threat of child welfare or threat of being homeless on the streets. I see even more younger and younger homeless women and girls on the streets these days. We should be able to have our own housing and not be dependent on men for housing. Women should be on the lease and women should get their own apartment, whether or not they are with a partner. Welfare claws your money back when women are in shared housing with a partner, and that's not right because it decreases women's financial independence. We also need housing that is family housing so women don't lose their kids to MCFD. And it's impossible to stay sober or to clean up without stable and safe housing. When you sleep on the streets, you end up doing more drugs not only because of the stress but also to stay warm and to kill the hunger pains. Housing is so foundational to what we need to stabilize our lives.

- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



**More recently, I was homeless again. I was alone. I was so scared to be alone as a Native woman; there are so many violent racist people around.**



**We should be able to have our own housing and not be dependent on men for housing.**



## I am Priscillia Tait

I am Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en and moved to Vancouver in 1986. When my son Ulrich was born, his father Patrick and I were renting a basement suite in Patrick's father's house. The birth of my son did not change Patrick. Patrick kept partying in the DTES while I was on EI and maternity leave, and our finances ended up supporting his alcohol and drug habits. Patrick would sometimes bring other women home and would simply say that they needed somewhere to sleep. I felt like I was looking after two kids, and so eventually Ulrich and I moved out of there and into a place with one of my friends.

I started to settle into the two-bedroom suite, and was able to finish off my educational upgrading while my son was in day care at the Collingwood Neighborhood House. Our housing was stable for about a year until the rental lease expired. My roommate moved back home to our reserve community and I had nowhere to go. This was around 1997 and Uli was 18 months old. I was able to squat in the house for a couple of months before the manager found out and I was asked to leave the property.

I was now homeless with my son Ulrich. I briefly couch-surfed on and off. It took me a long time to ask for help because of my pride but especially because I was afraid that if anyone told MCFD I would have my son taken away. I was homeless for six months with my son.

I finally went to the Collingwood Neighborhood House, where a worker found us a space at the Powell Street Shelter and paid for us to take a cab there. I imagined that the shelter would be a big warehouse with rows of cots, but I was relieved to discover that we had our own room. I met other women with children and tried to get to know them so my son and I would not feel so alone. On any given day in Vancouver, there are approximately 40 families with children that are homeless, and women are the invisible homeless who are over-represented in shelters and transitional housing.

The shelter was quite noisy. There was little privacy because the bedroom doors would not lock and I had personal items like diapers and shoes stolen from our room. So then I had to steal diapers for my son. I also knew I was only allowed to stay for one month at the shelter, so I began actively applying for subsidized low-income housing through BC Housing, Vancouver Native Housing, Lu'ma Housing, and co-ops. I was scared and overwhelmed, and the whole time I was terrified that Ulrich would get apprehended.

My son and I started exploring the DTES neighbourhood that we had found ourselves in. On a warm August day, we checked out the Powell Street Festival at



**On any given day in Vancouver, there are approximately 40 families with children that are homeless, and women are the invisible homeless who are over-represented in shelters and transitional housing.**

Oppenheimer Park. It was a wonderful festival with music, martial arts, and food. We managed to sit my son on a sumo wrestler, but he wasn't too impressed!

We also wandered the streets of the DTES. Initially the drug dealers scared me, but most people on the street were homeless. Thirty percent of the homeless in the DTES are Indigenous people. Ulrich and I hung out at the Carnegie Community Centre, where Patrick's brother uncle John watched Ulrich while I did my homework. Some of the staff at the Carnegie were quite friendly and would let Ulrich and I sneak some naps on the yoga mats in the gym.

I quizzed uncle John about Patrick's whereabouts. I found out that Patrick was also now in the DTES and one day I summoned up the courage to knock on Patrick's SRO door. He answered and let Ulrich and I in. We talked and hugged, and Ulrich and him started spending more time together.

My month at the Powell Street Shelter was nearing an end and I had not heard back on any of my housing applications. A counsellor at Native Education College made some calls to find me a new shelter. When the counsellor handed me the phone to speak with the shelter intake worker, the worker asked me if I was fleeing an abusive relationship. The counsellor, sitting next to me, could hear the question and nodded to indicate that I should say "yes". Though I was uncomfortable about lying, I followed her direction and said yes. The intake worker then said they had a room for us. This shelter was located in South Vancouver.

Eventually my time at that shelter also ran out and I was back at the Powell Street Shelter for yet another month. I was so determined to get housing. I consistently phoned Vancouver Native Housing and other housing agencies looking for a space in social housing. I was so desperate that I even checked out SROs, which are completely unsafe and unsuitable for children. When I would call private rentals that were advertising in the newspaper, they would ask me if I was Aboriginal. When I answered, "Yes, I am Aboriginal", they would refuse to consider me as a tenant. One landlord told me that their last tenant was Native and partied too much and so he would not rent to me. This is a clear case of discrimination and racism. The private housing market is never going to work for Indigenous women and we need social housing. I was also walking around in the rain, without a jacket, frantically looking for Patrick and I was diagnosed with pneumonia.

That month was hell and I shed so many tears. I was losing hope in finding a place. Being without housing and having my son and I go from shelter to shelter was creating really high levels of stress and anxiety for me. My school suffered and I felt like an inadequate mother who could not even provide a home for my son.

Just before the end of the month, I received a call from Lu'ma Native Housing who had a two-bedroom apartment for us in the Commercial Drive area. Just in the nick of time! Eventually, Ulrich and I did art therapy together to relieve all the stress from that time period, and that was helpful. My son and I finally are happy and healthy. Those months were the equivalent of a lifetime, but it was a journey and a stepping-stone for where I am today.



- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



We are on Indigenous land, why are Indigenous women homeless?

## Participatory Research and Literature Review



I am down here with my daughter. We are homeless in a shelter. The government doesn't help us. The people down here help each other and will give you the shirt off their back when you need it. And the shelter I was in, they kicked out 14 people from the shelter even though they had nowhere to go. At least one was an elder who is out on the street now.



There is not enough housing and the rent is too high.



I don't see why there is homelessness. The government should see and try sleeping without a blanket in the cold on the concrete. And elders are so isolated in their housing. No one checks on them. Elders are facing more and more homelessness too, and if we go get housing, we are isolated and alone. If there is an accident, it is serious. This week we lost an elder who fell and died because she had no one to help her in her home.

### Housing as a Human Right

The right to adequate housing is enshrined in Article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration for Human Rights, which states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care."<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s, over 30,000 social housing units were built per year across Canada, but the federal government began housing cuts in the 1980s and stopped developing new subsidized housing in 1993. By the 2000s, the federal government was building less than 2,000 units per year across the country. At the same time residential real estate prices doubled and higher mortgages have led landlords to increase rents dramatically, with many households spending over 50 percent of their income on rent.

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing, "Housing has lost its social function and is seen instead as a vehicle for wealth and asset growth. It has become a financial commodity, robbed of its connection to community, dignity and the idea of home."<sup>2</sup>

### Indigenous people are Disproportionately Homeless

Vancouver now has the unfortunate honour of being one of most expensive housing markets in Canada, with rents having significantly increased for consecutive years, vacancy rates among the lowest in the country, and rapidly increasing homelessness.

Indigenous people represent 34 percent of the homeless population in the Metro Vancouver region.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous homeless people are also more likely to be unsheltered and street homeless compared to non-Indigenous homeless people.<sup>4</sup>

Forty-five percent of homeless women are Indigenous, and Indigenous women with children and survivors of violence are the single largest demographic to experience 'invisible homelessness,' such as staying temporarily with family or a friend.<sup>5</sup> There are 681 homeless youth in the region, of whom 42 percent are Indigenous, 44 percent are female, and 26 percent are gay, lesbian, transgender, queer or two-spirited.<sup>6</sup>

Single Indigenous women elders are a fast growing demographic amongst Vancouver's homeless, with all seniors representing 23 percent of the homeless population in Metro Vancouver.<sup>7</sup> There has been an alarming 58.7 percent increase

in the number of seniors on BC Housing's applicant registry between the years 2012 and 2017.<sup>8</sup>

Like in many other urban areas, taken together, this is a massive over-representation of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness as a result of forced dispossession from land, the intergenerational traumas of residential schools and the child welfare system, and systemic discrimination.

## Intersectional Lens on Homelessness

Homelessness policy in Canada is largely framed around lack of housing, but according to the definition of Indigenous homelessness in Canada, "Unlike the common colonialist definition of homelessness, Indigenous homelessness is not defined as lacking a structure of habitation; rather, it is more fully described and understood through a composite lens of Indigenous worldviews. These include: individuals, families and communities isolated from their relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages, and identities. Importantly, Indigenous people experiencing these kinds of homelessness cannot culturally, spiritually, emotionally, or physically reconnect with their Indigeneity or lost relationships."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, most homelessness policy focuses on absolute homelessness in ways that completely erases women's and girls' experiences of homelessness.

For Indigenous women experiencing homelessness, the two primary concerns are safety and child welfare. Ninety-one percent of homeless women in Canada have experienced assault in their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Women often have to make the impossible decision between staying in an abusive relationship, or becoming homeless and having their children apprehended. Women's housing may also be bound to a pimp or a dealer. And finally, Indigenous women are often in over-crowded housing with multiple friends and family members sharing space.

As Homes for Women highlights, "Couch surfing, doubling up with other families in conditions of extreme overcrowding, cycling in and out of abusive relationships, trading sex for temporary accommodation, and other survival strategies that homeless women deploy are... every bit as profound and as 'absolute' as that of men on the street or in shelters."<sup>11</sup>

Indigenous trans youth are also particularly vulnerable to housing precarity. According to the McCreary Centre Society, 35 percent of trans youth they are connected to have run away from their home in the past year, and 30 percent said they have been physically or sexually abused.<sup>12</sup> Family violence and transphobia is a primary reason that trans youth leave a home and then, upon becoming homeless, one in three trans youth report being rejected from shelters as a result of transphobic shelter policies that police gender presentation.<sup>13</sup>

Indigenous two-spirit and trans adults are constantly discriminated against when accessing housing services and shelters that are gender segregated, and respondents in one study reported having repeated suicidal ideation as a result of the consistent lack of safe shelter or housing.<sup>14</sup>



I am an old age pensioner and they increased my rent \$100 from \$375 to \$475. I can't afford that as an old age pensioner.



They always promise more housing but never build it. Not having affordable housing is a huge issue for women. It means girls and young women are more likely to stay with abusive guys.



I was sleeping outside for two weeks and couldn't get on welfare. Those two weeks I was waiting I was so scared. I had no blankets and nowhere safe to sleep.



It is so effing hard to get into nice, safe housing. Some housing here is so unsafe. You are taking a bath and someone comes through the door and rapes you.

## Homelessness is a Health Emergency

In the DTES, 1 in 18 people are homeless.<sup>15</sup> Stable, permanent, and appropriate housing is a key social determinant of health. Housing instability increases health and drug-related harms, including risk of blood-borne infections, mental health issues, and increased substance use.

Eighty-three percent of homeless people in the Metro Vancouver region report at least one health condition.<sup>16</sup> The average life expectancy of a homeless person in B.C. is shockingly low—between 40 and 49 years old, and homeless people are twice as likely to die by accident, suicide, or homicide.<sup>17</sup>



The rich are moving in and we're getting pushed out.



There is so much discrimination against Indigenous women looking for housing. I get asked questions like if I have a criminal record or if I drink. I see so much housing being built down here that's condos, but what about social housing for us? It's getting cold and people get sick and die on the streets.



I hate my SRO. It's not safe. It's dirty. My room was broken into three times. The building is taken over by dealers who are violent to women.

## Gentrification in the DTES

Last year, according to a Carnegie Community Action Project report, 500 tenants were evicted through no fault of their own, only 21 new units of housing at welfare rate were opened, and the average lowest rents in 68 privately owned and run SROs was \$687 a month.<sup>18</sup>

The rate of change of new unaffordable housing units (condos, market rental, and social housing with rents above social assistance-shelter rate) to units affordable to those on social assistance or pension is 2:1, with 21 new housing units at income assistance or pension rate and 40 new housing units at market rates opened up 2017.<sup>19</sup>

According to a social impact assessment of the Downtown Eastside Local Area Plan, the biggest fear residents have is that “they will lose their current housing or be displaced from the neighbourhood due to new development and rising rents caused by gentrification.”<sup>20</sup>

Gentrification in the DTES is rapidly transforming the low-income neighbourhood through an influx of upscale residential and commercial development. In a DTES women's safety audit, 62 percent of women residents reported feeling displaced by people with higher incomes.<sup>21</sup>

The impacts of gentrification include higher rents that are increasingly unaffordable to low-income residents, new retail shops and restaurants that cater to higher-income clientele as smaller businesses get priced out, an increased presence of private security guards, and an overall shift in the socio-economic demographics of the neighbourhood that diminishes low-income residents sense of safety, belonging, and comfort.

## SRO Housing is Inappropriate for Women

While SRO housing was historically built for men working in seasonal industries, it has now become the primary source of housing available to all low-income individuals.

SRO units can vary between 100-300 square feet often with no kitchens or bathrooms, and can be nonprofit operated or privately owned. Private SROs are notorious for the most substandard housing in the neighbourhood: bedbug, rat, and



We need more housing for everyone. They tore down all the low-income homes like the Balmoral and Regent SROs where I was staying. Now so many of us from the Balmoral and Regent are out on the street and getting bugged by the cops to pack up our tents. They put some elders who were in the Regent into Jubilee Rooms that has no elevator. That's so messed up because they can't even get up to their rooms, and some of them are homeless now. I have been down here on and off since I was 13 years old and I have been homeless for five years. I am so sad for all of us down here.

mold infestations; damaged or non functioning amenities and building structures; landlord and staff extortion and exploitation; and overcrowded rooms with inflated rental prices.

Research conducted by the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use investigated the particular vulnerability for women who reside in SRO housing. Broken locks, sexual favours in order to get mail or keys, shared bathrooms with poor sanitation, and no privacy were found to be commonplace issues that normalize violence.<sup>22</sup> Lack of formal tenancy agreements in privately run SROs make women more vulnerable to eviction. There have also been a number of suspicious deaths in SRO rooms, including of 22-year-old Cree woman Ashley Machiskinic and 50-year-old Indigenous mother Verna Simard.

## Shortcomings of Supportive Housing

In addition to private SROs, the low-income rental stock in the DTES is increasingly under the model of supportive housing.

Supportive housing is operated by the provincial government where directly managed or nonprofit housing is provided to individuals and families who are unable to live independently as a result of struggles with substance use, mental health challenges, or other barriers. Supports include tenant onsite services such as a front desk clerk or support workers onsite.

While news stories dominate about private slumlords such as the Sahotas with 426 safety bylaw violations,<sup>23</sup> provincial nonprofit supportive housing in the DTES is in violation of 227 safety standards for fire code and standards of maintenance.<sup>24</sup>

Many nonprofit supportive housing providers also have rules such as room checks, curfews, requiring guest identification, and no overnight guests that are infantilizing and violate basic privacy rights and tenants rights. Enforcement of curfews and guest policies also force women to accept risky clients to meet curfew, or work outdoors where their ability to negotiate safety is limited. Some housing providers require women to maintain their sobriety and psychiatric treatment in order to remain housed.



I don't feel safe in my supportive housing building. When I complain about racism and sexism from staff, nothing changes and they tell me I should be grateful to have my housing. One staff has physically fought, harassed, and asked inappropriate questions to women tenants and he still gets to be staff there. Isn't this housing supposed to be for us to feel safe?



I gave my brother my key to my supportive housing unit and they cancelled my key for a week. I don't like how women's buildings treat us not like we are tenants, but like we are in day care.



Instead of making sure women are safe by talking to us, the social housing providers just make more rules on us like 'no visitors allowed.' More rules aren't the solution to women's safety.



When there was violence against me in my building, the police didn't properly investigate and building staff didn't remove or move the person who gave me a brain injury. I am now being evicted for complaining about this.



We need programs in new homes being built because chronically homeless people forget what it's like to be inside and say 'I don't know how to live inside anymore.'



I'm being evicted for complaining about violence committed against me in my building.



It took me two years to get my housing. I would make an appointment to see housing and then when I would show up, they would say 'It's rented'. When you are Native, they ask more questions like are you on welfare or they want to do a credit check.



There is a lot of discrimination against Native people for housing. Landlords won't rent to us but even social housing where we should have priority, we have to wait the longest. And Native housing has non-Native people living there.

A recent study on supportive housing reported three modes of regulation and control amongst supportive housing providers: physical surveillance technologies; site-specific modes of coercion; and police presence and staff surveillance. The study concluded "while supportive housing has the potential to provide safe and secure affordable housing, an overemphasis on security largely characterized the housing as 'sites of social control' with a negative impact on the lives of residents."<sup>25</sup>

### Lack of Safe Housing for Indigenous Women

In a DTES women's safety survey, one-quarter of women reported feeling unsafe in their place of residence.<sup>26</sup>

Across the housing spectrum, Indigenous women report a number of issues with their private landlords or government-funded housing providers: discrimination by landlords who refuse to rent to Indigenous women on social assistance; illegal rent increases; substandard or no maintenance; negligence from staff and management; building staff who extort sex in exchange for maintenance services; constant bedbug, mold, and rat infestations; illegal entry into suites; illegal rules such as not being allowed to use the backyard or to have guests; being reevicted or demovicted; refusal to return security deposits; and evictions without cause.

Under the provincial *Residential Tenancy Act* (RTA) the power imbalance is hugely skewed towards landlords, making it nearly impossible for tenants to effectively advocate for their rights and protections as tenants. Of even greater concern is that most supportive housing is not even covered under the RTA. This imbalance feels particularly egregious to Indigenous women who report they are "no longer landlords on our own lands."

### Policy Responses to Indigenous Women's Homelessness

Just as the conditions of homelessness are rarely understood through the specific experiences of Indigenous women, most policy responses are cookie-cutter approaches that do not take into account the particular conditions of Indigenous women.

For example, temporary modular housing is largely built for singles only and not for couples or families. Homeless Indigenous mothers, therefore, face the impossible decision of accepting temporary singles-only housing but not having their children in their care.





Furthermore, most of the \$2.3 billion federal commitment towards housing goes to Housing First initiatives. The Housing First definition of homelessness is limited to those who are homeless on the streets or in shelters, thereby excluding women who are couch-surfing, staying in an abusive relationship, at risk of homelessness, or otherwise ‘invisibly’ homeless. This creates a backward situation where Indigenous mothers have to wait to become absolutely homeless, which increases their vulnerability and places their children at risk of apprehension, before approaching a Housing First agency.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, those who are eligible for the subsidy are able to receive the subsidy for one year only, which is too short for Indigenous women facing multiple barriers. It is also telling that no Aboriginal organization has been successful in applying for Housing First funding, except through a separate process with limited funding allocated to Aboriginal organizations.<sup>28</sup>

Research has found that for every \$10 spent on housing and supports, \$21.72 is saved in costs related to healthcare, the justice system, shelters, and other social supports.<sup>29</sup> There is no ethical or economic reason that safe and affordable housing with security of tenure is not built immediately for every Indigenous woman and her children.



Women need to feel comfortable in their housing. They want to feel freedom.



## I am Elaine Durocher

I am Métis from Saskatchewan. I have resided in and around Vancouver for 40 years and in the DTES for 11 years.

I was in three foster homes by the age of six years old. The last home was a White foster home on a farm and they had everything there. I had love and hugs and food in my foster home. At the foster home we ate first as children and we ate as much as we wanted. I went from a White foster home to the reserve with my mother and stepfather. I felt unsafe immediately. I had nothing; no food, no love. Once we tried to call my stepfather 'dad' and he lined us up and punched us all one by one. He said, "You little bastards, I am your stepfather, not your dad. Don't ever call me that again. You are here only because I am with your mother." He would sit and eat all the food he wanted and we would get the leftovers. We were always hungry. We were Métis kids on a Native reserve and we were always reminded of that.

Then I went to residential school as a day student. I started there as a six year old for five years. In the residential school, we ate lumpy powdered milk and lumpy oatmeal. It was all lumpy food. I remember that I always had diarrhea from it. Then our stepfather would beat us up for coming home with soiled clothes. My stepfather's home and the day school were my first experiences of unsafe homes. My world stayed dark like that for years.

I learnt to run by the time I was 10 years old. I was homeless when I was 12 years old. At the age of 14, I was sleeping under bridges and near railway tracks. I would

cover myself with leaves and branches to stay warm, and I would sleep near trains so that the trains would keep waking me up and I wouldn't freeze to death. In order to get food for myself, I sold myself to old White perverts who would buy me as a child. My family forced me to have sex at the age of seven, so I knew about sex at a young age. I felt my life was a little bit better by running away, even though I had to do what I had to do. It was like that for nine years until I got into a car accident. Then I lost my older sister. She was my whole world and after I lost her, I tried committing suicide.

I remained in unsafe housing all my life. Even when I was with my kids' fathers I faced abuse and rape but I still had to stay. I felt I had to stay because those guys were the fathers of my children, and my mom never left even though she was beaten by my stepdad. So that is all I ever knew. I was 17 years old when I finally left my oldest son's father. My son was 10 months old at the time and I was still breastfeeding. I left because I knew he was going to kill me. I had my second pregnancy when I was 18 years old. The Ministry put me in a home for unwed moms. It was like a residential school for unwed pregnant Native women. The nuns who ran it made me give up my baby for adoption in the name of god. When I gave birth on February 27, 1976, they let me hold my baby for five minutes. I couldn't take her with me because I had no home for her. I told my baby I hope she would have a good family. Then they took her away.

