

PAM PALMATER ON MURDERED AND MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN & GIRLS

Root Causes, Public Discourse, and Call for a National Inquiry and Emergency Action Plan

Greg Macdougall



Photo: Walking With Our Sisters

“This issue around missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls didn’t just crop up a couple of years ago...this has actually been a problem since contact.”

The following consists of direct quotes and paraphrased summaries of what Pam Palmater had to say in a talk and interview on Feb. 24, 2015 at the University of Ottawa. She is a Mi'kmaw lawyer from Eel River Bar First Nation, Chair of Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University and a well-known activist for her role in the Idle No More movement, among other things.

The talk was entitled “The Law’s Role in Canada’s National Disgrace: Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls.” Videos of both the talk and interview are available at Equitable-Education.ca.

ON THE ROOT CAUSES OF INJUSTICE

“This issue around missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls didn’t just crop up a couple of years ago when it got all [this] media attention,” said Palmater. “This has actually been a problem since contact.”

Palmater feels we need to “address the root causes of why these Indigenous women and girls are vulnerable to begin with, and that’s a crucial place to start the dialogue.”

Her talk included a chronology of Canadian governments’ policies, motivated by genocide, towards Indigenous people. She said that the present problem of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is indicative of “a discussion that Canadians have yet to have [on] the second method [aside from assimilation] of obtaining [Indigenous] lands and resources, and that’s the elimination of Indigenous peoples in this country, targeting

Indigenous women.”

To the long and continuing history of the Canadian state’s racism, violence, neglect, perpetual victim-blaming and settler colonialism – of which forced relocations and dispossession of land, the Indian Act of 1876, the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop, and smallpox blankets are only the most well-known abuses – Palmater added a list of other atrocities intended to eliminate what was then referred to as Canada’s “Indian problem.”

Beginning in 1749, Nova Scotia began offering scalping bounties, beginning at 10 guineas (over \$3,750 CAD) per head and rising to 50 guineas per head by June 1750. “That,” said Palmater, “is how you decimate a nation by upwards of 80 per cent.”

She also highlighted the theft and murder of many Indigenous children from their own communities and the forced sterilization of Indigenous women in the past.

This legacy has direct descendants today, among them the “chronically maintained and legislated poverty by the federal government which makes these women more vulnerable, makes them homeless.” According to Palmater, the vast majority of cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls happen in urban areas, not home communities.

This cycle of poverty is self-sustaining, she said, and creates and maintains the conditions for violence.

CURRENT PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Palmater says that there is a big problem when it comes to educating Canadians about these “uncomfortable truths.” She feels that misinformation dominates public discourse.

Palmater takes issue with a 2014 RCMP report which pegs the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women at 1,181. She says the number is actually much higher – 1,181 is “all that’s known” or reported.

She also said she doesn’t trust the RCMP to be the ones to honestly deal with or assess the situation. She cited both the Pickton inquiry findings, which report that the RCMP consistently fails to adequately follow-up on and investigate cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and a 2013 Human Rights Watch report that found that RCMP officials have been perpetrators of rape and violence against Indigenous women and girls.

There is even a case of a sitting judge (David Ramsay, from British Columbia) who was found guilty of sexual assault causing bodily harm to Indigenous girls aged 12-17.

Palmater also says she feels that the discourse around criminality, victim-blaming and the ‘othering’ of Indigenous peoples creates a separation from potential allies in Canadian society on this issue.

THE CALL FOR A NATIONAL INQUIRY AND AN EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

Palmater backs the wide call for a national inquiry into the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. She says that such calls have been “almost unanimous – not just by the families of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, and all of the First Nation and women’s rights groups and organizations, but also by the majority of the provinces and territories, by all of the international human rights committees that have ever looked at the issue, by legal experts – there’s a reason why everyone is calling for a broad expansive national inquiry, and that’s because we need to know about all the things we don’t know.”

Such an inquiry, she suggested, should be “expansive in scope, with very targeted investigatory powers, done in partnership with those impacted and First Nations...At the same time [the government ought to develop] an emergency action plan to protect Indigenous women and girls right now, in terms of not just their personal safety, but also in terms of their mental health, their health, their social well being, all of those things need to be addressed...it can’t be a scenario where we do a national inquiry and just wait and see what happens.”

Calls for a national inquiry are, she said, “about giving Canadians the truth, the facts, so that they can analyze their own solutions for how we move forward, in addition to giving First Nations a voice.”



WALKING WITH OUR SISTERS

Walking With Our Sisters is an art installation which commemorates the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada and the United States.

In June 2012 a call was put out for people to create moccasin tops, or “vamps,” to honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Thirteen months later over 1,600 vamps had been sent in.

