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Missing, murdered Indigenous women, girls & two-spirit people

By M. Tiahui

Across Canada and the U.S., Indigenous women can often be seen at marches wearing red shawls or scarves, sometimes holding red dresses aloft. Indigenous people have formed dozens of organizations and organized walks and marches of solidarity and memory as well as stand-outs at government buildings and universities. They have written and spoken thousands of words, made videos and created art installations.

These actions are part of an ever-growing movement to amplify Indigenous voices and to remember and bring more attention to the longstanding issue of “Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls & Two-Spirit People” (MMIWG2S), lift up the concerns of their families and demand action to end the widespread violence.

In Canada, at least 5,100 women have gone missing or have been murdered nationally, with some areas such as Indigenous communities near the “Highway of Tears” in the Canadian province of British Columbia being particularly hard-hit. Many Indigenous families have been devastated by having family members stolen from them.

One of the many reasons that Indigenous nations all over are fighting against pipelines, fracking and mining is that man camps are set up for the influx of workers. The men have huge sums of money and lots of drugs to entice Indigenous women, who often end up being addicted and trafficked. Some of these women disap-



pear; some are killed.

Man camps are one of the many factors that lead to MMIWG2S in Canada and the U.S. Most of the men who assault or kill Indigenous women are white men, who act without fear of consequences in many jurisdictions.

But the disappearances do not just happen on reservations or in rural areas. The majority of Indigenous people live in urban areas, where Indigenous women are also targeted.

In Duluth, Minn., Indigenous women are stolen and held aboard ships to be sex trafficked on Lake Superior. In Canadian cities like Winnipeg in Manitoba, Indigenous youth, women and 2-Spirit people disappear all the time.

Bowing to public pressure, the Canadian government has undertaken a national MMIW inquiry, but that has been criticized for not being sufficiently staffed and insensitive to the needs of families and survivors.

The violence that Indigenous women experience knows no borders. During the Guatemalan civil war, tens of thousands of Indigenous women were raped as part of the genocidal government policy that also caused the killings of tens of thousands of largely Maya women and men.

In Mexico, Ciudad de Juárez and

Chihuahua are infamous for their high murder and disappearance rates, with Indigenous women workers particularly targeted. Throughout Latin America, women march to demand: “¡No Más Femicidios! ¡Ni Una Más! ¡Ni Una Menos!”

Australian Indigenous women have long been under attack, too. In both Australia and the U.S., Indigenous women are at least six times more likely to be murdered than the general population.

Inadequate yet appalling statistics

It’s hard to give exact figures for the magnitude of the problem because there are no central databases in the U.S. or Canada. Even when figures are available, they may not include Indigenous 2-Spirit people. (“Two-Spirit” refers to an Indigenous spectrum of gender nonconforming people, and some include lesbian, gay and bi people within the term.)

The statistics we do have are appalling. Studies indicate that 84 to 90 percent of Indigenous women have experienced violence, and 56 percent of Indigenous women are survivors of sexual violence, although many Indigenous experts think those numbers are too low.

Indigenous organizations and individuals have been working diligently to compile more comprehensive lists than currently exist and to construct meaningful databases.

One of the problems in talking about MMIWG2S is that Indigenous people are routinely undercounted

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and not identified separately in many statistics. Recently, through Freedom of Information Act requests, the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) identified 506 murdered or missing urban Indigenous women from the 71 U.S. cities from which they had requested data.

But that is an unrealistically low figure. Some cities, such as Santa Fe, N.M., do not even identify Indigenous people separately in their statistics, even though there is a large Indigenous population in that area. Instead they may classify Indigenous women as Black, white or “Hispanic.” Indigenous people are also not included because coroners, researchers and others make assumptions about what Indigenous people look like or where they live. It is because they do not believe that Native people count, so need not be counted. This undercounting is part of the erasure of Indigenous lives.

