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Addressing the History, Cases, Stories, and Activism of the MMIWG2S Crisis

Indigenous women are four times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be victims of violence. Indigenous women make up 16% of all female homicide victims, and 11% of missing women, yet Indigenous people make up only 4.3% of the population of Canada (“Murdered & Missing Indigenous Women & Girls”). Did you know that the youngest Indigenous girl to be a victim was just a baby, less than a year old, while the eldest was a 83 year old woman (“Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)”). Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirited People (MMIWG2S) is not just a crisis the country of Canada faces but one that has affected almost all of North America (“Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)”). In spite of the fact that countless families have lost sisters, cousins, mothers, grandmothers, and friends due to this crisis, our country fails to address it. Nevertheless, there are many families who hope their loved one will return to their home someday, but as time passes, they lose hope and they lose faith in the Canadian government, the RCMP, and the judicial system that promised to serve the people of the country. Racism has been built into these systems since day one, some Indigenous people believe that the system has failed them because when an Indigenous woman goes missing, her family's pleas for help are ignored. Many people have also decided that they will no longer stay silent and rise to fight for these lost sisters. But the persistent disappearance of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people

reflects deep-seated societal neglect and systemic injustices, demanding immediate attention and meaningful action.

But why are Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited people targeted and become the victims of violence? In Canada the answer dates back to the Indian Act and its long history of colonization (Indian Act). According to the Native Women's Association, "The *Indian Act* was created to control and assimilate Indigenous Peoples and their communities. Its implementation extinguished the recognition of Indigenous self-government structures. Under the *Indian Act*, Indigenous women have experienced longstanding and stubborn discrimination. As a result, they have been denied the rights to live on-reserve and to access services such as treaty and health benefits, cultural identity, and belonging" ("Indian Act"). As a result Indigenous women have become the victims of sexual trafficking, abuse, and exploitation. In a 2014 CBC article, a young woman was interviewed and discussed overcoming challenges such as addiction and sexual exploitation. She said, "I was getting money as a kid, and it was so easy to get money from this guy just to do whatever he wanted to do to me" (Taylor 1). She endured this sexual abuse for six years and she said that the older she got the more she considered selling herself for money (1). Another woman interviewed for this article said that the reason so many Indigenous girls fall victim to this abuse is because, "A lot of us grew up with poverty and not having all of those nice things" (1), and she also said, "Not having that support system and role models encouraging us to do good" (1). This is all the everlasting effects of colonization, poverty, and discrimination faced by Indigenous women that dates back to first contact.

More recently, here in Winnipeg there has been a MMIWG2S case unfolding. A man by the name of Jeremy Skibicki, aged 37, has been accused of murdering four Indigenous women (Gowriluk 1). This serial killer preyed on women in homeless shelters before committing his first

murder in 2022 (1). He has committed to murdering these women but, “Defence lawyers say Skibicki admits to the killings, but should be found not criminally responsible because of a mental disorder” (1). The crown is arguing that his actions were racially motivated (1). The trial is still underway and the court is yet to make a final decision. We can only hope that the families and friends of these victims, who were targeted based on their race, receive justice from a system that has failed numerous Indigenous families. The ongoing MMIWG2S case in Winnipeg serves as a tragic reminder of the racial targeting and violence faced by Indigenous women, highlighting the urgent need for justice and systemic change.

Indigenous families around us are being affected by MMIWG2S every day and we probably don't even realize it. In interviews I conducted with four Indigenous women, I asked them how MMIWG2S has impacted their lives. The names of the interviewees have been kept anonymous for this essay. Interviewee number one talked about the privilege she received because of how much whiter her skin was than other women in her family. She said, “ Me and my cousin, even though we had equal amounts of native blood coursing through our veins, her life would be a lot different because the worth of my skin put me in a higher place” (Interviewee one). She talked about how her parents always made sure that she was aware of this from a young age. She also talked about her mother's experience being an Indigenous woman. She said, “ My mom was a bartender and when I was young I remember my mom growing up had long straight black hair, because we don't cut our hair, so she grew up with long hair and she would always wear beaded earrings and she had dark skin. And then one day she was attacked. A guy had smashed a beer bottle over her head and said something racial to her. My mom cut all her hair after that, short and started curling it all the time, and she started whitening her skin, she stopped wearing beaded jewelry and she basically from then on raised me to be white”

(Interviewee one). The interviewee then said that her mom told her that if anyone asked where she was from, say she was Italian. When asked if she has ever been afraid to go missing the response I got was that she knew that because she was half white and that her skin was light she may not go missing. If she did, her dad (who is not Indigenous) would be the one to make the police look for her. Her fear grew when her parents divorced, and as a teenager she started to abuse substances. Then she felt a lot more vulnerable. She has also had some experience with the police and the stereotypes they have for Indigenous women. She said, “ Of the many times that my cousin has gone missing, the first questions we always get asked are, is she high on drugs, does she drink? It is never a question that other people might get when they are missing, like what was she wearing last, is there a reason why she could have left? It is almost like the police have this narrative that they think they know our story. If my cousin was high or drunk, why does that make her something less than someone who is sober and how does that have anything to do with bringing her home” (Interviewee one). She ended off by saying that if the MMIWG2S crisis is to be resolved we have to start working with the police as they are very racist.

