

# ~ Connecting Our Spirits ~

Recommendations from the 2015 Gathering of Yukon Families  
of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls





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## A Long Journey...

In 2004, Amnesty International shocked the world with their report, "Canada's Stolen Sisters: a Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada." This report identified nine Indigenous women and girls across Canada who had been murdered in acts of extreme violence, or who remain missing. The report identified four primary factors that link racism and discrimination against Aboriginal women and girls in Canada to experiencing higher rates of violence:

- Despite assurances to the contrary, police in Canada have often failed to provide Indigenous women with an adequate standard of protection;
- The social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women, along with a history of government policies that have torn apart Indigenous families and communities, have pushed a disproportionate number of Indigenous women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness and prostitution;
- The resulting vulnerability of Indigenous women has been exploited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous men to carry out acts of extreme brutality against Indigenous women;
- These acts of violence may be motivated by racism, or may be carried out in the expectation that societal indifference to the welfare and safety of Indigenous women will allow the perpetrators to escape justice (Amnesty International, Canada's Stolen Sisters, 2004, p. 5).

Amnesty International also identified the continuing legacy of residential schools in Canada, the mistrust between Aboriginal communities and the police force, and the ongoing inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people as contributing factors. These issues, connected with the main factors of racism and discrimination, provide a basis to examine the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.

Despite families advocating for their loved ones for over 30 years, the initial report from Amnesty International was the catalyst for a shift in the political climate and response to this issue. As a result, in 2005, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women granted the Native Women's Association of Canada funding for the national Sisters in Spirit Initiative (2005-2010), a research, policy and public education project focussed on missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. A second report, "No More Stolen Sisters," released by Amnesty International in 2005, put forward five critical recommendations to the Government of Canada to address the issue:

1. As a matter of urgent priority, the federal government should work with

- Indigenous women and representative organizations and provincial and territorial officials to develop and implement a comprehensive, coordinated national plan of action in keeping with the scale and seriousness of the violence and discrimination experienced by Indigenous women. Such a plan of action should include:
- a. The collection and routine publication of gender disaggregated data on health and social and economic conditions for Inuit, Métis and First Nations women and men, including rates of violence against Indigenous women;
  - b. The promotion of standardized protocols for police handling of missing persons cases including tools for fair and effective assessment of the risk to the missing individual;
  - c. Improved co-ordination of police investigations into long-term missing persons cases and unsolved murders involving Indigenous women and other women at risk.
  - d. Adequate, sustained, long-term funding to ensure the provision of culturally relevant services to meet the needs of Indigenous women and girls at risk of violence or in contact with the police and justice system, including emergency shelters, court workers, victim services and specific programmes to assist women who have been trafficked within Canada;
2. Review all social programmes to ensure that funding for programmes for Indigenous women, children and families is equitable to those available to non-Indigenous people in Canada and is sufficient to ensure effective protection and full enjoyment of their rights. Particular priority should be given to eliminating discrimination in funding for Indigenous child welfare;
  3. Restoration of funding to fulfill the commitment set out in the Kelowna Accord (First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders: Strengthening Relationships and Closing the Gap) to end inequalities in health, housing, education, and other services for Indigenous peoples;
  4. Immediate implementation of recommendations of the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the UN Human Rights Committee concerning the treatment of women prisoners, including the creation of a new security risk assessment system;
  5. Publicly commit to fully implement the standards contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to engage Indigenous Peoples in discussions about their implementation.

Sadly, despite 10 years and multiple voices calling for change, these recommendations have yet to be implemented.

From 2005 – 2010, the Native Women’s Association conducted research compiling media information, court transcripts, and first hand stories from people

with a missing or murdered female Aboriginal relative. From this data, an electronic database was created to house the information pertaining to the cases of these women. During the five year research period, 582 cases were entered into the database from secondary sources alone; with over 100 still requiring input when the project funding was cut in 2010. It is estimated that there are hundreds of Aboriginal women stolen from their families and communities, whose stories have not been recorded or included in this data set. Through this project, NWAC held a number of family gatherings to support each other and to share their stories and experiences. NWAC also established the Sisters in Spirit Vigils, held annually on October 4<sup>th</sup> to remember and honour our Sisters in Spirit.

Following the conclusion of the national Sisters in Spirit project, the Yukon Sisters in Spirit (YSIS) project began on April 1, 2010. This project was hosted by the Yukon Aboriginal Women's Council, a member of the Native Women's Association of Canada. In the first two years of this project, the YSIS staff traveled to all First Nations communities in Yukon and two in northern British Columbia to raise awareness of the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, to reach out to families, and to conduct research on cases in Yukon. Prior to this research, NWAC had only 5 identified cases of women who were missing or murdered in Yukon. The data collected through the YSIS project was shared with both NWAC and the local RCMP as part of a collaborative community effort to honour these women.

