

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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To all members of the House of Commons and the Senate,

Ten years ago, Amnesty International published its major report, *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*. The report built on work that Indigenous women and communities had been doing for years, documenting and speaking out for the hundreds of sisters, daughters and mothers taken by violence. At the time, all parties in the Canadian Parliament made statements affirming that urgent action was needed to stop this violence. Tragically, however, despite some positive initiatives by all levels of government, the response over the last decade has been primarily characterized by a piecemeal, inadequate and poorly coordinated government response to the dire threats facing Indigenous women and girls.

According to recently published RCMP statistics, at least 302 Indigenous women and girls were murdered between 2004 and 2012 (the last year covered by the RCMP report), with 105 remaining missing under suspicious circumstances or for undetermined reasons as of 2013. The homicide rate for the last decade covered by the RCMP report was roughly 7 times higher for Indigenous women and girls than for all other women and girls in Canada.

In the *Stolen Sisters* report, Amnesty International concluded that attacks on Indigenous women and girls are not simply isolated crimes, but acts carried out in a context of deep-rooted racism and discrimination that puts impoverished and marginalized women in harm's way, denies Indigenous women and girls adequate protection from violence, and encourages some men to target Indigenous women and girls in the belief that they can get away with such acts of racist and misogynistic violence. An effective response to this violence requires not only that the perpetrators be brought to justice, but

that discrimination at all levels of society, including within police forces, be addressed, and barriers to Indigenous women's safety dismantled, in order to prevent such crimes being committed.

It's well-established that accurate statistics on crime are needed to inform both police and community service agencies. The RCMP report specifically notes the value of statistics in prevention of crime. Yet official national statistics on murdered and missing women had never before made public. In fact, in September 2013 Canadian government officials rejected a recommendation that Canada institute consistent collection and reporting of such data, telling the Universal Period Review process of the UN Human Rights Council that there were operational barriers to doing so.

On September 15, 2014, the federal government released an "Action Plan to Address Family Violence and Violent Crimes against Aboriginal Women and Girls." The initiatives and directions that it sets out include some important and necessary measures, including acknowledgement of the need to better support affected families in their dealings with police and the justice system and a commitment to establish better coordination and reporting on government initiatives to address violence against Indigenous women. The plan is more notable, however, for all the needs it fails to address.

The "action plan" makes reference to building on the existing programs and initiatives that the government has identified as offering potential best practices to be replicated.

However, in this compilation, agencies and organizations repeatedly name inadequate and insecure funding as the principle barrier to meeting their objectives. The "action plan" contains no measure to change the funding structure for the groups and organizations delivering such vital service. In fact, it includes no new spending.

Other necessary measures not adequately addressed in the action plan include:

- increased access to emergency shelters on reserve (currently there are 41 shelters for 633 First Nations);
- measures to ensure equity in access to other government services essential to Indigenous women and their families, including on reserve child and family services;
- overall measures to address continued impoverishment and economic marginalization of Indigenous women and families;
- development and promotion of national police protocols and related training to ensure effective response to missing persons reports;

- independent oversight measures to hold police more accountable and build trust between police and the Indigenous communities they serve; and
- resources to enable independent review of unresolved missing persons, suspicious deaths and other cases where there are concerns about the adequacy of the initial investigation.

The above points are all ones raised either in Amnesty International's original Stolen Sisters report or in our 2009 follow-up report, No More Stolen Sisters. These reports were among 40 reports and studies cited by government spokespersons as evidence that the measures needed to address violence against Indigenous women are already known.

Amnesty International agrees that there is already considerable knowledge of the issues and the necessary solutions, particularly among the Indigenous women's organizations, affected families and frontline service providers who are immersed in addressing the needs of Indigenous women and girls. Acknowledging that good recommendations exist, however, is not the same thing as implementing them. And it certainly cannot justify failure to move ahead with the action plan and public inquiry that are so widely seen as being the necessary next steps. In fact, it is our view that the majority of recommendations that have been made to governments by families, service providers, human rights groups, and previous public inquiries into related issues have gone ignored.

When Amnesty International published the Stolen Sisters report ten years ago we did not call for a national public inquiry. It was our hope that government acknowledgement of the issues could and would lead without delay to a comprehensive, coordinated response in keeping with the scale and severity of the violence. This has not happened. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that an independent public inquiry is necessary not only so that the voices of affected families and communities can finally be heard, but also so that the authority of such an inquiry can break the government inertia preventing substantive and comprehensive reform and action.

International human rights standards require every government to take all reasonable action to prevent violence against women. Governments that fail to do so bear some of the responsibility for the harm that could otherwise have been prevented.

A series of United Nations resolutions, supported by Canada, call on all states to put in place "systemic, comprehensive, multisectoral and sustained" national action plans, with the direct involvement of affected communities, and a clear financial commitment to implementation. This is the

international human rights standard by which Canada's response to violence against Indigenous women and girls should be measured.

Critically, the government does not need to choose, and should not choose, between implementing such a national action plan and holding a national inquiry. A public inquiry can be a critical tool for ensuring that the right measures are adopted and that they are supported by the affected communities.

Amnesty International urges all members of government to work together, in collaboration with Indigenous women's organizations, to institute a comprehensive and systematic response to the widespread and severe violence faced by Indigenous women and girls, including a national public inquiry.

Sincerely,

Salil Shetty

Secretary-General, Amnesty International

London, United Kingdom

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Salil Shetty". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.