After they took my baby girl away, I was homeless again and back on the street. I was in Regina and became a waitress. Then I met the father of my third child and he beat me during the pregnancy. He threatened to cut me open with a knife. I cut myself and watched myself bleed. I was hospitalized and almost placed in a psychiatric ward as a 19-year-old pregnant girl. But then the father came to the hospital and told them what he did to me and they let me out. I gave birth to my baby girl and moved to Vancouver in 1978. Then I had another girl. In 1986, during the Expo Games in Vancouver, I was homeless again with two girls and pregnant. The rents were so high at the time and I couldn't tell welfare that the baby's dad was living with me or they would cut me off. I moved to Edmonton for one year. During that time I got charges for aggravated assault and those got dropped because it wasn't me they were looking for. I moved back to Vancouver in 1989 with my three kids. I was raising three kids on my own.

Back home, my grandma had passed and my whole world fell apart. My mom didn't tell me she was on her death bed. She passed away while I was making my way



**I learnt to run by the time I was 10 years old. I was homeless when I was 12 years old. At the age of 14, I was sleeping under bridges and near railway tracks. I would cover myself with leaves and branches to stay warm, and I would sleep near trains so that the trains would keep waking me up and I wouldn't freeze to death.**





**In 2007, I became homeless again. I was living in Port Coquitlam and was 50 years old.**

home. I didn't even get to say bye to her. I never told my grandmother that her sons raped me because I wanted to protect her. She would protect me too. Whenever I needed to get out of an abusive relationship, she would send me money to get a bus ticket home. She would mail me \$20 for diapers and milk for the babies when I was broke. Her death was really hard for me and I got addicted to all kinds of street drugs. I was addicted for six months. One day I told god that if he let me do my last hit, I would throw everything out. And I did. At 26 years old, I put myself back in school. They did an assessment and I was at Grade 2 or 3. It took me 16 years to get my Grade 12. I didn't give up. I graduated at age 44.

In 2007, I became homeless again. I was living in Port Coquitlam and was 50 years old. My son took me in for a few months. Then I ended up in the DTES. I used to park my car at Oppenheimer and make my bed in the back. I felt safe around the park because everyone there knew me as Loonie Lady. I used to give everyone loonies. I was couchsurfing at a friend's place and sleeping in my car for a few months. Then I finally got housing in my co-op in the DTES where I am now. It's been a wild life and I can't believe everything I have been through. I am grateful for what I have and I pray for safe housing for all low-income and homeless women and children.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*

# CHILD WELFARE



MCFD workers aren't trained about colonization

Investigations are arbitrary and not enough communication

The courts believe MCFD and don't listen to Native mothers



There is no screening for foster fathers who are raping girls

Child welfare is kidnapping

Children and youth do not receive proper care and there is physical and sexual abuse



**Need more parenting programs and family counselling instead of investigation**

**White foster homes shouldn't be allowed to take Native children**

White families don't have children apprehended for yelling or being poor

It should be illegal to apprehend babies and infants



**Let Indian extended families and foster families look after Indian children**

Social workers will cancel visitations and move kids to new homes without notice



Parenting capacity assessment process is racist

Social workers treat families poorly and are disrespectful

MCFD does not inform us about foster family background

**Money should be given to parents and families instead of foster families**

**Children in care never leave the system; they go from MCFD to street to prison**



There should be no MCFD. Our babies should stay in our nation

VACFASS is as racist because they are still under MCFD

Child apprehension is colonial genocide

Visitations are monitored and there is no privacy

# MY EXPERIENCES OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES



Ministry does not consider harm from family separation

Youth get cut off from all support when they age out



They do not place children with extended family or in community



Not enough resources, programs, or financial or emotional support for parents

Most foster parents only care about the money they are making off our children

Government does not want us to be together as strong families and nations

There is no accountability or oversight

It is like residential schools and Sixties Scoop never ended



Need Indigenous control over child welfare with our elders guiding us



Taking children for no reason too easily

There is no clear timelines or plan for when children will be returned



Not enough Native social workers and advocates

They say "we want to help you" but if you tell them anything they will use it against you. Just like the cops

No one is charged with neglect when Native children die in care



**My children have been in and out of foster care their entire lives.**

## **I am Robin Raweater**

I grew up in and out of foster homes as a result of the intergenerational trauma of my mother being in residential school. Now all of my children are in foster homes. My mother was forced into residential school, I was forced into foster homes, and I don't want my children experiencing what we went through. So I am fighting in an unprecedented trial and at the Human Rights Tribunal to take a stand for my children and for all Indigenous mothers dealing with MCFD's discrimination, forced family separation, and unaccountable practices.

My children have been in and out of foster care their entire lives. My daughters are 15 years, 9 years, 7 years, and 2.5 years old. I also had a baby boy who passed away when he was five months and six days old. My eldest daughter was first apprehended as a baby. She was returned to me after a few months, but then apprehended again along with her younger sisters. When MCFD came two years ago to get my kids, my baby was still breastfeeding. The social worker told me to breastfeed baby one last time before they took her away. I sat there breastfeeding her and singing to her. I can't believe they would take away a breastfeeding baby that has never been on formula. I wanted to run away with her. Now my children are all in different foster homes and the middle two girls are together in a group home. MCFD want to take my children away from me permanently, which is currently at trial at the B.C. Provincial Court.



I have made mistakes as a parent, but I have never abused my children. I have done every single program that MCFD has asked me to do and I attend regular counselling. Vancouver Aboriginal Child & Family Services Society (VACFASS) social workers are trying to put my kids in permanent care but even the elder at VACFASS has written in support of my parenting and my progress as a parent. My previous counsellor—who was also working for VACFASS—has written in support of me too, saying that she hasn't seen any other parent show up to every single appointment like I have. Her letter says clearly, "I have never met a more committed mother... There is so much wrong with this child removal process." I repeatedly asked MCFD for more support as a family, like whole-family trauma treatment, but we never got it. I don't know why; it's like they wanted us to fail as a family.

MCFD claims I am neglecting my children and subjecting them to abuse, but I have never been violent or abusive towards my children. They label us with whatever they want, but MCFD is not accountable for their abuse or for all the injuries, suicide attempts, and deaths in their care. Last year I got a call from the social worker that the foster parent had found my daughter with a bag tied around her neck. I rushed to the hospital; I was terrified. I still have no idea exactly what happened and I had to push VACFASS to ensure my daughter had mental health support. Then five months later, my other daughter drank bleach. I found out a few days later, during a regularly scheduled meeting, and the social workers informed me that my other daughter was treated at the hospital for drinking bleach. If that had happened while my kids were in my care, they would have apprehended my kids. I was shocked and angry that the social workers didn't notify me immediately. I recently heard the statistic that there have been 111 suicide attempts by kids in care between April 2017 and January 2018 in B.C. Why does MCFD get to keep my kids? Another time, my daughter was placed with a 16-year-old boy in the same home. My daughter would call me crying because the boy was trying to come into her room. I reported that to the social worker, but who is actually accountable for our children facing abuse and dying? Why is no one criminally charged?

I have never backed down from MCFD. I refuse to agree to the social workers' plans for visits, and then they cancel all my visits. I feel this is an intimidation tactic. They want me to see my children one-on-one, but I want to see all my children together. We are a family unit and need to be together. They also told me that I can't talk to my daughters about their foster homes, and I am not allowed to ask my daughters if they are doing okay. That's ridiculous!

Last year during one of the visits with my six-year-old daughter, she disclosed to me that the staff in the group home would come in at night and hold her down by the arms and legs. I thought if this is true then there must be evidence. I checked her out and saw bruises on both of her wrists, arms, thighs, calves, and ankles. I could also see finger impressions on the bruises. I called the police to investigate in October 2017. Then the next month, in November 2017, my eight-year-old daughter disclosed that a staff member at the group home had pushed her into the closet. Because of what happened before, I called the police to investigate right away. I was punished by VACFASS and denied further visits because they said I



**They label us with whatever they want, but MCFD is not accountable for their abuse or for all the injuries, suicide attempts, and deaths in their care. Last year I got a call from the social worker that the foster parent had found my daughter with a bag tied around her neck.**



**I have never backed down from MCFD. I refuse to agree to the social workers' plans for visits, and then they cancel all my visits. I feel this is an intimidation tactic.**



**Basically, my so-called emotional abuse of my children is me bashing MCFD in front of my children or pushing back against MCFD and social workers.**

was over-reacting. How else does one respond to kids being physically restrained to the point of bruising? The social workers told me that there was a confidential investigation of the staff conduct, but they wouldn't give me any details. And another time, they wanted to put my girls in the home of a single man. I refused. No strange man should be touching my little girl's body to clean her. What mother is going to be okay with that? I even asked to meet the man but the social workers refused. I told them that I was going to put a formal report in, and they finally backed off. Now in the trial, that is being used as evidence of me being difficult.

Basically, my so-called emotional abuse of my children is me bashing MCFD in front of my children or pushing back against MCFD and social workers. Social workers have so much power. They hold our children as hostage to make us agree to anything they say. But I won't back down and will continue to speak out, even if it means I am being punished and not allowed to see my children. I also think it's gross how MCFD is using my childhood trauma against me. They say I am emotionally traumatizing to my children because I have a history of bad family patterns. My family is not traumatizing; it's forced family separation that is traumatizing. They are also using my disability assistance application against me. I don't know how VACFAS got a copy of my disability assistance application, but the parenting capacity assessor is using the report to claim that I have mental health issues and am an alcoholic in remission.

The system makes me feel so bad. MCFD makes me feel that I am a bad parent who neglects my children, but then I show concern about the treatment of my children in care and then that's also apparently wrong. Every day is so traumatizing without my children. I am good at pretending that things are okay and I try to keep myself busy, but I feel guilty and bad all the time. These apprehensions are so unjust, and I know it but I feel powerless. In 2013, a guy pushed me so hard and I fell on top of a woman. They guy bolted and the woman called the police, who charged me with assault. It was my first charge ever, and I didn't want to plead guilty because I wasn't guilty. While waiting for my trial, I ended up in breach of my probation for possessing alcohol. I waited 18 months for trial, and during the trial there was video evidence that I was shoved and pushed and that's why I fell on the woman. The charges were dropped but the breach stuck and MCFD is using this now to further stigmatize me. What can I do in the face of them doing everything they can to label me?

This summer, the trial began with MCFD seeking to keep my kids in permanent custody. A lot has come up in trial in my favour, so I am a little hopeful that MCFD is being scrutinized. The judge asked what the actual child protection issues were and said that it seemed that MCFD was being punitive because I challenge social workers. The judge also questioned the parenting capacity assessment done by a MCFD psychologist, and said that the psychologist was not qualified to provide an expert opinion on my parenting because she never actually saw me and my children interact. It was based only on interviews, and yet MCFD was relying on this assessment to take my children away. I am glad the judge tossed it out.

I will always speak out for mothers. I am a co-chair on the board of DEWC, have participated in a number of training programs, and started a peer support group for Indigenous parents. Indigenous mothers really need independent advocates and support groups because when we go to MCFD or VACFASS for support, whatever we say is used against us. This is my #metoo movement.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**This is my #metoo  
movement.**



I was raised in foster care and abused in foster care. By the time I found my mother and brother, they died shortly after. My own children were apprehended twice, and their apprehension has just been set to trial. Our intergenerational trauma like addictions and residential school history is used against us to take our children. This system is horrible and our people are just shuffled between systems without ever addressing our pain or suffering. There is no support for trauma. They want to label us and give us diagnoses so they can steal our children. And so many of our children and women are unaccounted for. Who is accountable for this?



Social workers don't go to the houses of White people no matter how much fighting or violence is happening in their homes. Almost all Native kids go through the foster system. They call us 'mortgage helpers' because foster parents make money off us even though Native parents get no support.



They say our apprehended children are supposed to be placed with their families, but it doesn't happen. They are taken by White foster families who make money off our children.



Keep social services out of our face. They give the money to White people but not us. They took my children away and I will never forget.

## Participatory Research and Literature Review

### Child Welfare Separates Families

Every Indigenous woman in the DEWC membership has been embroiled in the child welfare system in Canada—whether as a mother or relative of a child in government care and/or as a former youth in government care.

The Auditor General of Canada estimates that Indigenous children are eight times more likely to be removed from their families than other children.<sup>1</sup> Despite being less than seven percent of the population, Indigenous children represent more than 48 percent of all children in care in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

### Indigenous Children Over-Represented in Government Care

Indigenous children and youth in B.C. are 15 times more likely to be in government care than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>3</sup> As of December 2017, there were 6,804 children in government care in B.C., 63.8 percent of whom are Indigenous and many are fostered in homes outside of their communities.<sup>4</sup> Over 2,800 Indigenous children are under Continuing Custody Orders in B.C.<sup>5</sup> The number is likely much higher because youth who have signed independent living agreements and children in the home of a relative are not counted in the statistics.<sup>6</sup>

In Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, where many DEWC members moved from, Indigenous children represent 73 percent, 85 percent and 87 percent of all children in care, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The Children's Advocate for Manitoba's First Nations says one newborn baby a day is being apprehended, and 484 children connected to Child and Family Services in Saskatchewan have died over the past two decades.<sup>8</sup>

## Fatal and Lasting Trauma

Beyond these shocking statistics, the intergenerational trauma is immeasurable.

Parents and families suffer from deteriorating mental and physical health, and engage in increased alcohol and substance use after an apprehension. A recent medical study found that the rate of suicide attempts is 2.82 times higher and the rate of death by suicide is more than four times higher for mothers whose children are not in their custody.<sup>9</sup>

Once placed in government care, children also have compounding vulnerabilities. According to a study in 2001, two-thirds of Indigenous people in prison had been involved in the child welfare system.<sup>10</sup> One hundred and twenty youth died in or receiving services from the B.C. child welfare system in the year 2016.<sup>11</sup> The provincial Representative for Children and Youth office receives 200 critical injury and death reports for children in care every month.<sup>12</sup>

## Violence against Indigenous Girls

The connection between the child welfare system and violence against Indigenous girls is stark.

Indigenous girls in the B.C. child welfare system are four times more likely to be victims of sexual violence than non-Indigenous girls.<sup>13</sup> Over 60 percent of children and youth who report sexual violence in government care were Indigenous girls, even though Indigenous girls comprise 25 percent of the total children in care in B.C.<sup>14</sup>

According to a review by the provincial Representative for Children and Youth, there were 145 incidents of sexual violence against 121 children and youth in care disclosed between 2011 and 2014. Foster parents were the reported perpetrators in one-quarter of the incidents that occurred in the care placement, and the report finds that social workers did not offer supports or take necessary steps from preventing ongoing abuse.<sup>15</sup>

When they become adults, Indigenous survivors of childhood sexual abuse are 10 times more likely to be sexually assaulted.<sup>16</sup>

## Child Welfare is New Residential School System

It is undeniable that the child welfare system is the new residential school system, as children are being removed and their connections to their families, nations, lands, and cultures are being irreversibly destroyed. The Sixties Scoop forcibly removed and adopted out over 20,000 Indigenous children between the 1960s and 1980s.

Today there are three times more Indigenous children in foster care than at the height of the residential school era.<sup>17</sup>



All my children were taken away when they were born. I didn't get any support as a mother. They just made me look like a bad mother. I had two boys and two girls and they wouldn't let me see them or tell me where they were. And when they got older, the judge wouldn't tell them who I was. They came and found me as adults.



We need Aboriginal social workers who are parents themselves. So many social workers don't have kids themselves and don't know what it's like to lose your children. When they apprehend kids, it makes mothers self-destruct and become more addicted and depressed.



I have many friends who died in care or died after MCFD decided they didn't need care and put kids out on the street.



Like residential schools, there is so much physical and sexual abuse in the child welfare system. In another 50 years are they going to apologize for apprehending our children?



My son got apprehended because they said I wasn't a fit parent. But then they hired me to work in a group home and my son was placed there. Go figure! Apparently, I can't take care of my son but they hired me to care of other people's kids.



We need more preventative measures for keeping families together. We need more family supports like housing, food, and counselling in place beforehand so apprehensions don't take place.



We need MCFD to stop taking children from Indigenous families. We should be supported with counselling and housing instead. Support us; don't punish us for being poor.



I was approved for my great niece to stay with me but my housing was too small and I didn't get more money for having a child in the home of a relative.

The rate of investigations of Indigenous children is 4.2 times the rate of non-Indigenous children,<sup>18</sup> and Indigenous families are being investigated for 'neglect' at 8 times the rate for non-Indigenous families.<sup>19</sup>

According to a widely circulated CBC report, a former child protection worker said that Indigenous children being investigated for neglect are largely being apprehended due to poverty.<sup>20</sup> Her assertion is echoed in a MCFD report that shows that the lowest percentages of reasons for apprehension are related to sexual abuse (0.7 percent), while the highest percentage of reasons includes 'inability to care' for the children.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than addressing systemic barriers due to colonization, 'inability to care' and 'neglect' are a continuation of the colonial logic of missionaries and residential schools that constructed Indigenous parents as 'irresponsible parents in need of civilizing'.

## Apprehension as a First Resort

In 2012, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed to Canada its concern about the frequent removal of children as a first resort in cases of neglect, financial hardship, or disability.

An internal INAC document also notes, "Lack of in-home family support for children at risk and inequitable access to services have been identified by First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies, and INAC, as important contributing factors to the over representation of Aboriginal children in the Canadian child welfare system."<sup>22</sup>

The provincial Representative for Children and Youth's office similarly writes, "Practices of removing Indigenous children have taken precedence over providing sufficient supports that would prevent problems in the first place. Continual underfunding of Indigenous child welfare combined with an emphasis on 'protective care' as opposed to 'supportive care' has brought too many Indigenous children into government care."<sup>23</sup>

## Systemic Discrimination against Children

In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that the Canadian government is racially discriminating against 165,000 First Nations children and their families for failing to provide equitable services at the same rate as non-First Nations children, including failure to properly implement Jordan's Principle.

Jordan's Principle aims to make sure First Nations children can access all public services including education, health, child care, recreation, and culture and language in a way that is reflective of their distinct cultural needs, takes full account of the historical disadvantage linked to colonization, and without experiencing any service denials, delays, or disruptions because they are First Nations.<sup>24</sup>

Jordan's Principle calls on the government of first contact to pay for the services and seek reimbursement later so the child does not get tragically caught in the middle of government red tape. Underfunding of First Nations child and family services is a major contributor to the over-representation of Indigenous children in government care.

Youth in B.C. age out of government care at the age of majority, which cuts them off from supports and they are forced into homelessness, precarity, and mental health struggles.

Youth in and from the foster care system make up 60 percent of homeless youth across Canada.<sup>25</sup> Approximately 1000 youth in B.C. age out every year. Youth in care in the province graduate high school at less than half the rate of their peers, and 40 percent are forced to rely on low rates of income assistance to survive once they age out.<sup>26</sup> While the recent provincial announcement of a postsecondary tuition-waiver is a first step, much more needs to be done to ensure youth in care have the capacity to access the tuition-waiver and achieve stability in their lives. Young people in or leaving MCFD care die at five times the rate of the general population of young people in B.C, and Indigenous youth and young adults account for 34 percent of the deaths.<sup>27</sup>

## Circles of Protection

A clear example of the need to involve communities in all child welfare cases is the case of a Huu-ay-aht infant, who was apprehended three days after birth and then ordered returned by the B.C. Supreme Court in March 2018. The judge in the case said that MCFD must establish it has been "active and diligent in attempting to find other alternatives to removing a child before a final determination that there are no other less disruptive means of protecting the child."<sup>28</sup>

Following this, in April 2018, the Huu-ay-aht First Nations declared the treatment of Huu-ay-aht children a public health emergency because 20 percent of Huu-ay-aht children were in foster homes.

The Huu-ay-aht First Nations Social Services Project is now focused on forming 'circles of protection' around families, extended families, house groups, and the nation. Through increased support like family support liaison workers, pregnancy support, anti-violence intervention, crisis intervention, and transitional living support for low-income families, the goal is to prevent children from being placed in government care. No child will age out of care and wrap-around support will be available for any community members who assist in child care and child rearing.



Instead of apprehending Indigenous children, they should support the whole family to get support and treatment like family drug and alcohol treatment or family anti-violence programs. Family separation is more traumatic.



Most of the workers at VACFASS are not Native and we don't relate to them. And once you have a file with them, you have a file for life no matter what you do and how you change. And then your children have open files too. Child welfare continues cultural genocide against us.



## Indigenous Jurisdiction over Child Welfare

A positive recent step provincially is Bill 26, *The Child, Family and Community Service Amendment Act*, passed in the spring of 2018 that amends existing child protection laws to allow an Indigenous community to be informed when safety concerns are raised involving a child who is a member of that community. Social workers will now be required to “make reasonable efforts” to involve a child’s community in their care plans before automatically placing children into foster homes.

However, the Bill does fall short. It uses the word ‘may’ rather than ‘shall’ in referencing engagement with First Nations, which leaves it open to the Ministry’s discretion.

The ultimate goal of any child welfare reform must be transferring authority over child welfare to Indigenous nations. This is in accordance with the UNDRIP, the preamble of which states, “Recognizing in particular the right of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child.”<sup>29</sup> Article 9 of the Declaration further stipulates, “Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an Indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned. No discrimination of any kind may arise from the exercise of such a right.”<sup>30</sup>

Indigenous jurisdiction over child welfare is the most substantive, immediate, and necessary shift required to reverse the over-representation of Indigenous children in government care.



## I am Beatrice Starr (Rest In Peace)

My ex-partner, who is also my children's father, abused me for 10.5 years. I had four children with him: Angela, Rosalie, Mike, and Jackson. I was beat all throughout my first pregnancy, and as a result my girl Angela was born a month early. She did not develop properly and was born with her heart on the right side of her body. She was a Mother's Day baby, born on May 13, 1973 at 5 pounds 11 ounces. I named her Angela Michelle because she looked just like an angel. She only lived to the age of 16 and died on January 17, 1990 in Prince George.

It is for her and in her memory that I tell this story.

You might be wondering why I stayed in a violent relationship for that long? I grew up without a dad and was often called a 'bastard.' I was always taunted with sayings such as, "Do you even know who your dad is?" It hurt a lot to be bullied and I did not want my own children to go through the same experience. So I silently suffered the abuse. At the time I did not realize that it was equally bad, if not worse, for my children to witness the violence of their father beating up their own mother.