YSIS collected information from a variety of sources, including public documents, and information provided by friends, family members or community members. Any information provided to Sisters in Spirit was recorded and accepted no matter how small or limited in detail it was. Even if the information consisted only of part of a name, the details were taken and a list of names was compiled from the information that the project gathered. It should be noted that the project was originally intended to gather and honour the stories of missing and murdered Aboriginal women from their families and communities – *not to judge the validity of these accounts*. As a result, all stories that were shared during the YSIS project were included, regardless of the availability of supporting information. However, where supplementary information was available, a number of cases were later corroborated with other information sources, including public documents (court decisions, newspaper clippings, police databases, etc.). As a result of this approach, the circumstances and information available about these cases ranges from as little as a last name to full investigations that include convictions and sentences.

Because of the significant research conducted by the YSIS Project, and subsequent, ongoing research from the RCMP *38 known cases of missing or*

*murdered Aboriginal women in Yukon* had been identified by the project's end in 2013 (33 more than NWAC had previously identified). Through researching the lives of these women, and the circumstances around their death or disappearance, the YSIS project began a conversation in Yukon and provided a safe place for the voices of families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women to be heard.

In addition to researching the circumstances surrounding the death and disappearance of Aboriginal women connected to the Yukon, YSIS project staff developed relationships with families, provided family and community support, engaged in a variety of advocacy platforms, hosted annual Sisters in Spirit Vigils, travelled to communities for outreach, hosted a land-based family gathering in 2012, and developed information and tool kits for communities.

For years, families have been advocating for a National Public Inquiry into the alarmingly high number of disappearances and deaths due to homicide of Aboriginal women. In 2012, Manitoba hosted the third National Aboriginal Women's Summit, with a focus on Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls. Chiefs, Premiers, Ministers of Justice and the Status of Women, as well as leaders of National Aboriginal Organizations participated in the meeting, while families of the women met in a separate venue. Aboriginal organizations lobbied provincial and territorial leaders to join the call for a National Public Inquiry, though no consensus on this was achieved at this meeting, and therefore little action was taken at that time. The federal ministers were notably absent from the discussion, however, provincial/territorial and First Nation leadership committed to a fourth National Aboriginal Women's Summit, to be held in 2014 in Nova Scotia, and a meeting of Aboriginal Affairs and Justice ministers in the spring of 2013, designed to work toward a national framework of action.

In 2013, provinces and territories joined the call for a National Inquiry, and began lobbying the federal government, however, in December 2014, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly stated that such an Inquiry "isn't really high on our radar, to be honest."

In spring 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police released *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*. This report identified a total of 1,181 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women nationally known to police between 1980 and 2012. Of the 1,181 identified, 1,017 were homicides, and 225 of these remain either unsolved, or as active missing persons investigations. Aboriginal females that were victims of homicide between 1980 and 2012 represent 16 percent of all female murders, a proportion four times higher than Canada's female Aboriginal population, (approximately 4

percent). The report also indicates that 30 percent of Aboriginal female victims were murdered by an acquaintance. This is a stark contrast to non-Aboriginal women, 41% of whom are killed by a spouse or former partner. Importantly, this report noted that the numbers may not accurately reflect the total number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, as not all victims are identified as Aboriginal during the investigation, and not all disappearances are reported to the police. Further, the report only includes incidents substantiated by investigators as “an offence of culpable homicide.” Any suspected murders or suspicious deaths were not included in the analysis.

In February of 2015, the first *National Roundtable on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* was held in Ottawa. This was a one-day meeting designed to bring together a variety of ministers (Justice, Aboriginal Affairs, Status of Women, Public Safety, etc.) to begin developing a national action plan. The meeting ended with the federal government vehemently opposed to a National Inquiry, and resulted in commitments to hold another roundtable in 2016, to work on a public awareness campaign, and improve coordination of policing, community safety, and crime prevention. Only four family members (including one from the Yukon) were able to be selected from dozens of family members who gathered together the day prior. With the limitation of only four family members attending the roundtable proceedings, the meeting was protested by family members, non-profits, and community who felt it failed to include a range of voices and experiences.

A month after the first National Roundtable, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights issued a press release (March 6, 2015) stating that a UN expert committee found that Canada has committed a “grave violation” against the rights of Indigenous women by failing to promptly and thoroughly investigate violence against Aboriginal women, including disproportionately high rates of death by homicide and disappearance. Yukon organizations participated in the expert investigation in 2012, providing evidence and information to the investigation team, which was led by Barbara Bailey in Whitehorse. The investigation determined that Canada had failed to adequately address the human rights violations of Indigenous women in Canada, as outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), signed by Canada in 1981.

