

Unit Four: Assignment 9: MMIWG

Introduction: When Sisters Don't Come Home

Imagine if women in your community started disappearing and nobody seemed to care. Imagine if when they were found dead, the investigations were cursory and the cases quickly closed. Imagine if this pattern continued for decades, affecting hundreds of families, while politicians and police dismissed concerns or blamed the victims themselves.

This isn't imagination—it's the lived reality for Indigenous communities across Canada. The epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) represents one of Canada's most urgent human rights crises, yet for decades it remained largely invisible to mainstream Canadian society.

Indigenous women are murdered at rates six times higher than non-Indigenous women, and Indigenous women make up 16% of all female murder victims despite representing only 4% of Canada's female population. Behind these statistics are daughters, mothers, sisters, and grandmothers whose disappearances have devastated families and communities already struggling with the ongoing impacts of colonization, residential schools, and systemic discrimination.

By understanding the historical roots, current scope, and potential solutions to the MMIWG crisis, we can begin to comprehend how the intersection of racism and sexism creates deadly consequences—and why this issue demands urgent action from all Canadians.

Background: The Historical Roots of Violence

The crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls cannot be understood without recognizing how centuries of colonial policies created the conditions for this violence. The Indian Act of 1876 systematically stripped Indigenous women of their status, property rights, and legal protections, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence. When Indigenous women married non-Indigenous men, they lost their status entirely—along with their connection to their communities, their right to live on reserve, and their children's Indigenous identity.

The residential school system, which operated from 1831 to 1996, deliberately destroyed family structures and cultural practices that traditionally protected Indigenous women and girls. Children were forcibly separated from their families, preventing the transmission of cultural knowledge about women's roles, rights, and sacred responsibilities within Indigenous societies. Survivors of residential schools often struggled with parenting, having been denied normal family relationships during their own childhoods, creating intergenerational cycles of trauma and family breakdown.

Throughout the 20th century, the "Sixties Scoop" saw thousands of Indigenous children, particularly girls, removed from their families and placed in non-Indigenous foster homes or adopted by white families. Many of these children grew up disconnected from their cultures and communities, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence as adults. The child welfare system continues to disproportionately apprehend Indigenous children—Indigenous children represent 52% of children in care despite being only 7.7% of the child population.

Government policies also created economic marginalization that increased Indigenous women's vulnerability. Reserve communities were systematically underfunded, lacking adequate housing, clean water, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The pass system required Indigenous people to obtain permission to leave reserves, limiting women's mobility and access to resources. When Indigenous women did leave reserves seeking education or employment, they often faced racism and discrimination that pushed them into dangerous situations.

The justice system has historically failed Indigenous women and girls. Police often dismissed reports of missing Indigenous women, assuming they had "chosen" to disappear or were involved in "high-risk" lifestyles. Investigations were frequently inadequate, with police spending less time and resources on cases involving Indigenous victims. This pattern of indifference sent a clear message that Indigenous women's lives were less valuable than those of non-Indigenous women.

The Current Crisis: Scope and Impact

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which released its final report in 2019, documented at least 1,481 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. However, advocates believe the true number is much higher, as many cases go unreported or are poorly documented. The inquiry found that Indigenous women face violence at rates far exceeding those of non-Indigenous women, with particularly high rates in northern and remote communities.

The crisis affects all Indigenous communities—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—but the vulnerabilities vary. Urban Indigenous women face high rates of violence while being disconnected from community support systems. Women in remote communities may lack access to shelters, police protection, or escape routes from abusive situations. Indigenous women involved in sex work, struggling with addictions, or experiencing homelessness face extreme vulnerability, often with little protection from authorities.

The impact extends far beyond the immediate victims. Families spend years searching for missing loved ones, often conducting their own investigations when police efforts prove inadequate. Communities live in fear, particularly parents of young Indigenous women who worry constantly about their daughters' safety. The trauma ripples through generations, as children grow up knowing that Indigenous women disappear and die at alarming rates, often without justice or accountability.