I tell this story for the women who are still in abusive relationships so that they will have the courage to get out. Anyone who controls you and physically and emotionally hurts you does not love you. We have to understand that violence against women is always unacceptable and, as Native women, we are five times more likely than other women to die as the result of violence. I became an alcoholic while I was in the relationship. The alcohol would numb the pain of being beaten. It would numb me for when he got home in the evenings so I could tolerate all the kicks and punches. It would numb me against his false accusations of me cheating on him when he was the one cheating on me with other women.

As a result of my drinking, MCFD became involved in my children's lives. I had several visits from MCFD over the years and they told me to stop drinking and to get counselling but I could not stop drinking. They also told me to leave my ex-partner, but I had nowhere to go. For years, MCFD kept





**I felt that if I did not have my children, then I had nothing to live for and would rather drink myself to death.**



**I realized that MCFD had not informed me of my basic legal rights as a parent and did not actually care to fulfill their responsibility and mandate to keep families together. I felt that as a survivor of violence and as a Native woman, I was being revictimized by being labeled a bad mother who was unable to protect her children.**

apprehending my children. Sometimes they would take my children away for a few weeks, sometimes it was for a few months. Then in December 1981, in a surprise visit, MCFD workers came to my home. I was not home, but my children's father was supposed to be home. However, he had left them alone in the house and the upstairs neighbour called MCFD. MCFD apprehended my children, this time seeking a permanent order. That meant that my young children, ages one to five, were going to be kidnapped from me forever.

I broke down and started drinking even more heavily. I felt that if I did not have my children, then I had nothing to live for and would rather drink myself to death. One night, in March 1982, I drank so much that I felt my heart was going to stop. That night I decided that I did not actually want to die an alcoholic and that I had to fight for my children. I quit drinking cold turkey. I went for alcohol counselling at the Native Courtworkers Society and also enrolled at Native Education Society to get my GED. I finally left my partner. After a few months I was able to get two-hour supervised visits with my children every six to eight weeks, but only after I appealed the decision by MCFD to deny me visits entirely.

After I won my right to supervised visits, I decided to appeal MCFD's decision to apprehend my children permanently. I did not even know that I could appeal this decision until I was informed by an advocate at Native Courtworkers that I could. I realized that MCFD had not informed me of my basic legal rights as a parent and did not actually care to fulfill their responsibility and mandate to keep families together. I felt that as a survivor of violence and as a Native woman, I was being revictimized by being labeled a bad mother who was unable to protect her children.

After four years of fighting in the court system, I finally won my case and my children were given back to me in 1986. Throughout the four years, I often felt like giving up but I knew I had to fight for my family. The MCFD social worker reported to the court that I was "not showing love and affection" to my children. But the court-ordered psychologist determined that there was lots of affection between us and said that it was clear that my children wanted to come back home. I thank Dr. Diane Mitchell for helping me win my case by recommending that my children be returned. It is frustrating, though, that we have to rely on these professionals to validate us.

The whole system of child apprehension is grossly unfair and unjust. From my experience and those of other women I know, it seems that the Ministry is interested in keeping children in the foster system rather than returning them to their parents. Most of the children in MCFD's custody are Native children. I believe this is both a continuation of the residential school experience—where children were torn away from their families and communities—as well as a consequence itself of residential schools that forced Native families into social dysfunction with rampant alcohol and drug use and abuse in the home. I feel like the odds are stacked against us, but still we continue on.



I am now 29 years sober and my three beautiful children—Rosalie and Michael and Jackson—are parents themselves. Once I had my children back, I told my boys to never hit a woman because it is like hitting your mother. I still live with the guilt about what happened to my deceased daughter Angela. I also felt responsible when my other daughter Rosalie was in an abusive relationship worse than mine. I felt that she thought it was okay to be abused because she watched me take it. But now my daughter Rosalie is happy and has a beautiful daughter named Kayla.

My son Michael has been clean from heroin for several years now. He is working and has a daughter named Tayla. My youngest son Jackson graduated from the Academy of Learning and has a wonderful baby girl named Gianna. I am so proud of my children and thank the Creator for every new day. Love to all my family and friends.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**I am part of the Sixties Scoop generation. We were apprehended from our families with federal consent. I had no culture, no language, no family, no extended family, no land growing up. The Sixties Scoop also completely severed my gender identity.**

## I am Larissa Healey

From what is known about me, I was born in Winnipeg and apprehended at three months old by the RCMP. My birth mother was 15 years old and father was 18 years old from Peguis Band. I was put in the child welfare system for seven months, and then adopted out to a White father and Japanese mother at about 10 months old. My adoption papers say my father is White and has no reference to my First Nations status. Assimilation started right away.

The Sixties Scoop is cultural genocide like the residential schools, and was murder of our cultures and spirits. This system was designed to oppress us. Actually it's way past oppression and poverty; it's genocide and annihilation. We need culture to be useful to our people. Cultural inheritance means everything for our sense of place in the world. Some of my friends have regalia that are 300 years old, but I don't have any of that.

My adopted father is such a good man. I feel like he took me on to help me, but the mother didn't. She would beat my ass and I knew she was enjoying it. My friend was over one day and told me, "This isn't normal." I had shut down and thought it was normal because the beatings were so regular, and even my neighbour molested me. My friend said, "I will report to social services if you don't." When I reported to social services my dad was so worried, so I said "I am fine" and that was the end of that. My dad was away a lot so he never really knew what was going on.

I knew I didn't look like the family and I was very isolated. I needed to run from everything and I felt disconnected and a bottomless black hole in myself. The mother couldn't control me so she would starve me and beat me. The hard part was the starvation. I was repulsed by my body and I turned to alcohol at the age of 15 to get over hunger pains. I started eating speed to depress my appetite and to feel numb. I didn't really know their biological child, my brother. Every time I would get beat up, I would go to his room and wear his clothes to cover my skin. That's why now I love clothes and regalia. There would be fights in school too. I would get beat up at home and carry that vibration to school. I would get into fights when I was called "native", "chug," or "wagon burner". I remember being in Grade 9 and sitting on the bus and having a mohawk. I felt awesome. And then a kid on the school bus turned around and said "wagon burner" and "chug" to me. I had no grasp of what the words meant but I felt the energy and knew I was different, though I didn't know how. When I was older and learnt about racism, all these words and experiences came back to me and hit me hard.

When I was 18 years old, the mother went to punch me. I had enough so I grabbed her hair and flipped her, and then I open-handed hit her on the chest to startle her. She got bruises. That evening the family asked me to leave. It was the best thing that could have happened. I left and I didn't tell my father anything that had happened. It's only recently, about seven years ago, that I told my father everything about her and he confronted her.

When I was in Vancouver I got into theft, drugs, and gang-related stuff. I ran warehouses and let the Hells Angels (HA) use them for parties so I could make money. I used to run girls too—dancers, burlesque, and sex workers. I would make sure they got paid. I was deeply gang involved for the money and also the sense of family and identity. It almost killed me, but when I decided to stop it was the HA that helped get me clean. I held their money, and they gave me money to get groceries so I could get clean. HA didn't use to let women deal so I used to hold the money. One night, three kids got shot in one of my spaces. That's when I left it all. I felt useless and ugly.

I was walking around hungry and met Carol from DEWC, and now I am surrounded by care. I have been in the DTES for 27 years. I used to hide in churches, and now a church has commissioned me for three art pieces on reconciliation. I knew at the age of five that I could do realism drawing. I have received several awards for my art. With other Native warriors, we created a team of artists and I went on the national Beat Nation tour, and I have showed my work at the Bill Reid gallery, the National Gallery, the Vancouver Art Gallery. I have murals around town and make music as Gurl23. I also support high-risk youth. I've been assaulted by police officers, and also I work with them to support youth. I am trying to disconnect from attachments of blame and to focus on helping the youth.



**I remember being in Grade 9 and sitting on the bus and having a mohawk. I felt awesome. And then a kid on the school bus turned around and said "wagon burner" and "chug" to me.**

When you sober up the racism is unbelievable, and then you wish you hadn't sobered up! Especially being two-spirit, I get asked a lot "Are you a guy or a girl?" And then being Native on top of that. I get comments and followed around everywhere—BC Hydro office, bank, grocery stores, shopping. Health clinics just want to slot you into a category, especially because I am on disability assistance. I had to go out of

town to see a decent counsellor. People see an Indigenous woman and they automatically create stereotypes and judgments. People won't sit next to you on the bus and won't look at you.

But that's where culture comes in. I wish I grew up in my culture. I make my own art, music, and regalia now. I learnt to pow wow and I dance in pow wow circles now. I am also connecting to myself and two-spirit identity. I am holding myself up through sweats, beading, regalia, dancing, singing, and my relationship with the Creator.

But even learning my culture, I had to go through an awful experience and was assaulted by one of my cultural teachers. I am already a survivor of rape and abuse. I remember getting molested in the basement of the foster home I was growing up in by a woman. I was eight years old and she put me in a tent in the basement and tied me down. It happened multiple times. I don't remember much, but lately it's been coming back to me and I have started to remember. The rape and abuse made me numb and like a ghost. Once I got choked out, so now I go to self-defense classes. It's hard to believe anyone and to have trust. I can't believe I was stolen as a child and went through so much. I first tried to commit suicide at 23 years old and I have been suicidal ever since. I am physically and spiritually exhausted.



The older I am, the more I ache for my family. I thank my adopted parents even though the mother did awful things. Those of us who are Sixties Scoop know how to live in both worlds. Through all of this, I am glad that the government has come



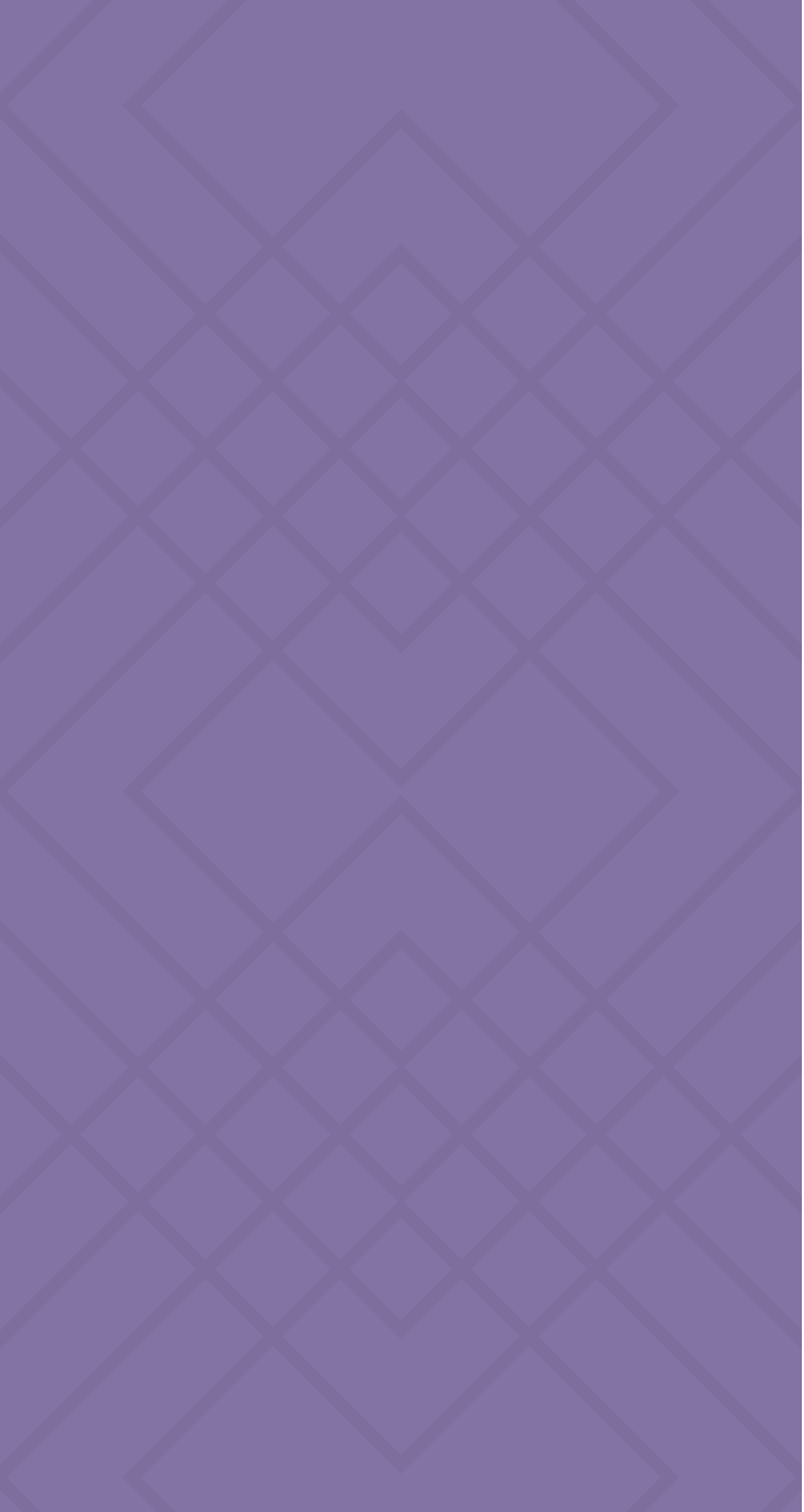
to terms with the Sixties Scoop and is offering us whatever compensation as part of the class action agreement. I fought to access my culture every day, despite everything. Now the compensation will allow me to keep accessing my culture, regalia, and ceremony. It's a first step. I can't keep up the anger anymore and I want to just dance as free as possible.

I ache for my own people. Who are my parents? Who are my grandparents? I went through hell to get my adoption papers and found out that I have a half-sister, but I am not yet connected to her. It's overwhelming to think about. If I saw my mother, I would thank her for having me. What a brave woman. I would tell her "Thank you for giving me life." I would love to see her face and know what she smells like. I want to know what her body is like. I want to see if she has my hair and my face. Whenever I see my own face in the mirror, I draw a blank about where it comes from. I would smell my mother and touch her hair. I would ask her to braid my hair. "Please brush my hair, mother," I would say. I'd hug my mother. I would buy her lunch and shoes. I would make her regalia. Maybe I would make us matching regalia! I would thank her for making me so strong. I know I am strong because who else goes through my life and 10 car crashes and still survives and dances.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**I ache for my own people.  
Who are my parents? Who  
are my grandparents?**





# POLICING, PRISONS & JUSTICE SYSTEM



Jay walking and bylaw tickets given more to Native people



**Police violence**

Laws criminalize us for petty theft, drug possession, and tenting on streets

Don't understand their system



Feel unsafe with cops who have too much power and weapons

Cops show up quick to arrest a Native person but not when we need help



No police accountability or oversight

The laws don't help poor Native women

Misogyny and sexual assault from police



**Racism from judges, lawyers, police**

No treatment, healing circles, and legal services in prison



Mostly Indigenous women in maximum security and segregation

Criminal record makes it impossible to get work and get more stuck in poverty cycle

Serial killers are all White men but they act like we are the biggest criminals

Not enough Native courtworkers or lawyers

Overrepresentation of our women in prisons



Indigenous law is not valued

Cops are harassing, humiliating, threatening, intimidating



Not enough alternatives to prison like circle sentencing or restorative justice

# MY EXPERIENCES OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Hard to make complaints against police

Prisons are not safe and return back even more hardened



Not enough free legal services and there is no Indigenous legal clinic

Not enough support for people leaving prisons

No healthcare in prison

System is colonial and corrupt



**We need return of our tribal laws and warrior societies**

Lawyers don't listen well and will twist our words and stories

There is no access to justice if you are poor Indigenous woman



Prisons are not restorative

Government makes these laws and enforces them to keep us down



We aren't told about Gladue reports

Pipeline from child welfare to prisons

Alternatives to prisons like healing lodges give spots to White women

More minor violations like breaches keep adding up



Public officials don't have cultural sensitivity training

Colonial system not made for us



## I am Chilli



**Sex work is not a choice for most street level Native women on the street, and so if we do have to work it should at least be safe and legal, and also we need more options to not have to work the street and not to live in poverty.**

I am Shushwap from the Okanagan. I was an only child. My biological mother died when I was 16 years old, just one week after I met her. My dad died crossing drunk on a highway.

I was in foster care since I was 18 months old. I was placed with a White foster family who adopted two Native kids and five other kids. I loved my foster mom but I was sexually abused by men and women in the family. They were really religious so I didn't say anything. My sister and I got together and shared what happened to each of us, but we swore that we would not tell or say anything. But I couldn't keep it in anymore and spoke out. The whole family said I was evil and I was going to the devil. They were seen as pillars of the community. I left Penticton after no one believed me and I received no support. I charged my foster father with historical sexual abuse 29 years later.

I came to the DTES when I was 29 years old, about 20 years ago. Due to all this trauma, I turned to drugs. I never did drugs till I got to Vancouver. I have been a sex trade worker for 25 years. We don't choose to do drugs or sex work; there is something hurting inside us. I don't think anyone should have to choose this life. But I also think sex work should be legalized. There is already so much damage from the laws. I'm on the board of Sex Workers United Against Violence and we want to have sex work legalized. Sex work is not a choice for most street level Native women on the street, and so if we do have to work it should at least be safe and legal, and also we need more options to not have to work the street and not to live in poverty.

I really want to deglamorize prostitution and drug use. The Native women on the streets are getting younger and younger. This isn't okay and can't become normal. We need more education in high schools and like a video you can get in the library



if you are curious. Although I know it's not that easy to say no to drugs. It goes back to the trauma. We need more free counselling and support to deal with trauma, and we need to educate the younger generation with real stories. I did two years in juvenile at the Burnaby Youth detention centre.

I don't see many First Nations police officers, and definitely no First Nations women police officers. We also need more peer-run organizations that are peer-run by First Nations women. Workers at DEWC like Kat, Myrna, and Tammy give us hope because they come from the street. As women who know the streets coming together to run things, we can do so much good for our community and for the younger generations.

*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



When I got sentenced, I was 16 years old. I was charged with manslaughter and sentenced for defending myself from rape by a priest in residential school. My son was born from and is proof of that rape. I was sent to max security at Kent Penitentiary. My first three years in there, I was in solitary confinement from the age of 16-19 years old. I served a total of 7 out of my 10 years in prison. I went straight from residential school to prison. From one system to another, there was no difference between the two. In residential school, I remember Marsha and Aaron who died and were found buried in the snow. They were seven years old, and when I turned seven years old is when I was first raped.

## Participatory Research and Literature Review



There is no justice for First Nations from police. A few officers are okay but the rest are evil and destructive. They don't care to help our people. They prefer a dead Indian.



I don't like the cops. I got beat up for nothing. They should do what they have to do instead of being crooked ass.



Police violence needs to stop.

### Residential School-to-Prison Pipeline

A recent report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women finds that factors contributing to Indigenous women's interactions with the criminal justice system are "intergenerational trauma; physical, psychological and sexual violence; substance abuse and mental health problems and illnesses; poverty; and disconnection from their own cultures and languages."<sup>1</sup>

According to the Correctional Investigator of Canada, approximately 50 percent of Indigenous women in federal custody attended or had a family member attend a residential school.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous women's over-representation in the criminal justice system is, therefore, directly connected to the intergenerational legacy of residential schools including child apprehension, loss of land and culture, and impoverishment.

### Mistrust of Police

In the DTES, the criminalization of poverty overlapping with the specific over-surveillance and over-policing of Indigenous women marks the beginning of lengthy entanglements with the criminal justice system through the courts and prisons. Fundamentally, the criminal justice system is an inappropriate and oppressive tool to resolve social and economic issues, and the Canadian legal system is a foreign and colonial system imposed upon Indigenous peoples.

One recent attempt to improve relations by the VPD is the SisterWatch program, referenced earlier. While it is significant that several agencies now have greater organizational trust with the VPD, an independent evaluation found that the program is not successful in building trust between the VPD and women residents in the DTES.<sup>3</sup> In a separate DTES women's safety audit, only 15 percent of 157 women said they would go to the police if they felt unsafe.<sup>4</sup>

There are many reasons for the lack of reporting to police: reliance on the person causing harm, fear of being marked as an informant, deep mistrust of police, and prior negative experiences with police either as a victim or an alleged offender.

## Targeted by Police

The DTES is the only neighbourhood in Vancouver that has a Beat Enforcement Team where officers patrol the streets on foot.

While the VPD says its intention is to increase trust through greater engagement with local residents, the arrival of police onto street corners has only increased the climate of criminalization. Indigenous women in the DTES report police harassment and brutality, and an overwhelming experience of fear of the VPD. Members of DEWC recount:

- Routine street checks
- Detention
- Arrests
- Search and seizure
- Bylaw tickets
- Use of force
- Extortion of information
- Use of police dogs
- Escalation during a mental health crisis (a majority of police-shooting deaths in B.C. involve individuals experiencing a mental health crisis)<sup>5</sup>
- Entry into homes
- Catch-and-release as a form of intimidation

It is also noteworthy that private security in the DTES has dramatically increased and, due to presumed authority, they illegally move people off public property, seize property, issue tickets, and use force.<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous people are over-represented in statistics on VPD street checks, also known as carding, when police randomly stop a person to obtain their identification and record personal information even though there is no legal cause for detention or arrest. Data shows that between 2008 and 2017, 15 percent of street checks involved Indigenous people, and Indigenous women account for 21 percent of all street checks of women.<sup>7</sup>

The VPD also routinely ticket DTES residents for minor infractions like jaywalking. Statistics via a Freedom of Information request reveals that 76 percent of 2,699 jaywalking tickets issued in the city between 2008 and 2012 were to people in the DTES.<sup>8</sup>

At least three members of DEWC have won high-profile complaints against the VPD:

- » Bobbi O'Shea sued the VPD after police responded to a call for medical assistance in 2008. Instead of providing medical assistance, the VPD imprisoned Bobbi and placed her in a restraint device, in which her hands were cuffed behind her back and her feet tied together with a strap. She was held in the device for an hour before being released without charges.