In May 2015, the Whitehorse Aboriginal Women’s Circle collaborated with community to bring *Walking With Our Sisters* to the Yukon. *Walking With Our Sisters* is described as a commemorative art installation featuring over 1,763 pairs of adult moccasin vamps, and 108 pairs of children’s vamps. Each pair of vamps is intended to represent the unfinished life of one missing or murdered

Indigenous woman, and the children's vamps are dedicated to children who never returned home from residential schools. The vamps were created and donated by hundreds of caring and concerned individuals to draw attention to this injustice. In preparation for the arrival of Walking With Our Sisters, Yukoners came together to welcome the bundle of vamps and sacred items. Much planning and preparation went into welcoming the vamps into our territory, and each step, from the logistics, to the ceremony, to sewing vamps in recognition of Yukon's missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, to supporting family and community, was a community effort. Walking With Our Sisters was the first time Yukoners were able to engage in the conversation, volunteer, and provide support. For some who attended, it was the first time they felt impacted by the issue, for others, it was the first time they had felt there was a place for them in working collaboratively to address the issue, for others still, it was a very visual reminder of those who have been lost to violence. For everyone, it was an intense and beautiful example of community engagement.

On October 19, 2015, Canadians elected a new government, whose platform commitments included calling a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls immediately following the election. On December 8, 2015, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Carolyn Bennett, the Minister of the Status of Women, Patty Hajdu, and the Minister of Justice, Jody Wilson-Raybould, announced the launch of a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

The 2015 family gathering could not have happened without all of the work done at various levels that sought to identify these women, develop collaborative community partnerships, and build relationships with families based on trust and reciprocity. Yukon families have come forward to share their stories and experiences in different ways, at different times. Some families have attended National Family Gatherings; others have spoken to global, federal, provincial/territorial and First Nation leaders. Others have quietly offered ceremony and support for those grieving in their community. Some have used media to get their message out, and others have become activists in community organizations to make change for the future. And still other families have endured excruciating silence in seeking justice and answers about their loved one.

## Summary of Gathering

On December 12, 2015, the Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle hosted a one-day gathering in Whitehorse for families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Yukon. 25 family members were able to attend the gathering, though over 50 had initially registered. Ann Smith prepared the venue by laying spruce bows and offering prayers and tobacco the day prior to the gathering.

The 2015 Yukon family gathering was held with the intent of families providing recommendations to political representatives of Yukon Government and First Nations, as well as the RCMP, and non-governmental Aboriginal and women's organizations at the Yukon Regional Roundtable, to be held in February, 2016.

The gathering was facilitated by Amanda Buffalo, with Mary Jane Jim providing facilitation support and giving a presentation on grief and loss as tools for community development. A total of 11 family support workers were present from the community, Kwanlin Dun First Nation, the Committee on Abuse in Residential School (CAIRS), and Yukon Government Victim Services. Ann Smith, an Elder from the Kwanlin Dun First Nation, and Agnes Mills, an Elder from the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation, provided prayers and cultural and spiritual guidance to families throughout the day. Julianna Scramstad of Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre was present as a note taker. Also present throughout the day were Katie Johnson, the event coordinator, Brenda and Daniel (the staff from the Old Fire Hall), and two catering staff.

Chief Doris Bill of the Kwanlin Dun First Nation gave opening remarks following the morning prayer at the healing pole. Krista Reid, President of the Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle and lead coordinator for Walking With Our Sisters, Whitehorse gave brief opening remarks to families and welcomed them to the gathering. Elaine Taylor, Minister Responsible for the Women's Directorate was also present for the opening prayer, welcome remarks and introductions. Amanda Buffalo provided a short history of work done to date in Yukon, and an overview of the gathering. At the closing of the morning, Nyla Klugie-Migwans shared a traditional prayer song with families.

Following the opening prayer, participants formed a circle, and welcoming remarks, introductions, and a brief history of initiatives related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Yukon were shared. The introductions were an important part of the process, and gave families present the opportunity to share who they were, who they were there for, and their experiences coping

with the loss in a supported and open space. This sharing was an immensely powerful part of the process.

Following the sharing circle, Mary Jane Jim gave a presentation to families on grief and loss as a community development tool. Mary Jane's presentation discussed the cycles of grief and the journey of healing from loss, and how working through both in a healthy way can support community growth and development long term. Her presentation stressed the importance of dealing with internal individual grief one step at a time, before trying to help others – an approach similar to putting on your own oxygen mask first. The faster individuals work towards healing, the faster the family and community heal in turn. By creating "sober leadership" with a clearly articulated vision, Aboriginal women and communities have "taught us, built us, gave us tools, created partnerships to get us to where we wanted to go – including partnerships with the Creator."

Family members brought photos of their loved ones, which were shared on a memorial table with traditional medicines. Throughout the day, family members participated in creating an optional video documentary about their loved one. This video will be used as part of the family presentations at the upcoming Yukon Regional Roundtable. Those who participated were asked to answer the following questions about their loved one:

1. Who was she to you?
2. What has losing her meant for your family/community?
3. What is your favorite memory of her?
4. What do you miss the most about her?
5. How do you keep her memory alive?

