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Supporting the Resurgence of Community-Based Responses to Violence

This is a collaborative response from [Families of Sisters in Spirit](#) (FSIS), [No More Silence](#) (NMS) and the [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#) (NYSHN) to the calls for a national inquiry by some family members of missing and murdered women. We come together here to name specific forms of state violence – as much of the violence we face as communities, nations, and families stems from colonial nation-states like Canada and the US and the laws themselves. Structures of colonialism (i.e. state governments, foster care, prisons, social services) are responsible for and contribute to ongoing violence against Indigenous women, girls, Two Spirit, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning intersex, and asexual (LGBTQQIA) people.

Gender based violence also impacts Indigenous women and Indigenous people who are part of the LGBTQQIA community. LGBTQQIA people often don't fit gender binaries, or other Western categories of relationships and identities dictated by mainstream culture and as a result experience increased amounts of violence. This has resulted in the continuance of hundreds, if not thousands of disappearances and deaths across these lands.

As grassroots organizations, we have also provided some concrete suggestions about working collaboratively across Turtle Island towards the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge while supporting each other to address these issues.

State Responses and Inquiries

With the recent disappearance and murder of Loretta Saunders, a pregnant Inuk university student living in Halifax, support for a national inquiry has grown stronger than ever before.

During the past three years, FSIS has engaged with and appealed to state institutions and government bodies. This included providing testimonies at both the Senate Committee in 2011 (which did not result in meaningfully implemented recommendations) and the Special Committee in June 2013 (whose findings were released Friday March 7th). This past fall, FSIS and NYSHN also participated in meetings with the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous People. We've gone through "the proper channels" and it hasn't got us any closer to justice that we are seeking.

“In my own mother’s case, I have been petitioning the province and federal government for an ‘independent investigation’; after 12 years I have gotten nowhere. So I did my own. The only way that I was going to find truth or answers about my mother’s death was to find them myself. It is what so many families across Turtle Island have been forced to do because they don’t have support from colonial agents in government, policy-making, media, police, and the legal systems. But as Indigenous women, the grief and trauma of experiencing crisis after crisis in our families and communities can overwhelm us; and the best we can do is just try to stay alive each day.” Bridget Tolley, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation – Co-founder of FSIS

Our concerns and responses as families and community based organizations regarding a national inquiry come from these types of experiences. It is not an endorsement of the federal government’s position to not have an inquiry, it’s exactly the opposite. It is because we are ourselves family members who are affected by disappearances, murders and violent deaths, as well as community organizers who have seen the harms of state-led interventions. We call attention back to ourselves: we have the answers and solutions. We always have. We are the experts in enacting those solutions too. Collaboratively we are interested in nurturing self-determined and community-led solutions to interpersonal and structural violence. This is where our hearts are; in resistance to colonialism and in fostering our solutions as Indigenous peoples with the support and consensual allyship of our non-Indigenous friends and family members in the struggle.

We have seen how state-led inquiries play out, most recently in British Columbia where the Missing Women’s Commission of Inquiry [was deemed a sham by families and the communities affected](#). Of the sixty-three recommendations made only three have been implemented. We have seen less change and improvement from these government initiatives than what is coming from community-based responses; such as the [February 14th Women’s Memorial March Committee](#). There have been suggestions on how to make inquiries more inclusive, but we as grassroots organizations, as families who have been through this before, prefer to look to each other for solutions. Where we have seen success has been in engagement with people on the front-lines and in our communities who live these realities everyday and seek change. This is where we draw our strength. An example of this collaboration and drawing strength from each other was our joint response between FSIS and NYSHN in regards to ongoing police violence and injustice: [“Police \(In\)Justice: Responding Together to Change the Story”](#).

Further, we do not believe it is enough to just call out state governments. While we identify the root causes of the violence as being outside of the community, this does not mean we should not be responsible and accountable to each other. This denies our own complicity in how we perpetuate/maintain colonial structures that play out in our everyday lives and contribute to the increase of violence. We need to look at what we can do.

How do we foster resurgence in everyday ways to respond to gender-based violence? Resurgence is working from our strengths and cultures as Indigenous nations and communities. These are some examples of on the ground responses to deaths, disappearances and gender based violence.