As soon as the cops see you are Native, they go after you. Once the cops tried to falsely accuse my son for going after them even though they were the ones who hit him with their car. My son was cleared and never charged, but the cops weren't charged for that even though he was injured.



The VPD takes stuff from street vendors. Street vendors work hard by binning just to make a few dollars to be able to eat. VPD officers taking vendors stuff should be charged with theft.



I got a ticket from VPD for crossing the street when the light wasn't red. I am an Indigenous trans woman using a wheelchair. I felt like I was targeted.



Larger representation of women and Indigenous peoples within the justice and police system would reduce the vulnerability of said groups.



I was in trouble with the law a long time ago and I know first hand the system is not meant for us. It makes no sense. They give us no information, we have no lawyers, and they ask us all these questions so aggressively.



We need more Native court workers because we need more people to understand who know who we are and where we come from. We don't need more of our people in jails.

- » In 2010, VPD Constable Taylor Robinson was filmed shoving Sandy Davidsen, who has multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy, for no reason as he walked along a sidewalk. After the video received widespread media attention, he was charged with assault. However the assault charge was eventually dropped, and he was suspended for six days.
- » In 2010, the BC Human Rights Tribunal found that the VPD discriminated against a trans woman Angela Dawson on the basis of sex, and awarded her damages for “injury to dignity, feelings and self-respect”. In one incident, Angela informed the police upon arrest that she had undergone gender reassignment surgery, for which she was required to perform certain post-surgery procedures to prevent infection. She was repeatedly denied medical care. On another occasion, she was arrested and repeatedly and deliberately misgendered by the arresting officers. This is not an exceptional circumstance, as one-third of Indigenous trans people in an Ontario study reported police harassment.<sup>9</sup>

## Unequal Access to Justice

Once Indigenous women are arrested, they are more likely to be charged, be held in pre-trial detention, rack up further charges from violations, plead guilty, and be sentenced to prison. Indigenous women are also the least likely to have full and appropriate legal representation.

The pressures on Indigenous women to plead guilty are immense. They face pressure from legal aid counsel. The length and costs of trial proceedings are prohibitive and Indigenous women often plead guilty in order to “have the matter over with.”

If Indigenous women do not have someone who can act as a legal surety to post bail, then they are more likely to face pre-trial detention. Pre-trial detention is a systematic tool of coercion to extract guilty pleas in exchange for a reduced sentence. People held in pre-trial detention are twice as likely to plead guilty as those who are out on bail.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous people are more likely to be denied bail than non-Indigenous people,<sup>11</sup> and the number of Indigenous people denied bail has jumped by 92 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Forty percent of criminal court matters in B.C. are administration of justice offences such as failure to appear, breach of a probation order, or failure to comply that creates a revolving door into the system and can snowball to prison time.<sup>13</sup> During sentencing, the use of mandatory minimum sentences has increased and has removed judicial discretion to deliver sentences that reflect the unique circumstances of Indigenous women.<sup>14</sup> Indigenous women are nine times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be sentenced to prison.<sup>15</sup>

## Unfulfilled Gladue Obligations

A frequently touted solution to reducing Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system is Gladue reports that give consideration and context to sentencing for Indigenous people.





There is unequal justice. White people and rich people get leniency or get lawyered up, but my son is doing so much time. I am not excusing what my son did, but he confessed to his crime and turned himself in but he had no lawyer and did no Gladue report and is serving a full sentence. Now when he comes out, he may turn to drugs and will have a hard time getting a job. I don't know if he will get a second chance like the rich people or White people do.

As the Supreme Court of Canada wrote in *Ipelee*, “Courts must take judicial notice of such matters as the history of colonialism, displacement, and residential schools and how that history continues to translate into lower educational attainment, lower incomes, higher unemployment, higher rates of substance abuse and suicide, and of course higher levels of incarceration for Aboriginal peoples.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet Gladue report programs largely remain underfunded. The Department of Justice commissioned a Gladue study across the country and found that “less than half the jurisdictions reported that sentencing recommendations made by the Crown are systematically informed by the kinds of non-custodial measures available to Aboriginal offenders.”<sup>17</sup> In one year, Legal Services Society had funding to produce only 79 Gladue reports across B.C.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore when a Gladue report is produced, it is “seldom on behalf of Aboriginal women.”<sup>19</sup>

## Revolving Door of Prison for Indigenous Women

Between the years 2003 and 2013, the federally incarcerated Indigenous population rose by a whopping 46.4 percent<sup>20</sup> even though there was an overall drop in crime rates and the overall federal inmate population grew by only five percent.<sup>21</sup>

Indigenous adults account for 30 percent of admissions to provincial/territorial prisons and 27 percent of admissions to federal prisons.<sup>22</sup> Over 75 percent of Indigenous prisoners remain in prison until their statutory release date, which is 10 percent higher than non-Indigenous prisoners.<sup>23</sup> Indigenous people account for 21 percent of adults in custody on remand, 27 percent of adults sentenced to provincial/territorial custody, 19.3 percent of adults in federal custody, 18 percent of adults on probation, and 20 percent of adults serving conditional sentences.<sup>24</sup>

As the Correctional Investigator of Canada puts it, “Any net growth in the federal inmate population since 2012 is almost exclusively attributed to new or returning admissions of Indigenous offenders.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite being approximately five percent of Canada's total female population, Indigenous women make up 38 percent of the federally incarcerated female population across Canada.<sup>26</sup> This a shocking increase of 83.7 percent over the past decade<sup>27</sup>, and represents the fastest growing incarcerated population.<sup>28</sup>

In the Pacific and Prairie regions, Indigenous women make up more than 50 percent of the federally incarcerated female population.<sup>29</sup> In the provincial custody system,



They don't enforce the Gladue principles when they sentence Native women, and women without lawyers don't know about it.



Prison is a revolving door for Native people.



I went to jail for drug trafficking. A lot of Native people get jailed for selling drugs and get possession and trafficking charges. I did five years total in jail. I had a good lawyer through legal aid. We need more legal aid lawyers and more legal aid.



A guy rapes you and beats you up so bad, you get black eyes and a broken nose. But the cops don't do nothing and don't charge him. The next time you try to stop him and stand up for yourself because no one else will, and you end up getting arrested.

41 percent of women are Indigenous women.<sup>30</sup> Approximately 75 percent of women in provincial prisons are sentenced for administrative crimes or fraud, possession of stolen property, and theft—all of which are essentially poverty-related offenses. Indigenous women are also more likely to be sentenced for minor drug-related offenses.<sup>31</sup>

As the Canadian Human Rights Commission states, “Female offenders are the most vulnerable inmates. They are twice as likely as male offenders to have a significant mental health diagnosis at time of admission, and they are far more likely than males to self-harm in prison. Aboriginal women are the most vulnerable among this vulnerable group. These are women scarred by generations of neglect, abuse, and systemic discrimination. The high numbers of unresolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women speak to the same systemic issues of violence, poverty and marginalization, and the too common indifference of bureaucracies to basic human rights.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Criminalization of Indigenous Survivors**

There are critical links between violence against Indigenous women and girls and the over-criminalization of Indigenous women and girls.

First, compared to non-Indigenous women, Indigenous women are more likely to be attacked by their abusers and are then more likely to be counter-charged by police.<sup>33</sup>

When Indigenous women in northern B.C. report domestic violence, a Human Rights Watch report details how they face police neglect, victim-blaming, inappropriate and invasive body and strip searches, sexual harassment, excessive use of force, physical assault, and arrest for actions taken in self-defense.<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch also reports that Indigenous trans and two-spirit people are even more likely to experience police violence.<sup>35</sup>

This blatant discrimination means that Indigenous women and two-spirit people are often charged not only when they may be legally innocent, but also when they themselves are the victims of violence.

Second, Indigenous women in the federal correctional system are, on average, younger than non-Indigenous women. Ninety-one percent report histories of physical and/or sexual abuse<sup>36</sup>, and 90 percent report using drugs or alcohol the day they offended.<sup>37</sup> Many Indigenous women enter the criminal justice system specifically because of their experiences as survivors of violence. Most serious charges, like murder, are in relation to women defending themselves or their children from violence.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, 75 percent of federally incarcerated women are mothers to young children, and of those almost two-thirds are single-parent caregivers.<sup>39</sup> When mothers are incarcerated, their children are often placed into government care, perpetuating the cycle of forced family separation.<sup>40</sup>

## Access to Healthcare in Prison

Even though the United Nations Mandela Rules require prisoners' right to access healthcare equivalent to that available in the community, prisons have deplorable access to healthcare.

Eighty percent of all federally incarcerated women face mental health struggles, caused or exacerbated by the conditions of incarceration itself.<sup>41</sup> Access to trauma and abuse counselling is limited, there is inadequate staffing of healthcare teams, and there is no 24-hour access to healthcare. Until recently many trans women were denied gender-affirming surgery while in prison.

According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, prisons house the highest per-capita proportion of persons who use substances in society.<sup>42</sup> Seventy-one percent of incarcerated Indigenous women have a history of drug use, but are denied safe and culturally appropriate harm reduction or treatment.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the incidence of HIV infections among prisoners is approximately 10 times greater than in the general population.<sup>44</sup>

The forced break from drugs in prison and the lack of transitional support makes prisoners particularly vulnerable to fatal overdoses upon release. The BC Coroners Service found that two-thirds of those who die of an overdose have spent time in jail or were under correctional supervision. Of those fatalities, 18 percent occurred within 30 days of release from jail.<sup>45</sup>

## Compounding Discriminations in Prison

Discrimination against Indigenous women in the prison system is systemic and best characterized as a series of compounding discriminations.

Indigenous women serve disproportionately more of their sentence behind bars before first release and are more likely to remain in prison until their statutory release date or warrant expiry date; are over-represented in maximum security institutions and under-represented in community supervision populations; are disproportionately placed into segregation; have less access to rehabilitative and culturally-relevant programs in prison; and are more likely to return to prison on revocation of parole.

This is despite the fact that common law and Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) policy commits to Gladue principles, and sometimes actually because of it. Gladue factors of, for example, drug dependence are often weaponized against Indigenous women as evidence that they need more correctional interventions.<sup>46</sup>

There are specific systemic barriers for Indigenous trans women in prison. Until this year, trans women were forced into men's prisons where they were at constant risk of sexual assault. Now, following a human rights complaint, CSC has issued an interim policy on gender identity and expression. While it remains to be seen how this policy will be implemented, there are already significant concerns. For example, the new policy ensuring that trans prisoners are placed according to their gender identity is subject to a caveat that denies placement according to gender identity as an unconditional basic human right.<sup>47</sup>



Prisons are not part of Aboriginal culture. It's a colonial model based on punishment and not justice. In my home community, we go through circles if there is an issue and it's more healing and rehabilitative. Especially when the root issues are alcohol and trauma, then prisons just make it worse.

## Indigenous Women Over-Represented in Maximum Security

Using an archaic Custody Rating Scale, Indigenous women are more likely to be classified as 'high-risk' and sent to maximum security. The Custody Rating Scale fails to account for the experiences of Indigenous women, and often actually uses histories of abuse, substance use, and involvement in street economies to classify women as 'high risk.'

Forty-five percent of women in maximum security are Indigenous,<sup>48</sup> while only 18 percent of women in minimum security are Indigenous.<sup>49</sup>

The Supreme Court of Canada has recently ruled that Canada's prison system has failed to ensure that its risk assessment tools are not racially biased against Indigenous prisoners.<sup>50</sup> Although Management Protocol—a super-maximum security level used between the years 2003–2011—is now discontinued, it is telling that all the women on Management Protocol by the year 2011 were Indigenous women.<sup>51</sup>

Implicit bias and gendered racism hugely influence the over-classification of Indigenous women. Indigenous women's legitimate mistrust of colonial authority means that they are often deemed to be 'uncooperative' or 'hard to manage.' Indigenous women who are classified as 'dangerous offenders' generally have received this designation because of offences committed while they are incarcerated and often specifically in resistance to the institution.<sup>52</sup> Trans women are often placed in segregation as a form of 'protective custody.'

In another very disturbing trend, Indigenous women account for 78.2 percent of self-harm incidents by women in prison and because self-harm is often considered evidence of 'not coping with prison life', this is another significant reason why Indigenous women are moved to a higher security level.<sup>53</sup> In this way, individual Indigenous women—instead of the conditions of the prison itself—become characterized as violent.

The over-classification of Indigenous women into maximum security has irreversible impacts. Indigenous women are often placed into secure units or administrative segregation, forced into behavior modification programs, restricted from access to culturally safe programs, and denied parole eligibility.

### Solitary Confinement is Torture

Administrative segregation within prison, which can be indefinite, is of particular concern. Indigenous women are 10 percent more likely to be segregated than non-Indigenous women,<sup>54</sup> make up 50 percent of federal segregation placements,<sup>55</sup> and spend longer stints in segregation.<sup>56</sup>

Solitary confinement leads to increased rates of recidivism, self-harm, and suicide among prisoners.<sup>57</sup> The United Nations Mandela Rules consider prolonged solitary confinement of more than 15 days as torture or cruel treatment. Even though the B.C. Supreme Court recently found that indefinite solitary confinement in federal prisons is unconstitutional and amounts to cruel and unusual punishment, the federal government is appealing the decision while proposing a new law on solitary confinement.<sup>58</sup> As articulated by West Coast LEAF, this new federal bill



I did time in segregation 10 times.  
It's harsh in seg. It's deadly in there.  
Every time I was in seg, I only  
saw other Native women in there.  
There shouldn't be no segregation.

adds some procedural safeguards but “does not address the real harms associated with isolation or their disproportionate impacts for Indigenous people and people experiencing mental illness.”<sup>59</sup>

## Inadequate Healing Programs in Prison

Within prisons, sections 81 and 84 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* and Aboriginal programming in prisons under Commissioner's Directives 702 *Policy Objectives and Spiritual Practices* are intended to address the over-incarceration of Indigenous women.

However very little use is made of sections 81 and 84, which provide for release and reintegration into non-institutional settings. Ninety percent of Indigenous prisoners are prevented from completing their sentences in section 81 Healing Lodges due to their security classification.<sup>60</sup> Over a two-year period there were only 13 agreements for the release of paroled women to Indigenous communities entered into under section 84.<sup>61</sup> There are only two CSC-operated Healing Lodges for women in Canada, and sometimes spots are given to non-Indigenous women.

And while there is more programming within prisons, much of it is very limited and sporadic, has long wait lists, and is often based on generalized institutional notions about pan-Aboriginal culture. Seventy-five percent of Indigenous women are unable to complete the rehabilitation programs they need when they are first eligible for parole because they do not get timely access to the programs.<sup>62</sup> A serious disincentive to accessing programming, when it is available, is that women prisoners are regularly strip-searched when they return to prison after participating in programs.<sup>63</sup>

Another example of an illusory solution is the Mother-Child Program that allows some women to keep their young children with them while incarcerated. This program has undergone significant changes over the past decade with more women excluded from the program, a reduction in the age of children participants, and imposition of additional eligibility requirements.<sup>64</sup> Given the particularly traumatic history of forced family separation for Indigenous families, it is unconscionable that there are times when there are no Indigenous women in federal facilities in this program.<sup>65</sup>

## Indigenous Jurisdiction over Indigenous Legal Processes

The crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada requires police services to be attentive to the particular vulnerabilities of Indigenous women, yet it is evident that police and the entire criminal justice system is systematically responsible for constructing Indigenous women as ‘risks’ to be contained, making Indigenous women unsafe, and exacerbating Indigenous women's socio-economic inequality.

It is unclear whether this relationship can actually be reformed, or whether a more immediate and appropriate solution is Indigenous jurisdiction over Indigenous legal processes in order to end the criminalization and incarceration of Indigenous women and girls.



Native women in jail need more support like healthcare, counselling, and skills development to have more opportunities for when we get out, instead of getting forced into same patterns.



I worked in the tailor shop and we need better pay for prisoners. We need more classes and trade schools and healing instead of prison. Jail is like a dog in a cage; you come out bitter and hating the world even more.



We need to go back to our traditional laws instead of these police and courts. We need circles where the community comes together to restore balance and well-being. This colonial system doesn't work for any people, and definitely not our people.



## I am Kayla Fox

I am from Sweetgrass First Nation in Saskatchewan. I came to Vancouver around 1996 and to the DTES in the fall of 1999. I didn't come down here right away because mainstream society had scared me with stuff like "You will get robbed down there."

I was a teenager when I came down here. I became recreationally involved with drugs and then I got addicted. I needed to feed my addictions and, as a poor trans Native person, what options were there for me other than sex work? That's all I saw and that's what I was told. Most women who were using down here were selling themselves. There's high class, medium class, and lower end street girls. Aboriginal women were mostly always street girls. They call us "bottomfeeders." I wanted so badly to be anything but Native. I would say I was of mixed descent. I was embarrassed and ashamed. All the labels hurt. Welfare bum, prostitute, drunk. I was called everything, and somewhere along the way I became all those things. I tried to do things the right way but you get all these doors slammed in your face, so at some point you don't bother trying anymore.



**A guy smashed my head in once and the cops made me believe I had provoked it.**

Being involved in the drug trade and sex trade was scary. I had so many bad dates. A guy smashed my head in once and the cops made me believe I had provoked it. There was blood everywhere and the cop asked me what I did and if I had robbed the john. The cops didn't even take me to the hospital and they wouldn't give me their badge numbers. I wrote a complaint afterwards with the help of an advocate who helped me feel less scared. I saw the report by the VPD from my 9/11 call. Their report implied that I had robbed that guy because I had money on me. Because I am a sex trade worker with money on me, the assumption was that it wasn't my money and I had robbed him. The report framed him as a hard-working man. My complaint eventually got the two cops suspended for six months and I got a written apology. I didn't put too much stock into the apology and I don't really buy it. Someone probably made them write it or wrote it for them. But I hope my complaint has some effect internally and changes their dealings with First Nations trans women.

Since then I have been reluctant to go to the cops and have the cops involved. Even when I get into fights with my partner and I feel scared, I don't call the cops. Cops are so racist and don't take you seriously. They judge you based on the colour of

your skin. Cops are supposed to protect society; aren't we a part of society? Just because we don't live in fancy houses, it does not mean we don't deserve the same level of protection. All the lives of Indigenous women we have lost down here are all someone's family. And secondary to the racism I face is the fact that I am trans. The cops have stereotypes of me being a man and not really a woman. All these bullshit stereotypes. It's not only about me. You can walk down the street and see the cops won't help our people. I walk by it every day down here. I see it and I hear it. I don't know when the cops will ever take our women seriously. We are looked at as not worthy. The cops need education about what it's like to be an Aboriginal woman.

Most of us are from or impacted by residential schools. My mother didn't know how to parent. We were kids looking after kids. It's a domino effect. I got tired of looking after my siblings and eventually I took off. It's taken years and my family and I are only now making up for the lost time. My siblings and I don't really have a connection anymore. It's painful to say but I'm seen as the one who took off. I couldn't help it. It was too much to take care of my siblings and to constantly lie to welfare about my mom when they came snooping around. I've learnt to deal with that pain and I am at a point where healing can take place.

The drug scene is so different now in the DTES. It doesn't feel the same down here anymore. People used to look out for each other more. Now it feels like everyone is focused on themselves and trying to survive. I work at the women's overdose prevention site. We have the lowest overdose rate. It's good to have peer-based work, but also its so triggering and traumatizing to have a peer-run place. We need more safe places for women to use drugs and we also need more resources for healing from trauma. We need to deal with immediate addictions, and we also need to deal with root causes. Too much money is going into band-aid solutions and everything is a crisis, but we need to stop the crisis at the root. We need to deal with the childhood trauma. The sadness here is overwhelming.

For Indigenous trans women, we are really loaded with grief and trauma and discrimination. We need more understanding and acceptance. I am not a man. I am an Indigenous woman. Trans women should not have to live up to some standard about how we present ourselves. As Indigenous women, we never fit the mainstream standard of being a woman anyway. As First Nations, we should accept humans for who they are. As women's services, it's one thing to say you are trans inclusive and another thing to actually do it. Everyone needs constant education and to be more assertive in standing up for Native trans women.