The remainder of the day was allocated for discussions that centred on the following themes:

1. Experiences in accessing support/navigating legal and investigative processes, including barriers;
2. Family participation in the Yukon Regional Roundtable and the National Inquiry, including follow up and supports;
3. Ongoing research and identification of women and their families;
4. Ways to honour loved ones lost to violence, including ceremony, public recognition and acknowledgement.

Families were given the opportunity to smudge outside in the afternoon, and several prayers were said throughout the day. Because a one-day gathering provides limited opportunities for engagement, families were asked to form smaller groups facilitated by the support team to address the following questions:

1. How can we support families?
2. How do families want to be involved in a National inquiry?
  - a. What supports are needed?
3. What kind of follow up would you like to see from this gathering?
4. Should we expand the list of names, based on new information that has come available?
5. Is it time to make the list of names public?
  - a. Should it be shared at the Roundtable?

Families came back together in a full group discussion near the end of the day to address the following question:

1. How should families be represented at the Yukon Regional Roundtable?
  - a. What supports are needed?

The gathering concluded with a blanketing ceremony, in which each of the family members present were blanketed by the support staff. Family members were also given a small gift to encourage self-care. A hug circle was completed, and each person present received a hug from every other person at the gathering. Ann Smith closed the day with a ceremony and prayer. The spruce boughs that were present at the gathering, along with the Kleenexes used by family members were collected and were burned in a ceremony the following day by Khasha.

## Shared Experiences

It is important to remember that each one of these women was a unique individual. Each of these women left behind relationships with families and community. As individuals, each of these women had their own goals, challenges, relationships, and dreams. These women can never be replaced, and the loss of their lives will always be felt deeply by those that remain. With the death and disappearance of these women families have had individual struggles, unique to them. The intent of identifying shared experiences is not to diminish each family's personal experiences, but rather, to demonstrate where our community has fallen short in supporting these families, and create opportunities for community reflection and improved supports and responses.

Families have identified communication with RCMP and justice officials as an ongoing challenge. The grief and loss experienced by families has been compounded by lack of communication from justice officials throughout criminal investigations and court proceedings. It is well understood that these are complex proceedings, and that there are legal requirements for RCMP and other justice officials, however, communication and follow up with families is an important part of this work. Each family present has identified struggles with communication and the justice system as a barrier to healing. Delays in the investigative or legal processes have often been cited to families as rationale for lack of communication. Families have noted that the news is often their primary source of information, and that communication is often delayed or non-existent from the RCMP and justice workers. Family needs to be informed and involved through the process. A number of families also noted a lack of communication when the perpetrator was released from prison.

***“One investigator, Bob, kept it going. He’s retired now.”***

Families have also cited a lack of resources and support in their communities as a major barrier. Without dedicated local resources, they have difficulty accessing counseling and support services, which impedes their healing process. Distance counseling is made available to families; however, the impersonal nature of distance counseling is an inadequate approach. Counselors open both new and old wounds. Ideally, counselors support individuals and families through the grief and loss cycle, however, distance based counseling is less personal, takes greater time to develop a trusting relationship, and requires families to stretch themselves, sometimes beyond their capacity. Face to face crisis intervention

***“I need professional help. I can’t do it on my own.”***

and ongoing counseling for individuals and families would support families through the grieving process.

The passage of time alone does not lessen the wound. Any number of things can trigger family members, and leave them feeling open and vulnerable, and there are limited supports available at the community level. When community-based workshops or other opportunities become available, there is often no aftercare, support or follow up for those who remain in the community once the workshop has concluded. There has been a strongly identified need for sustained local support, including professional counselors throughout the whole grieving process.

***"I couldn't afford counseling."***

Many of these stolen women were also mothers, and this has resulted in more Aboriginal children in the child welfare system as a result of their death or disappearance. Families have fought for custody and kinship rights to the children, as well as visitation. These families have faced significant challenges with the child welfare system, and many of these children remain in foster care. Families feel that these children need opportunities to know who they are, who their family is, and practice their culture, and to do so, children need to be connected and brought back to the community. Families need to be together and access help and support together in order to heal. Support is needed to help their children grieve, and to help them fit back into the community once they have been disconnected through the child welfare system.

Families recognize that they are not the only ones impacted by the loss of these women: the entire community is affected – including extended family, friends, and acquaintances across multiple geographic locations. The whole community feels the loss, and therefore, needs support in dealing with the loss. Yukon communities are especially small and tight knit, and the ripple effect extends to every member of the community for many generations. In addition, Indigenous communities have so many existing hurts, and are constantly dealing with the impacts of colonization, residential school, trauma and more. Families are challenged with helping their community grieve while experiencing grief of their own.

For some communities, impacts included rumors and gossip about what happened. This created disharmony and distrust within the community, as fingers were pointed in all directions. Speculation is a rampant part of dealing with a missing or murdered person in a small community; the less factual information or evidence available, the greater the speculation. This has created permanent damage between people and families in the community.

