Tears 4 Justice and the Missing and Murdered Women and Children Across Canada: An Interview with Gladys Radek

BY VICKI CHARTRAND

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this land, on this Algonquin territory and Turtle Island. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the elders both past and present.

BACKGROUND

On December 6, 2012, the National Action Day to End Violence Against Women, I interviewed Gladys Radek in Ottawa, Ontario. Gladys is from the Gitksan Wet’suwet’en territory, more commonly known as Moricetown, British Columbia. She recently moved from Vancouver to Ottawa, or to the ‘belly of the beast’ as Gladys suggests, to continue her work raising awareness of the missing and murdered women and children across Canada. Gladys is a human rights and grassroots activist who began organizing when her niece, Tamara Lynn Chipman, went missing on September 21, 2005 in Prince Rupert, B.C. along Highway 16—infamously known as the Highway of Tears. Tamara was 22 years old and mother to a 4-year-old boy when she disappeared—she is still missing today.

Gladys’ work began with the Walk 4 Justice on June 21, 2008, walking from Vancouver to Ottawa. Since then, Gladys has co-organized 4 more walks across Canada to continue raising awareness nation wide on the far too many missing and murdered women and to support the families who have lost loved ones. Her fifth and final walk, the Tears 4 Justice walk,
began in Halifax on June 21, 2013 and ended in Prince Rupert on September 21, 2013—approximately 7,500 kilometers over the course of 105 days. Throughout her walks, Gladys has met many families and has collected the names of over 4,200 missing and murdered women and children across Canada, with a large majority being Aboriginal women and girls. Gladys, and other supporters, are pushing for a National Grassroots Symposium with the families of the missing and murdered women and children, a National Public Inquiry that explores the systemic gendered and racialized realities of these disappearances, and the development of a unified National Action Plan that will protect women and children in this country. The ultimate goal is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and children but, as Gladys states, “we need action today, tomorrow and forever to protect the life givers of our society.”

This interview took place at the time of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Policing in British Columbia (2012), also known as the Opal Commission—an inquiry into the missing and murdered women and the discriminatory conduct of the Vancouver police. The Commission was, however, fraught with inadequacies from the onset as outlined in Bennett, et al. (2012) *Blueprint for an Inquiry: Learning from the Failures of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry*. Problems included the tendency to consult with professionals rather than with the women and families, a lack of legal funding and representation for the Aboriginal and anti-violence interveners and the families, a long drawn out and expensive inquiry that has left many questions unanswered, the undertaking of an individualistic inquiry rather than a substantive or systemic understanding of policing practices, sexism, racism, and poverty, and ultimately legitimating the violence as somehow inevitable, and finally significant conflicts of interest that, for example, saw the appointment of a Commissioner who, as Attorney General of BC, saw no value in a commission of inquiry.

According to the Opal Commission (2012) and other reports (e.g. Amnesty International, 2004; Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2011), when it comes to police reporting and practices, there are many discrepancies, inconsistencies, and inadequacies in the recording, sharing of information and acting on missing persons cases and reports of violence. Despite this,
the RCMP nonetheless contest the numbers of missing and murdered women. Recently, the RCMP questioned the 582 number of cases advanced by the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) collected through their ‘Sisters in Spirit’ campaign beginning in 2004 (NWAC, 2009; 2010), claiming they only had 64 reports of the 118 names provided. Despite these conflicting accounts, NWAC’s funding to further research missing and murdered indigenous women was cut in 2011 and was redirected to an RCMP non-distinctive database for missing persons. This approach effectively removes any gendered and racialized understanding from the analysis and offers little context and understanding to the disappearances of Aboriginal women or women in general. Thus far, Saskatchewan appears to be the only province to have carried out a systemic review of missing persons and found 60% were Aboriginal women. The most recent government work carried out with particular reference to Aboriginal women is by Statistics Canada (2011) in their report Violent Victimization of Aboriginal Women in the Canadian Provinces, 2009. The report reveals that close to 67,000 Aboriginal women aged 15 or older living in the Canadian provinces reported being the victim of violence in the previous 12 months. According to the General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization, the overall rate of self-reported violent victimization among Aboriginal women was almost three times higher than the rate of violent victimization reported by non-Aboriginal women. These numbers are, of course, limited to their methodology such as with an inability to reach remote and transient indigenous populations, to engage indigenous participation and the extreme lack of trust between indigenous peoples.

