



Sisters in Spirit Initiative

An Issue Paper

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Background

The Amnesty International Canada (2004) report “*Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*” estimated that 500 Aboriginal women had gone missing or had been murdered in Canada. In the same year, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) launched the national *Sisters in Spirit* Campaign to raise public awareness of the alarmingly high rates of violence against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. As a result of this campaign, NWAC signed a five-year contribution agreement with the Government of Canada to implement the Sisters in Spirit Initiative.

The overall goal of the *Sisters in Spirit* initiative (SIS) is to reduce the risks and increase the safety and security of all Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The expected outcome is to increase gender equality and improve the participation of Aboriginal women in the economic, social, cultural and political realms of Canadian society.

The objectives of SIS are to:

- ❖ Increase public knowledge about the extent of racialized, sexualized violence occurring against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.
- ❖ Increase public understanding of the global impacts caused by continued racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls.
- ❖ Dispel the myths about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls by presenting the realities of racialized, sexualized violence.

These objectives will be achieved through the SIS research, policy, education and awareness activities.

A key component of the SIS research agenda is the gathering of qualitative and quantitative information. NWAC aims to accurately describe the number of Aboriginal women and girls who are missing or who have been murdered in Canada. NWAC is exploring the root causes, circumstances and trends surrounding these incidents. In-depth interviews are being conducted with family members to get a comprehensive picture of the lives of these Aboriginal women and girls. Interview questions have been designed to reflect the Life Cycle teachings and will allow families to share and celebrate the lives of their missing or murdered relative, as well as to collect important qualitative information.

NWAC has developed a Community Based Research Plan (CBRP) to ensure that all SIS research is conducted in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. NWAC has adopted the ethics of Caring, Sharing, Trust, and Strength to guide its

work, and to ensure that family members, service providers, communities, and staff are well taken care of when undertaking this difficult but important work.

The research will continue throughout the five-year implementation of SIS, and will inform the policy components of the initiative, as well as the communication and education activities.

The purpose of the SIS policy activities is to develop a comprehensive strategy for work at both the national (federal government) and international levels (United Nations) on issues relating to improving the human rights of Aboriginal women and girls. A policy strategy will be developed to address the underlying factors contributing to the racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls. The work conducted through the SIS policy activities will complement other advocacy areas undertaken by NWAC such as issues around Matrimonial Real Property, Repeal of Section 67, etc. Through the SIS activities, NWAC will advocate to improve the human rights of Aboriginal women and girls, including the right to live free from violence, and the right to live free from discrimination.

The SIS education and awareness activities are expected to increase public understanding and knowledge of the impact of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. Community education and action kits have been developed and distributed to Aboriginal organizations and services providers. These kits provide tools to help individuals and communities reduce and prevent racialized, sexualized violence.

Current Status

Currently, NWAC is entering the third year of the Sisters in Spirit initiative. The SIS research continues according to the Community Based Research Plan. NWAC is now finding itself in the position of being contacted by family members of missing or murdered Aboriginal women looking to participate in the initiative, with the hopes of preventing other families from facing this terrible experience.

As part of overall policy activities, NWAC is currently developing a culturally relevant gender-based analysis framework. This framework will be a valuable tool for recognizing and understanding the impacts of legislation and policies on Aboriginal women in Canada. This GBA will be used as a tool in all future policy and advocacy work undertaken by NWAC.

Education and awareness activities are increasing as well. NWAC regularly receives requests from various organizations to make presentations or provide information on SIS and the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. NWAC has been establishing relationships with other organizations in order to raise awareness of racialized, sexualized violence. The SIS initiative has gained the support of organizations such as Kairos, Amnesty International Canada, and

most recently, the Public Service Alliance of Canada. NWAC continues to seek support from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations, across Canada.

NWAC Community Development Coordinators (CDC) will be visiting 10 vulnerable communities per year for the next three years. This year, CDCs will visit primarily urban centers that have high Aboriginal populations. The purpose of these visits is to engage community members and organizations in education, awareness and prevention activities concerning racialized, sexualized violence.

Recommendations

1. THAT all levels of government commit to working in cooperation with National Aboriginal Organizations and First Nations, Métis and Inuit to eliminate violence against Aboriginal women and girls.
2. THAT the Federal Government commit to a 10 year action plan in cooperation with NWAC and other National Aboriginal Organizations to improve the human rights of Aboriginal women and girls.
3. THAT all levels of government assist National Aboriginal Organizations in their efforts to educate the general public about the issues of racialized sexualized violence and missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. This may be addressed through various initiative or campaigns such as anti-discrimination and anti-poverty awareness as well as active assistance to the issue.
4. THAT upon findings of the SIS, the Federal government commit to working with NWAC and other National Aboriginal Organizations in making the necessary legislative and non-legislative changes (where appropriate) to prevent racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls. Further initiatives must be rooted in holistic approaches addressing socio-economic factors including economic development, education, housing and other concerns.
5. THAT all levels of government take coordinated action to ensure that the provision of affordable and appropriate housing is a priority: so that Aboriginal women and girls are able to access such housing both on and off reserve.
6. THAT all levels of government, National Aboriginal Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations implement a Culturally Relevant Gender Based Analysis in all legislation, policy and programming initiatives affecting Aboriginal peoples.