Many of these stolen women were youth or young women, and as a result, there is a unique impact on the young adult population in communities. Families have observed increased mental health challenges, including depression and increased

substance use in youth who are coping with the loss. The result is that the grieving youth and young adults are made to be even more vulnerable, and it should be recognized that additional supports are absolutely needed for youth and young adults in the community.

Sometimes the best support a person can have is someone who has been through what you are experiencing, who knows how to support you. For some families, hearing of another missing or murdered Aboriginal woman is a trigger for them. Each of the families present are at a different stages; this includes various stages of experiencing their loss, have different levels of engagement in the healing process, and are at diverse points in investigative and court processes. There is currently a lack of resources available for families to help and support each other and other families. In many cases, families lacked the financial resources to attend a trial that was outside of the community. Some were able to pool resources, or sell off possessions to be in court for their loved one. Families want to be able to support each other because being with other families and your own is a great support; and more family gatherings would be welcome.

Regardless of how a loved one is lost, there is a spiritual component to the healing journey. It is always difficult to let go of a loved one, and harder still when so many questions remain. Families need spiritual support to let go, to participate in ceremony, to connect to the ancestors and support their loved one's journey to the other side. Communities also need ceremony to help them cope and support them to let go. Children do not attend funerals in the traditional way, so they also need ceremony and cultural support to grieve.

***“It’s been 25 years. It’s still very hard on my family. I still have lots of anger. I pray lots. Forgiveness is important. And hard.”***

Not all families have seen justice for their loved one, and have noted that it is absolutely necessary to the healing process. Families feel strongly that they have been treated differently by the justice system. Sadly, this is not new. Indigenous peoples have been in a state of colonization and have been dealing with the impacts of racism and trauma for over 500 years – to think communities are just going to magically heal in the next few years is daunting. These families have been torn and ripped apart and they need justice from more than the western court system. The western court system is not supporting closure. First Nations have our own laws, the Creator's law, tribal law, traditional law, and the natural law. These are not negotiable, and in order for healing and reconciliation to take place, these need to be recognized and actions taken to restore the balance

these laws create in our communities. These laws need to be a part of reconciliation, grief and healing, as well as part of daily life for families and communities.

***“When the initial searches are completed, and there’s no leads, then it becomes a cold file. There’s nothing for the officials to go further on, that’s when the family steps in and it’s out of their pocket to continue searches.”***

The challenges were a bit different for those who went missing. In some cases, the police refused to investigate after the family filed the missing persons report. Families were told that there were no resources available to help in the search, or to support families to return to their home community to be with family or aid in the

search efforts. A huge challenge was accessing resources to travel the distance between the family members and where she was living. The search was done almost entirely by community volunteers who weren’t given any money for transportation, or for helping with the grid search. There was no emotional support available during the search, or when they called it off. In every single incident where the woman remains a missing person, the families continue to search.

## Recommendations and Key Messages

### Key Messages

- 1.** Rushing is not the way to do things – we should not be doing things just because the government is starting to think that this is important. It has always been important and we should treat it with the respect that it is due.
- 2.** Not all families have been identified or want to be identified at this time, and we do not speak for them. Every family has their own perspective. We need to know who the families are in order invite them and provide support. We also need to be patient and acknowledge that this is incredibly difficult, and not all families are ready and willing to participate.
- 3.** Support and resources are paramount to prevention. Valuing Aboriginal women is an act of prevention. Many of these women needed support and resources to increase safety, and the community failed them in many respects. Resources are needed to provide our women with the support needed to begin with so that they do not experience increased vulnerability.
- 4.** The issue and focus is missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, which has been a great loss to families and communities. It is important to remember that there is a ripple effect and ripples move in all directions.

### Support for Families

- 1.** Create access to immediate and continuous support and follow up for families. Families need a range of options to choose from, including culturally safe counselors and access to Elders. These supports must be available at all times, in all communities, not just between 8:30 and 4:30, and not offered in isolation (e.g. one grief workshop) – consistent follow up is needed for healing.
- 2.** The first step is to identify all of the families. Not all families have been identified at this time. However, when they do come forward and are ready to share, they will need wrap around support, and opportunities to have their voices heard.
- 3.** Supports for families can't just fall to community members and families. Professional support that goes to the different communities is of paramount importance. Face to face counseling supports are needed; a 1-800 number is not adequate.

