Call It a Femicide: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)

Johanna Villalobos

Native communities across the world are facing a human rights epidemic. In North America, alarming numbers of Indigenous women and young girls are being murdered and have been missing for several years. Despite the severity of these tragedies, they frequently garnered insufficient media coverage and law enforcement resources compared to cases involving white women, reflecting deep-seated biases and institutional failures. Historically, the cases of these women have been marginalized, reflecting broader systemic issues of racism, sexism, socio-economic disparities, and stereotypical narratives that undermine their humanity and worth. Having a narrative towards Indigenous women or victimizing them, historian Andrea Smith explains these injustices in her seminal work, "Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples," emphasizing how women are frequently misrepresented. Smith contends that the depictions demonstrate the dehumanizing nature of these historical actions that have long devalued Indigenous women's lives. Being marginalized or stereotyped often portrays Indigenous women as "vulnerable" or participating in "dangerous behaviors," resulting in the lack of urgency and seriousness in family members' efforts to solve their disappearances and murders. This disparity underscores the need to reframe these incidents not merely as homicides but as *femicides*, a term that emphasizes the gendered nature of these crimes and the societal structures that perpetuate them. Femicide, as a concept, highlights the intersection of gender, race, and colonialism, which are critical in understanding why Indigenous women are disproportionately affected. As a result, the investigation into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) is critical, as it seeks to both illuminate the systemic violence experienced by

Indigenous women/girls and ensure that their identities are not solely defined by victimhood, thereby advocating for broader recognition of their rights and resilience.

The historical research on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls demonstrates colonialism's horrifying legacy and long-term consequences for Indigenous communities. These historical injustices paved the way for current issues affecting Indigenous people, such as rising rates of sexual violence and human trafficking, which are exacerbated by systemic prejudices and a lack of awareness. However, as early as the twentieth century, a growing awareness among their people and allies prompted them to discuss these crucial concerns. To provide those who are directly impacted by voice and present an authentic picture of their experiences, this research essay will be supported by scholarly works that examine the causes and historical development of these difficulties in addition to merging first-hand accounts. This strategy not only emphasizes the scale of violence against Indigenous women, but it also serves as a potent advocacy tool for justice and structural reform, aiming to remove the structures that perpetuate prejudice and marginalization. This research not only seeks to honor the victims and their families but also to challenge the societal indifference that has allowed such violence to persist. Through a comprehensive, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the structural inequalities that underpin the epidemic of missing and murdered women in North America.

Colonial Encounters: The Early Impact on Indigenous Women and Girls

In the context of the thesis, colonialism in North America has orchestrated acts of violence and physical dominance against Indigenous women and girls, creating an uneven power structure, which is examined through this issue by historian Sarah Deer's book *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence*. Deer argues that the process of colonialization that happened upon Columbus's arrival not only represented "the beginning of the destruction of Indigenous

communities but also the moment when European men introduce rape as a major tool of that destruction."[1] Deer asserts that European men used sexual violence as a means to assert control and dominance over Indigenous women, a claim supported by primary sources such as Michele de Cuneo's "Letter to a Friend," a report during Columbus' second voyage to the Americas, where he graphically describes his capture of a "Carib woman" and subjected her to sexual violence for his desire, stating, "I took a rope-end and thrashed her well, following which she produced such screaming and wailing as would cause you not to believe your ears," inflicting the illustration of how rape was systematically employed to subjugate and terrorize.[2]

Similar to the portrayal described by Deer, historian Andrea Smith's paper, "Not an Indian Tradition: Colonization of Native Peoples," (2009) delves into the harrowing intersection of colonialism and sexual violence against Indigenous women and communities in North America. Smith's work explores how colonial powers systematically orchestrated acts of violence and physical dominance, perpetuating a cycle of oppression that has long plagued Native communities. She highlights the colonial mindset that dehumanized Indigenous women by labeling them as "dirty" for their lack of clothing, which made them "polluted with sexual sin," thereby considering them to be "sexually violable" and "rap[e]able," revealing the historical practices that have long devalued Indigenous women's lives.[3] Smith contends that this dehumanization was not a result of colonialism, but rather a strategy for asserting authority and dominance over Native peoples. This paradigm emphasizes how sexual violence was used as a tool for oppression and cultural erasure.

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[1] Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 33.

[2] Michele de Cuneo, "Letter to a Friend," in Castillo, Susan P, and Ivy Schweitzer *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (Malden Blackwell Anthologies, 2001), 128.

[3] Andrea Smith, "Not an Indian Tradition: Colonization of Native Peoples" *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 70-85, 72-73.