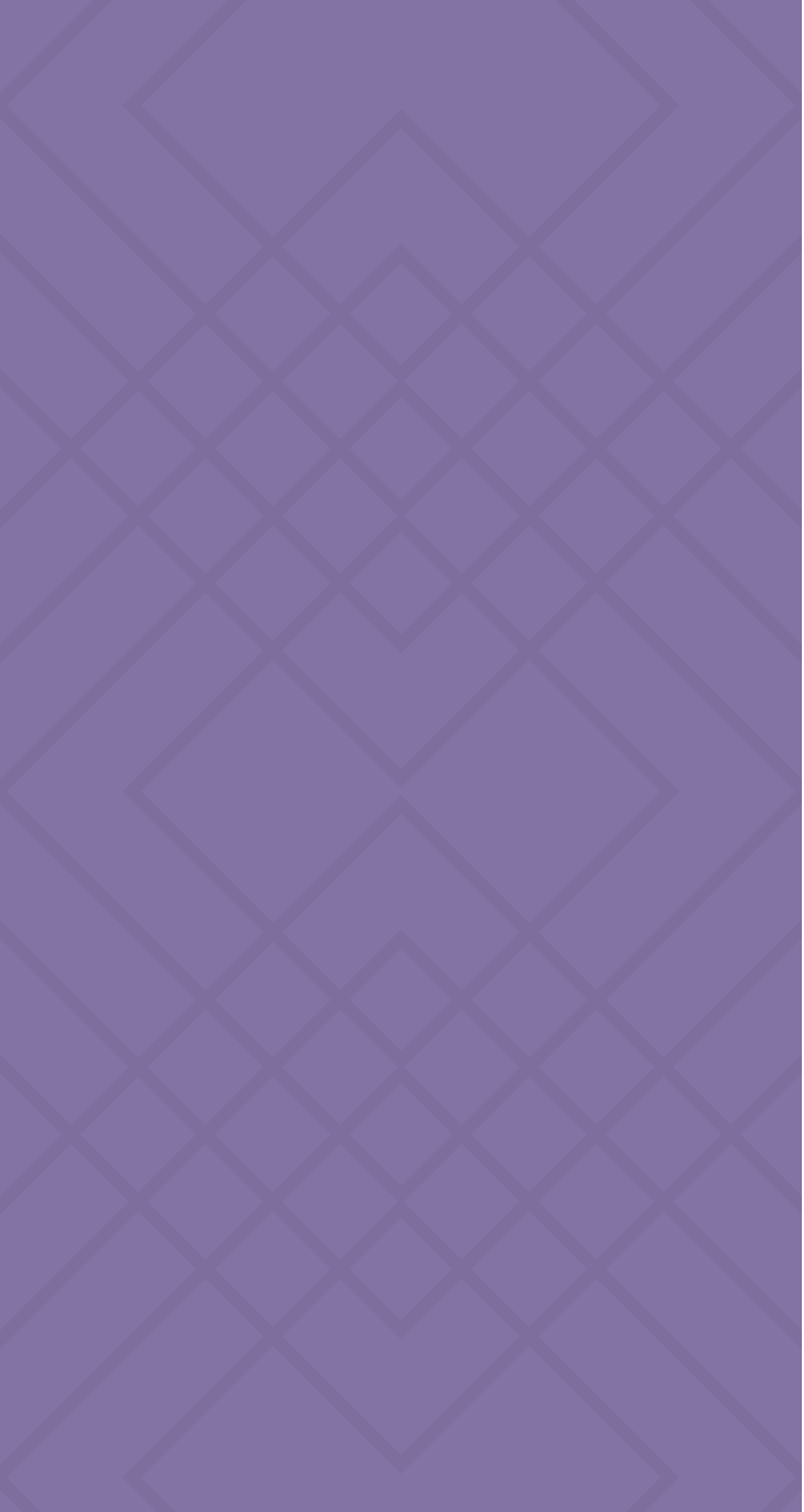
*- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia*



**Cops are supposed to protect society; aren't we a part of society? Just because we don't live in fancy houses, it does not mean we don't deserve the same level of protection. All the lives of Indigenous women we have lost down here are all someone's family.**



**For Indigenous trans women, we are really loaded with grief and trauma and discrimination. We need more understanding and acceptance.**





# HEALTH AND WELLNESS



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

**No land-based or culturally safe treatment for Native women only**

Not enough family doctors

**Colonization and poverty makes me crazy**

Not enough elder support or transport to access medical appointments

Cannot get scooters, prescriptions, or alternative treatments covered

Cuts to extended healthcare



**Don't have enough drinking water or clean bathrooms**

High suicide rates but nothing changes

**Racism everywhere in the healthcare system**

Not enough home care or home support



Clinics won't prescribe drugs because of 'drug-seeking' narratives

**People with mental health and trauma issues not getting help**

Doctors are the drug pushers and call us the druggies



**Not enough detox or treatment on demand**

**Not enough mental health support or counsellors**

Canadian colonialism is an infectious disease



**No ongoing support to access treatment and stay clean**

Doctors and nurses treat Native women poorly

**Don't trust the system and don't use it**

# MY EXPERIENCES OF HEALTHCARE



Opioid crisis is genocide

Healthcare professionals are not educated in our issues and cultures

Level of care is inconsistent

Long waitlist for addictions treatment and mental health teams



Alienating and colonial system

No healthy food. We mostly eat starch and sugar

Health workers let social workers apprehend babies from hospital



**No Indigenous health centres based on holistic Indigenous healing**

Bureaucratic and inaccessible system and get referred out



Not believed or trusted

Need consumption sites for Indigenous women only

Not enough community gardens and healthy community kitchens

No Native medicines being used and no attention to spiritual health

Cannot access counselling without medical diagnosis and getting labeled



Need more doctor and nurse home-visits, mobile vans, community clinics

Disrespect of reproductive sovereignty

Need Indigenous and female healthcare workers

Discharge you without any help or housing



## I am Cynthia Mack



**I have been down here in the DTES since 1983.**

I am from Toquahat. When I was younger, my little baby sister died from a crib death and my mother drank and drank and would leave us in the taverns in the lobby. My mom was so drunk, so we ended up with my aunt and grandparents who raised us. I was the oldest. Grandpa was a longshoreman and working graveyards. My grandma gave me advice at a young age and I am grateful for that. My grandfather died in front of my eyes from a heart attack during lahaal games. My grandma took it hard and started drinking.

My younger siblings got put with an auntie who already had 11 children in her house. My sister and I were taken out to Cumberland and put in foster care. I used to hold my sister every night. I've blocked that part of my life out. He was a reverend who used to come to my room and would hit us. I draw a blank on the rest. Child welfare said they lost my sister in the system, and it's taken us 45 years to become friends.

I was married at the age of 16 years old. My husband was mentally abusive and he used to watch everything I did. He was also physically abusive, and his brother once caught him pulling my hair. His brother fought him saying, "Never beat your wife". His brother beat his own wife and I think he didn't like who he was, so he was stopping his younger brother.

I left. I gave him the kids and I left. I never had a life so I got on a bus with nothing. I followed my sister and brother down here. My sister had run away from home and was down here. And my brother got out of jail and stayed here. I have been down here in the DTES since 1983.

My first year down here, I stayed with my sister for a year. Back in the 1980s, we did T's and R's. It's not like the street drugs now at all. A dealer back then asked me to hold and said, "I will buy you breakfast, lunch, smokes, and give you \$50." So I

did that for a few months. One night, the dealer asked us over and said, "Wanna try something?" My boyfriend and I said yes. I sat there at first, and then I gave in. I spent three hours after that puking but it was so addictive, and the next day I woke up and wanted a fix.

One day what scared me was an abscess on my ankle. I normally can look after it but I woke up and I had ulcers outside. I went to the hospital and I was on an IV for two weeks. If I had waited two more days, I would have lost my feet. My boyfriend at the time was doing two years in jail. He said "When I get out, I will come live with you in Port Alberni." He set me up with a phone and some money. I went to Port Alberni and went through withdrawals there. I slept for a week straight. I stayed with my grandmother in her room. I weighed only 90 pounds when I went home. I told grandma everything. She said, "Thank you for telling me. I understand now."

That is the kind of care and support we need to get clean. I have been on the recovery road for 15 years. When I went to treatment I also found my voice. I cleaned up, even though drugs are still all around me. I still do rock now and then, but it's not controlling me. I control it. Sometimes something gets to me and I want to numb myself and calm down.

I also now have a one bedroom place with dinner every night and housekeeping once a week in my building. The first time that I've ever slept through the night in my adult life is in this new place. Though I wish I could smudge in my place without the alarm going off. For so long I could not get into housing or get work. No one wants to hire or house Native women. They see you and say, "Not interested." It's happened to me so many times.

I have 3 children, 11 grandchildren, and 2 great grandsons. My youngest daughter, Savannah, is in New Zealand right now. She's working there. I get to see the world through her eyes. I always talk to my grandchildren about how drinking and addictions has had such a genocidal impact.

It's gotten worse down here. You get beat up for \$5 and killed for \$10. One time, this guy was banging on the door and I saw another guy holding his throat. The guy holding his throat was trying to stop the bleeding from a slit throat. That guy just fell down dead. We never used to see this. Fentanyl has made everything worse; not just the overdose deaths but also the violence of debt extraction. And the new gangs have no connection to the neighbourhood and no respect for elders. There are also more cops on the streets, and vendors trying to sell are getting charged and arrested just for trying to sell to survive.

We need detox on demand for people trying to clean up. You should not have to wait for detox. By the time your date comes, you no longer want to get clean. We need resources to provide immediate detox especially for our women. I've been at Onsite for treatment five times and I think we need more Onsites. We also need holistic healing, like access to our culture and our languages. All the people I knew in the 1980s have passed away.

- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



**Fentanyl has made everything worse; not just the overdose deaths but also the violence of debt extraction. And the new gangs have no connection to the neighbourhood and no respect for elders.**



**We need detox on demand for people trying to clean up. You should not have to wait for detox. By the time your date comes, you no longer want to get clean. We need resources to provide immediate detox especially for our women.**



I don't have any respect for this Canadian law. The Canadian medical people killed my sister. They murdered her. She was the head of my family. How does my family go on when the head of my family has been murdered?

## Participatory Research and Literature Review



My niece died from her drug addiction. My cousin and lots of friends died by drinking themselves to death.



Some Native women can't even afford medication because they are non-status under the *Indian Act*. Even for a lot of status women, many prescriptions aren't covered. We need better and extended health coverage.



We need more intergenerational connection between elders and children. Especially for urban Indigenous women who are not as connected to our communities or families, we need elders in our lives to guide us and teach us here in the DTES.



The doctors look you over and make you believe there is nothing wrong with you.

### Prioritizing Health and Wellness

A brief overview of some of the persistent health outcomes for Indigenous women highlights the urgent need to prioritize Indigenous women's health.

The life expectancy of First Nations women is five years shorter and the life expectancy for Inuit women is 10 years shorter than the average life expectancy of the total female population in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous women account for 45.1 percent of new HIV cases.<sup>2</sup> Suicides are seven times higher among Indigenous women than non-Indigenous women.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous adults are more than twice as likely to die from avoidable causes than non-Indigenous people, and the risk of death for Indigenous people is five times more than non-Indigenous Canadians.<sup>4</sup>

### Social Determinants of Health

These health disparities are often explained through racist colonial theories such as 'genetic disposition to alcoholism' or 'high-risk lifestyles,' rather than looking at the social determinants of health.

According to the Canadian Medical Association, social determinants of health account for 50 percent of a person's health, which includes income, early childhood development, disability, education, social exclusion, social safety net, gender, working conditions, race, Aboriginal status, nutritious food, housing, and community belonging.<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous women's health is inseparable from the social and economic context within which Indigenous women are born, develop, live, and age. The poor health that Indigenous women suffer is a lack of appropriate and equitable care in a colonial system. Indigenous women's health is particularly influenced by the trauma of child apprehension and forced family separation, as well as sexual violence. Over 25 percent of young Indigenous women report at least one instance of sexual assault.<sup>6</sup> A medical study found that the rate of suicide attempts is 2.82 times higher and the rate of death by suicide is more than four times higher for mothers whose children are not in their custody.<sup>7</sup>

Disrupting Indigenous knowledge systems and the outlawing of spiritual and medicinal practices have also damaged Indigenous women's health. As outlined in the report *First Peoples, Second Class Treatment*, it is critical to examine links between current high rates of infant and maternal mortality amongst Indigenous women to the historic context of forced sterilization, the undermining of Indigenous midwifery, and mandatory medical evacuation for pregnant women in northern communities.<sup>8</sup>

## Lack of Culturally Safe Healthcare in the DTES

Culturally safe care requires the patient's way of knowing to be respected and for the healthcare provider to take into consideration the social, political, linguistic, economic, and spiritual realm in which the patient lives.

However, Indigenous women at DEWC report unsafe care and a number of barriers to accessing culturally safe healthcare:

- » Having no family doctor or continuous care, and primarily using walk-in clinics and the ER.
- » Not enough Indigenous doctors or nurses.
- » Illnesses going untreated and refusal of pain medication by healthcare workers because of 'drug-seeking' narratives.
- » Fear of judgment, child apprehension, or forced institutionalization upon disclosing personal information such as abuse, substance use, or mental health challenges.
- » Implicit bias and being trivialized and not seen as credible experts over one's own health.
- » Involuntary discharge from hospitals, and being discharged in the middle of the night without bus tickets or a place to go.
- » Having security and police called for expressing frustration at discriminatory treatment. In 2016, there were 482 reports of incidents where security guards were called to respond to patients at Vancouver General Hospital. In the same year at St. Paul's Hospital, there were 907 reports.<sup>9</sup>
- » An emphasis on Western approaches to healthcare being alienating and irregular access to Indigenous healing including plant medicines, spiritual ceremony, culturally based counselling, and healing circles.
- » A lack of accessible and safe healthcare across the spectrum of physical, mental, sexual, and emotional healthcare for Indigenous two-spirit and trans people.

## Food Insecurity in the DTES

Dispossession from traditional lands, often as a result of unhealthy resource extraction projects, has interfered with Indigenous women's access to traditional foods and clean water. Access to safe drinking water is also an issue in the DTES. Many SRO rooms have old lead pipes that run contaminated water. During heat waves, accessible public fountains and drinking water stations are lacking and have resulted in fatalities.<sup>10</sup> The DTES is also a food desert where it is difficult to buy affordable and good-quality fresh food. Most agencies serve high-starch, high-sugar, and processed foods.



The health services are not individualized or specific to each Indigenous woman's needs. We need individualized health support and we deserve quality care including medication, all health supports covered, and not long waitlists. They cut me off medication saying it's too addictive but they were the ones who first prescribed it to me.



As soon as they find out you are from the DTES at St. Paul's Hospital, they treat you so much worse. They think you are there for drugs, and they make you wait longer, and don't take your health concerns seriously.



My counsellor told the judge and my social worker everything I disclosed. That was a violation of my trust and I never went back. What we tell them cannot be used against us in the justice system.



We need Native doctors. There is so much discrimination from non-Native doctors. I am always one of the first in the door of the clinic and always the last to be seen.



Stores around here only sell junk food and the drop-ins mostly serve old food and starches. We never get healthy food. It feels bad to be complaining about free food but we should be able to eat clean and healthy food. People are already so sick and food makes such a difference in our lives.



We need more Native healthcare workers who know this community. And we need health clinics to be more low-barrier and open for longer hours.



We had in-home counselling who came to our home and in our comfort zone and that really helped us. They spent 90 minutes with our whole family and that worked better than running around to separate counsellors without bus fare.



If you are arrested in the midst of a mental meltdown, why aren't you getting a proper assessment and referral to counselling, psychiatric help, or ongoing outpatient treatment?

Lack of proper access to clean and healthy water and food further contributes to poor physical and mental health including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, anxiety, and depression amongst women already struggling with health conditions. According to research in the American Journal of Psychiatry based on a survey of 293 DTES SRO residents, 95.2 percent of respondents said they were substance-dependent, 61.7 percent said they used injection drugs, 47.4 percent reported a psychosis diagnosis, and 45.8 percent said they had a neurological disorder.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous trans women and two-spirit people experience particularly high rates of HIV infection.<sup>12</sup>

## Lack of Mental Health Supports

In 2013, the City of Vancouver declared a “mental health crisis” with St. Paul’s Hospital and Vancouver General Hospital seeing 9,790 emergency mental-health visits in one year.<sup>13</sup>

The median time that a person waits for their first meeting with a Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Community Mental Health team is between 10 and 20 days.<sup>14</sup> The wait for VCH’s outpatient psychiatry team is 20 to 40 days.<sup>15</sup> Across B.C., hospitalization rates and length of hospitalizations for mental illness are both higher than the national average, and B.C. has the highest rate of repeat hospitalizations and readmission within 30 days due to mental illness in Canada.<sup>16</sup>

In a DTES women’s mapping survey, 36 percent of women reported that at some point the medical system had failed to support them with mental health issues.<sup>17</sup> VCH recognizes this in their observation that “Women remain acutely vulnerable and have trouble accessing appropriate gender-specific services; protecting, serving, and empowering women should be a special focus for DTES investment.”<sup>18</sup>

Mental health struggles, particularly depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, are intensified for Indigenous trans women and two-spirit people stemming from the violent experiences of living at the intersections of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonialism.<sup>19</sup>

According to the Carnegie Community Action Project, the City’s Task Force report on Mental Health and Addictions relies on an individualized model of mental health “which fails to address and understand the social determinants and societal structures that impact people’s mental health. In this framework, rather than addressing root causes, individuals with mental illness and addiction become seen as problems that have to be fixed.”<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore the Second Generation Health Strategy, a new health strategy in the DTES, has shifted towards more clinical and institutional approaches to mental health and, consequently, peer-based programs have lost their funding.

## Mental Health and Law Enforcement

Labeling people undergoing a mental health crisis as ‘dangerous’ has justified the increased use of police to handle mental health crises.





When we seek help for anything for our mental health, we need our own people to be the ones listening to us. Our own people who understand we are not crazy but that this system makes us crazy.

The new Assertive Outreach Teams (AOT) and the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) program, mental health service delivery models operated by VCH, are integrated with police. A police-based approach to mental health often worsens an acute episode, especially for Indigenous women who have negative experiences with law enforcement.

There were 3050 VPD apprehensions in 2015 under Section 28 of the *Mental Health Act*, which allows an officer to take an individual into police custody if they are deemed a threat to themselves or others.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between mental health and law enforcement is startling: of 99 police-involved deaths investigated or scheduled for investigation by the BC Coroners Service between the years 2007 and 2014, 90 percent involved a mental-health component, substance abuse, or both.<sup>22</sup>

## Opioid Crisis in the DTES

There is also a correlation between the mental health crisis and the opioid crisis in the DTES.

According to findings of a September 2018 report by the BC Coroner's Service, more than half of the people who died as a result of drug overdose in the province during the years 2016 and 2017 had a clinical diagnosis or anecdotal evidence of a mental health disorder, and 79 percent who died were in contact with health services in the year prior to their death.<sup>23</sup>

Stigma further fuels these crises. Nearly 40 percent of people with mental health issues experience stigma, and people with substance use problems experience higher rates of stigma than those with any other health condition.<sup>24</sup>

The Provincial Health Officer declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency in 2016. The BC Coroners Service reports that 1,422 people fatally overdosed across the province last year.

Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by the opioid crisis with an overdose death rate that is three times higher than the general population. Even though Indigenous people make up 3.4 percent of the population in the province, Indigenous people account for 14 percent of overdoses and 10 percent of overdose deaths.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Indigenous peoples are five times more likely to overdose and three times more likely to die from an overdose in B.C.<sup>26</sup>

Indigenous women contending with systemic racism, gendered violence, and intergenerational trauma are over-represented in the devastation of the opioid crisis. Indigenous women are experiencing eight times more overdoses and five times more fatal overdoses than non-Indigenous women.<sup>27</sup>



I lost my granddaughter and many friends to addiction and fentanyl overdose.



I would like to see our people healthy. Drugs and alcohol are what colonization brought into our communities. This opioid crisis is genocide against our people, our young people.



We need more detox and more land-based recovery homes with traditional ways like sweat lodges and berry picking as recovery on the land.



We need addictions counsellors and Native women's only detox on demand. And when women are using at the sites, there should be counsellors there.



A recent study found that less regulated drug use settings, like the street, increase predatory drug scene violence against women. Indigenous trans and cis women in this study characterized overdose prevention sites as safer spaces since they are more regulated, and peer-administered injections allow women to control their own use.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, women face many barriers accessing overdose prevention sites, and gender-specific services are needed to improve safety for women and trans people.<sup>29</sup>

## Opioid Crisis and Law Reform

The opioid crisis must be removed from policing and criminal law approaches of the ‘war on drugs’.

A recent report by Pivot Legal Society details how the police routinely seize drug paraphernalia and harm reduction supplies, which increases health risks amongst drug users who are forced to find and use unsafe supplies. The police are also regularly stationed near supervised consumption sites, which results in many people avoiding supervised consumption sites for fear of arrest.<sup>30</sup>

In 2016, there were 95,417 drug arrests across Canada, and 73 percent of drug arrests were for personal possession of minor amounts.<sup>31</sup> Criminalizing approaches further marginalize and stigmatize women since a higher percentage of women are serving sentences for drug-related offenses than men, and especially criminalizes Indigenous women who are already the fastest growing prison population in Canada.<sup>32</sup>

## Improving Indigenous Women’s Health

Destigmatizing personal use and treatment options beyond abstinence are more effective and ethical approaches to substance use.

As the First Nations Health Authority puts it, harm reduction is “respecting where an individual is at on their health and wellness journey and providing a continuum of options to assist the individual, their family, and their community on their path to sustaining or improving their health and wellness without judgment or shame. First Nations need access to a range of trauma-informed supports and culturally safe harm reduction services.”<sup>33</sup>

While culturally safe harm reduction approaches and culture as treatment are vital, Indigenous women’s holistic wellness requires strengthening all the social determinants of Indigenous women’s health including governance over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and safety.



## I am Veronica

I am an Anishinaabe woman. I don't use a last name because the English last name I have is neither my mother's name nor my father's name. It is a White colonized name that I don't like to use. We never really lived on my reserve because we were on the run a lot. My dad had taken my older siblings out of residential school so we had to leave the reserve and hide from the Indian agent, the residential school agent, and the Ontario Provincial Police. My father also ended up losing his land when he joined the army to fight in World War II. My grandmother agreed to send the men to war, and a written pass was required to join the army and to be released from the army. My father was released from the army with only the clothes he was wearing. He came home and went to his hunting ground, which required a pass as well, only to find that his land had been divided between White veterans of the war, who were given 45 acres of land each.

We lived in the country on a farm. We were farmworkers. Our entire family lived on the farm and worked as farmworkers. My mom and dad did not speak or read or write English. My dad had Grade 1 English and my mother had Grade 3 English. One time a finance company, Avco, got my father to sign a loan for a car. He bought the car but didn't know how to drive. He crashed the car and owed the finance company for the rest of his life. The debt collector was after him for the rest of his life. Later in his older age, my dad started making those payments and did so until the day he died. After he died, they tried to come after us and eventually it came out that he had overpaid the company. He paid them every month for 23 years of his sobriety.



**My father was released from the army with only the clothes he was wearing. He came home and went to his hunting ground, which required a pass as well, only to find that his land had been divided between White veterans of the war, who were given 45 acres of land each.**



**We never went to the hospital or white coat doctors. If we had a toothache, we would pull the teeth out. If we got cut, our dad would squeeze our skin shut and tape it together.**

We could always find food out in the country. We never went to the hospital or white coat doctors. If we had a toothache, we would pull the teeth out. If we got cut, our dad would squeeze our skin shut and tape it together. But then my older sister got sick. I was six years old at the time. My mom and dad took my sister to the doctors in the city. They moved us all to the city. I believe my parents signed some papers at the hospital that they could not understand. The doctors cut off her hair. They said it was a brain tumour and they were going to do brain surgery three or four times. My sister only came home a bit. I feel it was brain testing and they used her as a guinea pig. The last time they took her in, when I was eight years old, they would not let us inside the hospital. We had to stand outside on the grass. Why didn't they let us in? And I don't think there were brain surgeries going on in the 1960s in that small town. I really believe the medical profession murdered my sister.