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1 The Sisters in Spirit campaign was later renamed Evidence to Action, as requested by the federal government to ensure continued 8 month funding of the project. Of the 582 cases from 1980 to 2010, 115 (20%) involve missing women and girls, 393 (67%) involve women or girls who died as the result of homicide or negligence, and 21 cases (4%) fall under the category of suspicious. There are 53 cases (9%) where the nature of the case remains unknown, meaning it is unclear whether the woman was murdered, is missing or died in suspicious circumstances.

2 Ivison, John, “Conflicting numbers on missing aboriginal women another reason an inquiry is needed”, National Post, 19, February 2013.
and a colonial government. There are countless stories and cases that remain untold.

Canada’s Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) thoroughly documents how every aspect of Aboriginal peoples lives has been governed from education, status, wages, employment and so on. The Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, Commission into the Death of Helen Betty Osborne (1999) reveals, among other things, an implicit but decisive belief Aboriginal women and their bodies are accessible. Most of the public and the criminal justice system hold the view that women are responsible for their own safety and ultimately for the violence committed against them. In such a climate of impunity, women are reluctant to go to the police who often see such violence as a normal and acceptable part of the women’s’ lives. Few police forces in Canada have concrete guidelines to help officers evaluate the risks to missing persons and what kind of investigation is required. According to Amnesty’s report No More Stolen Sisters (2009) women, and particularly Aboriginal women, are made vulnerable through:

1) the role of racism and misogyny; 2) the sharp disparities in economic, social, political and cultural rights; 3) the continued disruption of Indigenous societies caused by the historic and ongoing mass removal of children from Indigenous families and communities; 4) the disproportionately high number of Indigenous women in Canadian prisons, many of whom are themselves the victims of violence and abuse; and 5) inadequate police response to violence against Indigenous women as illustrated by the handling of missing persons cases (4).

On February 19, 2013, a Special Committee On Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was created—a parliamentary inquiry of investigation specific to missing and murdered Aboriginal women. The decision to create the committee came a day after Human Rights Watch (2013), an international watchdog organization, launched their report, Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia—a scathing report citing allegations of abusive police practices, brutality, assaults and rape of indigenous and other dispossessed women by RCMP officers in Northern BC. Among many things, the report outlines the lack of trust between state officials and Aboriginal women.
Women who call the police for help may find themselves blamed for the abuse, are at times shamed for alcohol or substance use, and risk arrest for actions taken in self-defense (10).

Not only are Aboriginal women less likely to report incidents of violence, but also fear experiencing further violence at the hands of the police. According to Amnesty International Canada (2004) Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada, families described how the police fail to act when sisters or daughters go missing, how families are treated with disrespect and are not informed about the investigation, if there is any investigation.

There have been grassroots initiatives in place to better support families and track the occurrences of missing and murdered women. Operation Thunderbird uses crowd mapping to document the murders, assaults and disappearances of women in Canada and the United States. Ka Ni Kanichihk, a non-profit organization, has provided an online toolkit for Missing Persons. Missing Manitoba Women carry out searches and support families in finding loved ones. Ending the Violence Against Women, BC (2011) also released a report and toolkit entitled Increasing Safety for Aboriginal Women.


3 https://missingsisters.crowdmap.com/main
4 http://www.kanikanichihk.ca/?page_id=761
5 https://www.facebook.com/MissingManitobaWomen
these reports reveal, among many things, is the need for a nationally coordinated and organized action plan that addresses the endemic issues of poverty, sexism and racism that heighten the conditions for violence to occur, address current colonial practices of segregation like child welfare and imprisonment, and to implement practical programs and supports, such as shelters and transportation, that will alleviate those conditions that force individuals into dangerous situations.

Despite longstanding recommendations, documentation, reporting, and research that has been undertaken, there is still little specifically done to address the gendered and racialized reality of the disappearances and murders of women and children. To date the government has not launched a national investigation and has refused to develop a National Action plan, despite such plans existing elsewhere such as in Australia (see Council of Australian Government, 2010). The Special Committee On Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2012) stated that what is required is a co-ordinated, holistic approach to violence. The vulnerability of women and Aboriginal women is not new; it is chronic.

**Interview**

**Vicki:** What made you decide to walk across Canada to raise awareness of the missing and murdered women and children?

**Gladys:** I started the Walk 4 Justice back in 2008. Growing up in Northern BC, I often knew about women going missing or being murdered, especially in the Aboriginal communities. I was tired that nothing was actually being done. It also really resonated for me when my niece, Tamara Chipman, went missing in 2005 and how little support the family received from the police from the onset.

