

# A year later, little action on protecting First Nations women and girls

It comes as little surprise to Chrystal Desilets that one year later, the federal government has no action plan in place in response to the inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Little was done in the lead-up to the inquiry, little has been done since and violence against Indigenous women continues, she said.

Desilets points to an assault on the Tiny House Warriors as recently as April, where a drunken group, one woman and three men, attacked the Tiny House Warriors' Blue River camp in British Columbia.

The camp is on Secwepemc territory along the Trans-Mountain Pipeline route, and was set up to protect traditional territory. The attackers destroyed the memorial of red dresses for missing and murdered women, a woman's truck was stolen and then rammed into a house. The community apprehended the attackers, took their photos before letting them go and then shared the photos with the RCMP. They still await an arrest.

"How can you think anything has changed when the RCMP can't take clear photos and find someone to charge with this assault," said Desilets, Indigenous rights program co-ordinator with the multi-faith social justice organization Kairos. "How can we think that anybody is serious about anything when things like that are happening."

June 3 came and went, one year to the day since *Reclaiming Power and Place*, the final report of the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) inquiry, was released to great fanfare and emotion.

Governments across the land swore they would take this report seriously, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau even agreeing that a genocide had taken place in Canada's colonial past against the nation's original inhabitants.

Yet the promised national action plan to deal with the 1,200-page report and its 231 calls for justice to provide a safer world for Indigenous women was nowhere to be seen, another victim of COVID-19 and the government focusing attention on its pandemic response.

"We're right where we were the day before the calls for justice were released," said Desilets. "It's nowhere. Nothing has changed."

In an interview with CBC last month, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations

Carolyn Bennett said the government is still working on a national plan with Indigenous groups and provincial and territorial governments that will address the recommendations in the MMIWG report, and that plan has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MMIWG was called to examine the phenomenon of so many Indigenous women and girls who were murdered or gone missing over the years. It looked at the systemic issues allowing these cases to go unchecked by police across Canada and heard the gut-wrenching direct testimony from 1,500 survivors, family and friends of the victims and another 800 alternate submissions as the inquiry criss-crossed the nation between May 2017 and April 2018.

Among its calls for justice were better access to housing and food support, funding for women's shelters, enhanced remote and rural transportation options and funding for awareness programs.

The federal government, in a statement released by six ministers working closely on this file, including Bennett and Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services, said the safety and security of Indigenous women is a priority and highlighted a number of initiatives put in place so far.

These include respect for Indigenous languages, eliminating gender discrimination in the Indian Act, community-based supports and investment in housing strategies.

It was a lot of talk, with little action to show, and that's shameful, said Desilets.

"We've had all this pomp and glamour, and this June is another anniversary on top of the others (since the residential schools' apology by then Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008). But really it keeps coming down to nothing," she said.



Archbishop Murray Chatlain is a member of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle engaged in renewing and fostering relationships between Canada's Indigenous people and the Church. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media file photo

Archbishop Murray Chatlain of Keewatin-Le Pas is hopeful for the future, but realizes this isn't a "quick fix kind of situation."

"I think there's been some progress but there's an awful lot of work to do yet," said Chatlain. "I think there's more people that are aware, and that's positive, but we still have a lot of work to do."

In Catholic Church circles, much of that work is being done through the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. It's a Catholic coalition of Indigenous people, bishops, clergy, lay movements and institutes of consecrated life engaged in renewing and fostering relationships between Canada's Indigenous people and the Church. Chatlain and Baie-Comeau Bishop Jean-Pierre Blais are the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' members.

The circle has been in steady contact with Indigenous organizations, said Chatlain, particularly the Native Women's Association of Canada. COVID-19 has slowed the process, though Chatlain said a meeting is hoped for soon in Ottawa for an update on "what sort of areas could we help to support them in, work in promoting concerns of this report."

Chatlain sees some parallels with the current situation in the United States surrounding the death of Floyd George while in the custody of Minneapolis police which has sparked wide-scale protests across the nation. This is a moment to learn and positively channel frustrations through raised awareness and sensitivity to the racism issue, and hopefully bring change. The American lessons can be learned north of the border, said Chatlain.

"The same would be true for us in Canada around the missing and murdered Indigenous girls issue," he said. "To make more people aware of what the real issues are, and how significant, and to look at some systemic changes."

It may take time, but governments and other institutions must be held to account and not allow these issues to fall off the table because of the pandemic, he said.

"There needs to be pressure put on political leaders so it doesn't fall off the agenda. It's easy for things to drift down the agenda and then nothing really happens."

Desilets has little confidence things will change any time soon, however.

"No confidence whatsoever, but I'm kind of cynical that way," she said with a laugh. "Hopeful, but far from confident."

Much of that has to do with continued realities faced by Indigenous. From her own experience, and now as the mother of a teenaged girl, she knows youth grow up with a fear they can be taken away from their families at any time, not unlike the experience of their ancestors with residential schools.

Desilets said there is this "fear that their spot with their family is temporary, precarious and fragile."

It could be a young student who goes to school with no snacks, wearing the same socks from the previous day or no change of season shoes, "these are all the little flags that can add up to a parent being scrutinized and having their child taken away."

True change, she said, will come when the grassroots collectives and social enterprises in Indigenous communities are empowered to move forward and enhance care within their communities, allow these communities to solve their own problems and not have a top-heavy bureaucracy in faraway Ottawa leading the way.

For June, National Indigenous History Month, Kairos is marking it unofficially as Indigenous Women's Month to commemorate the anniversary of Reclaiming Power and Place. The work of Indigenous women is being celebrated all month long with special emphasis on land defence and reconciliation, said Desilets.