A source that supports Andrea Smith's argument is historical documentation, such as David H. Wrone's book *Whose the Savage?: A Documentary History of the Mistreatment of the Native North Americans* (1973). Wrone's work presents a detailed narrative of the United States' genocide and abuse of Native Americans, drawing on the primary sources to depict not only the horror history of sexual assault and rape toward Native women but also the mutilation of their bodies. For instance, "Two of the best looking of the squaws were lying in such a position, and from the appearance of the genital organs and of their wounds, there can be no doubt that they were first ravished and then shot dead. Nearly all of the dead were mutilated," reflecting how Native women were dehumanized and their suffering rendered invisible.[4] This account, including de Cuneo, underscores the pervasive and intentional use of sexual violence as a weapon of colonization, and this documentation supports the assertion by Smith and Deer that sexual violence was not only a method of physical domination but also a strategic tool for dismantling Indigenous cultures and identities, furthering the colonial agenda of erasure and control. The colonial agenda relied on this strategy, which continues to impact Indigenous women who are missing or murdered. Understanding the historical context of these atrocities is critical for addressing and overcoming the structural causes of violence against Indigenous communities today.

The Impact of Sexual Violence and Trafficking Rates on MMIWG

Around 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police released a report addressing the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), the first data on this matter stating that this has been a problem since the 1980s. It reported that nearly 1,200 Indigenous

[4] "Massacre of Pacifist Apache April 30, 1871" in Wrone, David R. and Nelson, Russel S. *Who's the Savage? A Documentary History of the Mistreatment of the Native North Americans* (United States: Fawcett Publications, 1973), 382-383.

women and girls have either gone missing or been murdered.[5] By 2019, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls published its Final Reports, which included 231 Calls for Justice aimed at tackling the high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls, as well as the inadequate tracking of their cases and inconsistent MMIWG statistics. There was not a lot of comprehensive databases for tracking the annual number of Native women and girls who go missing or are murdered. However, the FBI National Crime Information Center estimates, in 2022, that over 5,590 Indigenous women were reported missing though the number could be higher.[6] According to the National Institute of Justice-funded story, Indigenous women and girls have reported "more than four in five have experienced violence in their lifetime, and more than one in three experienced violence in the past year" than their non-Native peers.[7] The study revealed that many experience physical violence by partners, stalking, and a significant danger most Indigenous women and girls face in sexual violence, which is sex trafficking. According to the Garden of Truth report authored by a group of researchers focused on Native women working in prostitution, it was found that in the U.S. and Canada, up to 40% of women and girls had been sexually exploited in trafficking.[8]

Historians Andrea Smith and Launa Ross extensively discuss these problems in their 2004 paper, "Introduction: Native Women and State Violence," emphasizing how state and institutional failures contribute to perpetuating cycles of violence against Indigenous women and girls. They contend that native women who are survivors of violence often find themselves forced into silence

[5] Royal Canadian Mounted Police "Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview" *Exhibits* (2014): 1-10, 7.

[6] "2022 National Crime Information Center Missing Persons and Unidentified Persons Statistics" *Statistics* (2022): 1-12, 5

[7] Andre B. Rosay, "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men," *NIJ Journal* 277 (2016): 1-8, 1.

[8] Melissa Farley, et al., "Garden of Truth: The Prostitution and Trafficking of Native Women in Minnesota" *Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition / Prostitution Research and Education* (2011): 1-72, 19.

around sexual and domestic violence by their communities because of their desire to maintain a united front against racism and colonialism. This situation shows the unwavering connection to colonial histories and state actions that have consistently undermined their sovereignty and safety.[9]

For instance, their paper draws painful parallels to the tragic case of 15-year-old Tina Fontaine, a Sagkeeng First Nation whose life was cut short by violence in 2014, embodying the struggles and injustice faced by numerous Indigenous women highlighted in the paper. The violated corpse of the teenager - wrapped in a garbage bag, weighted down by stones, and left discarded was pulled from Red River in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Despite her youth, Tina succumbed to violence and was overlooked by the welfare and education systems responsible for her care. For example, after her father was brutally murdered in 2011 her family recalls her going into a "downward spiral" and "drifting away," prompting her aunt to contact CFS agencies for help but to their distraught, Tina was placed in foster care in Winnipeg, away from home.[10] Her time there, which was two months resulted her in experiencing severe sexual trafficking, using drugs, and being taken advantage of before she was murdered; reflecting the broader crisis of trafficking among young Indigenous girls. During her last weeks, she was residing at a motel arranged by CFS but often ran away. Unfortunately, many people not only neglected to protect her but also marginalized and criminalized her actions. Her story is a devastating reminder of how Child and Family Services (CFS) and governmental systems failed to shield her from the horrific risks of sexual violence and trafficking. Tina's awful fate is not a unique incident, but rather a harsh

[9] Andrea Smith and Launa Ross, "Introduction: Native Women and State Violence" *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (98) (2004): 1–7, 1.

[10] Steve Lambert, "Sentencing Hearing into Death of Manitoba Teen's Father Hears Girl Lost Her Way" *(*Toronto: Canadian Press Enterprises Inc, 2014), 1.

reminder of how the state's shortcomings contribute to a cycle of abuse that binds thousands of Indigenous women and girls.