When we moved to the city, we started starving. We no longer had all the food from the land we were used to. My father started drinking and lost all his jobs. My mother went to the church to ask for help for her and her starving kids, but the church excommunicated her rather than help her. My father also became violent with my mother around that time. My mother started spending more time in the bingo hall trying to win. My mother was refused welfare. The welfare office just gave her enough money to get back to the reserve. That's around the time I stopped believing in the system and stopped any kind of acceptance or reliance from any outside help. I stopped believing in god too. I knew there was no help for me or my family as Indian people. We worked as kids. I stole a little kid's wagon to pick up cans, bottles, and newspapers to salvage. A little old lady would buy those from us. I also stole from grocery stores. I stole loaves of bread and sandwich meats, any food I could bring home.

I eventually came to the DTES in 1980 and around 1982 is when people started talking about Indian women going missing in this neighbourhood. In 1982, I was hired by the City of Vancouver as an Aboriginal youth outreach worker for a three-year project. They hired two Indians and one White guy. I was the only worker who stayed on. It was also the only time I took money for any kind of work with our people.

As a worker, I started to see how outreach workers would get our people hooked on the welfare system and made our people dependent on the government. The welfare system would give you money, but it was also used to track you into the child welfare system and then the kids and grandkids would get tracked for life. I saw how kids coming out of care were given one-way tickets to the DTES. I used to sit at the old bus station and worked till four in the morning and would talk to the youth getting off the buses. I would buy them socks from my own pay cheque and give them meal tickets. I would also try to get the youth back into school when they were being suspended or kicked out. I only had a Grade 6 education but I really wanted the youth to be able to stay in school, and so I would go with them to advocate for them when the schools were suspending so many of our youth.

That's when I met Molly. Her and her sister were hanging around the Carnegie. They didn't want unaccompanied minors around Carnegie at that time, so I was sent to connect with them. I was basically a kid myself too. I was 20 years old and Molly was maybe 14 years old. Her boyfriend Herman was 16 years old. He had come out of the foster care system. That's how we got connected. A few years later, the hospital called me because she was young—about 15 or 16 years old—and about to give birth. It was my night off but I went to the hospital delivery room. It ended up that all the doctors and nurses got busy and I ended up delivering Molly's baby. I remember thinking, "I am so glad this baby is being born into brown hands." When she finally went up north to live, Molly got sober.

Molly's daughter Angeline Pete, the baby I delivered, went missing in 2011. She is still missing to this day. Molly only came back to the city to look for her daughter. Molly never stopped looking for Angeline and did everything she could to try and find her. She would put up missing posters all day and all night. She would always bug the police and speak to media to bring up the issue of Angeline whenever and wherever she could. Molly died in 2017. They said it was heart failure. She was only 51 years old. We all know she died of a broken heart.

For me, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is incomplete while our Indian women still go missing or are dying. It is incomplete until the medical profession, military, police services, federal government, provincial government, and municipal government are all honest and subjected to an inquiry into their practices of ongoing violence and genocide against Indian people.

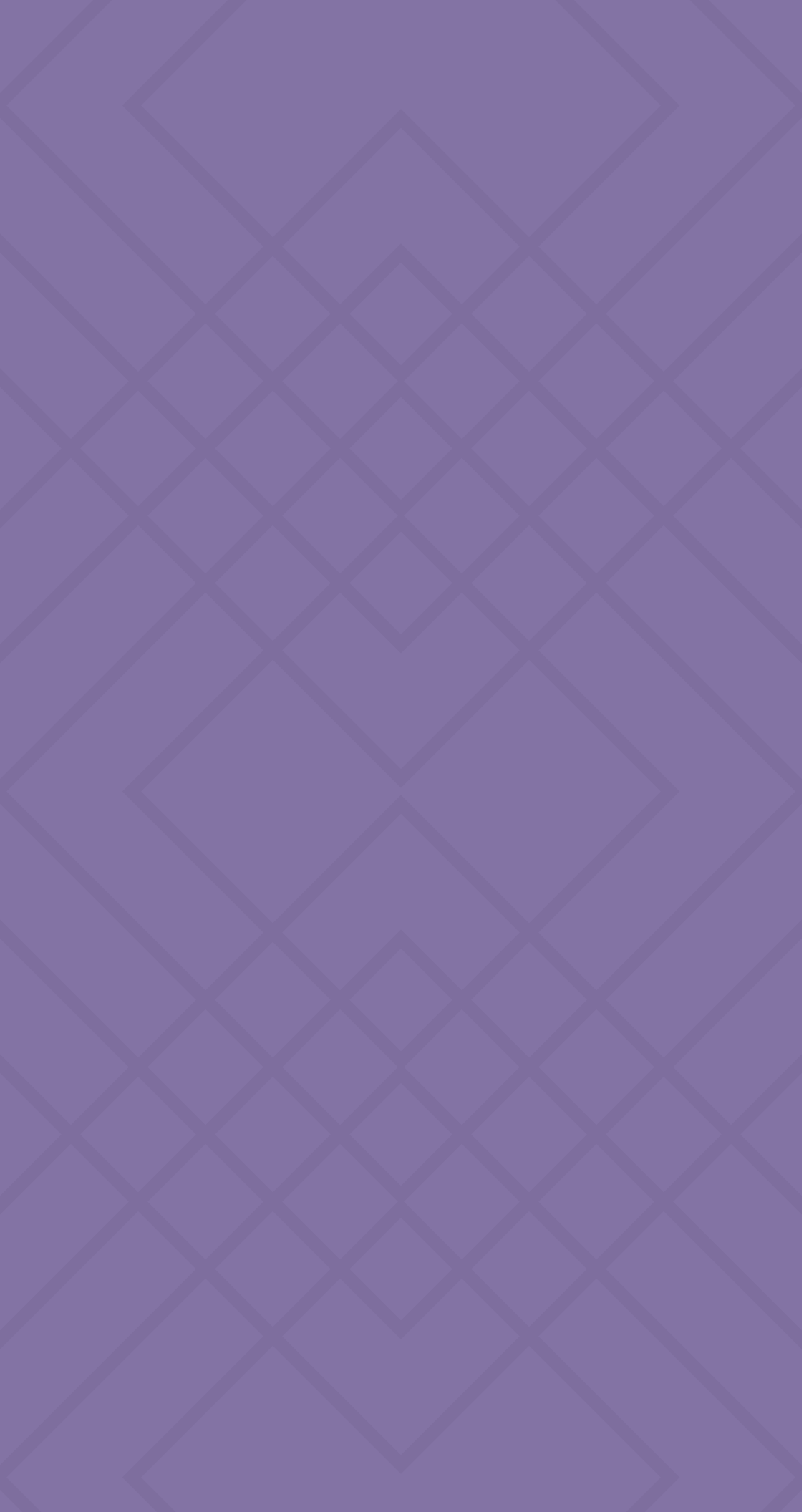
- Transcribed as told to Harsha Walia



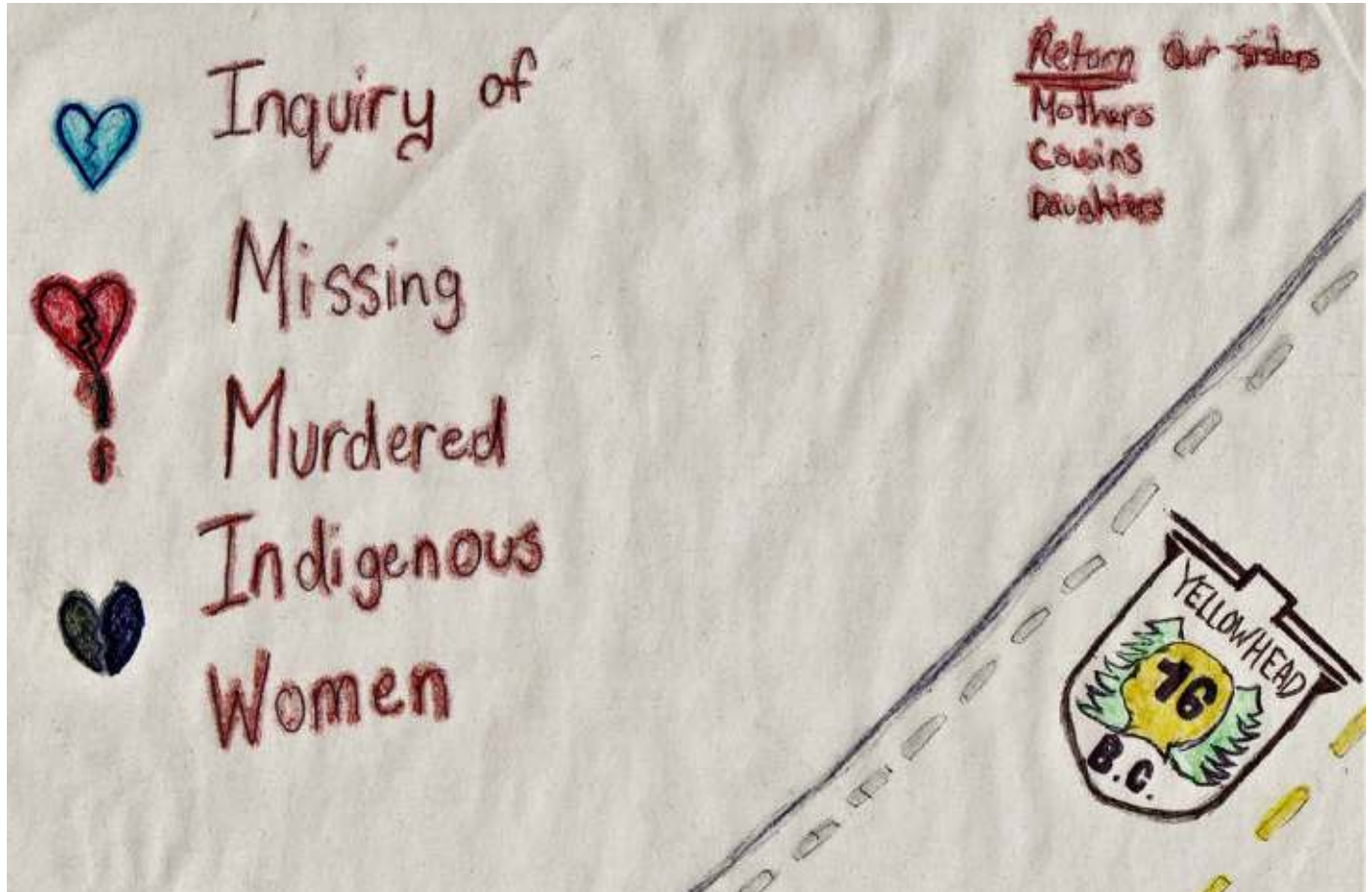
**The welfare system would give you money, but it was also used to track you into the child welfare system and then the kids and grandkids would get tracked for life.**



**For me, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is incomplete while our Indian women still go missing or are dying.**



# THIRTY-FIVE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



## **Full Indigenous jurisdiction:**

1. Implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* at all levels of government; assertion of Aboriginal Title over lands; jurisdiction over all areas of law-making; and restoration of collective Indigenous women's rights and governance.

## **Active Indigenous women's leadership:**

2. All levels of Canadian government, national aboriginal organizations, and nonprofit agencies must ensure the active leadership of Indigenous women in the design, implementation, and review of programs and policies that are directed to increase the safety of Indigenous women. Strengthen and support solutions that restore the role of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people as Title-holders of their lands, traditional knowledge keepers, sacred life-givers, and matriarchs within extended kinship networks.

## **Eliminating structural violence against Indigenous women and girls:**

3. Increased state enforcement alone cannot eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls because structural violence is connected to individual acts of male violence. A comprehensive national-level integrated action plan to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls must address all the socio-economic factors impacting Indigenous women's, girls', trans and two-spirit's safety including equitable access and self-determination over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and physical, mental, sexual and spiritual health.

## **Legislative reform to reduce Indigenous women's manufactured vulnerability:**

### **Immediate legislative reform including but not limited to:**

4. Implement independent civilian oversight of officials responsible for responding to and investigating violence against Indigenous women. Ensure that administrative, disciplinary, or criminal measures are available to hold such officials accountable when officers are found to have failed to act on reports of missing women or to have carried out biased or inadequate investigations of violence against Indigenous women.
5. Remove discrimination from the *Indian Act* by making women and men equal in the ability to pass on status, repair situations where discrimination against women has disadvantaged those claiming status through the mother's line, and remove the two-parent rule for transmitting status and the 6(2) cutoff that withholds status from the children of many women who are unable or unwilling to provide the father's name.



6. End the apprehension of Indigenous children and prohibit the placement of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous foster and adoptive families.
7. Require Gladue factors to be used as mitigating factors only, unless the victim is an Indigenous woman in which case her wishes should take precedence over an offender.
8. End the policing practice of street checks; reduce the number of bylaw infraction tickets issued by police in the DTES; prohibit police from carrying and using all lethal weapons; develop guidelines to facilitate greater use of police discretion not to lay charges especially for minor poverty-related offences; and end the counter-charging and criminalization of Indigenous women who defend themselves or their children.
9. Commit to using non-incarceration and alternative measures especially for minor offenses committed by Indigenous women. Governments must also provide sufficient and stable funding to Indigenous communities and organizations to provide alternatives to incarceration including community-based rehabilitation, diversion, community courts, and restorative justice methods geared towards Indigenous women.
10. Repeal laws that criminalize or increase harm for Indigenous women in the sex trade.
11. End the criminalization of people who use or possess small amounts of illicit substances.
12. End the criminalization of homelessness by eliminating bylaw infractions and criminal charges for sleeping or tenting in public spaces, and end the displacement of tent cities.
13. Change government definitions of social housing and affordable housing to mean rates that are affordable to people on social assistance, and rents that are income-geared not market-geared.
14. Amend the provincial *Residential Tenancy Act* to cover all housing and to strengthen tenants rights. Amend the provincial *Human Rights Code* and *Residential Tenancy Act* to make it illegal to discriminate on the basis of social condition including health status and drug use.
15. Implement an Indigenous reparations tax on top of property taxes on residential, commercial, and industrial properties, with all revenues going to implementation of an Indigenous poverty reduction plan.



## **Immediate Services needed in the DTES:**

### **Implementation of comprehensive services in the DTES including but not limited to:**

16. At least one multipurpose Indigenous Women's Centre in the DTES that is run by and for Indigenous women with long-term funding and wrap-around supports including healing support, communal kitchen, child care facility, elder accompaniment, artisan training and vending, and 24/7 educational, cultural, recreational, and empowerment-based programming to bring Indigenous women together collectively. This would also serve as a single point of access to connect to integrated services.
17. Fund more 24/7 low-barrier emergency shelters, transition homes, and drop-ins for women with long-term funding and full wrap-around supports. Also fund more Indigenous-centered and community-based, rather than police-based, victim services programs that provide holistic support including connection to land-based healing and guidance from elders.
18. An Indigenous Health and Wellness Centre in the DTES and Indigenous-run health programs that use Indigenous methods to address physical, mental, sexual, emotional, and spiritual harms. Also fund more mobile healthcare vans and community-based clinics, street nurses, and healthcare providers in the DTES.
19. Guarantee access to affordable, healthy, and nutritious foods especially fruits, vegetables, and meats in the DTES. This means more community gardens, food banks, nonprofit grocery stores, and providing discount cards for regular super markets.
20. Expand non-policing options for publicly intoxicated people, including civilian-operated 24/7 sobering centres providing appropriate care for Indigenous women.
21. Rapid easy access to Indigenous women's detox-on-demand where there is no time limit; Indigenous-run treatment centres; indoor overdose prevention sites and consumption sites for Indigenous women only; access to safer drug supply; and full spectrum of substitution treatment options.
22. Guarantee a 24/7 Indigenous mental health and addictions counselling program that is low-barrier, drop-in based, available on demand, and includes overnight street-based counselling in the DTES. Also ensure long-term mental health and addiction services, ranging from prevention, early intervention, treatment, crisis care, home visits, and aftercare.
23. Fund an Indigenous legal clinic in the DTES that can support Indigenous women in all criminal and civil legal matters including but not limited to family, criminal, mental health, and poverty law issues.

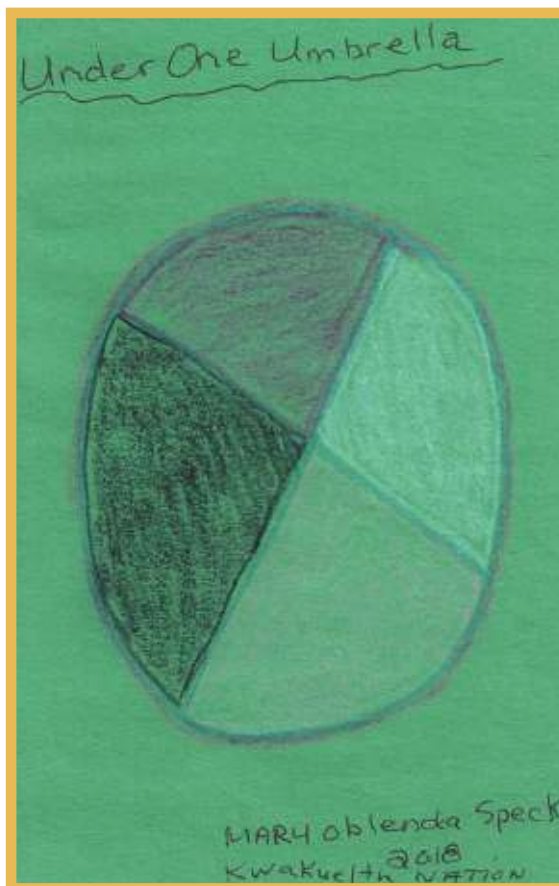
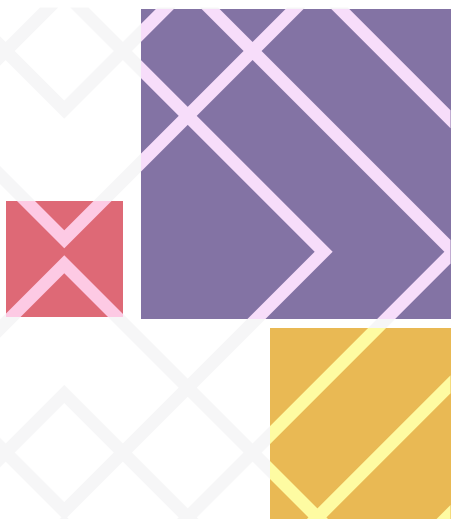
24. Fund a Bear Clan Patrol in the DTES that is led by Indigenous residents and based on Indigenous reciprocal responsibilities of safety, security, and kinship.
25. Provide a free medical accompaniment program where women are guaranteed rides and an accompaniment advocate for all medical appointments.
26. Provide an annual transport allowance for Indigenous women in the DTES to be able to travel to their home community.
27. Create a diversity of low-barrier, peer-based jobs in the DTES with priority hiring and support for Indigenous women of the community. Ensure that peer workers are paid a living wage, have full benefits, and the right to unionization. Recognize the contribution of volunteers and create appropriate and accredited volunteer programs to transfer skills and enable access to employment.

## **Guaranteed Public Services:**

### **Guarantee a range of public services including but not limited to:**

28. Provide a safe and affordable home for every Indigenous woman on and off reserve. This housing must be with long-term security of tenure, independent of matrimonial or common-law status, and self-contained units of at least 400 square feet with bathrooms and kitchens. Housing must also consider specific needs such as mobility access, space for children and extended families, and ceremonial practices. Highest priority for social housing should be given to Indigenous women fleeing violence and Indigenous mothers at risk of child apprehension.
29. Provide all residential school survivors with a guaranteed livable income for the rest of their lives. Increase federal pensions and provincial income and disability rates to the Market Basket Measure. Eliminate barriers to accessing income and disability assistance by reducing unnecessary eligibility criteria and simplifying the application processes. End clawbacks, increase earnings exemptions, and raise all asset limitations for those on income and disability assistance.
30. Ensure Indigenous mothers are able to maintain an adequate standard of living by raising income assistance and disability rates, ensuring safe and affordable housing, and guaranteeing food and transit allowances. Provide grandparents raising grandchildren, and all kinship care providers, with livable incomes and benefits. Provide income, housing, food, transit and all additional supports to youth transitioning out of government care until the age of 25 years old.
31. Guarantee a free and culturally appropriate child care system for all Indigenous families, including families awaiting kinship care placements, that accommodates children of all needs and abilities and is independent from child welfare services.

32. Universal public healthcare coverage to include supplements, prescriptions, counselling, dental, optical, mobility devices, adaptive equipment, and alternative treatments like acupuncture.
33. Provide a free transit pass for children ages 0-18 years old, all youth transitioning out of government care till age 25 years old, and for all adults on pensions, income assistance, and disability assistance.
34. Establish free public bus transportation between each town and city located along the entire length of Highway 16 and all other highways, with a number of safe homes and emergency phone booths along the length of all the highways.
35. Provide free tuition for all postsecondary education for all Indigenous women and girls, and eliminate all existing student loans for Indigenous women and girls.



