



# Women of the Métis Nation

Policy Paper on Violence  
Against Métis Women

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Background

Métis women experience gender-based violence, something that a great number of Métis women experience repeatedly throughout their lives. Métis women experience many forms of violence but the result remains the same – Métis women often are unable to address the social issues that create the causes of their victimization.

The victimization of Métis women is not part of our traditional culture. Violence against Métis women within their families and communities must be understood as part of a wider spectrum of social stress and turmoil that has resulted from government policies imposed on Métis people without their consent.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Métis women were a part of an egalitarian society where their contributions were valued and their participation in their communities was essential to its existence. The influence of churches, colonization and the demeaning of our cultural values has contributed to the marginalization and devaluation of the role of Métis women in their communities for many generations. The federal government's Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) concluded that:

[r]epeated assaults on the culture and collective identity of Aboriginal people have weakened the foundations of Aboriginal society and contributed to the alienation that drives some to self-destruction and anti-social behaviour. Social problems among Aboriginal people are, in large measure, a legacy of history.<sup>2</sup>

The situation of Métis women is compounded by sexist stereotype and racist attitudes towards Aboriginal women and girls and societal indifference to their welfare and safety. "...[M]ost Aboriginal people have known racism first-hand – most have been called 'dirty Indians' in schools or foster homes or by police and prison guards. Aboriginal people have also experienced subtle shifts in treatment and know it is no accident."<sup>3</sup>

We also cannot ignore the influence of the new social climate brought about through the introduction of television and computers, leading to a huge influx of outside cultural values, and the change of conceptual activities that affect our young people. Issues of bullying, youth violence and the loss of cultural identity have continued to contribute to the violence perpetrated against Métis women.

Violence sometimes takes place at home, within the family circle, and is perpetrated by the closest relatives. A blend of tolerance and the privacy of the act of violence makes it invisible or difficult to detect unless we introduce

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada, a Summary of Amnesty International's Concerns*, London, United Kingdom, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)*, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Freeman Marshall, Pat and Marthe Asselin Vaillancourt, *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence – Achieving Equality: Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women*, Ottawa, Supply and Services Canada, 1993.

ourselves to the women who are impacted. However, we would be remiss if we only acknowledge violence that is part of a family cycle.

The dynamics of violence against Métis women extends well beyond the confines of the family circle. Métis women are placed at risk simply because they are Métis women. Amnesty International, as well as a long line of government commissions and inquiries, has identified a number of factors linking racism and discrimination to violence against Aboriginal women:

- Despite assurances to the contrary, police in Canada have often failed to provide Aboriginal women with an adequate standard of protection;
- The social and economic marginalization of Aboriginal women, along with a history of government policies that have torn apart Aboriginal families and communities, have pushed a disproportionate number of Aboriginal women into dangerous situations that include extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution;
- The resulting vulnerability of Aboriginal women has been exploited by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men to carry out acts of extreme brutality against Aboriginal women; and,
- These acts of violence may be motivated by racism, or may be carried out in the expectation that societal indifference to the welfare and safety of Aboriginal women will allow the perpetrators to escape justice.<sup>4</sup>

### **Types of Abuse**

Métis women experience both passive and aggressive types of abuse. When we speak of aggressive abuse we are referring to the physical, sexual or economic abuses that Métis women experience. Passive abuses are institutionalized policies that generate systemic abuses and the physical and emotional neglect and the overall marginalization of many Métis women which result in them becoming victims of aggressive abuse outside of the family circle.

Women of the Métis Nation does acknowledge that most people see this type of aggression as criminal behaviour and a violation of human rights. However, our experiences have taught us that violence against Métis women is tolerated, and in fact is accepted, by society because of societal values and systemic policies. Amnesty International identified that, “[f]aced with apparent indifference to the welfare and safety of Indigenous women, the families and non-governmental organizations working on their behalf have been obliged to launch their own campaigns to bring the issue before the police, media and government officials.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Significant Signs of Changing Violence in our Communities**

Through their consultations with Métis women from across the Métis Homeland, the Women of the Métis Nation have identified that the loss of culture and

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada, a Summary of Amnesty International's Concerns*, London, United Kingdom, pp. 4 & 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

community has resulted in exacerbated violence amongst the youth in our communities. Young Métis women are involved with or experiencing more aggressive forms of violence through bullying, drugs, gangs, poverty, and a lack of familial supports. Through their close ties to the community, Métis women have identified that our youth culture has come to tolerate verbal, physical and emotional violence. Young women are willing participants to the verbal abuse where their partners refer to them as their 'bitches' and other derogatory terms that reflect the type of sexist violence that has become tolerable. These young women accept these derogatory labels as terms of endearment.

These abusive relationships lead to heinous crimes. One only has to look at the case of Nina Courtepatte to see just how heinous the violence directed at young Métis women has become. Nina Courtepatte was a thirteen year-old Métis girl who was raped and killed in Edmonton, Alberta on April 3, 2005. Her bloody body was discovered by a golf course groundskeeper the following day. She had been brutally beaten, sexually assaulted and killed. She was lured to the golf course under the pretext that she was going to a party. One of the men convicted of killing her was believed to be seeking an individual to kill prior to targetting Nina. Another young Aboriginal woman on trial for her murder openly admitted in court to participating in her beating and had no remorse for the loss of her friend. Stories like these clearly indicate that work specific to our young Métis women is necessary and aggressive solutions are needed to ensure that we halt the escalation of these types of crimes and, eventually, prevent them from occurring altogether.