Further reinforcing this perspective, Roe Bubar and Pamela Jumper Thurman's article, "Violence Against Native Women," further supports the arguments presented by Smith and Ross. Their work furthers the discourse on systematic violence plaguing Indigenous women by providing insights into the societal and governmental factors that enable such violence. The article exposes the historical context, with state actions enforcing "removal, relocation, and assimilative federal policies that resulted not only in the loss of traditional homelands and lifestyles but also the loss of identity and culture. This environment placed Native women at greater risk," creating a situation where women are disproportionately and inadequately targeted.[11]

This article is echoed in Sarah Deer's book *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence* (2008), presenting personal narratives that emphasize the persistent challenges faced by Indigenous communities. For instance, an anonymous account in the book vividly describes a woman's abuse at the hands of her husband, recounting a traumatic incident where her husband entrapped her out of anger after she rejected his advances. In a brutal escalation, he dragged her into the bedroom, where she endured physical violence and rape. Despite the assault, when she sought justice by reporting the incident to the police, she was met with a disheartening response: "I was told there was nothing could be done since there was no witnesses," underscoring a significant barrier to justice that many survivors face.[12] The narrative reveals how, as her husband's violent behavior persisted, she was dealt with dismissive attitudes from law enforcement, often being told, "You let him in!" or "Why don't you divorce him instead of calling

[11] Bubar, Roe, and Pamela Jumper Thurman. "Violence Against Native Women." *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (98) (2004), 4.

[12] Anonymous, "From a Woman Who Experienced Violence," in Deer, Sarah, et al. *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence*. (Altamira Press), 2007, 108.

us," and even, "We can't do anything!"[13] Such responses not only fail to provide protection but also create a cycle of self-blame, resulting in long-term despair associated with such horrible experiences when thinking about the trauma and systemic neglect. Another disheartening narrative, "Walking in the Darkness, Then Finding the Light," recalls her rape that occurred on her university campus in 1996. Frank opens up about the significant impact the assault had on her life, including dealing with feelings of guilt and despair. She criticizes her college administration's response, for not ensuring "my safety or my well-being after I was raped on their campus by one of their students," and was treated unjustly, which left her in a period of second-guessing herself *why did this happen?* and *what if…?* questions that took a toll on her academics and personal life.[14] Both stories highlight a larger pattern of systematic neglect and unfair treatment by the government and law enforcement, compounding the physical and sexual violence that has long afflicted Native communities.

Indigenous communities have been significantly touched by the ongoing epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), which has brought to light the widespread problems of sexual violence and trafficking. The stories of survivors and the tragic losses serve as a critical reminder of the urgent need for systemic change. Recognizing this issue is critical because it reveals systemic weaknesses and institutional disinterest, particularly the lack of response from government institutions and law enforcement.

Government and Police Inaction in Investigating MMIWG

[13] Anonymous, "From a Woman Who Experienced Violence," 109.

[14] Lisa Frank, "Walking in the Darkness, Then Finding the Light," in Deer, Sarah, et al. *Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence* (Altamira Press), 2007, 118.

Since the 1980s, the crisis of MMIWG in North America has become a deeply alarming issue, highlighting systemic failures and the need for immediate action. As previously stated, the 2022 report underscores the gravity of the situation, revealing that 5,590 Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or been murdered which underlines the major and ongoing threat to Indigenous communities.[15] This significant number contrasts sharply with the mere 116 incidents recorded by police as missing since 2016, indicating a severe discrepancy in reporting and response efforts.[16] Further, the report indicates a large majority of unsolved cases being recorded, illustrating a pervasive lack of resolution and justice for the affected families and communities. Despite increasing advocacy and attention to this crisis, the discrepancy points to significant deficiencies in the law enforcement response, which has been characterized by untimeliness and a lack of accountability at the federal, state, and local levels.

To continue, there is a significant gap between the U.S. and Canadian governments and the justice system to provide the resources they promised to 'protect' tribal nations but continues to work to silence Native women. For example, the order of laws and investigations within a Native country in the United States is complicated by the fact that the race of both the victim and suspect determines which authority - federal, local, or state - has criminal jurisdiction over the case, which continues to hinder Native women's lives. In 1885, the Major Crimes Act provided “the federal government concurrent jurisdiction over a list of major crimes” on reservations, meaning that rape or murder could not be handled within the tribal community but through many channels to get to the federal desk.[17] Next, the 1953 Public Law 280 “transferred both civil and criminal jurisdiction

[15] “2022 National Crime Information Center Missing Persons and Unidentified Persons Statistics,” *Statistics* (2022): 1-12, 5.

[16] “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: A Snapshot of Data from 71 Urban Cities in the United States,” *Urban Indian Health Institute*, 2018: pp. 1 – 30, 2.

