

**House of Commons**  
**Violence Against Aboriginal Women**  
**January 18, 2011**  
**Presentation by Marilyn George and Tracy Porteous**

Good afternoon, my name is Marilyn George. I am the Outreach Services Coordinator in Smithers BC, almost the midway point on the Highway of Tears between Prince Rupert and Prince George, where thus far, upwards of 19 women have either been killed or gone missing.

I am also here today as an Aboriginal Women's Representative to EVA BC, which is a provincial organization in BC that works on behalf of 240 programs located throughout the province that respond to violence against women.

Like the work of my provincial organization EVA BC, my work is solely related to responding to violence against women, that is, domestic and sexual violence, child sexual abuse and criminal harassment. I have been doing this kind of work for 14 years.

I am from the Sikedakh/Glen Vowell BC; in the Hazelton area and I have travelled here from the north to speak with you about the shocking levels of violence being perpetrated against Aboriginal women and girls here in BC.

I don't think I need to speak about the **kinds** of violence or the extent of the violence experienced by Aboriginal women because by now, through the many hearings you have attended already or will attend, you will hear that over 90 % of Aboriginal women have either been sexually abused as girls, gang raped as adolescents or raped and/or beaten as adults.

According to Statistics Canada's 2004 General Social Survey:

- Rates of physical and sexual assault against Aboriginal women are more than three times higher than non-Aboriginal women;
- Aboriginal women report experiencing more severe and potentially life-threatening forms of physical and sexual violence (54% of Aboriginal women versus 37% of non- Aboriginal women);
- Aboriginal women are almost seven times more likely to be murdered than non-Aboriginal women.

It's like walking around with an X on your back.

In BC as you know, our province has more missing and murdered women than anywhere else in Canada, 160 in fact according to the Sisters in Spirit Report....

.....a shocking and shameful reality that must be addressed without delay and I wish to thank you for caring enough by holding these hearings....

I wish to focus my talk with you today on what to do and where we should go from here.

**I wish first though to caution you very strongly against concluding these hearings with recommendations for “more reports or more studies”.**

Aboriginal people have been studied perhaps more than almost any other group and the time for study on this subject is past, the time for action is now.

Throughout the first decade of 2000, EVA BC, working in partnership with the Pacific Association of First Nations Women and BC Women’s Hospital and held a number of meetings bringing together Aboriginal women from across the province to discuss the violence perpetrated against us and what needs to be done.

During this time numerous Aboriginal women from across BC came together for many meetings. We studied the issues very carefully, we looked at all the other studies and wrote 2 reports ourselves, the second of which I will share with you today.

It is entitled “Researched to Death” and I think the title alone speaks to what many Aboriginal women feel today.

The three organizations involved concluded that the findings in the previous reports were especially alarming given that the violence experienced by Aboriginal women is believed to exceed that of any other group of women in Canada as said by the late Patricia Monture-Angus. (in 1995, (p. 170).<sup>1</sup>

For Aboriginal women, violence frequently begins in childhood and continues throughout adolescence into adulthood. That is the same for me and most other Aboriginal women I know....

Violence in Aboriginal women’s lives is pervasive and is compounded by the violence of systemic and institutionalized racism, as well as the effects of historical violence such as residential schools, the Indian Act and other legacies of colonization (Manuel, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>.

In school I grew feeling looked down upon and punished for who I was, I experienced people feeling sorry for me and my sister and punishing us for being “dirty little Indian girls”.

Violence in many Aboriginal women’s lives is a daily occurrence. Far too many women have died, either by murdered or by their own hand.

Many governments have been willing to fund studies and reports, but very few have been willing to step up and fund the long-term solutions to the problem of violence against our women and girls.

How many more women have to die before any concrete long term action is taken.

We need programs designed by us and for us and anything short of that will not do.

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<sup>1</sup> Monture, A. (1995). *Thunder in my soul: A Mohawk woman speaks*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel, N. (n.d.). *The impact of residential schooling on First Nation’s women: Substance and addiction*. Unpublished masters’ thesis, City University, Bellevue, Washington.

We need the kind of big action that will support an ongoing network of anti violence services run by Aboriginal women and for Aboriginal women.

All across BC and in fact in every province and territory in Canada, there are networks of services to respond to violence against women.

Not all jurisdictions have enough of these services, but they exist and, they have been making a difference.

