

Trafficking of Indigenous Women and Girls

The high rates of sexual exploitation and trafficking of Indigenous women and girls is another consequence of the poor socio-economic determinants of Indigenous nations across this country. It is also the result of the disgraceful colonial legacy of physical and sexual abuse experienced at residential schools, the dispossession of identity and culture wrought by the *Indian Act* and the systemic racism that continues to characterize and permeate Canadian institutions and the attitudes of many Canadians. According to the 2016 census, under 5% of the Canadian population is Indigenous. Yet experts estimate that at least 35% of the women and girls in the sex trade are Indigenous. This doesn't add up.

Before she joined the Senate of Canada, Senator Boyer and Peggy Kampouris published a 2014 report commissioned by Public Safety Canada which examined the problem of sex trafficking of Indigenous women and girls. The findings were heart-wrenching. Not only does poverty force Indigenous girls and women into the violent world of trafficking, but the women are manipulated by gangs and criminal organizations and, tragically, sometimes by family members and kinship relations may be involved the exploitation. When every angle of their lives is one of vulnerability, the women and girls are coerced into this life through methods of false promises ("love" and "riches"), drugs and alcohol that culminates in addictions, and sometimes its by brute intimidation through bodily violence.

One of the greatest challenges Indigenous women and girls face is in the lack of protection and safety. Their domestic situation is often terribly disordered, but this is magnified by the deficiency in protection from the police and law enforcement agencies. Corroborating what the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* alleges, some of the women Senator Boyer and Ms. Kampouris interviewed reported that the police were guilty of misconducts that ranged from inadequate investigations to accounts of experiencing violence and racism at the hands of police officers. The inability of some police officers to fulfill their mandate and live up to their oaths only intensifies the mistrust on the part of the women and girls, including their families, who are already mistrustful of authority because of Canada's history of colonialism.

"The 2014 study revealed that this is a complex problem," said Senator Boyer. "But we know that police services have a lot of work to do. They need to purge the culture of racism that continues to misguide their work and they need to become more knowledgeable of how Indigenous women and girls are targeted and exploited."

Some of the recommendations the research outlines suggests how police agencies must devote more resources to identifying and investigating human trafficking; put in place mechanism that can allow for better information sharing across jurisdictions; develop and maintain relationships with Indigenous communities to develop a relationship of trust; educate law enforcement officers on the unique aspects of human trafficking; and increase collaboration among service providers who work closely with Indigenous populations.

Though this issue requires further actions, Parliamentarians have been addressing the issue. In October of 2018, the Parliament of Canada Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and the Subcommittee on International Human Rights issued a report titled, "A Call To Action: Ending The Use of All Forms of Child Labour in Supply Chains". This study informed the formulation of the Modern Slavery Act which was introduced to the House of Commons on December 13th 2018, but, regrettably, Parliament dissolved before it could be debated.

In January 2017, Shirley Cuillierier, M.O.M. was appointed as the Senior Advisor on Reconciliation to advance and promote the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation – Calls to Action and to champion practical, every day acts of Reconciliation. In her efforts, A/Commr. Cuillierier led the RCMP's response to the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

The Indigenous women and girls who are sexually exploited are caught in a complex web of challenging social-economic determinants. Trapped, they are subject to poverty, low self-esteem, addictions, mental health issues and poor health. This is a crisis in Canadian society and one that intersects with the awful findings exposed by the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*.