[17] Lily Grisafi, “Living in the Blast Zone: Sexual Violence Piped onto Native Land by Extractive Industries.” *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems* 53 [2020] (4): 509–39, 518-519.

in Indian country from federal to state authorities in six states, while simultaneously refusing to provide those states with the resources to carry out their new responsibilities."[18] However, Public Law 280 failed because states that accepted the required authority lacked resources, leaving state police departments with huge constituencies, geographical jurisdictions, and confusing jurisdictions. Another, the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act placed a cap on tribal sentencing authority, which imposes a limited punishment a tribal court can impose and only prosecute them for minor crimes. Finally, the result of the 1978 Supreme Court Decision in the *Oliphant v. Suquamish* case showed that tribal governments could not exercise criminal jurisdiction over non-natives.[19] The outcome of this case is that if a non-native individual rapes a Native woman on Native land, the tribe must rely on either the state or the federal government to carry out the punishment.

As for Canada, Colin Luoma's article, "Closing the Cultural Rights Gap in Transitional Justice," highlights the systemic failures within their governmental laws and justice system to protect Indigenous women and girls from becoming missing and murdered. Despite Canada's outward support for transitional justice initiatives abroad, internally, the legal and justice systems have repeatedly fallen short in safeguarding Indigenous communities. The existing laws and systems often lack culturally appropriate frameworks and fail to address the deep-rooted historical and systemic issues that contribute to the vulnerability of Indigenous women and girls. Moreover, the national approach does not recognize inquiries like the MMIWG Inquiry as mechanisms of transitional justice, failing to articulate a clear transition path from past injustices towards reconciliation and reparation.[20] One example of their actions is the Canadian child welfare system,

[18] Joseph Mantegani, "Slouching Towards Autonomy: Revisioning Tribal Jurisdiction, Native American Autonomy, and Violence Against Women in Indian Country" *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1973-)* 111, no. 1 (2021): 315–50, 324.

[19] Grisafi, "Living in the Blast Zone: Sexual Violence Piped onto Native Land by Extractive Industries," 517.

[20] Colin Luoma, "Closing the Cultural Rights Gap in Transitional Justice: Developments from Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls" *Sage Publications* Vol. 39, Issue 1 (2021): 30-52, 40.

which continues to be considered "a colonial institution that enacts racial biases in the operation and consolidation of state power over Indigenous families, communities, and children."[21] According to the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the child welfare system makes Indigenous girls more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, addictions, and violence. This concludes that both the series of sources from the US and Canadian governments leave into the systemic neglect and inadequate measures to address this humanitarian crisis, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and dedicated efforts to bring justice and safety to affected Indigenous communities.

As mentioned before, 15-year-old Tina Fontaine, whose life showed lapses in both the system and policing. It was reported that On August 8, at around 3 am, police stopped a vehicle in which Tina, who had been reported missing, was a passenger. The driver was intoxicated, yet the police allowed them to go. The next day, she was found in an alleyway and taken to the hospital. CFS took her into custody but left her unattended, which led her to flee. Unfortunately, she was never reported back and that was the last time she was seen again.[22] Despite those previous interactions with the police and doctors, she was still repeatedly let down by those meant to protect her though she was listed as a missing person. To add to the severity of the situation, once Tina's body was found, CFS workers did not inform her great-aunt about her passing. Her case and the inaction of the police in her story resonates with the book *The Fire Within* by John Fox from the narrative of a grieving father as he struggles for justice for his daughter, Cheyenne Marie Fox. The tragic events following Cheyenne's death affected her family, starting with the police's failure to inform them until four days had passed. This delay was compounded by the dismissive assertion

[21] Roxburgh, Shelagh and Sinclair, Megan. "Colonial Constructions: Systemic Racism in Child Welfare Practice" *Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 24 (1) (2023): 3 – 20, 3.

[22] Farley, Lisa, and Julie C. Garlen, "Editorial: The Child in Question: Childhood Texts, Cultures, and Curricula" *Curriculum Inquiry* 46, no. 3 (2016): 221–29, 224.

from law enforcement that Cheyenne had "committed suicide," with no thorough investigation to support such a claim.[23] The family ordeal was aggravated when they struggled to give Cheyenne a proper burial as no facility agreed to do so, and staff members were unwilling to assist in retrieving her body, stating that releasing it was "not possible."[24] John and his sons pleaded with them, who merely watched as they were forced to transport Cheyenne's body in the back of their truck themselves, due to the facility's inability to provide a driver.

In the following months, John's pursuit of justice led him to meetings with the Toronto Police Services, investigators, and lawyers to piece together the events surrounding Cheyenne's death. Despite confronting recordings that captured his daughter's frantic cries and screams from the 24th floor of a condo building before her death, John faced a police force seemingly intent on sweeping the case under the rug. This presented John with additional challenges, as the government continuously declined to launch a bigger investigation into cases of missing and murder of Indigenous women. When the suspected rapist was brought to trial, the complexity of the judicial process became brutally clear. The judge dismissed the case, stating that the video did not demonstrate a rape occurring. This led to the alleged rapist's acquittal, a decision that was never appealed, leaving the Fox family uniformed and feeling abandoned by the legal system. This representation shows the broader injustices faced by Native American families, as John reflects the systemic biases stating, "As Native Americans, we'll get no justice in an injustice system."[25] This demonstrates that police officers' negative perceptions of Indigenous women caused the MMIWG cases to either go unresolved or receive less attention than other cases because of

[23] John Fox, *The Fire Within: My Struggle for Justice, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. Dorrance Pub Co. (2019), 73

[24] Fox, *The Fire Within*, 77-78.

