

MINWAASHIN LODGE – THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S SUPPORT CENTRE



Presentation to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Study on Violence Against Aboriginal Women

Presented by Irene Compton, Manager, Culture Program, Minwaashin Lodge

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

It is an honour to be here as a representative of the Aboriginal women and children that Minwaashin Lodge serves, and to give a voice to the countless urban First Nation, Métis, and Inuit women who are living with the reality of violence in our community.

I will be using the time allotted to me to address causes, prevalence, and solutions, as outlined in your mandate, with special emphasis on solutions which can be arrived at..... through collaboration with Aboriginal women.

Violence against women in Canada was first reported in 1993 when Statistics Canada conducted the first dedicated survey on violence against women. It has become understood that violence against women is a complex issue that needs to be examined within the context of a woman's reality. In the case of violence against Aboriginal women the reality is one with deep historical roots which span across time.

An Issue Paper, "*Violence against Aboriginal Women and Girls*", written by the Native Women's Association of Canada, clearly reveals the answers to the questions being asked by this committee.

The opening paragraph states, “Systemic violence against Aboriginal women (VAAW) and girls, their communities and their nations is grounded in colonialism...” The paper spells out the impact the *Indian Act* had on Aboriginal women and girls.ⁱⁱ The colonization and attempt at assimilation through the Indian Act and the Residential School system all served to rip apart families, communities, and Nations. The “fall out” from these events, ladies and gentlemen, has been, and continues to be, devastating for all Aboriginal people, and it is the reason there is such a high incidence of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women.

I would like to introduce myself personally. My name is Irene and I am a First Nation’s Saulteaux woman from the Keeseekoose band in Saskatchewan. I am of the Bear Clan.

I am also an intergenerational survivor of the Residential School System meaning that my mother went to residential school in 1926 – 1942. Today, had she lived a long life, she would be 89. My mother had nine children. Today there are only two of us left. My youngest sister committed suicide at 20 years old in 1979.

Recently two of my sisters died early, due to alcoholism and mental illness.

Another sibling was murdered on the Yellow Quill Highway in Saskatchewan in

1968. I ask you, “How much can a family withstand?” Most of my siblings suffered from alcoholism and depression. Me and my brother are the only survivors of our family today. The reason we are still here and healthy is because we were given a chance.....that chance was to go on our healing journeys.

For many years, I did not speak about my background because it was too painful. It was easier to deny anything ever happened to me. Besides there was no safe place to share my story and get the help I needed.... so I carried that pain..... until, Creator brought me to Ottawa and I was given the responsibility of co-founding the Aboriginal Women’s Support Centre in 1993. It was through working at Minwaashin Lodge that I found my identity and purpose, courage to heal and ability to give back to my community. All I can say is that it has been a journey of personal and professional growth.

So let’s fast forward to today. It has taken 40 years to see that the government is starting to assist organizations like Minwaashin Lodge and I hope to see in my lifetime a substantial decrease of unresolved *intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal women*.

My story is a lot like the stories we hear from the women accessing services at Minwaashin Lodge. Most of the women are intergenerational survivors of the

residential school system. Many of them don't know their identity and culture because throughout the generations there was shame..... so their mothers decided to not teach them their language and their ways. Today, a lot of those women are reclaiming their heritage and culture through Minwaashin Lodge's Culture program.

Many of the women we see are suffering from the impacts of addictions, poverty, unresolved trauma, untreated mental health issues and low self esteem.

Minwaashin provides programs and services to assist women and their families to determine a life that is free from violence. We have been operating in Ottawa for 17 years and have seen many women go on journeys of healing.....taking small steps of bravery and building their confidence to determine good things in their lives.

We have a counseling team that supports a lot of women to deal with their unresolved trauma. Additionally we have a grandmother on staff to help women with traditional support and ceremonies to heal. We not only assist the women but also their children and teenagers.

We have a shelter that took ten years to achieve sustained funding. It is the only VAW shelter in the City of Ottawa serving First nation, Inuit and Métis women.

We are seeing more women becoming survivors and thrivers. They are doing well. We are also teaching them to be advocates for the prevention and education of violence in the home, schools, communities and workplaces. A lot of them are publicly advocating for change and are speaking out and being heard.

We still have a long way to go though..... because there are still a lot of women suffering from the impacts of violence and the men are lagging behind in their healing.

One of the best ways of empowering women is to provide them with healing and cultural identity and then training and education. Many women are sole supporters of the family and need long term, sustainable livelihoods.

Real and lasting solutions to violence against Aboriginal women can be, and should be, provided through Aboriginal organizations, run by Aboriginal people.

Our organization may be a small piece of the puzzle we are all trying to solve, but I can tell you that what we doworks. That's because all of our work is grounded in the historical understanding of the impacts of colonization, The

Indian Act, and Residential Schools. We understand the women who come to us for help. We have lived their life experience, and they know and trust us. These women have an internalized shame about their identity and culture that leads them to live lives filled with violence, addiction, and mental illness. They have been lost, disconnected from their spirit, culture, language, family and community. When Aboriginal women seek out support and ask to learn about themselves they deserve to be received by women who are like them, have lived that reality, and who understand. It is not enough to send a woman in an airplane to a city far away from her home, to a government office that is foreign and bureaucratic. It is not enough to say we are sorry.

Each woman deserves to be welcomed home.

As I said before, I am hopeful that Aboriginal women can be given a chance in life.... and that Aboriginal women need to be respected, loved and valued in today's society. We can start here, in the nation's capital and..... I thank Status of Women Canada for being leaders in the journey towards equality and justice for the grassroots women and their families.

Miigwetch, and thank you for listening.

ⁱ Native Women's Association, Violence Against Aboriginal Women and Girls, An Issue Paper Prepared for the National Aboriginal Women's Summit June 20-22, 2007. Available online: <http://www.nwac-hq.org/en/documents/nwac-vaaw.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p.4.