



Native Women's Association of Canada

September 20, 2011

Madame Sylvia Pimentel, Chair
Members
United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
c/o CEDAW Secretariat
OHCHR - Palais Wilson, 8-14 Avenue de la Paix, CH-1211
Geneva 10, Switzerland

Dear Madame Pimentel and Members of the Committee,

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) requests that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women initiate an inquiry under Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW regarding violence against Aboriginal women in Canada, and in particular, the hundreds of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. We are aware that the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) made a request for such an inquiry in January 2011. FAFIA did so with our knowledge and agreement. With this letter, NWAC adds its voice to the request.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is one of Canada's National Aboriginal Organizations and represents Aboriginal women, particularly First Nations and Métis women. NWAC participates in meetings of Canadian leaders and is generally viewed as the national voice representing Aboriginal women in Canada.

NWAC was founded in 1974 as an aggregate of 13 Aboriginal women's groups from coast to coast to coast, with the goals of preserving Aboriginal culture, achieving equality for Aboriginal women, and having a role in shaping legislation relevant to Aboriginal women. NWAC is led by a President and Board of Directors, who cooperate and exchange information with our provincial and territorial member associations to make local and national recommendations on programs, policy, legislation and initiatives affecting Aboriginal women and girls.

In 2005 NWAC launched the Sisters In Spirit initiative. The initiative began as a five-year research, education and policy initiative funded by Status of Women Canada designed to address the alarming incidence of violence against Aboriginal women, including the disturbing numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Many activities were supported by the initiative: the project led the way for understanding root causes of violence and providing statistical evidence of nearly 600 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.

Between 2005 and 2010 the Sisters In Spirit project turned to practical analysis and reflection on how to better respond to the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. The research, combined with life stories of women and girls who are either missing or who have been found murdered, has led to an intimate knowledge of the experience of families, the patch work of policies, programs and services available to women, families and communities, and the jurisdictional divisions that present barriers in the police and justice systems to their effective response to the needs of Aboriginal women and families. NWAC has produced two important reports documenting its research, copies of which are attached.

Over the last five years, NWAC has met regularly and repeatedly with government officials and elected representatives – provincial, territorial and federal – to advocate for the development of concrete measures, and for a national action plan that would address both the root causes of the violence and the identified failures of the police and the justice system to prevent the violence, protect women from it and respond effectively to it when it occurs.

However, governments in Canada have not yet engaged with the issue of violence against Aboriginal women in the full and thorough way that is necessary to make real change to this long-standing problem. Notably, the federal Minister responsible for the Status of Women, Rona Ambrose, rejects the need for a national action plan to address violence against Aboriginal women (media story attached). In addition, despite supportive statements at the July 2011 meeting of all the Premiers of the provinces and territories, which NWAC participated in with other National Aboriginal Organizations, the Government of British Columbia denied NWAC funding for legal counsel to enable it to participate on an equal footing with the police and government officials in the fact-finding hearings of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. This is the first and only inquiry appointed in Canada so far to determine the facts regarding some disappearances and murders of women. Therefore, while espousing concern about Aboriginal women and girls, the Government of British Columbia has shut the Native Women's Association of Canada out of this inquiry (correspondence attached). The Native Women's Association of Canada is now calling for a national inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women (resolutions attached).

In short, our experience is that, so far, the rampant and extreme violence against Aboriginal women and girls receives attention at some high-level meetings and by some intergovernmental working groups. But concrete actions, and in particular, national, inter-jurisdictional plans to address both the root causes of the violence, and the inadequate police responses, still do not exist, even though Aboriginal women and girls continue to face threats to their safety every day.

An inquiry by the CEDAW Committee is urgently needed. The Committee can demonstrate commitment to the rights of Aboriginal women and girls, and highlight the human rights obligations of governments in Canada. A visit to Canada by members of the CEDAW Committee would raise the profile of this issue, and alert senior officials and Members of Parliament and Legislatures to its gravity.

We hope that you will respond positively to this request. Aboriginal women and girls in Canada need your help.

Sincerely,



Jeannette Corbiere Lavell
President