The Highway of Tears in British Columbia exemplifies the crisis. Along Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert, at least 18 Indigenous women and girls have disappeared or been murdered since 1969. Despite decades of advocacy from families and communities, many cases remain unsolved. The remote highway, lack of public transportation, and police indifference created conditions where predators could target Indigenous women with impunity.

The case of Tina Fontaine illustrates both the vulnerability of Indigenous girls and the justice system's failures. The 15-year-old from Sagkeeng First Nation was found dead in Winnipeg's Red River in 2014, wrapped in a bag and weighed down with rocks. Despite clear evidence of foul play, the man charged with her murder was acquitted, devastating her family and community. Tina's death galvanized national attention, but for many Indigenous families, her story was tragically familiar.

The Current Crisis: Scope and Impact

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which released its final report in 2019, documented at least 1,481 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. However, advocates believe the true number is much higher, as many cases go unreported or are poorly documented. The inquiry found that Indigenous women face violence at rates far exceeding those of non-Indigenous women, with particularly high rates in northern and remote communities. Addressing the MMIWG crisis requires fundamental changes to the systems and attitudes that enable this violence. The National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice provide a comprehensive roadmap, demanding action from governments, institutions, and Canadian society as a whole.

Immediate priorities include improving police responses to missing persons cases, ensuring adequate funding for Indigenous women's shelters and support services, and implementing Indigenous-led solutions in communities. Long-term solutions require addressing root causes: ending child welfare system discrimination, ensuring Indigenous communities have adequate housing and economic opportunities, and transforming justice systems to be more responsive to Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous women and organizations have been leading this fight for decades, often without adequate support or resources. Organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada, Families of Sisters in Spirit, and local grassroots groups have documented cases, supported families, and advocated for change. Their work demonstrates the strength and resilience of Indigenous women while highlighting the urgent need for broader support.

Some progress has occurred. The federal government has invested in Indigenous-led prevention programs, appointed an Indigenous person as Minister of Justice, and committed to implementing the inquiry's calls for justice. Several provinces have improved their missing persons protocols and increased funding for Indigenous women's services.

However, advocates stress that words and symbolic gestures are insufficient. Real change requires sustained political will, adequate funding, and a fundamental shift in how Canadian

society values Indigenous women's lives. It means addressing not just the violence itself, but the colonialism, racism, and sexism that enable it.

The MMIWG crisis challenges all Canadians to confront uncomfortable truths about our society. It demands that we move beyond viewing this as an "Indigenous issue" to recognizing it as a Canadian crisis requiring urgent action. Most importantly, it calls us to center Indigenous women's voices, experiences, and solutions in the work of creating a safer, more just society for all.

Questions to Think About

For all the following questions, you must use the introduce, illustrate and conclude approach. Each question has a specific word count range. Work within that range if you want to earn full marks for the assignment.

1. How do the historical policies described (*Indian Act*, residential schools, Sixties Scoop) connect to the current MMIWG crisis? Why is it important to understand this historical context rather than viewing the crisis as isolated incidents? (200-300 words)

2. The National Inquiry called the treatment of Indigenous women and girls "genocide." Based on your reading, do you think this term is appropriate? What does using this term accomplish, and what challenges might it create? (150-250 words)

Final Task

Identify and research one specific case of a missing (or murdered) Indigenous woman or girl from the past ten years. This could be a local case, a nationally known case like Tina Fontaine, or an international case. For your chosen case, provide the following information:

1. Who was she?
2. What were the circumstances of her disappearance or death?
3. How did police, media, and government respond?
4. What challenges did the family face?
5. What broader patterns from your reading are reflected in this specific case?
6. What does this case teach about the changes needed to prevent future tragedies?

Your response should follow the introduce, illustrate and conclude format and be in the 400 to 600 word range. Please include the URL(s) where you found your information. Approach this research with respect and sensitivity. Focus on honoring the person's life and dignity rather than sensationalizing the violence. Do not use AI for any part of this assignment.