1. We need to lift each other up and support each other’s well being.

Families and communities have been asking for support for years and we need to start listening. Change is going to come from the grassroots and when we work from Indigenous ways of engaging with one another, the land, and Creation. It’s about going back to or retracing the teachings that were stolen from us and re-building strong families, communities and nations that are attentive to their members’ needs. This support includes supporting families in understanding the connections between violence in their lives and the bigger political picture.

Further, we need to highlight the fact that exploitation of resources and land theft is directly related to the disappearances and violent deaths of Indigenous peoples.

2. Teach-ins and critical education with families and communities.

Education by and for families of those who have gone missing or been murdered, in collaboration with Indigenous communities and organizations is critical and needs to be supported. We must put families first, ensuring that the needs of those most affected are met with active support and solidarity as well as the necessary resources to meet families where they are at. Critical education means creating and nurturing spaces that allow us to call each other inward and to really listen to how colonial violence has affected families herstorically and how specific government policies, at all levels, contribute to the violence we face and struggle against. This is also an opportunity to have internal conversations within communities about gender based violence, stereotypes, patriarchy and the types of violence we are working to address, including homophobia and transphobia.

3. Media Arts Justice.

We need to continue to create our own [accountable media in our own words](#). Many of the responses that are portrayed through mainstream media fail to also present the downfalls of a state-led response to deaths and disappearances. We must be critical of how we consume media about Indigenous peoples; not only in the harmful stereotypes about Indigenous women and Two Spirit people as “street involved, invaluable, drug-using and at risk”, but also in how the state represents their responses to this issue. Rather than showing how systems puts us at risk in the first place and fails us, these mainstream media stories construct the violence Indigenous people face as being from individual issues. An example of arts justice is [Walking With Our Sisters](#), which NYSHN is helping to support [youth engagement and leadership](#) in.

4. Centering Indigenous youth leadership and intergenerational organizing.

We need to recognize and center the leadership of Indigenous youth, including when it may not appear “conventional”. This may include but is not limited to: youth who take care of each other from day to day, teach their peers about harm reduction (safer drug use and condoms), etc. Young people are also asking for more opportunities to work with and learn from Elders in ways that respect open communication and dialogue, especially when discussing violence that happens across generations. Youth are already taking the initiative to determine their needs in the community and it is actually time to do the things they suggest! For examples of peer-lead youth leadership on the ground in communities go to <http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/whatwedo.html>.

5. Supporting people in the sex trade.

We need to support people in the sex trade, sex industry and street economies in our conversations, writings, activism and any space we organize. We need to address the harmful impacts of “rescuing” and “saving” approaches and not assume that all people in the sex trade need or want to be saved. We encourage positive healthy sexuality conversations (ie. safer sex), consensual allyship and consent in general. For more resources by Indigenous peoples in the sex trade, sex industry and street economies go to <http://maggiestoronto.ca/resources>.

6. Community-led database.

Indigenous peoples have always been excellent record keepers and counters. The loss of the Sisters In Spirit database once government funding was cut is the perfect example of the need for this work to be in community hands and outside state control. Aside from documenting

violent deaths of Indigenous women, girls, trans and Two Spirit people, a soon to be created website will honour their lives. For now go to <http://nomoresilence-nomoresilence.blogspot.ca> for more information and media interviews explaining the process and partners so far.

7. Local initiatives. Look to local community-based initiatives and organizing in your area or region that are responding to violence and building more community. Action starts at our kitchen tables, backyards, on the street, in community spaces and with families.

**#ItEndsHere #ItStartsWithUs
#Support Not Stigma**



Artwork by: Tannis Nielsen

Families of Sister in Spirit (FSIS) is a grassroots not-for-profit volunteer organization located on unceded Algonquin Territory (Ottawa) led by families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls with support from Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies. Follow them on Twitter: @Famsisterspirit

No More Silence (NMS) aims to develop an inter/national network to support the work being done by activists, academics, researchers, agencies and communities to stop the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women. <http://nomoresilence-nomoresilence.blogspot.com>

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) is an organization by and for Indigenous youth that works across issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice throughout the United States and Canada. Follow them on Twitter: @NYSHN

Originally posted on Indigenous Nationhood Blog: <http://nationsrising.org/it-starts-with-us/>