4. Counseling programs need to provide options for whole family counseling, as well as grieving camps - preferably on the land. Healing the whole family is a traditional value. The whole family is affected, and it is imperative to have access to support in our own community.
5. Families need to be able to choose their supports, and have access to them in their own community, so that they are comfortable with their helper.
6. Create resources for families to support each other in different ways. We need to build our capacity to be supportive; we need access to resources to allow us to be physically present for other families as they are going through trials or investigations.
7. Resources need to be allocated to and expended at the family and community level into critical areas, such as: crisis response and aftercare, travel costs to attend court proceedings, annual family gatherings, and family-to-family support.
8. There needs to be someone to check on families. This person needs to come around in a traditional way – not just over the phone. Even if people are drinking, it's ok to talk to them. When families are drinking, that's when they need the most support.
9. Families need someone who can help them through the whole process to heal, recover and be empowered.

### Family Gatherings

10. The bulk of the resources are going to development of some big report – resources need to come down to our level. Resources should be used for family gatherings and community gatherings, not on a report that is collecting dust somewhere. We need more family gatherings to allow us to support each other, we need resources to heal the whole community.
11. More family gatherings are needed, so that families can talk with each other and provide support. Families need to know that they're not alone, and have a network of supports.
12. It is hard to stay connected and keep in touch when it is long distance. Family gatherings should be held at least once or twice a year.
13. Families need support before, during and after the family gatherings, and any other kind of meeting.
14. Family gatherings need to have some fun and creative activities, like the angel dolls, or a patchwork quilt like the national quilt. These should be displayed and travel to the communities.
15. Family gatherings also need some humour. Laughter is an important part of our cultural being. It is good medicine, and it teaches us to heal.
16. Family gatherings should include someone to make families laugh.

17. Supports need to be in place for family members who do not attend family gatherings as well. Family members often remain behind in the community, and they have no access to support.
18. Family gatherings shouldn't be limited to just the Yukon. There are a lot of family members outside the Yukon – Alaska, NWT, BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan. Our families are connected all over, and these connections need to be honoured.
19. At family gatherings, a healer from elsewhere should be brought in to help us through the journey of letting go. We need to be able to be vulnerable, and we need a person who can guide us through it and put closure to the end of the session.

### Support for Communities

20. Families are not the only ones affected. The whole community is impacted by the loss and therefore the whole community needs support and opportunities to participate in healing. The whole community is grieving. How we experience loss depends on how closely we are related to it.
21. Funding resources need to be allocated for grid searches, crisis support teams, food, and gas. This is currently done on a volunteer basis.
22. Resources are needed for capacity development and training for ongoing grief awareness, so that there are people in the community teaching each other how to help themselves.
23. Develop a train the trainers on how to support families and communities through various stages of the grieving cycle. The Elders can't do it all, and shouldn't be expected to.
24. It is the young people who need the most help in the community; they have lots of things they haven't dealt with. A lot of times, too, children and youth will get into drugs because a party is a safer place to go when there is violence at home. There needs to be after hours support and safe places for youth in all communities.
25. More counseling supports are needed for youth. These need to be available more than once every three weeks. The young people need professional and culturally appropriate care, which should be offered through the school and the college to start. Support needs to be provided by someone they feel comfortable talking to, someone they trust and feel safe with.
26. More programs for youth are needed in the community. We need leadership and training programs for youth that they want to be part of.

***“When communities begin creating vision, we know we are on the healing path and accepting responsibility and growing”***

- 27.** It would be ideal if programs like Jackson Lake, for example, had mobile units and were able to go out to communities to provide support.
- 28.** Better safety mechanisms and resources are needed for women fleeing violence. Not being able to leave the community until the next day is too dangerous. Women should not be turned away from safe houses or other places because they are drunk or high, or because it's after a certain time – there needs to be a safe place for them to go at all times.
- 29.** Search and rescue training is needed in all communities, even if it's a volunteer team in each community; they need to be professionally trained (like the program in Saskatchewan).

## Justice

- 30.** It is imperative that our loved ones are respected throughout the process. When the RCMP and justice system see them as a person and not a stereotype, it makes a huge difference. Cultural competency, gender competency, and trauma informed care training is needed for RCMP and court and justice workers.
- 31.** Communication between the RCMP and families is needed from the outset, and should be regular and ongoing throughout the investigation. Information should flow back and forth regularly. The RCMP should follow up with families, especially when families provide information. The relationship needs to be reciprocal.
- 32.** Families need resources and support for travel to support search efforts, be part of the investigation process, and attend hearings and court proceedings.
- 33.** The RCMP needs to improve their response times for calls related to missing persons and women experiencing violence, and an audit of response times should be done every few months to monitor and provide feedback for improvement.
- 34.** We need regional crisis teams, funded by government that have resources and supports available for mobilizing searches and investigations, including resources for food, gas, crisis response teams, etc.
- 35.** The waiting is really painful for families. There needs to be ongoing communication and information flow to families about the court system and legal processes. It is too much to deal with in isolation and without support.
- 36.** The Gladue report process has significant impacts on the families who have lost a loved one, and should be examined, and the punishment of offenders needs to be addressed.
- 37.** The justice system has failed many of our women, and isn't supporting closure for the families. We need to address this as a community, in a traditional way. In all cultures, when you take someone's life, there are

consequences to those actions, and we need to feel that cultural justice is done too.

