

The B.C. CEDAW Group

June 4, 2009

The Honourable Robert Douglas Nicholson
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada
284 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0H8

Dear Minister Nicholson,

The B.C. CEDAW Group is a coalition of non-governmental organizations, based in British Columbia, whose specific concern is the compliance of all levels of government in Canada with the terms of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

We write to urge you to immediately initiate a full public inquiry into the failure of Canada's justice system to adequately protect Aboriginal women and girls from racialized and sexualized violence, and to investigate the cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women promptly and effectively.

The Native Women's Association of Canada has now issued a second report from the Sisters in Spirit campaign, which documents 520 cases of missing and murdered women. 55% of those women and girls have been murdered or gone missing since 2000, and more than 25% of them are from British Columbia. In 43% of the cases of murdered women, no one has been charged. Violence against Aboriginal women and girls has reached epidemic proportions in Canada, and it requires urgent attention.

In October 2008, Canada's human rights performance under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) was reviewed. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in its Concluding Observations expressed concern "that hundreds of cases involving aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in the past two decades have neither been fully investigated nor attracted priority attention, with the perpetrators remaining unpunished." The Committee urged Canada to examine the reasons for the failure of the justice system to deal with these cases and to give them priority attention. Canada was asked to "remedy the deficiencies in the system" and to report back to the Committee on this urgent matter in one year, that is, by October 2009.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women also linked the level of sexualized violence experienced by Aboriginal women and girls to their poverty and poor living conditions. The Committee called on Canada simultaneously to "develop a specific and integrated plan for addressing the particular conditions affecting aboriginal women, both on and off reserves, ...including poverty, poor health, inadequate housing, low school-completion rates, low employment rates, low income and high rates of violence."

When presenting the second report of the Sisters in Spirit project, Beverly Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada said to the media that Canada has treated missing and murdered Aboriginal women as though they were "garbage." It is well past time to correct this. A full public inquiry is needed into the root causes of the epidemic of racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls, and into the reasons for the justice system's failure to protect Aboriginal women. Further, a full public inquiry is needed to foster a change in the social environment that permits the violence, and to support a search by communities, governments and justice officials for real and lasting solutions.

As a society, and a part of the international community, we cannot ignore the violence against Aboriginal women and girls any longer. The epidemic nature of the violence, and the failed official response to it, constitute a massive and systemic violation of the human rights of Aboriginal women. A public inquiry is needed in order for the country, and all levels of government, to move forward, take responsibility, and begin to provide Aboriginal women and girls with equal respect and care.

We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Carrie Humchitt, Aboriginal Women's Action Network
Kasari Govender, West Coast Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (West Coast LEAF)
Asia Czapska, Justice for Girls
Daisy Kler, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter
Lee Lakeman, Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (B.C. Region)
Cenen Bagon, Vancouver Committee for Domestic Workers and Caregivers Rights
Caryn Duncan, Vancouver Women's Health Collective
Susan Harney, Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC
Shelagh Day, Poverty and Human Rights Centre