UIHI notes that “the National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the U.S. Department of Justice’s federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases. ... No research has been done on rates of such violence among American Indian and Alaska Native women living in urban areas despite the fact that approximately 71 percent of American Indian and Alaska Natives live in urban areas.” (<http://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>)

Communities organize self-defense

There are many proposals from Indigenous communities about what can be done. In addition to creating national databases of missing persons that identify Indigenous people, states and municipalities would need to be mandated to obtain proper data.

Other proposals include providing greater access to resources and services and providing special training to police forces. But more policing is not necessarily a viable solution. In many areas, the police have been a part of the problem, suspected of being among those who assault or steal women and also accused of being re-

sistant to investigating when missing women are reported. Native people — men as well as women — also have the highest rates of death by police in the U.S.

Often ignored by police, Indigenous communities and families sometimes undertake their own investigations and organize for self-defense.

For instance, in the Canadian city of Winnipeg, the Drag The Red community organization has searched for remains of MMIWG2S in the Red River in order to provide some closure to heartbroken families who did not know what had become of the person who had gone missing.

The Bear Clan Patrol organized by the large urban Indigenous community in Winnipeg operates as volunteer Indigenous peacekeepers who work within the community to increase safety.

A key proposal is that no projects should happen on Indigenous land without Indigenous consent, so that the Indigenous nation can take into account the impacts that the project might have. The U.S. and Canada are both historically resistant to this concept.

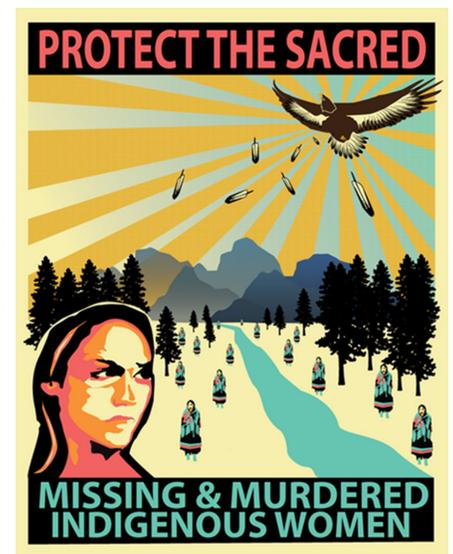
History of MMIWG2S

Some of the reforms that are being proposed will certainly help. But they will not entirely solve the crisis.

That is because violence against women and 2-Spirit people is a hallmark of colonialism in the Americas, started by Christopher Columbus and his men when they raped, murdered and kidnapped their way through the lands they claimed for Spain. This violence is a mechanism of domination and oppression. It is intended to terrorize, disrupt and demoralize Indigenous populations.

The violence of settler colonialism — a form of colonialism that seeks to replace the original population of a colonized territory with a new society of settlers — is not just something that happened in the past. It’s an ongoing system of power that perpetuates genocide and repression of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

And the violence stems from capitalism, the profit-seeking socio-economic system we live under, where



our social relations are based on commodities for exchange such as private property and the exploitation of labor and the land.

Settler colonialism and capitalism try to disrupt our natural relationships to the land and make them nothing more than property relationships, something to be bought and sold and exploited. The devaluation of the lives and bodies of Indigenous people, and the violence against Indigenous women in particular, are deeply intertwined with the contempt that settlers and their systems have for the land. They do not respect the sovereignty of Indigenous nations or lands, and they do not respect the sovereignty of Indigenous bodies that by their very existence stand in the way of the settlers.

These systems reduce people to property, leading to violence against the land and violence against Black and Brown bodies. White supremacy, racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia reinforce the colonial violence.

The ongoing crisis of MMIWG2S is also interrelated with the violence being enacted right now against migrant families — many of them Indigenous — coming from Honduras, Mexico and other countries. Women and 2-Spirits are especially endangered in their home countries as well as in the U.S.

This year, Roxsana Hernández Rodríguez, a trans migrant, died in ICE custody after being severely beaten and denied medical care, and Claudia Patricia Gómez González, an unarmed Maya migrant, was shot at the border by the Border Patrol, while Indigenous children are ripped from their families and caged.