## Culture and Ceremony

38. More ceremony is needed for healing and supporting families. We learn to heal through ceremony. Resources need to be made available for ceremonies to move throughout the territory, because not everyone can afford to attend – move ceremony around the territory.
39. Elders and counselors are needed to support families and other community members to have talking circles in their homes.
40. Traditional belief systems and ceremony are important tools. We get affirmations from ceremony and from dreams. We need to make individual and community offerings (with red, white and navy blue cloth and tobacco) across country in ceremony. These offerings are for those who need to be called to ceremony for purification, and to ask for help and guidance and ceremony for ourselves.
41. The names of each of these women should be brought out and shared in a cultural, ceremonial and traditional way, through a potlatch that honours them and allows their storied to be shared. Acknowledging these women publicly will bring closure. The whole potlatch is a sacred ceremony, but lots of additional ceremony (e.g. sweats) is needed before and after the potlatch.
42. A remembrance potlatch should be held annually to honour the women, and to bring families together in ceremony, and funding needs to be available to support families.
43. Ceremonies are happening all the time, and create a safe forum to come to and make a connection. Many are open to everyone who comes and makes an offering. We need resources to continue these ceremonies; this work is important and needs to be valued too. We need to have ceremonies for our people, and also send them out for ceremony; especially the young people.

*“If we don’t have human help, we have help from our relation with the earth, with the air, with the water, with our relations on the other side...”*

## Sharing the Names of Loved Ones

44. The list of names should be expanded to include additional cases that have come to light since it was originally created.

- 45.** The list of names should be shared. The names of these women should be made public in a cultural way, at a potlatch. All of the families need to be contacted directly, to let them know before the list is shared.
- 46.** Once all of the families have been contacted, and it has been potlatched, the names should also be shared with the public.
- 47.** The names need to be shared in a way that honours the women and their stories, Yukon-style. A memory book with photos and biographies and stories that reflects the women, their families, cultures and communities would be ideal.
- 48.** A traditional memorial site is needed for these women, such as a memorial pole, a vigil site, or other monument.

### Yukon Regional Roundtable

- 49.** There must be room for families at the roundtable. Not just to attend, but to have a voice. Financial supports need to be made available to families. The gathering cannot help families if it isn't open to them and inclusive. Strong relationships need to be built in order to do the work.
- 50.** All families who are available and willing to come need to be represented at the roundtable.
- 51.** Families need ceremonial, cultural and counseling support before, during and after the roundtable. Family support workers need to be present at the roundtable, to help families carry forward the work.
- 52.** Resources need to be made available to support families to meet the day before the roundtable, to prepare, and the day after, to debrief.
- 53.** The roundtable should be opened and closed with a ceremony.
- 54.** Families have expressed concern that there will be another meeting, and about what happens to this report and recommendations. We do not need another report - we need an action plan that maps out how we are going to address these issues.
- 55.** Government needs to be more constructive with resources. Less money should be allocated for government meetings, and more for supports in the community.
- 56.** The RCMP need to be present at the roundtable and part of the conversation.

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*“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

*Lilla Watson*

## Appendix One

### Yukon Family Statement Regarding the Development of a National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls

#### Preamble

On December 8, 2015, families welcomed the announcement that after years of lobbying at every level, the Government of Canada would begin a National Public Inquiry into the disproportionately high rates of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. In preparation for the National Inquiry, families wanted to have a discussion about what a National Inquiry should look like, and what families need to be part of the process.

On December 12, 2015, several (but not all) Yukon families came together for a Family Gathering, hosted by the Whitehorse Aboriginal Women's Circle. The families present began a discussion, and from this meeting, prepared the following statement to the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada regarding the development of a National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. This statement is not intended to represent all families; only those who were present at the gathering.

#### Statement

A key message we want to share, both in relation to the Inquiry, as well as to any other gatherings is that ***rushing is not the way to do things. We should not be doing things just because the government is starting to think that this is important. It has always been important and it needs to be treated with the respect that it is due. It doesn't matter how good the intentions are, it will show if it is not given the time, respect, and resources that are needed.***

The Inquiry team needs to work with our local people and agencies that we have relationships with. Without working with our community, you will not be able to identify the families. It is not enough to just post it in the news or online. For Elders and others, they need to be approached personally. They need to be given the opportunity to make a choice to participate. The government needs to learn about our community. They also need to learn to be flexible. We feel that they have not begun in a good way; it is too rushed, too inflexible. When it is rushed it feels like we are being pushed and bullied, it feels like a flashback to residential school. The process is the most important part. We need and want to be part of every single step of the Inquiry. So it is important to share that in some ways, we feel helpless to be part of the National Inquiry. We need to know what the Inquiry will do, what actions will be taken and what resources there are after the Inquiry is done to make things better in our communities.