### **Current Status of Violence Against Métis Women**

Violence against Aboriginal Women in Canada is prevalent and occurring at a disproportionate and alarming rate. As Michelle M. Mann writes:

“[c]ompared to other Canadian women, Aboriginal women are three times more likely to report that they experienced some form of violence perpetrated by their spouses and Aboriginal women run eight times the risk of being killed by their spouse after separation. Twenty five percent of Aboriginal women were assaulted by a current or former spouse during the 1999 General Survey's five year period, twice the rate for Aboriginal men (13%) and three times the rate for non-Aboriginal women and men”<sup>6</sup>

Aboriginal women are also disproportionately represented in activities that put them at higher risk of violence and abuse. The PACE (Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education) Society conducted a study of 183 women in the

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<sup>6</sup> Mann, Michelle M. (2005). *Aboriginal Women: An Issues Backgrounder.* Retrieved from, *Status of Women Canada Website*, [http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=resources/consultation/ges09-2005/aboriginal\\_e](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=resources/consultation/ges09-2005/aboriginal_e) (May 17, 2007).

Vancouver sex trade. More than 30 per cent of the sex trade workers surveyed were Aboriginal women, although Aboriginal people make up less than 2 per cent of the city's population.<sup>7</sup>

Métis Women attempting to escape violence are often forced out of the family home and community and into cities, where they encounter a multitude of systemic barriers. They are constantly being revictimized by systemic racism. Métis Women are often forced to live in extreme poverty. Multiple barriers lead Métis women to situations where they are over represented in statistical analyses demonstrating the level of violence that impacts their lives. Métis women need to raise awareness within the justice system about violence against Aboriginal women, including Crown Attorneys, judges, police and court workers. Cultural awareness and sensitivity training should be required for all stakeholders within the justice system and should provide an overall understanding of the impacts of violence and abuse. All stakeholders, including Métis women, need to be involved in policy reviews to assist in identifying the elements of a system that internalizes decisions that affect them. A National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence report released in November 2006 indicated that:

“[M]eanwhile, the impact on the male perpetrator is often seen as minimal and ineffective. A common view among women within the Aboriginal community, as well as among first responders, is that community sanctions are mild, and legal repercussions within the corrections system are flimsy. Although some laws and policies allow police officers to lay charges against a perpetrator without the consent of the victim, neither victims of violence nor first responders feel that laws are adequately applied. First responders and focus group participants call for increased accountability among perpetrators, and reform of the justice system to allow for more punitive measures.”<sup>8</sup>

Much of our preliminary research has indicated there is some inclusion of Métis women and their perspective. However, data and suggested solutions to the barriers and issues faced by Métis women have not incorporated many recommendations that result in changes that will create awareness or changes to programming benefiting Métis women.

While pan-Aboriginal research on violence against Aboriginal women is extremely important, specific research regarding Métis women and their experiences is needed. The Women of the Métis Nation recognize that our personal and family experiences allow us to contribute anecdotal experiences; these subjective experiences need validation through academic research. Métis

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<sup>7</sup> PACE Society, *Violence Against Women in Vancouver's Street Level Sex Trade and the Police Response*, Vancouver, 2000, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, *Aboriginal Women and Family Violence: Final Report*, [http://www.nacafv.ca/en/pdf/family\\_violence\\_report.pdf](http://www.nacafv.ca/en/pdf/family_violence_report.pdf) (released November, 2006).

academic and researcher Emma LaRocque addresses this issue in “*Violence in Aboriginal Communities*”, stating:

“[s]ince it is considerably more difficult to get precise statistics on Métis people, it is virtually impossible to say with any exactness the extent of sexual violence in Métis families or communities. However, as more victims are beginning to report, there is every indication that violence, including sexual violence, is just as problematic, just as extensive as on reserves. In November 1992, the Women of the Métis Nation of Alberta organized an historic conference near Edmonton dealing specifically with sexual violence against Métis women. The interest shown by Métis women from across Canada was overwhelming. The stories shared by the 150 or so conference participants indicated that Métis women, no less than Indian women from reserves, have been suffering enormously – and silently – from violence, including rape and child sexual abuse.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Métis Women’s Experiences Become Lost in Non-Specific Research Parameters**

Statistics Canada has published statistics indicating a shocking level of violence in Métis communities: 39.0% of Métis experienced family violence, 23.0% of Métis experienced sexual abuse, and 14.6% of Métis experienced rape.<sup>10</sup> These statistics are not gender-specific, yet the rates of violence reported indicate a prevalence of violence, sexual abuse and sexual assault experienced by Métis. The Women of the Métis Nation request that statistics regarding these social issues be reported in Métis and gender-specific terms.

### **Métis-Specific Research**

Métis women need to conduct the necessary research identifying their unique situation in the mosaic of “Aboriginal Women”. Due to the nature of the differences in Métis women’s lives, Métis-specific solutions and programming need to be developed. Métis women do not want to ‘go it alone’; they wish to work in partnerships in order to complete Métis-specific research addressing the issues and priorities around violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Emma LaRocque, “Violence in Aboriginal Communities” in *Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: An Aboriginal Perspective*, Information from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, Vol. 5, Table 5.4. Adapted from the Statistics Canada publication, “Language, tradition, health, lifestyle and social issues,” 1991, Catalogue 89-533, June 29, 1993.