This large, grassroots collaboration began touring in late 2013. It arrives in Ottawa this fall, hosted by Gallery 101 from Sept. 25 through Oct. 16, 2015.

According to the installation’s website, “The work exists as a floor installation made up of beaded vamps arranged in a winding path formation on fabric and includes cedar boughs. Viewers remove their shoes to walk on a path of cloth alongside the vamps.

“Each pair of vamps (or “uppers” as they are also called) represents one missing or murdered Indigenous woman. The unfinished moccasins represent the unfinished lives of the women whose lives were cut short. The children’s vamps are dedicated to children who never returned home from residential schools. Together the installation represents all these women; paying respect to their lives and existence on this earth. They are not forgotten. They are sisters, mothers, aunts, daughters, cousins, grandmothers, wives and partners. They have been cared for, they have been loved, they are missing and they are not forgotten.”

A group of women of diverse backgrounds and ages have come together locally to organize Walking With Our Sisters community conversations in Ottawa – the fourth one happens Thursday Mar. 26 at 7:00 p.m., at Carleton University in 2017 Dunton Tower.

Find more information on Walking With Our Sisters at www.walkingwithoursisters.ca - and “Walking With Our Sisters Ottawa” on Facebook and Twitter, or by email at wwosottawa@gmail.com.

SURVIVORS LEAD IN FIGHTING INDIGENOUS WOMEN CRISIS

Federal government not doing enough

Francella Fiallos



Photo: Indigenous Peoples Solidarity Movement Ottawa

Whenever Chantel Henderson was around people she didn't know, she'd get a strange feeling.

At age 16 Henderson was beaten and raped after a night of underage drinking. A man she'd known only vaguely when she was a child held her captive for a week and threatened violence if she tried to escape. She eventually did.

Four years later, Henderson found herself in a similar situation, tied up in a basement apartment. Once again, she found a way out.

"I'm here for a reason," the Concordia University graduate student said. "I was made to survive all these terrible things that were done to me."

Henderson is also a member of the Sagkeeng and Pinaymootang First Nations in Manitoba. Unlike 1,181 Indigenous women across Canada who have been murdered or have disappeared, Henderson is still here fighting for justice.

On Feb. 27, Canada's largest advocacy group for Indigenous peoples, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), held a national roundtable on murdered and missing native women in Ottawa. The roundtable sought to hear from both government delegates and families seeking justice for their loved ones.

The AFN invited Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Bernard Valcourt, Minister for the Status of Women Kellie Leitch, and Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne to participate in the roundtable.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper was not present at the roundtable.

The roundtable "wasn't meant to replace a national inquiry," said AFN Director of Communications Don Kelly. "We focused on immediate actions: shelters, safer transportation. It was a chance to look at those issues."

The federal government held a separate press conference from the AFN and families after the roundtable was over — a clear indication of disrespect, according to NDP Aboriginal Affairs critic Niki Ashton.

"They used [the roundtable] as a PR strategy," she said. "The federal government says they're doing enough but they say 'no' to an inquiry."

Mi'kmaq lawyer and activist Pam Palmater also criticized the government for playing up the roundtable as a PR stunt.

"Our Indigenous women and girls deserve better than a one-day political save-face roundtable with no objectives, no targets, and no proposed outcomes," she said. "[The roundtable] is a pathetic response to the deaths of our women and girls on a weekly basis."

"We're in a crisis: if Canadians were experiencing the same level of violence, we would have over 20,000 Canadian women murdered and missing right now, in the last three decades. They would call out the military; we would be under martial law until those women were protected. Why don't we get the same response?"

Bridget Tolley, who lives on the Kitigan Zibi reserve close to Maniwaki, north of Ottawa, rejects the notion of a federal inquiry.

"We don't need the people who abused us to find a solution for us," she said.

Tolley is the lead organizer for the First Nations collective Families of Sisters in Spirit, a group dedicated to helping families heal and seek justice for missing or murdered loved ones.

Her mother was killed by an off-duty police officer in Quebec in 2001. Tolley has long demanded that the Quebec government conduct an investigation into her death.

She was not invited to the official roundtable, or the peoples' gathering held the same day at Carleton University.

"There were police there trying to block the families. What kind of message are they sending? There is so much disrespect," she said.

Only four seats at the roundtable were reserved for family representatives. Representatives were chosen on Feb. 26 and were given just four minutes to speak.

Family member C.J. Julian told APTN: "I just think what they did was re-victimize the families by picking four ceremonial witnesses for the national roundtable. It felt like we had to go against each other... I saw a lot of people walk away with heavy hearts... It was like we all went against each other. It was like lateral violence."

The ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women has received a considerable amount of attention this past year partly due to the high-profile case of Tina Fontaine, a Winnipeg teen whose body was found in the Red River in August 2014.

According to a January report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Indigenous women make up 16 per cent of all female homicides in Canada even though Indigenous people make up just 4.3 per cent of Canada's population.

The same report states that high levels of violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls stems from a "history of discrimination beginning with colonization and continuing through inadequate and unjust laws and policies such as the Indian Act and forced enrolment in residential schools."

When reflecting on her own story, Henderson says it's easy to see the links to a violent history of assimilation and injustice.

"My education and understanding of the colonial history [helped] me understand why people targeted me, why people wanted to see me as less valuable," she said.

Indigenous peoples have called on the government to launch a national inquiry into the crisis, only to be met with steadfast refusal from Prime Minister Harper.

Instead, the government has promised a five-year, \$25-million plan to reverse the high rates of violence toward Indigenous women and girls.

So far, Tolley isn't impressed by the government's action plan, claiming that she hasn't seen any results yet.

"If the government is

giving that much money, why isn't anything going on?" she asked.

Both Tolley and Henderson represent a neglected perspective when considering the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women: that of survivors.

"There are so many other women who aren't as lucky as I am," said Tolley. "It's healing for me to share my stories."

Even though violence disproportionately impacts the lives of Canada's Indigenous women, there is likewise a strong presence of resilience and determination.

But even Henderson concedes that it takes time for women who have gone through trauma to speak out and make a difference, especially with so many prevailing stereotypes in society about Indigenous women.

"It's very hard to get people to understand," she said. "My own family didn't understand...it didn't get real for them until my friend went missing in 2012."

Then suddenly two years later, it became real for the rest of Henderson's community.

Back in Henderson's hometown of Winnipeg, Rinelle Harper was raped, beaten and left for dead near the banks of the Assiniboine River in November 2014.

When Harper spoke publicly for the first time in December 2014, Henderson took notice. For the first time, she had seen another survivor demand to be heard.

"What happened to Rinelle was horrible, I'm glad she survived. She is bringing the issue of survivorship to the table," Henderson said.

Henderson says that her education and involvement with the Montreal-based group Missing Justice has helped her find her voice and to speak out, something she urges all Indigenous women to do.

"There's no risk in telling your story. It could make someone who has been in the same situation more bearable and who knows where that could lead," she said.

"Any woman with a story to tell should tell it."

EXTENDING THE CONVERSATION

Gender-based violence is not restricted to women. Widening discussion about the violence inflicted upon Indigenous women to include other gender identities exposes how deep and how wide gender-based violence runs in Canada's Indigenous communities. Below, we shed some light on the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous men and trans and Two Spirit-identified people.

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS TWO SPIRIT & TRANS PEOPLE

Groups like It Starts With Us, a campaign to support victims of violence and their families and loved ones, aim to "expand the dialogue... to include those [First Nations, Inuit and Métis Two Spirit, or trans identified people] who fall outside of Eurocentric male/female gender and sexuality binaries."

According to the group, violent deaths and disappearances of Indigenous people who are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning intersex and asexual (LGBTQQIA) community not only face increased violence but are often ignored by mainstream media and public discourse simply because they are so marginalized.

The group exists as a partnership between three other groups: No More Silence, Families of Sisters in Spirit, and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. Some of the group's most important support work involves the maintenance of a community-run database, publicizing disappearances and cataloguing violent deaths of Indigenous women and members of the LGBTQQIA community.

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS MEN

Although there is much popular and media attention given to the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and justly so, the documented murder rate of Indigenous men in Canada is actually higher than that of Indigenous women.

Both the Toronto Star and APTN have had stories reporting on Statistics Canada's figures of Indigenous murder victims between 1980-2012. StatsCan documented 745 Indigenous female homicide victims and 1,750 Indigenous male homicide victims. That's 14 and 17 per cent of all female and male homicide victims, respectively, despite the fact that, as of 2011, only 4.3 per cent of Canada's population self-identified as Indigenous.

The female figure of 745 Indigenous female homicide victims differs from the 2014 RCMP report of 1,017 murdered and 164 missing Indigenous women since 1980. (The RCMP has yet to provide such a figure for murdered and missing Indigenous men.) Regardless, these figures still show a disparity between Indigenous and settler Canadians' experiences of violence.

Such violence scars communities all across Canada. Lydia Daniels, whose son Colten Pratt has been missing since November 2014, told APTN that "we also wanted to make a statement that we also have murdered and missing men in our communities." Sandra Banman, whose son Carl was murdered in 2011, stated "In balance and unity with our people, we also need to think about our men. We don't love our daughters more than we love our sons, so when our sons go missing or are murdered, it hurts the families just as much."