# FULL LIST OF 200 RECOMMENDATIONS



**Red Women Rising:**  
Indigenous Women Survivors  
in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

## Recommendations to End Violence Against Indigenous Women in the DTES

1. Adopt a national-level integrated action plan to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls that:
  - a. Addresses all the socio-economic factors impacting Indigenous women's, girls', trans and two-spirit's safety including equitable access and self-determination over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and physical, mental, sexual, and spiritual health.
  - b. Incorporates the specific needs of extremely marginalized communities like the DTES.
  - c. Sets public timelines for implementation of existing recommendations from CEDAW, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, UN Human Rights Committee, Assembly of First Nations, Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Highway of Tears Symposium, and Native Women's Association of Canada.
  - d. Establishes a national database on murdered and missing Indigenous women, with accurate data collection on rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls.
  - e. Prioritizes a public education campaign in schools, transit system, media outlets, and community centres on Indigenous rights and systemic racism.
  - f. Immediately establishes free public bus transportation system between each town and city located along the entire length of Highway 16 and all other highways, with a number of safe homes and emergency phone booths along the length of all the highways.
  - g. Ensures adequate human, technical, and financial resources allocated for implementation, monitoring, and assessment of such a plan.
2. All policies at all levels of government impacting Indigenous women must meet the requirements set out in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. This includes full implementation of Indigenous jurisdiction over Indigenous lands, justice systems, and all areas of law-making.
3. Strengthen and support solutions that restore the role of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people as Title-holders of their lands, traditional knowledge keepers, sacred life-givers, and matriarchs within extended kinship networks. All levels of Canadian government, national aboriginal organizations, and nonprofit agencies must ensure the active leadership of Indigenous women in the design, implementation, and review of programs and policies that are directed to increase the safety of Indigenous women.



4. Remove discrimination from the *Indian Act* by making women and men equal in the ability to pass on status, repair situations where discrimination against women has disadvantaged those claiming status through the mother's line, and remove the two-parent rule for transmitting status and the 6(2) cutoff that withholds status from the children of many women who are unable or unwilling to provide the father's name.

### **Anti-Violence Services in the DTES:**

5. At least one multipurpose Indigenous Women's Centre in the DTES that is run by and for Indigenous women with long-term funding and wrap-around supports including healing support, communal kitchen, child care facility, elder accompaniment, artisan training and vending, and 24/7 educational, cultural, recreational, and empowerment-based programming to bring Indigenous women together collectively. This would also serve as a single point of access to connect to integrated services.
6. Fund more 24/7 low-barrier emergency shelters, transition homes, and drop-ins for women with long-term funding and full wrap-around supports including culturally-centered and holistic victim services, healing supports, counselling, legal assistance, programming, and recreational activities for Indigenous survivors of violence.

7. Fund a 24/7 Indigenous street intervention team that is staffed with counsellors and emergency services.
8. Fund a Bear Clan Patrol in the DTES that is led by Indigenous residents and based on Indigenous reciprocal responsibilities of safety, security, and kinship.
9. Fund training and certification for Indigenous women in the DTES to form a number of Indigenous Crisis Response Teams including search and rescue, family support, and community coordination to be ready to serve when an Indigenous woman or girl goes missing in the DTES.
10. Fund more Indigenous-centered and community-based, rather than police-based, victim services programs. These programs should provide land-based healing, cultural programs, counselling based on Indigenous practices, and guidance from elders.
11. Create violence prevention programs based on teachings of egalitarian gender roles including of two-spirited people, and teaching about consent, power, healthy relationships, emotional skills, and sexual health.
12. All service providers, police, prosecutors, and judges should receive mandatory and ongoing training in the causes and consequences of violence against Indigenous women and girls. This includes training on the duty to protect Indigenous women from violence and training on dealing with bereaved and grieving loved ones with compassion and sensitivity.
13. All agencies in the DTES must:
  - a. Provide mandatory training to staff and management in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, anti-racism, colonization, cultural competency, trauma-informed support, and Indigenous women's human rights.
  - b. Prioritize Indigenous women's safety and needs in allocating resources and services.
  - c. Guarantee appropriate services for Indigenous lesbian, trans and two-spirit women by operating specific programming that supports their needs, and ensuring that two-spirit identity is widely understood and supported.
  - d. Shift from providing services towards empowering the collective leadership of Indigenous women as hired workers, managers, board members, and within elders councils.
  - e. Implement an ongoing Warriors Against Violence program for men and masculine people.
  - f. Be subject to regular independent oversight and audits that include input from Indigenous women to ensure they are being proactively included and respected; and not marginalized, discriminated against, or excluded by agencies' practices.



## **Support for family members:**

14. Provide access to free and independent legal representation, victim services, counselling, and financial restitution to the families of missing or murdered Indigenous women, including street families and families of the heart.
15. Provide accessible information for families such as a toolkit on missing persons investigations, how to access legal and emotional support, and dealing with the media.
16. Provide annual local, regional, and national opportunities for families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and families of the heart in the DTES to spend time together, support each other, and guide a national action plan.
17. Establish an annual retreat for children of missing and murdered Indigenous women.
18. Establish a legacy fund for the children of missing and murdered Indigenous women that supports the children till at least the age of 25 years old with housing, education, healing programs, recreational programs, and cultural connection.

## **Policing protocols:**

19. Ensure that all cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women are duly investigated and prosecuted by standardizing protocols for police handling of cases, including coordination of police investigations into long-term missing persons cases and unsolved murders of Indigenous women and girls.
20. Review and repair police policies and procedures that are conducive to violence against Indigenous women, girls, trans and two-spirit people.
21. Ensure that family members and relatives are regularly contacted, have access to information about the development of investigations, and are informed about their rights in any legal proceedings.
22. Implement independent civilian oversight of officials responsible for responding to and investigating violence against Indigenous women. Ensure that administrative, disciplinary, or criminal measures are available to hold such officials accountable when officers are found to have failed to act on reports of missing women or to have carried out biased or inadequate investigations of violence against Indigenous women.
23. Provide Indigenous women, their families, and community advocates with an available and effective procedure to file complaints in the case of noncompliance or negligence by officials, and information on how to initiate and pursue that procedure.
24. Ensure adequate support and protection for witnesses.

## Recommendations to End Indigenous Women's Displacement from Land

1. All levels of the Canadian government must fully implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and apply its principles, norms, and standards including the right to self-determination and the right to exercise free, prior, and informed consent.
2. Change federal, provincial, and municipal policies to uphold Aboriginal Title and Indigenous jurisdiction over all areas of law-making that impact on reserve and off reserve nation members.
3. All levels of government must respect and honour historic Treaty relationships.
4. All levels of Canadian government must repudiate *terra nullius* and the Doctrine of Discovery, and end policies of assimilation of Indigenous peoples and policies of extinguishment of Aboriginal Title.
5. All levels of government and police forces must end the criminalization of Indigenous peoples who are asserting their jurisdiction and rights to lands and resources.
6. All Canadian and Aboriginal governments must ensure that Indigenous women are engaged fully and have equitable access to decision-making on issues of governance, land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, health, and other areas impacting Indigenous women.
7. Remove discrimination from the *Indian Act* by making women and men equal in the ability to pass on status, repair situations where discrimination against women has disadvantaged those claiming status through the mother's line, and remove the two-parent rule for transmitting status and the 6(2) cutoff that withholds status from the children of many women who are unable or unwilling to provide the father's name.
8. Compensation for the disenfranchisement and lack of protections for women and their descendants as a result of the discriminatory *Indian Act* and matrimonial real property laws.

### On reserve:

9. The federal government must guarantee:
  - a. Access to clean drinking water; food security based on a traditional diet; critical infrastructure including roads and sanitation systems; and essential health, education, child care, housing, transport, recreational, cultural, and emergency services on every reserve.

- b. Safe, affordable, and livable housing for every woman on her reserve that is independent of her matrimonial status.
  - c. Affordable child care and licensed day care options on every reserve.
  - d. Complete complement of maternal and infant/child health services on reserve to enable women to remain closer to home to give birth.
  - e. Free public transportation between each town and city located along the entire length of Highway 16 and all other highways, with a number of safe homes and emergency phone booths along the length of all the highways.
  - f. Increase funding on all reserves for programs and services that strengthen traditional and cultural knowledge grounded in Indigenous laws, values, and practices.
  - g. Range of anti-violence services including preventive programs, crisis intervention, victim services, advocacy support, restorative justice circles, shelters, transitional housing, and second-stage housing on every reserve.
  - h. Cultural sensitivity training for all first responders such as police, healthcare professionals, and social workers who assist survivors of violence on reserve.
10. Implementation of overarching substantive federal legislation to protect the rights of women and children living on reserve in the interim until First Nations communities can develop their own laws to replace matrimonial real property laws. This legislation should include opt-out clauses.
  11. Implementation of and full funding for federal Indigenous Child Welfare legislation that is attentive to specific First Nations, Metis, and Inuit needs. Ensure that Indigenous nations resume sole jurisdiction—and not simply service delivery—over child welfare for child-members of the nation who are on reserve and off reserve.
  12. End the apprehension of Indigenous children due to poverty or Eurocentric ideas of neglect that stem from a legacy of colonization.
  13. All levels of government should fully implement Jordan's Principle.
  14. The federal government must eliminate the discrepancy in federal education funding for First Nations children being educated on reserve and First Nations children being educated off reserve, and provide sufficient funding to close educational attainment gaps.
  15. Increase funding for the *Indigenous Languages Act* to preserve, revitalize, and strengthen all Indigenous languages. This should include efforts to hire and accredit language speakers to teach the language as credit courses for Indigenous students.



16. Close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and focus on indicators such as infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence, and the availability of appropriate health services.
17. Provide an annual transport allowance for Indigenous women in the DTES to be able to travel to their home community.

### **Band Councils:**

18. Women's shelters on reserve should have the option to incorporate as nonprofit organizations to receive funding directly from INAC, rather than through band councils, in order to maintain the privacy of those accessing the shelter.
19. Aboriginal governments should provide mandatory training for band councillors and community leaders to ensure that they treat the issue as a high priority.
20. Aboriginal governments should increase funding for education and programs regarding violence prevention directed at children, youth, and adults with an emphasis on consent, sexual education, and healthy relationships.
21. Aboriginal governments should fund community-based education to ensure that the historical and cultural importance of two-spirit identity is widely understood, supported, and promoted.
22. Aboriginal governments should adopt the principle of equal representation of women in governing councils and decision-making bodies, and introduce pay-equity policies on reserve.

## Recommendations to Guarantee Economic Security for Indigenous Women in the DTES

1. Implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.
2. Implement a human rights, Indigenous rights, and gender based analysis in the conception and implementation of all poverty reduction strategies, policies, legislation, and decision making.
3. All levels of government must coordinate on an Indigenous specific poverty reduction plan, complete with specific goals, targets, timelines, and accountabilities.
4. Implement an Indigenous reparations tax on top of property taxes on residential, commercial, and industrial properties, with all revenues going to implementation of an Indigenous poverty reduction plan.
5. Increase the federal Old Age Security (OAS), the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), Canadian Pension Plan (CPP), and BC Seniors Supplement.
6. Provide all residential school survivors with a guaranteed livable income for the rest of their lives.
7. Implementing existing recommendations from the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition for a whole-of-government poverty reduction strategy.

### Provincial Income Assistance:

8. Increase income and disability rates to the Market Basket Measure to reflect the cost of an adequate standard of living, and index them to inflation.
9. Provide grandparents raising grandchildren, and all kinship care providers, with incomes and benefits comparable to foster parents. This includes a living wage and full access to child care and respite support.
10. Eliminate barriers to accessing income and disability assistance by reducing unnecessary eligibility criteria and simplifying the application processes. This includes:
  - a. Removing the two-year financial independence requirement for income assistance.
  - b. Basing income assistance eligibility on current income only.
  - c. Removing the penalty clawback for failure to work search requirements for income assistance.
  - d. Removing the work search requirement for mothers with children over the age of three years old.



11. Restructure the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, including:
  - a. Bringing back individual caseworkers and timely individualized assistance.
  - b. Ensuring there are computers and Ministry support staff at every Ministry office for the purpose of helping applicants.
  - c. Modifying the online application for income assistance so that it is not mandatory to create an email address and BCeID.
12. End clawbacks of income and disability assistance including clawbacks of Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits and penalties for cohabitation.
13. Increase earnings exemptions for those on provincial income and disability assistance program, and any clawbacks must be incrementally tied to income.
14. Raise all asset limitations for those on income assistance to bring them in line with asset limitations for those on disability benefits.
15. Amend income and disability benefits assessments so that only relationships that display significant financial dependence or interdependence are relevant for the purposes of eligibility, and remove financial interdependence by default on the basis that a person indicates parental role for a child unless a spousal relationship can be established.
16. No reduction of welfare for families in cases of child apprehension, so that income support and housing is maintained while mothers are in the process of getting their children back.
17. Allow recipients of income assistance to remain on income assistance while attending postsecondary education.
18. Provide income supports to youth transitioning out of government care until the age of 25 years old, regardless of whether or not they are employed or in school.
19. Remove the age cap and the two-year eligibility requirement for income assistance for the Tuition Waiver Program for youth aging out of care.
20. Eliminate the prohibition on accessing Rental Assistance Program (RAP) and Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) housing subsidies for people on income and disability assistance.

21. Extend coverage for health supplements for people accessing income or disability assistance, such as counselling services that are particularly relevant for Indigenous women.

## **Employment Security:**

22. Increase the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by June 2019 for all workers with no exemptions, and increase it annually till it reaches a living wage that matches the cost of living.
23. Free skills training, retraining, and apprenticeships for Indigenous women in the DTES.
24. Rectify Indigenous women's exclusion from the economy by:
  - a. Developing equitable and inclusive hiring policy and standards.
  - b. Creating a diversity of low-barrier jobs in the DTES with priority hiring and support for Indigenous women of the community.
  - c. Creating peer-based employment programs including navigation positions throughout the housing, mental health, substance use, and income support systems.
  - d. Ensuring Indigenous women peer workers are paid a living wage, have full benefits, and have the right to unionization.
  - e. Creating jobs that value and compensate skills such as weaving, beading, drum making, food harvesting, and traditional healing, and support the creation of an Indigenous women's cooperative in the DTES.
  - f. Improving employment supports and workplace accommodations for Indigenous women who are single parents and/or in recovery to ensure that they are not setup to fail in their employment due to systemic barriers.
25. Expand the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model for all employment support programs.
26. Recognize the role and contribution of volunteers in the DTES, and create accredited volunteer programs to transfer skills and enable access to employment opportunities.
27. All levels of government should pay living wages to all direct and contracted government employees, and encourage other employers to do the same.
28. Enact stand-alone proactive pay equity legislation that requires public and private sector employers to pay women equal pay for work of equal value.
29. Restore the coverage and enforcement of employment standards at the Employment Standards Branch including effective proactive investigations and enforcement for wage theft and other employment violations, and providing benefits such as paid sick leave to all workers.

## **Universal Public Services:**

30. Guarantee a free and culturally appropriate child care system for all Indigenous families, including families awaiting kinship care placements. Child care must accommodate families' diverse schedules, be available to children of all needs and abilities, and must be independent from child welfare services.
31. Universal public healthcare coverage to include supplements, prescriptions, counselling, dental, optical, mobility devices, adaptive equipment, and alternative treatments like acupuncture.
32. Guarantee free and extended transportation:
  - a. Free transit pass for children ages 0-18 years old, all youth transitioning out of government care till the age of 25 years old, and for all adults on pensions, income assistance, and disability assistance.
  - b. Expand public transit, including HandyDart and community-based passenger van programs.
  - c. Access to free transportation to and from medical appointments, especially for those with disabilities and the elderly.
33. Implement better educational supports:
  - a. Expansion of the Head Start program for Indigenous families.
  - b. Guarantee a school breakfast and lunch food program in all public schools that is free, nutritious, and culturally diverse.
  - c. More Indigenous-focused schools with Indigenous teachers, Indigenous-based educational methodology and curriculum, and that is supportive to urban Indigenous students needs and contexts.
34. Free postsecondary tuition:
  - a. Free tuition for all postsecondary education for all Indigenous women and girls.
  - b. Eliminate all interest on existing student loans for Indigenous women and girls.
  - c. Under the Single Parents Employment Initiative, extend tuition coverage to multi-year degrees and training programs and remove the restricted list of eligible careers and programs.
35. Adoption of low-income customer rates and rules by BC Hydro and all energy providers including waiver of security deposits, late payment fees, and reconnection fees; more flexible payment arrangements; and suspension of disconnections during cold weather and for people with medical conditions.



## Recommendations for Safe and Affordable Housing for Indigenous Women in the DTES

1. The *Definition of Indigenous homelessness in Canada* should form the basis of all policies on housing and homelessness with appropriate solutions to homelessness that integrates land, culture, belonging, and kinship networks.
2. Comprehensive federal, provincial, and municipal Indigenous Housing policy framework to specifically address Indigenous homelessness.
3. Change government definitions of social housing and affordable housing to mean rates that are affordable to people on social assistance, and rents that are income-g geared not market-g geared.
4. Funding initiatives to end homelessness must be more inclusive of Indigenous women. Implement the existing recommendations of Homes 4 Women and Women's Shelters Canada on making homeless initiatives and funding structures more gender-equal.
5. Federal funding for homelessness needs to go beyond Housing First initiatives to better suit the diverse needs of Indigenous women. Housing First funding must also have less eligibility criteria and longer timelines.
6. Extend the provincial Shelter Allowance for Elderly Renters (SAFER) to housing charges in nonprofit cooperative housing, and extend SAFER grants to the amount of rent increases.

### Build Social Housing and Transition Homes:

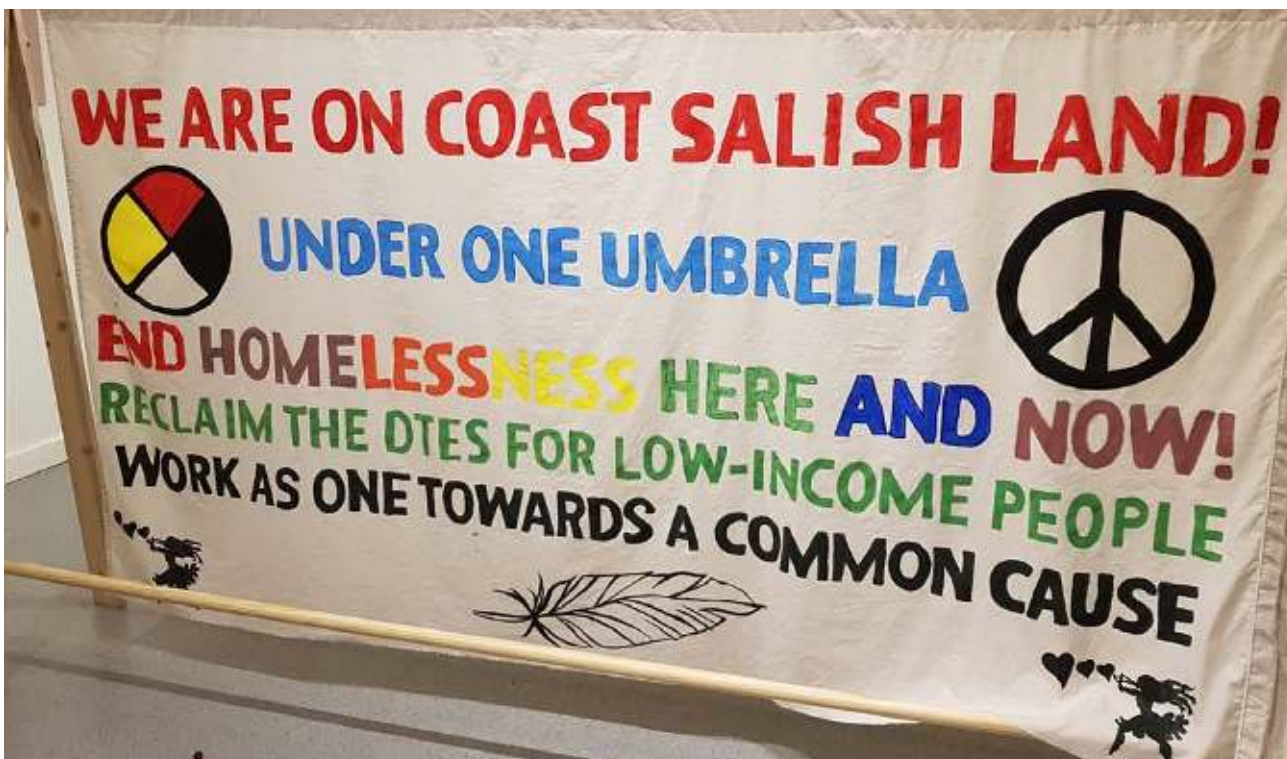
7. Immediately build 10,000 affordable social housing units per year in B.C., with an additional 1000 units each year. These units must be self-contained units of at least 400 square feet with bathrooms and kitchens.
8. A minimum of 30 percent of all units funded by the current National Housing Strategy and the various Building BC Housing Funds must be designated to Indigenous women and families, and be operated by Indigenous housing providers.
9. Any new social housing must consider the needs of Indigenous women, such as adequate space for children and extended families, cooperative housing models, accommodating cultural and ceremonial practices, equipped for mobility devices and accessibility for elders, and with integrated services such as child care, free laundry, and programming on-site.
10. Highest priority for social housing should be given to Indigenous women fleeing violence and Indigenous mothers at risk of child apprehension.

11. Provide Indigenous women with individualized options for housing that supports choice and self-determination. For example, women should have the option to live in or outside of the DTES, for abstinence-based or harm reduction-based buildings, for women-only or housing that includes men, for housing that is with or without increased security and guest rules.
12. Open more transition homes and low-barrier shelters that are for Indigenous women only.
13. Fund more Indigenous housing outreach workers and advocates.
14. All supportive housing and shelter providers should prioritize Indigenous women's participation in service delivery, as well as prioritize Indigenous women as peer workers, staff, and managers.