[25] Fox, *The Fire Within*, 96.

societally accepted disposability attitudes, which established the precedent that violent crimes against Indigenous women are acceptable.

Tragically, the systems meant to protect Indigenous women and girls like Tina and Cheyenne failed them, leaving families to deal with severe trauma while pursuing justice. Families frequently encounter stereotypes held by government agencies and law enforcement as they strive for accountability, which makes their efforts much more difficult. This ongoing struggle brought to light the larger failure of the police and administration to prioritize and provide the resources they had pledged to solve the problems that Indigenous women and girls face. In addition, the stories of those who lost their lives serve not only to reform law enforcement and government responses but also to ensure that their stories are being heard through public conversation, especially through media representation.

No News Isn't Always Good News: The Media's Role in the MMIWG Crisis

Despite the urgent calls from Native communities regarding the epidemic of disappearances and murders of Native women and girls in the United States and Canada, media portrayal often exacerbates the issue through negative stereotypes. Since the 1980s, when these disappearances began gaining occasional attention through newspapers and news reports, Native women and girls have frequently been depicted as vulnerable or even blamed for their victimization. This unfavorable portrayal adds to a broader societal bias that overlooks the seriousness and pervasiveness of this problem, partly because of the phenomenon known as “missing white woman syndrome,” in which media coverage disproportionately focuses on cases involving young, middle-class white women and the idea that they typically receive more news

coverage than native women and girls.[26] Stereotypes about Indigenous women and girls that have persisted throughout history serve to draw lines between what is deemed respectable or inconsiderate frequently marginalizing these women even after death. This biased portrayal not only misrepresents Native women but also hinders the awareness and action needed to address the crisis of MMIWG. Meaningful change needs to occur as it is essential to shift the narrative towards respecting and honoring the integrity of Native communities, while also increasing the visibility and prioritization of Indigenous women's safety and justice.

In the article "Newsworthy" Victims?" by Kristen Gilchrist, the stark disparity in media coverage between Aboriginal women and White women is critically examined. Gilchrist reveals that "Aboriginal women received three and half times less coverage; their articles were shorter and less likely to appear on the front page. Depiction of the Aboriginal women were also more detached in tone and scant in detail in contrast to the more intimate portraits of the White women."[27] This disparity implies that Aboriginal people are dehumanized, and their stories are ignored, highlighting structural biases in media representation. She demonstrates the distinction in news coverage between missing and murdered Indigenous women and their white counterparts through a thorough quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Gilchrist's findings reveal that "white women were mentioned in the local press a total of 511 times compared with only eighty-two times for Aboriginal women; more than six times as often..."[28] Even when this analysis was narrowed down to articles focused solely on the specific cases of missing or murdered women, Indigenous women still received significantly less attention, with only 53 articles covering their cases

[26] Zach Sommers, "Missing White Woman Syndrome: An Empirical Analysis of Race and Gender Disparities in Online News Coverage of Missing Persons." *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (1973-)106, no. 2 (2016): 275-314, 278.

[27] Kirsten Gilchrist, "Newsworthy" Victims? Exploring Differences in Canadian Local Press of Missing/Murdered Aboriginal and White Women," *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2010): pp. 373 – 390, 373.

[28] Gilchrist, "Newsworthy" Victims?," 379.

compared to 187 for white women. Gilchrist underscores that cases involving MMIWG not only received scant coverage but were often relegated to being footnotes within articles, unlike the cases of missing white women, which frequently took center stage on the front page.

From examining Gilchrist, she sheds light on how the biases in the media's selective spotlight perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous communities, as seen in the lack of comprehensive coverage on the "Highway of Tears"— also known as Highway 16 in British Columbia, Canada. Many Indigenous women and girls, from ages 15 to 25, in the surrounding area have either gone missing or have been found murdered along the 447-mile stretch of road since the late 1960s. Dan Levin's article "Dozen of Women Vanish on Canada's Highway of Tears, and Most Cases Are Unsolved," explained that although the RCMP "acknowledges" 18 murders and disappearances, most of them being Indigenous, from 1969 to 2006, community activists and relatives argued that this number is misleading and believed the total is closer to fifty.[29] Almost all of the cases remained not only unsolved but received less attention than the white woman who lost their life on the highway. Even though the Highway of Tears cases go as far back as 1969, local media articles across British Columbia surrounding MMIWG in the region go only from 1997 onward, and accessing complete archives from this period is difficult due to incomplete databases and archives. Journalist Adriana Rolsten's article, "Highway of Tears Revisited," points out the media bias against Indigenous victims. She states that it wasn't until "the first time papers like *The Globe and Mail*, the *Edmonton Journal*, and *The Vancouver Sun* really covered the Highway of Tears was in 2002, when [Nicole] Hoar, a 25-year-old [White]...woman, vanished."[30] Similar to Jessica McDiarmid's book *Highway of Tears* (2009) where she highlights the treatment

[29] Dan Levin, "Dozen of Women Vanish on Canada's Highway of Tears, and Most Cases Are Unsolved" *New York Times* (May 2016), 1.