Walking from community to community seemed like a good way to unite families and supporters and raise awareness to the ongoing violence against women nation wide. Walking the highways across Canada is also significant given that it is the

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*Kilpatrick, Sean, “No action plan on missing aboriginal women: Protesters rally for missing, abused aboriginal women”, Canadian Press, 5 July 2011.*
highways where many of the women’s bodies are being ‘dumped’. As we walked across Canada, we met many other family members who were experiencing grave injustices for many years at the hands of the police who were not investigating the reports of disappearances, who were not helping families in their search for their missing loved ones, and who were not offering much support or information to the families.

Unfortunately, as Aboriginal women, this is also something longstanding in our history; something we are very familiar with. I was raised in several communities along the Highway of Tears (Highway 16), so it has been a part of my whole life. Walking the highways lets us connect with the families, hear their stories and support them—that’s grassroots. It is difficult to appreciate how this impacts families and communities unless it is happening to you or you are in it. Many of my relatives have gone missing or have been murdered, whether it is from my foster family or biological family. This really is something many of us are familiar with. So I walk.

**Vicki:** Explain to us why it is so important to work from a grassroots level. What advantages does a grassroots approach have in addressing this issue?

**Gladys:** Grassroots lets you connect with those who are either directly or immediately impacted. When I advertised the walk, I had an immediate response from the families. Despite what the police say, we hear firsthand from the families that whenever they report a loved one missing, they are often told by the police that she ‘might be out partying’ or she may have ‘run away’. The families are more often than not told they will have to wait 24, 48, 72 hours, or sometimes longer before the police will act. Sometimes the police insinuate it is the fault of the families because maybe ‘they had a fight with their daughter’. Some of the families won’t even report because there may be charges pending, or the police suggest that the women are trying to evade their charges by running away. That is what happened in this situation of my niece Tamara who has been missing. The police have a ‘blame the victim’ attitude. The problem
is sexism and racism and the racist relations with the police and government.

**Vicki**: In recent news reports, the police have been contesting that the number of Aboriginal women who are missing or murdered is as high as 582, as advanced by the Native Women’s Association of Canada.

**Gladys**: How could they? I do not know how they can. We have the names of over 4200 women who are missing and murdered, with the majority being Aboriginal women. The police are not doing what is needed. In many ways they promote the violence and racism by picking and choosing who gets to be considered as ‘deserving’ victims. Statistics can also be a problem. Statistics are used to confuse or dally around the problem. There are women going missing and murdered. It is tiring how we are simply arguing over numbers. The police are just not responding. Publicly they will tell you that they are immediately responding and that the 24 hour wait period is a myth, but many communities are having to put together their own search parties. The reality is that it is a network of community and people that respond to the disappearances of women that is more helpful and effective. Despite their efforts, the communities lack the resources and funds to keep on the searches, while the police have all the resources.

**Vicki**: In my experiences, the justice system tends to minimize the extent of the problem by making violence an individual problem when it is clearly endemic to Canada. It fails to break down attitudes of violence while criminalizing those who are most vulnerable and coming from poverty. Do you have a sense that the police are trying to minimize the problem?

**Gladys**: Absolutely. There is no accountability. When you don’t have accountability, you don’t have justice, you don’t have closure, and you don’t have equality. The problem only gets bigger. Until we have accountability from the police, they should not be a part of the solution. The police first need to admit that they are a big part of the problem.
**Vicki**: What concerns do you have with the Opal Commission that is currently investigating the police conduct around reports and their investigation into the missing and murdered women in Vancouver?7

**Gladys**: They are not consulting with the families, especially with first nations women. They only invited some families to the commission, but not all the families. For example, only the families of the six victims that Robert Pickton was convicted of murdering were invited. There are many more, and although it may be hard, you need to give time to all the families. All this is going to lead to just another report. Like with so many of the existing reports, it’s people asking the same questions to the same people. For example, the RCMP are reporting that they have many programs to address this issue, but if these programs were working, then why are we still having so many women going missing? We do not need any more reports. We have the recommendations from the Highway of Tears Symposium, the Native Women’s Association of Canada and Amnesty International. We have the recommendations. We need a national action plan. We need to implement programs that are holistic and culturally sensitive and that have eliminating violence as the basis of its framework. We need community, healing and native friendship centres. We need places that teach about violence, culture, and tradition. We need safe places and safe travel. We need places that can remove people away from violence and problems. We need shelter, safety, support and healing.

**Vicki**: In my work in the anti-violence field, governments are more and more trying to make violence against women a housing issue. Although housing is important, the tendency is to undermine the systemic and endemic violence occurring against women and children nationally and worldwide. This only heightens the potential for more violence to occur.

**Gladys**: There is no doubt it is a violence issue. We are holding the government, police and justice system to account for this vi-
 Violence. We want for everyone to have a roof over their heads, food in their bellies and safe place to stay. Right now there is a lot of pain in our societies. It does not matter what society you come from. We need to heal. We need to overcome the pain and developing on a violence-free future. I feel like I have been in mourning since I began this journey, but I am proud of all the walkers who keep raising awareness in their own communities.

Vicki: Can you give us a day in the life of a walker?

Gladys: One day we were walking just outside Portage la Prairie. There was a young woman who had just been reported missing as we were walking through the territory and we offered to help search for her. The mother was very thankful for our offer, but she wanted us to keep on our walk and continue raising awareness for the women. But she asked us as we continued our walk to “keep your noses in the air”. That statement didn’t press upon me until later. As we continued on our walk, we got a smell of death in the air. The smell of death is something you will never forget. It was our worst fear. We were afraid that we were going to find the young women’s body. Unlike when you are driving, when you are walking on the side of the road, you see things and as we walked along, we saw a black hoodie. This young woman had been reported to be wearing a black hoodie when she was last seen. That scared the hell out of me; it scared the hell out of all of us. My granddaughter, three other walkers, and I started combing through the grass around the area. After about a half hour of smelling death and this young woman on our minds, we were relieved to have eventually found the carcass of a deer. But there are no words that can express how sickening the feeling was for that half-hour of searching for her with the smell of death in our nostrils. It touched on all of us. We are the ones who have lost. We are the one’s who feel the pain. We know what we have lost. We know the pain. We also know the resources we need. We know.

Vicki: What does colonialism look like to you today?
Gladys: They haven’t won yet. We’re still here. We’re still here and were still strong as ever. We are fewer in numbers and unless we bring things back into the grassroots heritage and our knowledge of ancestry, we will lose that. It is still genocide. I do not feel bad about using that word. When you take away our women and children that is genocide. If you think about how the average Aboriginal women has 5 children, and how we have collected at least 3000 names of Aboriginal women who have gone missing or who have been murdered, that’s 15,000 first generation children we’ve lost. It is a silent genocide.

Many people don’t understand either their culture or colonialism and we are also receiving mixed messages. Like receiving cultural training, in a prison environment. It is a contradiction in terms. Aboriginal people have been devalued. We are also trained as sex toys as a result of colonialism. This is why I see the legalizing of prostitution as problematic. We are building laws that implicitly lead us to believe that we are responsible for serving the wants of men, or what are often considered ‘needs’. It confuses people. It not only leads us to believe that we somehow have this obligation, but it also more and more becomes the only means by which women, and especially Aboriginal women, can make money, live or survive. This does not protect women—it only further entrenches women in an industry that has always been and is still obviously inherently violent, again particularly for the majority of Aboriginal women who are poor. Many of the women that are picked up on the highway of tears and killed, are seen as accessible or available for sex. The men believe they have a right to own and do as they will with women to satisfy their ‘needs’. That is why the legalizing of prostitution is dangerous. It leads men to believe that they have even more entitlement and access to women’s bodies. Many of these so-called ‘managers’ of women prey on vulnerable women and entice them into prostitution either forcibly, or preying on their wants, needs, fears and desires. Legalizing prostitution will make it easier to bring more vulnerable women into this industry and there will be even fewer choices available for women to make a viable living otherwise. It is possible that decriminalizing prostitution will serve specif-

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8 Editor’s note: This does not reflect the views of the Radical Criminology editors.
ic type of women, and more often women who are privileged. It will also drive the prices down for those women who are trying to survive with more women ‘freely’ entering the trade. I don’t think this is a simple black and white debate. We need to acknowledge the vulnerabilities inherent in our system and that the ‘law’ will not simply shift that—when in fact the law has always been implicit in perpetuating vulnerabilities. We cannot ignore that.

Vicki: What do you want people to know?

Gladys: We want people to know that Canada is guilty of crimes against humanity. It is a safe haven for violence against women.

Vicki: From the people to the people.

Gladys: Right. What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!

REFERENCES