### **Legislative Protections:**

15. The provincial *Residential Tenancy Act* needs to be amended as follows:
  - a. The *Act* must cover all housing, including residents of social housing, nonprofit SROs, supportive housing, and temporary modular housing. People living in supportive housing should not be subjected to restrictive rules that violate their basic tenancy rights.
  - b. The *Act* must tie rent to the unit, not the tenant, so landlords cannot renovict tenants to increase rents. The *Act* must also tie landlord rights to increase rent with obligations to maintain property and to comply with orders made by the Residential Tenancy Branch.
  - c. Extend the 'right of first refusal' to tenants to return at their renovated unit at the previously payable rent in order to prevent renovictions. Also extend right of first refusal to all tenants, not just those living in residential complexes of more than five units.
  - d. When evicting a tenant on grounds that the landlord or a close family member intends to move in, require the landlord to file a statutory declaration indicating their relationship to the family member and that they intend to occupy the unit for at least six months.
  - e. Extend the grace period for non-payment of rent to 20 days; eliminate the Direct Request Process for non-payment of rent; and allow arbitrators discretion to consider contextual factors and refuse an order of possession for failure to pay rent.
  - f. Provide tenants the right to a warning before getting an eviction notice for cause and require automatic dispute resolution hearings for all evictions, where landlords initiate eviction proceedings by applying with the Residential Tenancy Branch in order to receive a registered eviction notice and schedule a mandatory hearing.
  - g. Develop a property maintenance policy that outlines a breadth of health, safety, and security standards.

- h. Create more robust enforcement mechanisms at the Residential Tenancy Branch to stop fraudulent evictions and to ensure landlords are adhering to maintenance obligations; amend criteria and lower the threshold for accepting investigation requests; increase the deadlines and expand the grounds for Review Consideration; and introduce a wider breadth of penalties that are imposed more often.
16. Landlords and property managers must be licensed and make licenses revocable in cases of significant misconduct.
17. An annual audit of all landlords and property managers to track refusal of housing and housing discrimination.
18. Amend the provincial *Human Rights Code* and *Residential Tenancy Act* to make it illegal to discriminate on the basis of social condition including health status and drug use.
19. Legalize tent cities and mobile home parks.
20. Amend the City of Vancouver *Single Room Accommodation* bylaw to define SRO conversion to mean raising rents above income assistance-shelter rates. Include zero-eviction conditions in all renovation and building permits.
21. Stop market housing development in the DTES to preserve land for social housing. Once adequate social housing is built, abide by the City of Vancouver's 1:1 rate of change principle.
22. All levels of government must buy or lease SRO hotels to prevent them from gentrifying and pushing out low-income residents.



## Recommendations to Keep Indigenous Families Together in the DTES

1. Implementation of and full funding for federal Indigenous Child Welfare legislation that is attentive to specific First Nations, Metis, and Inuit needs. Ensure that Indigenous nations resume sole jurisdiction—and not simply service delivery—over child welfare for child-members of the nation who are on reserve and off reserve. This is in accordance with the *United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
2. In full partnership with First Nations, INAC must immediately:
  - a. Fully redress the inequities and structural problems of funding for First Nations children.
  - b. Support funding and policy options proposed by First Nations for child and family services.
  - c. Ensure that a formal compliance and reporting program be established specifically for the First Nations Child and Family Services Program.
3. We applaud the work of Dr. Cindy Blackstock and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and call on the federal government to comply with the legally-binding orders of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal to:
  - a. Immediately and fully apply Jordan's principle to all First Nations children living on and off reserve.
  - b. Apply Jordan's principle based on the need of the child and not limited to the normative standard of care.
  - c. Ensure that administrative delays do not delay service provision and respond to most cases within 48 hours.
4. Implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Actions on Child Welfare, recommendations in *Indigenous Resilience, Connectedness and Reunification – From Root Causes to Root Solutions* by Special Advisor Grand Chief Ed John, and recommendations in *Calling Forth Our Future: Options for the Exercise of Indigenous Peoples' Authority in Child Welfare* by the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

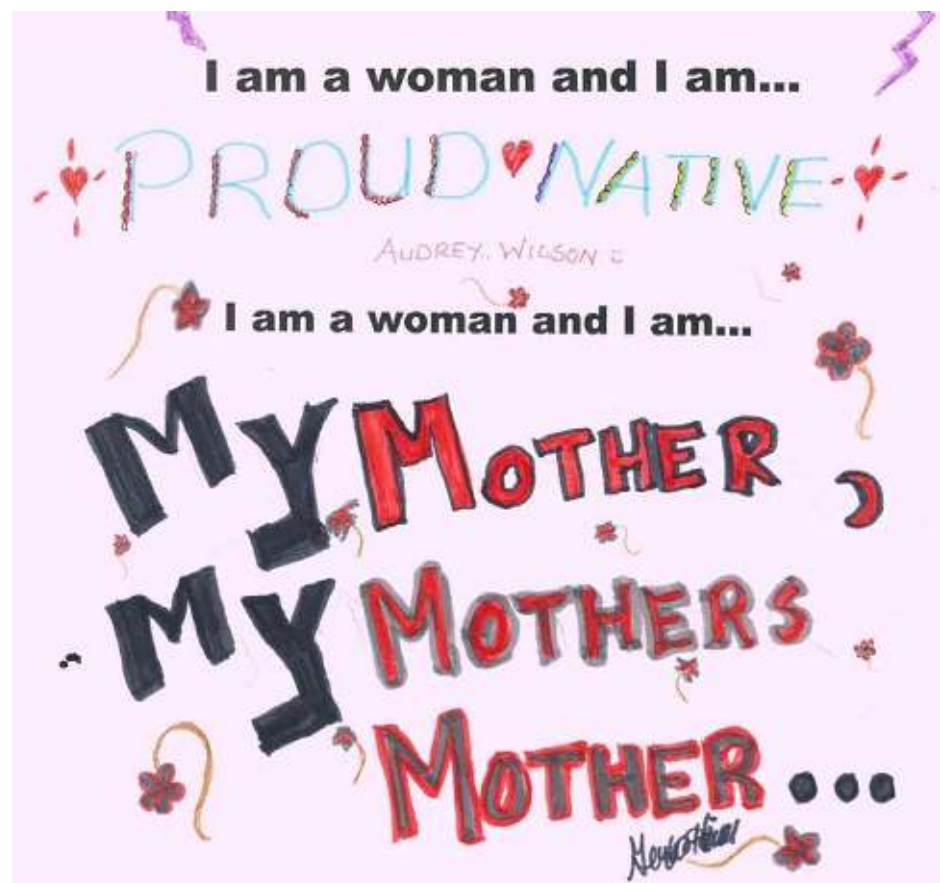
### End Child Apprehensions:

5. End the apprehension of Indigenous children due to poverty or Eurocentric ideas of neglect that stem from a legacy of colonization. Poverty must not be conflated with neglect or mistreatment, and removing children from their families exacerbates cycles of trauma and poverty.

6. Immediately disallow apprehensions of Indigenous babies at birth and while they are still breastfeeding.
7. Prohibit the placement of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous foster and adoptive families, and regularly report on how many Indigenous children are in government care and how many are being placed in non-Indigenous homes.
8. The provincial government must immediately review the care plans for all Indigenous children and youth currently in care and involve their Indigenous communities, especially extended family members and elders, in the care plan.

## Support Indigenous Families:

9. Making funds available for non-Indigenous foster care services but not for supporting Indigenous families perpetuates the detrimental cycle of apprehension. Increase available supports and preventative services for mothers and families.
10. Ensure families are able to maintain an adequate standard of living by raising income assistance and disability rates, ensuring safe and affordable housing, and guaranteeing food and transit allowances.
11. Increase financial amounts provided to caregivers under MCFD's Home of a Relative program.
12. Guarantee free and culturally appropriate child care and early childhood education for all children on and off reserve, with adequate staffing ratios and support for children with special needs.
13. Guarantee free individualized support such as culturally appropriate parenting programs; detox on demand; and counselling for mothers with mental health diagnoses, learning disabilities, drug use dependence, and who are survivors of domestic violence.
14. Enforce the Ministry mandate of supporting—not surveilling—families. Voluntary disclosures of personal information in order to seek support must not be used as a reason to remove children.



15. Social workers must increase communication with families about what is being investigated, clear timelines and goals, and file status.
16. Frequent family visits and family reunification must always be the top priority and never delayed due to MCFD's own bureaucratic inefficiencies. Social workers must not be allowed to cancel family visits without written authorization from the Director.
17. Increase the number of culturally appropriate family liaison workers and parenting supports.
18. Implement existing recommendations by the Fostering Change Initiative and First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. In particular:
  - a. Remove eligibility restrictions and increase financial and other supports for youth and young people on Youth Agreements and Agreements with Young Adults. Agreements with Young Adults should be increased to at least \$1400 per month with no clawbacks.
  - b. Remove the maximum number of months during which young people are eligible to remain on Agreements with Young Adults.
  - c. Extend the age till 25 years old for how long MCFD should support young people as they transition into adulthood and continue to receive housing, food, transit, cultural, and other financial supports.
  - d. Remove the age limit to be eligible for free postsecondary tuition and eliminate the requirement of months in care to be eligible for free postsecondary tuition.

### **Accountability:**

19. Train and hire more Indigenous social workers and ensure that all social workers are culturally-competent, committed to decolonizing practices, have better communication skills, and are educated about and sensitive to the intergenerational trauma of family separation.
20. Fund and guarantee independent Indigenous family advocates who can advocate for mothers and families in their dealings with MCFD.
21. Require that all child welfare decision makers and courts must mandatorily consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers.
22. An independent and external process for complaints, oversight, and accountability for MCFD neglect investigations, decisions to apprehend children, and for deaths of children and youth in government care.

## Recommendations to End Criminalization of Indigenous Women in the DTES

1. All levels of government must recognize the inherent and constitutionally protected right of Indigenous people to establish and control Indigenous justice systems. All levels of government must also fund the establishment of Indigenous law institutes to support the restoration and advancement of Indigenous legal systems.
2. Redirect growing municipal, provincial, and federal police and prison budgets towards solutions that increase safety for Indigenous women such as more housing, child care, income, healthcare, mental health and addictions services, and healing supports.
3. Implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action on Justice for Indigenous Peoples.

### Policing:

4. As in other jurisdictions, prohibit the police from carrying and using all lethal weapons. Even in the most escalated scenario, there is no justification for a police-involved lethal shooting.
5. Eliminate the use of VPD restraint devices such as the hobble restraint device, and end the use of police dogs as weapons.
6. Eliminate searches and monitoring of Indigenous women and girls by male police officers.
7. Immediate independent investigation into the VPD practice of street checks with the goal of ending street checks.
8. Reduce the number of bylaw infraction tickets issued by VPD in the DTES.
9. Develop guidelines to facilitate greater use of police discretion not to lay charges especially for minor poverty-related offences.
10. Ensure that that all policing practices conform to the *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act*.
11. All police forces should implement Sex Work Enforcement Guidelines similar to those in Vancouver that support the safety of sex workers in police interactions.



12. Expand non-policing options for publicly intoxicated people, including civilian-operated 24-hour sobering centres providing appropriate care for Indigenous women.
13. Make it easier to file a police complaint and establish an independent civilian watchdog that conducts investigations of reported incidents of serious police misconduct, including allegations of police violence and sexual assault. Increase liability for the misconduct of police officers to include criminal charges.
14. Allow the provincial Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner to initiate its own systemic investigations or hearings, and shift investigations of misconduct within the jurisdiction of the Police Complaint Commissioner to investigations directly by the Commissioner.
15. Implement existing recommendations by Human Rights Watch in *Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia, Canada*.

### **Legal and Judicial Reform:**

16. End the counter-charging and criminalization of Indigenous women who defend themselves or their children from abuse and violence.
17. Repeal all mandatory minimum prison sentences for non-violent offences. Implement legislation to allow trial judges to depart from mandatory minimum sentences and restrictions on the use of conditional sentences.
18. Repeal laws that criminalize or increase harm for women in the sex trade.
19. End the criminalization of people who use or possess small amounts of illicit substances.
20. End the criminalization of homelessness by eliminating bylaw infractions and criminal charges for sleeping or tenting in public spaces, and end the displacement of tent cities.
21. End transit fare evasion ticketing.
22. Repeal the mandatory imposition of the victim fine surcharge and give judges the discretion to waive the fine for those unable to pay it.
23. Reform the drug treatment court process so as to not require a guilty plea to access the program.
24. Increase the ways in which failures to appear and other violations can be quashed early in the judicial process and take proactive steps to clear bench warrants for Indigenous women.
25. Legislation should require Gladue factors to be used as mitigating factors only, unless the victim is an Indigenous woman in which case her wishes should take precedence over an offender.



## Access to Justice:

26. All levels of government must commit to using non-incarceration measures especially for poverty-related minor offenses. Governments must also provide sufficient and stable funding to Indigenous communities and organizations to provide alternatives to incarceration including community-based rehabilitation, diversion, community courts, and restorative justice methods geared towards Indigenous women.
27. Fund an Indigenous legal clinic in the DTES that can support Indigenous women in all legal matters and provide regular legal education workshops.
28. Increase Indigenous women's access to justice by extending funding to guarantee all Indigenous women have access to full legal aid for criminal and civil legal matters including family, criminal, mental health, and poverty legal aid.
29. *Gladue* is a legal requirement. All levels of government have an obligation to ensure that all Indigenous women in the DTES have timely, appropriate, and high-quality access to Gladue reports when involved in the criminal justice system.
30. Expand the number and scope of courts like B.C.'s First Nations Court that emphasize healing plans over punishment.
31. Expand funding for community-based and court-based victim services.
32. Prioritize funding to train Indigenous legal advocates, court workers, and lawyers including through increased funding and capacity for Indigenous court worker programs and initiatives under the Indigenous Justice Program.
33. The Federation of Law Societies of Canada, law schools in Canada, and the Canadian Judicial Council must provide mandatory training to all law students, lawyers, and judges on the legacy of residential schools, Canada's obligations under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Indigenous legal traditions, Gladue principles, and the systemic failure of colonial legal systems to uphold justice for Indigenous people.
34. Implement existing recommendations of the Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission.
35. Implement existing recommendations in *Justice Reform for British Columbia* by Community Legal Assistance Society, Pivot Legal Society, West Coast LEAF, and B.C. Civil Liberties Association.

## Correctional Facilities:

36. Full decarceration of Indigenous women in the federal and provincial corrections system. No Indigenous woman should ever be sentenced into a colonial system.

**In the immediate, a number of necessary reforms can drastically reduce the incarceration rates of Indigenous women:**

37. Increased resourcing, capacity, and funding for section 81 Healing Lodges. Indigenous nations and urban Indigenous organizations must be able to operate Healing Lodges on a long-term basis and with full wrap-around supports. Change the policy of not allowing women with maximum-security classifications to be at CSC-operated healing lodges and increase access to all healing lodges.
38. Increased resources, capacity, and funding for section 84 agreements so that Indigenous nations are compensated and can provide full support for Indigenous women seeking section 84 releases. Indigenous communities and organizations should exercise control and self-determination in the development and implementation of reintegration plans.
39. Start all Indigenous women prisoners at a minimum-security level and remove the requirement to automatically incarcerate Indigenous women in a maximum-security facility for the first two years of a murder sentence.
40. End the current classification scale and reassess all Indigenous women currently classified at the maximum-security level using a gender and culturally-responsive classification tool.
41. The test for security classification under s. 18 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations* should be amended to eliminate institutional adjustment as criteria for a higher classification level.
42. End the placement of Indigenous women in solitary confinement in all prisons, and establish an independent external review of all Indigenous women in segregation placements.
43. Increase supports for Indigenous women on conditional release, particularly through income assistance, employment, counselling, and child care. Permit conditional release options that facilitate Indigenous women to be housed with their children.
44. All day-to-day programs and services at remand, provincial, and federal facilities must be accessible, timely, and long term with the goal of decarceration and successful reintegration. Access must be unconditional, not contingent on classification, and not withdrawn as a punitive or disciplinary measure.

Guaranteed programs and services must include:

- a. Independent prison legal services.
- b. Independent healthcare in accordance with the U.N. Mandela rules including 24/7 appropriate healthcare; mental health counselling; access

to gender-affirming surgery; detox on demand; heroin-assisted and injectable hydromorphone treatment; and safe needle exchange and tattooing program.

- c. Culturally appropriate and non-punitive healing programs that understand physical, mental, spiritual, and sexual traumas as intergenerational collective traumas caused by colonization.
  - d. Free phone calls.
  - e. Nutritious food.
  - f. Library, reading materials, and computer literacy.
  - g. Increased visitation, including increased hours, more opportunities for physical contact, and decreased security checks for visitors.
  - h. Access to meaningful employment and higher prisoner pay.
  - i. Support for release planning.
45. Establish alternatives to correctional facilities for all mothers who are primary caregivers or expected to give birth while in prison. In the immediate, implement child-friendly mother-child units in all correctional facilities so no child is separated from their mother.
46. For women who do not have primary custody of their children, prioritize the social bond between incarcerated mothers and their children. This includes:
- a. Funding for families to cover the costs and logistics of transportation for visits and child-friendly practices during visitation including visitation hours scheduled after school hours, no body searches of children, and allowance for physical contact.
  - b. Visitation outside the prison setting.
  - c. Free and unlimited phone calls and introduce video calling technologies, in addition to the right to open in-person visits.
  - d. Family reunification as a priority post-release by providing all the necessary supports including housing, child care, and parenting support.
47. Implement existing recommendations in the Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, *A Call to Action: Reconciliation with Indigenous Women in the Federal Justice and Correctional Systems*.

## Recommendations for Indigenous Women's Wellness in the DTES

1. All levels of government must acknowledge that the current state of Indigenous women's health is a direct result of colonialism and government policies.
2. Strengthen all the social determinants of Indigenous women's health by ensuring access to and governance over land, culture, language, housing, child care, income security, employment, education, and safety.
3. Access to affordable and nutritious foods especially fruits, vegetables, and meats in the DTES. This means more community gardens, food banks, nonprofit grocery stores, and providing discount cards for regular super markets.
4. End the health risks associated with living in the DTES by ensuring healthy environments and built-environments in all buildings, residences, and outdoors. This includes the right to:
  - a. Clean air and clean streets.
  - b. Green space and urban ecological systems.
  - c. Sanitation.
  - d. Accessible and clean public washrooms.
  - e. Potable water.
  - f. Functioning water fountains and more access to water sources.

### **Culturally safe healthcare:**

5. An Indigenous Health and Wellness Centre in the DTES and more Indigenous-run health programs that use Indigenous methods and medicines to address physical, mental, sexual, emotional, and spiritual harms.
6. End the coerced sterilization of Indigenous women, and hold health professionals criminally responsible for acts of coerced sterilization.
7. End the medical pathologizing and diagnosing of gender identity. Train healthcare professionals to provide gender-affirming care that is safe for and respectful of trans women and two-spirit people.
8. Reframe mental health and addictions services so they mirror Indigenous women's social and economic realities and aspirations towards healing.
9. All healthcare workers must believe Indigenous women and treat them as credible experts about their own health.

10. All medical and nursing schools in Canada must require courses dealing with Indigenous health issues, including the legacy of colonialism and its impacts, as well as skills-based training in anti-racism, human rights, and trauma-informed care.
11. More doctors and nurses, and especially more Indigenous healthcare professionals.
12. Recognize Indigenous healing practices and have more health professionals trained in Indigenous health practices. Recognize the role of Indigenous reproductive and birthing knowledge, including ceremonies related to healthy sexual development.
13. Opportunities for urban Indigenous women to learn traditional and land-based healing practices and develop peer-based holistic health support programs and activities such as regular opportunities to go canoeing, pick medicines, and harvest foods.
14. More Indigenous patient navigators and Indigenous medicine people in hospitals to bridge between Indigenous patients and the Western medical system.
15. More Indigenous healing spaces and sacred spaces in hospitals and hospices.
16. Social workers in hospitals need to ensure wrap-around support, including financial, housing, and social support, before discharging Indigenous women from hospitals.
17. Hospitals including security guards need to be welcoming and supportive—not judgmental and criminalizing—in their interactions with Indigenous patients.
18. Security guards and all emergency room healthcare providers and staff must receive mandatory training in cultural sensitivity, mental health, and de-escalation.

### **Expanded health services:**

19. Universal public healthcare coverage to include supplements, prescriptions, counselling, dental, optical, mobility devices, adaptive equipment, and alternative treatments like acupuncture.
20. Expanded access to free transportation to and from medical appointments especially for those with disabilities and the elderly.
21. Expand home support, residential care services, and the number of residential care beds.
22. More mobile healthcare vans and community-based clinics, street nurses, and healthcare providers in the DTES.

23. Ensure timely, culturally safe, and evidence-based mental health and addiction services in the DTES, ranging from prevention, early intervention, treatment, crisis care, home visits, and aftercare.
24. Guarantee a 24/7 mental health and addictions counselling program that is low-barrier, drop-in based, available on demand, and includes overnight street-based counselling in the DTES.
25. Declare the opioid crisis a national public health emergency that disproportionately impacts Indigenous women, and expand funding for immediate health-based solutions for the opioid crisis that focus on the specific needs of Indigenous women. This includes:
  - a. Full spectrum of recovery supports including immediate access to Indigenous women's detox-on-demand and treatment centres.
  - b. Indigenous-run treatment centres that use culture as treatment with Indigenous healing methods and land-based practices.
  - c. More indoor overdose prevention sites and consumption sites, including culturally safe sites for Indigenous women only.
  - d. Decriminalization and access to safer drug supply.
  - e. Opioid-assisted therapy programs and full spectrum of substitution treatment options.
  - f. Longer-term funding for range of culturally safe treatment programs.
  - g. Provincial regulation and oversight over all recovery programs and facilities.
26. Ensure that people with mental health and/or substance use-related disabilities have a means to enforce their human rights related to accessing and maintaining their housing and employment.
27. Replace the deemed consent provisions of the *Mental Health Act* and the consent override provisions of the *Healthcare (Consent) and Care Facility (Admission) Act* and the *Representation Agreement Act* with a legislative mechanism that protects and respects the patient's autonomy in making healthcare decisions and allows the patient to include trusted family members and friends in their treatment and recovery process.
28. Create legislative standards regulating the use of isolation in mental health facilities and the use of physical, mechanical, environmental, and chemical restraints against mental health patients to ensure compliance with *Charter* rights.

# ENDNOTES

## Executive Summary

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