[30] A. Rolston, "Highway of Tears Revisited," (2010) *Ryerson Review of Journalism.*

of the cases from media reports and small-town newspapers where Nicole Hoar's disappearance "bolstered media interest in all cases, the content of many stories demonstrates the same kind of biases that Gilchrist previously found in her analysis."[31] McDiarmid further examines how newspaper clippings had personal stories of Hoar, painting her a vivid image of who she was while previous victims tended to describe them briefly or as 'prostitutes' rather than sexually exploited individuals, with no context or details of who they were, or any examination of how young Indigenous women could be a possible next victim.

Rolsten found that during the time the disappearances had started, the media and police never released the victims' race. Still, Rolston's review of earlier coverage showed that before Hoar's disappearance, reporters had mistakenly believed all the victims were Indigenous, when in fact, eight were white. Gladys Radek, a native activist and aunt of victim Tamara Chipman believes "that if it weren't for Hoar, the police would have invested less effort in investigating cases, and the media would have done little, if anything, to inform the public about the tragedies along the road."[32] Unfortunately, many Indigenous victims faced selective reporting perpetuated narratives, contributing to a lack of awareness and urgency in addressing these disappearances and systemic issues behind them.

Another examination was the Vancouver Sun's coverage of the sex trade workers around the 1970s to 1990 where they portrayed the women as nuisances and criminals, often urging police, neighborhood interest groups, and city officials to enforce laws so that police "could sweep prostitution from the streets and from 'good' neighborhoods."[33] By 1998 and 1999 reporter

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[31] Jessica McDiarmid, *Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference, and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Atria Books, 2019), 123.

[32] Rolston, "Highway of Tears Revisited."

[33] John Lowman, "Violence and the Outlaw Status of (Street) Prostitution in Canada," *Violence Against Women* Vol. 6, Issue 9 (Sept. 2000): 987-1011, 1002.

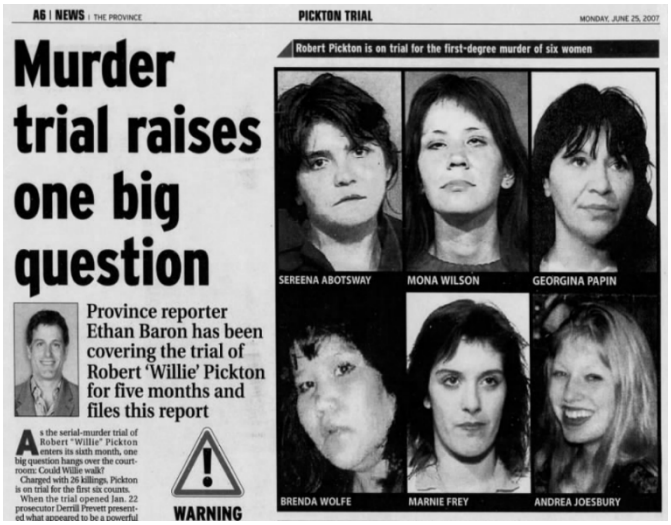
Lindsay Kines, also from the *Vancouver Sun*, started to write a series of articles on violence occurring, which was never covered before and only rarely up to the late 1980s, after several women began to go missing since 1978 from Vancouver's notorious and impoverished Downtown Eastside. This case involving missing women in British Columbia was under the horrific actions of Robert Pickton, who was charged with first-degree murder of twenty-six women, many of whom were Indigenous women. Despite the severity of their cases, Indigenous women received far less media attention compared to cases involving non-Indigenous victims. Similar to Kristen Gilchrist's critique of the media handling of cases involving Indigenous women, Jori Dusome's article "Discourses of Blame," addressed this disparity through the Robert Pickton case. Dusome's analyses reveal how the "media perpetuates colonial systems of violence against Indigenous women by constructing a hierarchy of victimhood, where the more "relatable" stories of white women sit front and center, while both the individual and systemic issues affecting Indigenous women go largely unmentioned."[34] This framework allowed Pickton to carry out his violence for years without repercussion, while the news, police, and the state turned a blind eye, largely because of the lives of the missing women and who they were.