The National Inquiry needs to be well planned out and provide ongoing opportunities for families to engage with the commissioners, but also with each other. The Inquiry needs to be designed in a way that families will have the opportunity to share their stories, express their emotions, and feel that they have been heard. Family Gatherings are the best way to start; they create a network for families, a network that will still be here when the Inquiry is over, and the family gatherings make us feel like we have a voice and the power to do something. Both family gatherings and the Inquiry need to be brought to all Yukon communities, not just Whitehorse, and the government needs to plan for those costs and make sure that the resources are in place.

Families need culturally appropriate care and support for the Inquiry – before, during and after. We need face-to-face supports and counseling available to us 24-hours a day, in our own communities, and not just a 1-800 number to call. There needs to be access to support when we need it. Grief happens outside of business hours; the hours outside of 8:30 and 4:30 are some of the hardest of the day. We need a network of support available to us all the time. There are counselors available that have longstanding relationships with us and that's an important linkage for well-being and overall health. We shouldn't have to start over with someone new every time a different government steps in. We need to be able to make our own choices about where and who we seek support from. Changing supports all the time can cause trauma. There are often policies that limit the number of times you can see a counselor to heal. We are expected to just heal in five or six sessions. It's not possible. We need ongoing, long-term access to counselors and supports of our choice, whether they're western, or traditional, or Elders.

It is very important that the National Inquiry include culture and traditional ceremony. Ceremony and culture have so much impact on our healing, and these cannot fall to the wayside. If we are going to start anywhere, it should be with ceremony. We need ceremony to prepare for the Inquiry, be part of the Inquiry, and we need ceremony for closure after the Inquiry is done. We need access to ceremony on an ongoing basis. We are on a healing journey, but sometimes it feels like old hurts get torn wide open, and we need to address this in a ceremonial and cultural way, which means healing for the whole community. The impact of the loss is not just felt by the immediate family; it ripples out to the whole community, the whole Yukon. Because it impacts every individual, family and community differently, we need to be able to share our stories in a variety of ways. This could be through gatherings, through video, through ceremony, through poetry – there are lots of ways to share, and we need a variety of options. We also need opportunities for self-care. Sharing these stories is difficult. We need opportunities to rejuvenate ourselves through the process. Body and energy work, humor, and other alternative treatments are all important tools for self-care and healing.

We need the Inquiry to respect and honour our loved ones, and our families and communities. It should acknowledge what we have been through, the long struggle that we have had with our healing, rebuilding, and lobbying for change. It should support us to heal. We want to feel empowered by the Inquiry, not defeated by it. We need to have the option of being part of it. This means that we need resources for emotional, mental and spiritual support. We need resources for travel – food, meals, accommodation, and childcare. In some places, there are people who are making profit off of all this, and that is not right. If there's profit being made, it should be allocated to resources to support and fund families to participate. There are so many excuses and reasons to not participate, especially for those who are grieving. We need to remove as many barriers as we can.

We do not want an Inquiry just for the sake of an Inquiry. We do not want merely another report that sits on the shelf and collects dust, we need follow-up. There needs to be action. When the Inquiry is all done, we need to figure out how to move forward together. So you need to come back here and we need to collaborate on what needs to be done to help our families and communities. The Inquiry is not a one-time thing; it is the beginning of a relationship.

## Appendix Two

### Feedback and Lessons Learned – 2015 Family Gathering

1. A debrief for support workers should be planned for and completed immediately following the event, and a second debrief meeting planned for one week following the gathering, to allow time to reflect and receive feedback from community.
2. Traditional and comfort foods would have been desirable
3. Catering staff were present all day, spoke loudly and were interruptive to the process and gathering. Ideally, the kitchen and meal area will be separate for the next gathering.
4. The selected venue was not the most appropriate for the intimate nature of the gathering; a venue with breakout spaces, a separate kitchen, and a space where smudging can be done indoors is ideal.
5. In the morning families were asked to be present at 8:00am. When some families arrived between 7:30 and 8:05, the doors were not opened for them. In addition, the caterer arrived after 8:00, and breakfast was not ready for the families who were there first thing.
6. Family gatherings have always been an apolitical venue for families to tell their stories and seek support. Families were clear in expressing their discomfort with political representatives being at the gathering.
7. A pre-meeting for the support and facilitation team would have been helpful in order to build the team in advance of the gathering, to provide better support for families.
8. Inviting children/family members for lunch was uncomfortable for the families present, and families felt it was unprofessional.
9. Ceremony was needed alongside the family gathering. A sacred fire, at the very least, was needed to burn the tears.
10. Communications could have been improved between coordination team to ensure that the gathering logistics ran as smoothly as possible.
11. Traditional healing colors should be used whenever possible. Specifically purple and pink.

# Connecting Our Spirits

Recommendations from the 2015 Gathering of Yukon Families  
of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls



