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The Epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in North America

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There is an epidemic of gendered and race-based violence against Indigenous[1] women and girls in North America, which, despite its scope and severity, has only recently gained public attention through the tireless work of activists (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). It is referred to as, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls" or MMIWG,[2] and while the name for the epidemic and the public attention it has received have been fairly recent, it is not a new problem (National Congress of American Indians [NCAI], 2016). Historically and to the present day, women have "held respected and even sacred statuses" to many Indigenous peoples, making the epidemic of violence against them a stark confirmation of the continuation of settler-colonialism and oppression faced by Indigenous people in North America (Burnette & Hefflinger, 2016, p. 588).

Defining the Problem

One of the most notable aspects of the MMIWG epidemic is the great difficulty of precisely describing the problem because data collection has been virtually nonexistent until fairly recently (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). However, the available numbers are striking. In the United States, there were 5,712 reports of missing Indigenous women and girls in 2016, of which only 116 were logged in the Department of Justice's federal database. The third-leading cause of death for Indigenous women and girls aged 10-24 in the United States is homicide, and on some reservations, Indigenous women are murdered at 10 times the national average rate (Monchalin et al., 2019). In Canada, estimates of MMIWG range from about 600 to upwards of 30,000, and Indigenous women are murdered at six times the rate of non-Indigenous women. In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a city near the U.S.-Mexico border and a hotspot of violence in the ongoing drug conflicts, hundreds of women have been killed every year since 1993, most of them Indigenous (Johnson & Santos, 2013). While there is no universal consensus on the exact numbers in any of these countries, there is broad agreement among those studying the MMIWG phenomenon that the violence is widespread and rampant.

[1] This paper will use the term "Indigenous" to refer to descendants of the original peoples who already populated North America prior to European contact in 1492.

[2] Often "and Girls" is omitted, making the acronym "MMIW."

Thousands of Indigenous women and girls being murdered or abducted[3] each year implies thousands of perpetrators. As stated above, there are large gaps in our available data on the epidemic, but experts and activists have offered several potential explanations. Domestic abuse is often involved whenever there is violence against women, and Indigenous women do experience disproportionately high rates of domestic abuse compared to non-Indigenous women (Burnette & Hefflinger, 2016). However, while domestic abuse may play a role, Indigenous women in Canada are less likely to be killed by a family member than are Canadian women in general, making it difficult to attribute the crisis to domestic abuse alone or even principally (Palmater, 2016).

Human trafficking is another suggested factor (NCAI, 2016). Traffickers prey on people they deem vulnerable, which includes the homeless, those with addictions or a lack of resources, and those who have been exposed to violence. Indigenous women and girls are more likely to meet those criteria than the general population. Another risk factor identified by the NCAI is an "influx of a transient, cash-rich workforce," (p. 4) as happens when extractive industries set up makeshift camps for their workers on reservation land. Canadian Highway 16 in northwestern British Columbia has been informally named "The Highway of Tears" by activists due to the high number of Indigenous women and girls who have disappeared there (Morton, 2016). The road is remote and poorly serviced, with unreliable cell-phone reception and very few rest areas or options for public transportation. This leads the many, mostly poor Indigenous women in the area, to turn to hitchhiking for transport, and human traffickers, rapists, and even serial killers have taken advantage of this. A 2015 survey of four sites in the United States and Canada found that 40% of women who were victims of sex trafficking there were Indigenous (NCAI, 2016).

The ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism cannot be divorced from the modern MMIWG phenomenon because it explains why Indigenous women in particular are more likely than most to suffer racialized, gendered violence on such a massive scale (Savarese, 2017). Nor can White supremacy or patriarchy be omitted from any thorough explanation of the problem. "In response to the alarming numbers and horrific facts regarding the disappearances and homicides, scholars and advocates remind us that women's bodies, like Indigenous lands, have been deemed as available for exploitation" (Savarese, 2017, p. 180). Non-Indigenous settlers have sold Indigenous women and girls for sexual slavery since colonial times (NCAI, 2016), and the accumulated historical trauma of Indigenous peoples after centuries of "cultural genocide, land dispossession, forced relocation, and assimilative boarding school experiences" (Burnette & Hefflinger, 2016, p. 588) shows itself in disproportionately high rates of poverty, victimization, discrimination, and physical and mental distress. Additionally, the imposition of European governmental systems and patriarchal values onto

[3] As Palmater (2016) notes: "Even the term 'missing' is a misnomer. It seems to imply these women and girls just got lost or ran away for a few days. The reality is that these women and girls are kidnapped, taken, or otherwise held against their will—a situation far more sinister than the word 'missing' might imply" (p. 255). She goes on to suggest the term "disappeared" as more appropriate.

Indigenous communities upended more egalitarian and, in some cases, matriarchal social structures that had existed prior to contact with Europe, leading to a loss of social cohesion and exacerbating (or introducing) social issues like poverty and addiction. Generations of successive traumatic events can lead to "cumulative and unresolved grief, which can result in the *historical trauma response*, which includes suicidal thoughts and acts, [intimate partner violence], depression, alcoholism, self-destructive behavior, low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, and lowered emotional expression and recognition" (Burnette & Figley, 2016, p. 39).

Media bias and cultural stereotypes also play a role in marginalizing Indigenous women and girls. While 95% of MMIWG cases are never covered by national or international news media, the coverage of the other 5% relies on stereotypes and misleading assumptions (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). "The vast majority of coverage on MMIWG, both on individual cases and on the issue overall, was centered on reservation-based violence" (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018, p. 18). Approximately 71% of Indigenous people in the U.S. live in urban areas, yet media coverage portrays them as typically living in remote or rural areas. Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk (2018), in a report by the Urban Indian Health Institute analyzing 934 news articles related to the MMIWG epidemic, found that violent language such as victim-blaming, misgendering, references to drugs and alcohol, or to the victim's criminal history, etc. was present in 31% of the articles, with some news sources using violent language in 100% of their coverage. Stereotypes of Indigenous women include the "squaw" or "Indian princess" (Monchalin et al., 2019) stereotype, which "frames Indigenous women as promiscuous, prone to deviance and incapable of controlling impulses" (Morton, 2016, p. 304). In this telling, white settlers serve as "the exclusive keepers of civilization, while the colonized Indigenous populations, as the antithesis to Whiteness, were considered savage, backwards and primitive" (Morton, 2016, p. 304). These stereotypes are visible today in eroticized "sexy Indian" costumes (Monchalin et al., 2019). In addition to these, "narratives of disposability and brokenness" (Savarese, 2017, p. 160) frequently accompany media coverage of MMIWG, contributing to the ease with which the public can ignore the problem. Morton (2016) notes how it is often assumed of Indigenous women and girls that they are poor, which (while often the case) serves only to marginalize them further and cast them as victims or annoyances.

According to Savarese (2017, p. 176), a primary concern is the "minimization of Indigenous perspectives" in discussions of MMIWG cases. Indigenous activists have sought to change that, and in recent years, have been successful in bringing the issue to national and international attention. Jaime Black, a Métis artist in Manitoba, started the REDress project as a way to visually represent the missing Indigenous women and girls (Johnson & Santos, 2013). The art installation is simple and haunting: red dresses hanging on wooden hangers in public spaces. Black took her inspiration from her experiences in the Opaskawayak Cree nation, where, in 1971, nineteen-year-old Helen Betty Osborne was brutally assaulted and murdered. Of the four White men found to be involved in the attack, only one was convicted, and he received full parole after serving fewer than 10 years of a life sentence. Other efforts by Indigenous activists include the Sisters in Spirit (SIS) project to track disappearances and homicides in the area near the "Highway of Tears", with a special focus on those names each October 4th—a day of remembrance for all victims of the MMIWG epidemic (Tolley et al., 2012). SIS was defunded by the Canadian government in 2010 but now exists in a volunteer-based form as Families of Sisters in Spirit (FSIS).

Historical Analysis

The history of policy efforts to address the MMIWG epidemic specifically is mostly confined to the past decade, but there are a few older policies worth mentioning here that affect Indigenous women's experiences of violence (Burnette, 2015). The Major Crimes Act (1885) established federal jurisdiction over certain, serious crimes committed by Indigenous people (against anyone) within "Indian country," dealing a blow to tribal sovereignty, while laying the groundwork for what would become the mass over-incarceration of Indigenous people; "Over-incarceration is a prime way Indigenous women are 'lost.'" (Savarese, 2017, p. 165). Indigenous women often meet particularly harsh treatment in North American justice systems, from their first encounters with a police officer—who is statistically more likely to kill an Indigenous person than a person of any other race (Woodard, 2016)—to their time in prison, with many controversies in recent years centered around women like Kinew James, who died of a heart attack after five distress calls from her cell went unanswered by the prison guards, who knew of her condition (Savarese, 2017). The Indian Civil Rights Act (1968) severely limited the powers of tribal courts in sentencing convicted criminals, stipulating a maximum sentence of one year in prison and/or a $5,000 fine; the Tribal Law and Order Act (2010) loosened these restrictions slightly, allowing tribal courts to impose penalties of up to three years in prison and/or a fine of up to $15,000 if certain conditions are met (Burnette, 2015). Nevertheless, the Major Crimes Act (1885) and Indian Civil Rights Act (1968) "create a danger zone for indigenous women where perpetrators can get away with crimes with relative impunity" (Burnette, 2015, p. 1528). Additionally, the Indian Relocation Act (1956) "encouraged" Indigenous people to leave reservation land (primarily by first terminating its protected status) and move to cities (Campbell, 2016), where 71% of Indigenous people in the U.S. live today (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Dispossession from the land and inadequate resources made life difficult for those who relocated, and this dispossession continues to put Indigenous populations at greater risk of victimization (NCAI, 2016). Against this general trend toward limiting tribal sovereignty, the Violence Against Women Act (1994), as amended in 2013, gave tribal courts jurisdiction to prosecute non-Indigenous people[4] who committed violent crimes on tribal land and allocated some funding and resources for the prevention of violence against Indigenous women (Burnette, 2015). Despite this victory, Indigenous women are still likely to resist going to the authorities to report abuse for a number of reasons, not least the fact that U.S. attorneys decline to prosecute almost 52% of violent crimes oc-

[4] This was a restoration rather than a novel right for tribal courts, as the ability to prosecute non-Indigenous offenders for crimes committed on tribal lands had been stripped away by the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* (1978).

curring on Indigenous land; of those not prosecuted, 67% are sexual assault cases (NCAI, 2013).

As mentioned, all of the policies enacted specifically to address the epidemic of MMIWG have been fairly recent. In Canada, years of outcry from Indigenous activists and victims' families finally led the federal government to convene a National Inquiry in which survivors' testimony was heard and entered into the National Inquiry's Final Report (2019), which described the MMIWG epidemic as genocide and called for reparations and other actions to counter colonial violence. That the inquiry occurred at all is remarkable considering that, only five years earlier, the Canadian minister responsible for Indigenous affairs was asked what "he would say to Rinelle Harper," an Indigenous sixteen-year-old girl who had just been found clinging to life in the Assiniboine River after being attacked and left for dead (Piché, 2015, p. 70). Harper had recently called for a national inquiry to be held into MMIWG soon after her rescue. The minister gave his answer when he walked away in silence. In the U.S., Savanna's Act, named for Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, an Indigenous woman murdered in North Dakota in 2017, is aimed at correcting the serious lack of reliable data regarding MMIWG (Golden, 2019). It passed the Senate in 2018, though still has not been brought to a vote in the House (U.S. Congress, n.d.). Most of the key policy moves regarding MMIWG have focused on data collection, including the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, launched in 2010 and leading to the Justice Department's 2016 report, "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men" (Rosay, 2016). Activists frequently bemoan the dearth of data on MMIWG, but now these findings and others will be available to policymakers and researchers to direct future action (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Another tactic is to strengthen the working ties between federal, state, and tribal law enforcement, as a Washington state bill passed in 2019 aimed to achieve through the creation of liaison positions in the state patrol for that purpose (Golden, 2019). This tactic is complicated by the high rate at which Indigenous people are killed by police, and by the inaction Indigenous women have come to expect from law enforcement when reporting a crime (Monchalin et al., 2019). Yet another strategy is public service announcements, as when Canadian officials put up billboards along the "Highway of Tears" warning of the dangers of hitchhiking—without offering any alternative, that is (Morton, 2016). While these particular billboards are probably not very helpful, the most significant change in policymakers' response to the epidemic is that they *are* responding now, having been forced by Indigenous activists, and better data that should eventually yield better policy experiments as well.

Conclusion

The policy history of addressing the MMIWG epidemic is much shorter than the long history of colonial policies and practices that led Indigenous peoples of North America to be dispossessed, disenfranchised, and at disproportionately high risk for numerous health and safety concerns. Most of the concrete policies addressing MMIWG specifically are less than a decade old, and many are focused on improving data collection, raising public awareness, and strengthening ties between federal, state, and tribal authorities. But it remains difficult—and ultimately impossible—to remedy the effects of colonialism while the process is still ongoing.

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