Following the release of newspaper articles, the Vancouver Police Department and the officers that were interviewed didn't want to investigate because the lives of the women were drug users, sex workers, poor, and Indigenous - who were all deemed unworthy of saving. And with the coverage of a possible serial killer, Lindsay Kines quoted Constable Anne Drennan, the VPD's media liaison officer saying, "There is no indication that a serial killer is preying on the women. Detectives also have to investigate the possibility of a suicide or drug overdose that has gone

[34] Jori Dusome, "Discourse of Blame: An Analysis of Media Coverage in the Robert Pickton Case," *Invoke* Vol. 6 (2020): 1-6, 1-2.

undiscovered, or that the women were killed in a dispute over drugs."[35] Due to the lack of significant attention regarding the missing women, Kines and three other reporters conducted in-depth investigations through *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province* and published their findings.[36] Despite their aim to promote accountability, their stories reinforced stereotypes, portraying Downtown Eastside as an area of mean streets and depicting the women working there as drug-addicted sex workers.

Not only that, but it was evident that a lot of the newspaper articles only had police reactions and their responses when a missing woman was discovered in the area. When it was also revealed that "many" of the women were Aboriginal, the media frequently portrayed them as responsible for their deaths. As the trial had begun against Pickton for first-degree murder in 2007, *The Province* featured for the first time the profiles of each of the six murdered Indigenous women.[37] Still, the coverage was fixed on the identities of these women as troubled, abused runaways. The newspaper prompted activists Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young to criticize not only the articles but also toward to Kines, for failing to highlight statements from family members and instead, mentioning their "troubled lives." In another case, a newspaper article included details about family and friends towards the end of a story, providing a brief profile of one of Pickton's victims, Serena Abbotsway. It


A6 | NEWS | THE PROVINCE PICKTON TRIAL MONDAY, JUNE 25, 2007

Murder trial raises one big question

Robert Pickton is on trial for the first-degree murder of six women

SEREENA ABOTSWAY MONA WILSON GEORGINA PAPIN

BRENDA WOLFE MARNIE FREY ANDREA JOESBURY

Province reporter Ethan Baron has been covering the trial of Robert 'Willie' Pickton for five months and files this report

As the serial-murder trial of Robert "Willie" Pickton enters its sixth month, one big question hangs over the courtroom: Could Willie walk? Charged with 26 killings, Pickton is on trial for the first six counts. When the trial opened Jan. 22 prosecutor Derrill Prevett presented what appeared to be a powerful

WARNING

Figure 1: The Province "Murder Trial Raises One Big Question." Pictured top left to right: Sereena Abotsway, Mona Wilson, Georgina Pipin. Bottom left to right: Brenda Wolfe, Marine Frey, Andrea Joesbury

[35] Lindsay Kines, "Police Target Big Increase in Missing Women Cases" *Vancouver Sun,* (July 6, 2006): B1
[36] Lindsay Kines, Interview with the author, Minidisc Recording, Victoria B.C. (March 2004).
[37] See Figure 1, "Murder Trial Raises One Big Question."

mentioned her excitement for her 30th birthday and highlighted her relationship with Anna Draayers, who raised her from age four to seventeen. However, the newspaper primarily focused on the abuse Abbotsway suffered before entering the foster care system. The article also quoted Abbotsway's mother, who said, "She was abused in every imaginable way, and that really set her future. This is what she had to deal with every day of her life—the mistrust and everything else."[38] Although Serena Abbotsway was an Aboriginal woman, the narrative did not explore how colonialism and residential schools might have impacted her life or led to her adoption.[39] Jiwani and Young pointed out that reports of missing individuals often tend to criminalize them, leaving gaps in their life stories and the circumstances of their disappearances. This stance towards Aboriginal women was seen as invisible and absence of a human being.

The media coverage of cases like the Highway of Tears and the Pickton murders often disregards Indigenous women and girls, wrongly attributing blame to their communities rather than addressing the systems that have created the involved social structures. Also, the narrative around these murders was largely influenced by police findings, giving law enforcement a higher voice than the victims' families and communities. This dynamic perpetuates the dominance of state perspectives over marginalized voices, leading to what Kristen Gilchrist described as the "symbolic annihilation" of marginalized bodies in the news, distracting from understanding the deeply rooted social issues that continue the oppression of the oppressed.[40] Therefore, it is important to have the media be more educated on how to report on MMIWG by giving space for families to be given a voice for their missing loved ones. The media must send a message to those who are mainly ignorant or unconcerned about the extremely high number of MMIWG in North

[38] Kim Bolan, "Fabulous girl" didn't fit in Downtown Eastside," *The Vancouver Sun* (2002), p. A1.

[39] Mary Lynn Jiwani, Yasmin and Young, "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse" *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 31 (2006): 895-917, 906.

[40] Gilchrist, Kristen. "Newsworthy Victims?" 385.

America. If the media serves as an instrument for connecting, influencing, and reflecting Canadian [and American] society, then Indigenous women are, in fact, “the most victimized group.”[41]

Refused to be Silence: No More Stolen Sisters!