The next person I interviewed talked about always telling her daughter to be careful and watch out and stay alert and also how she herself has been afraid of going missing. She said that growing up she didn't know how big of an issue this was. The third person I interviewed talked about not knowing about this issue until the movements around MMIW G2S started. She also expressed how she is afraid of going missing and is particularly for her partner who identifies as two-spirited. She believes that instead of focusing on issues like that 60s scoop that happened many years ago, though they are important, we should focus on the MMIWG2S crisis we are living through right now and focus on doing something to resolve it. She said that she was glad to see more people coming out and talking about this issue.

The final person I interviewed talked about growing up on a reserve and having someone close to her go missing. This is what she had to say: “ My cousin went missing in 2019 and she was missing for three years, and it was really hard because the police were looking for her, but on a reserve it was tricky because a lot of Indigenous people don't want to talk to the police and they don't want to tell them anything. Police officers come to your house, everyone hides. It was hard to get any answers, I had seen myself that they were looking but no one wanted to talk to the police. So my cousin was missing for three years and just this past year they found her body near my reserve and her body had been there for three years. I feel like they could have gotten some answers if people were more comfortable speaking about it” (Interviewee four). She expressed how there should be more Indigenous police officers so that people would be more comfortable with the police. When asked if she has ever been afraid of going missing she said, “ I feel like I actively look out for things that a lot of my friends don't. I grew up on reserve and the first time a physically left reserve was when I was eight years old and started going to a nearby school and a lot of things my friends didn't look out for I always did. But I guess from my parents' experience passed down to me I always look out and keep an eye on people and my friends who were not indigenous did not do those things and I thought wow these people have no survival skills” (Interviewee four). She also shared how often, for example if she goes to the garage to get her car fixed, she will take off the feathers hanging in her car. She will almost erase anything that shows her identity as an Indigenous person, so that she is not taken advantage of and be overcharged. She also said that the way to resolve the MMIWG2S crisis is to start with the police. This includes things like having more Indigenous police officers so Indigenous people feel more comfortable. Conducting these interviews put into perspective how almost every

Indigenous family has been affected by this crisis either directly or indirectly. It made me think about what steps can be taken to hopefully resolve this issue and move towards reconciliation.

MMIWG2S is an urgent issue that our society faces and there are many groups and people who are part of initiatives that advocate for MMIWG2S. One initiative that has become a symbol for MMIWG2S is the red dress and Red Dress day. This is how Red Dress Day started, “Red Dress Day was inspired in 2010 by Jamie Black, a Métis artist based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Black hung hundreds of empty red dresses in public places to represent missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and to bring awareness to the issue” (“Red Dress Day: What it is and how it began”). The red dress has no doubt become a significant part of the MMIWG2S crisis. Another initiative is No More Stolen Sisters. It is an art project created by Nick Alan and Kelsey Mata in collaboration with The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC). It was created because, “In response to the critical and ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis across the nation, the creation of No More Stolen Sisters was undertaken with intentional reflection on what has persisted for generations and what it means to stand in solidarity with the daughters, sisters, mothers, and aunties who were taken from their nations and communities” (“No More Stolen Sisters" (2023) by Nick Alan and Kelsey Mata | NIWRC”). These are just the tip of the iceberg as there are so many more groups and people who are contributing to the activism of the MMIWG2S crisis.

To conclude, the ongoing and unresolved disappearances of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people highlight profound societal neglect and systemic injustices, underscoring the urgent need for immediate and effective intervention. This issue not only dates back to colonization and the Indian Act, but is going on around us everyday. It is important and valuable to listen and learn the perspectives of other Indigenous women and to step up and take part in

activism supporting the MMIWG2S crisis. The RCMP needs to wake up and realize that it's not just Indigenous women going missing, it's someone's mom, sister, daughter, cousin, or aunt. It is our responsibility as Canadians to recognize this crisis and work towards preventing another Indigenous woman, girl or two-spirited person from going missing. We need to realize that they are humans, people, and are no different than us. As Brianna Jonnie wrote in her letter to Greg Selinger (former Premier of Manitoba), “And if I go missing and my body is found, please tell my mom you are sorry. Tell her I asked to be buried in my red dress, for I will have become just another native statistic” (Jonnie and Shingoose 55-56). The Missing and Murdered Women, Girls and Two-Spirited people crisis is not just an Indigenous issue, it's a human rights one.

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