As I mentioned, I myself work at one of these services in Smithers and Hazelton.

These anti violence services are mostly what I would call 'mainstream services', that is, services set up by mainstream, non-Aboriginal, social services agencies, women's agencies or governments.

In looking at these services across the North of BC, I can say that while many of these programs have Aboriginal women on staff and are doing excellent work.....

..... and many reach out to women on reserve....

..... there are many women on reserve who either have no way of getting to town, who are not "allowed" to engage in these services because the control their abusive partners have on them or, who don't trust the mainstream services no matter how good they are.

And, without getting into the history of colonization, which I am sure you all familiar with.....

....the issue of violence against Aboriginal women on and off reserve is very complex.

For many women, they want the security of confidentiality that comes with going to town for help and therefore the existing mainstream services must have cross cultural competency training and have Aboriginal women on staff.

This could be a funding stream you put in place, that is, for each existing anti violence service, you provide funding for an Aboriginal counsellor/advocate position.

**But in addition, and most importantly, there should be** anti-violence services, run by aboriginal women and for Aboriginal women in communities all across the nation.

I believe it is this, one to one support work and advocacy and the community education these programs would also do, that will make the difference, immediately and in the long term.....

The solutions that will work will only come from our women and we need to empower them to act and to help others and to speak out.

Article 22 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* provides that:

- I. Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities in the implementation of this Declaration; and

- II. States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.
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My name is Tracy Porteous and I am also with the EVA BC. I am here as an ally to Marilyn and Aboriginal women all across BC, and I would like to, very quickly, share with you some of the findings and recommendations that have been made numerous times by Aboriginal women in BC through our consultations and meetings.

Aboriginal women who attended our forums have spoken extensively about the context of violence in Aboriginal women's lives. Specifically, women have spoken of the systemic racism they experience and the devastating legacy of violence left by the impact of residential schools.

As a front line worker I can testify to my witnessing that Aboriginal women are treated differently by the systems, and that racism is a reality that needs to be addressed.

As Marilyn suggests, we think there needs to be more Aboriginal women providing front line services and as such would like to also suggest you fund colleges and universities to provide pre employment training so that more Aboriginal women are prepared and ready to work in this sector.

In addition to this kind of training, we think there is a strength-based approach we can bring to training, supporting and preparing Aboriginal women to provide their own front line services.

There are many anti violence workers, such as Marilyn who have been doing this work for many years. Any new services that you might fund could have the benefit of training provided by existing anti violence service providers. There is no need to start from scratch.

There will need to be some cultural translation brought into the mix, but we have experience doing exactly this when we supported the development of "The women of our people"....

Next, the Aboriginal women who participated in our forums uniformly agreed that Aboriginal women's interests are inadequately represented at the provincial level.

Women in BC feel strongly there should be an organization funded where Aboriginal women's voices are central and we support this concept fully.

In order to address a systemic understanding at provincial and federal levels, we need a provincial organization to engage in policy discussions and funding negotiations addressing violence against Aboriginal women.

Governments must include Aboriginal women in these and other processes if meaningful programs and responses are to be developed.

**Aboriginal women have also been clear that Aboriginal women's healing cannot occur in isolation from the healing of Aboriginal men, children and their communities — programs and funding for women's anti-violence services must also include funds for men's and youth services.**

Staff of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal anti-violence, health, legal and related services, require anti-violence training and education that is specific to Aboriginal women.

A general understanding of violence against women, for example, will not sufficiently equip front line workers with the knowledge and skills necessary to work with Aboriginal women who have experienced violence.

Meaningful, effective training, must provide staff with a historical context of violence against Aboriginal women and people, address specific dynamics of violence and healing in Aboriginal families, and actively work to de-normalize the violence pervasive in Aboriginal women's lives.

As well, training must be both culturally and geographically relevant to meet the diverse needs of different communities.

In addition, all training and education must be led by Aboriginal instructors whenever possible.

We strongly urge the Government to show leadership by committing funds to the above recommendations.

The Government of Canada has already announced a commitment of Millions to assist with increasing the safety of Aboriginal women and we applaud you for this.

What we must ensure is that there are funds for ongoing services and infrastructures and not just project funding.

The issue of safety and security of women in BC has never been more important and visible.

As a result, we believe that immediate action is needed to more adequately address the human rights, life safety and liberty of Aboriginal women and children of British Columbia.