MMIWG are victims of this human rights crisis, which goes undetected by governments, police, and the media in general. To combat this silence, Native communities come together to decolonize the narrative, advocate for MMIWG, and commemorate the lives of their daughters, sisters, and matriarchs. Many people are committed to amplifying the activists' voices and supporting them as they work toward their goal of ensuring that every Indigenous woman and girl lives in safety and dignity, with their rights protected. In their article "Fighting for Our Sisters," Erica Ficklin and the other authors explore the critical role of storytelling, artwork, and activism in addressing the crisis against Indigenous women and girls. The authors argue that by presenting these types of works, alongside reciting the names of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, activists are reclaiming narratives and amplifying voices that have long been silenced. One of the powerful strategies employed by activists is the reclamation of the color red, (historically used as a negative reference) to their advantage by wearing red and participating in Red movements to draw attention to the ongoing crisis, transforming a symbol of oppression into one of unity and resistance.[42]

An example of a Red movement is the REDress Project, founded by Metis artist Jamie Bryant in 2010. Hundreds of red dresses are hung in public places to represent the number of MMIWG, which was her idea to confront people with the violence women are experiencing and have this project for women to tell their stories. She explains that the color 'red' is a “representation

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[41] Kristen Gilchrist, “Newsworthy Victims?,” 374.

[42] Erica Ficklin, et al., “Fighting For Our Sisters: Community Advocacy and Action For Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls” *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 78, Issue 1 (2021): 53-78, 67.

of the woman of the red nation and lifeblood; the woman's ability to give life. But it is also a symbol of deracialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal woman."[43] In addition, MMIWG has also gained national attention using social media. Originally started by Shiela North Wilson, the hashtag itself is depicted as a powerful tool in online advocacy, particularly in shedding light on the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The hashtag serves not only to "amplify Indigenous voices but also to hold colonial institutions accountable for their role in the safety and well-being of Indigenous communities."[44] By engaging individuals in conversations about this national crisis, the hashtag helps to challenge and change the political landscape of media. Some key movements to honor Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) include the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Women and Girls, observed on May 5th in remembrance of Hanna and other Native women who lost their lives due to inadequate law enforcement responses. Another significant initiative is "Walking with Our Sisters," led by Christi Belcourt, which features 1,763 moccasin vamps designed to highlight the injustice faced by these communities. Additionally, the Faceless Dolls Project, launched by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), involves faceless felt dolls traveling across Canada to commemorate the more than 600 MMIWG. The combined efforts of educational initiatives, movements, and art installations have contributed to raising awareness and gradually effecting change for MMIWG in North America, thanks to the unwavering dedication of Native women and their families. As Matilda, mother of Ramona Wilson who went missing from the

[43] Susan Solway, "Red Dresses: There, But Just Not There" *Windspeaker*, vol. 28 no. 8 (Nov. 2010): p. 8.

[44] Moeke-Pickering, Taima and Rowat, Julia et al. "Indigenous Social Activism Using Twitter: Amplifying Voices Using #MMIWG" in *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism*, (Rutgers University, 2021): 112-24, 119.

Highway of Tears in 1994, said that the memorial walks and the other movements are to demonstrate:

"We are showing people that we are not afraid. We will never be afraid. That we are here. We will always be here. If it's not me, it will be my children. And if it's not my children it will be my grandchildren. And if it's not my grandchildren, it will be my great-grandchildren. I am fighting. I'm fighting for my loved ones. I'm fighting for unsolved murders. I'm fighting for everything that I have. I never back down. I will always be here. This face will always be here."[45] For those families who have lost a loved one, Matilda's determination demonstrates survival and sovereignty, demonstrating the determination that Ramona's murder profoundly hurts but cannot break. Thus, having the memory of those who lost their life to keep moving forward for future generations to come.

Figure 2: Picture of red dresses hanged on tree branches (REDress Project)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in North America represents a profound human rights violation, demanding urgent action from the Canadian and U.S. governments. This crisis is deeply rooted in a history of colonization characterized by violence and domination over Indigenous communities, particularly targeting women and girls. An uneven power structure persists, marked by systemic neglect and discrimination, which facilitates ongoing abuse. While there have been advancements in

[45] Matilda Wilson, "Statement," in Allison Hargreaves, "Finding Dawn and Missing Women in Canada: Story-Based Methods in Antiviolence Research and Remembrance" *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 27, no. 3 (2015): 82–111, 105

recognizing Indigenous rights, these measures have fallen short in addressing criminal violations against Indigenous people. Factors contributing to this epidemic include domestic violence, stalking, and the grave threat of sexual trafficking.

Indigenous women are often silenced due to efforts to shield their communities from external prejudices. Compounding these issues is the consistent failure of governmental, law enforcement, and media entities to provide sufficient support or attention, as tragically exemplified by cases such as Tina Fontaine, the Highway of Tears, and the victims of the Pickton murders. Scholarly research underscores the necessity for comprehensive solutions that address both historical injustices and contemporary systemic failures, calling for policy reforms, better resource allocation, and inclusive dialogue with Indigenous communities to address and rectify these human rights abuses. Therefore, it is important to recognize that this is an international problem that communities need to be made aware of. Awareness will lead to ensuring that their identities are not solely defined by their victimhood, but recognition of their rights and resilience.