

Violence Against Aboriginal Women – Is Anyone Listening?

By Jennifer Koshan

Cases Considered:

[Study on Violence Against Aboriginal Women](#) (Standing Order 108(2))

In March 2010, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women (FEWO) undertook a study on violence against Aboriginal Women. It held meetings in Ottawa in April 2010, and travelled to various communities across Canada in 2010 and early 2011 to hold hearings and meet with interested individuals and organizations. The Committee wrapped up its tour with a visit to Edmonton on January 21, 2011, where I was called as a witness. Sadly, and in spite of receiving a [news release](#) related to this and [earlier hearings](#), no one from the media was present in Edmonton, a situation we were told was replicated in the Committee's other hearings. Although one of the Committee members, Conservative MP Nina Grewal, stated repeatedly during the hearing that violence against Aboriginal women is a "top priority" of the government, the issue does not appear to be getting much attention.

In addition to Ms. Grewal, the MPs present in Edmonton were Hedy Fry (Liberal, Chair of the Standing Committee, who unfortunately arrived towards the end of the hearing), Dona Cadman (Conservative, and Acting Chair in Ms. Fry's absence), Jean Crowder (NDP critic for Aboriginal Affairs), Nicole Demers (Bloc Quebecois spokesperson for women's issues), and Anita Neville (Liberal, Official Opposition critic for the Status of Women). Three rounds of witnesses were heard, focused on the following topics / areas of expertise: (1) service providers and local police (with testimony from representatives of the Edmonton Police Service, Awo Taan Healing Lodge (Calgary), Métis Child and Family Services Society, and Little Warriors), (2) missing and murdered women (with testimony from Jo-Anne Fiske, a Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Lethbridge, representatives from the Memorial March for Missing and Murdered Women Calgary and the Stolen Sisters Awareness Walk and Movement, and the RCMP), and (3) research on violence against Aboriginal women (where I testified, along with researcher Sandra Lambertus and Muriel Stanley Venne, President of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women). Some of the witnesses were themselves Aboriginal women survivors of violence. Witnesses had 7 minutes each to present submissions, followed by timed rounds of questions from each of the Committee members.

All of the witnesses seemed to have much more to say, and the Committee members more questions to ask than the time allowed. Some of the recurrent themes from the witnesses were as follows: violence against Aboriginal women, both by family, acquaintances and strangers, occurs in epidemic numbers, and has its root causes in colonialism, cultural genocide, systemic racism and poverty; Aboriginal women vastly under report this violence, largely out of fear of the reactions of police, child welfare, health care workers, etc.; the impact of legal and justice system reforms on Aboriginal victims of violence cannot be accurately assessed due to a lack of

information gathering within the system; at the same time, some of those reforms (e.g. dual charging in spousal violence cases as a result of zero tolerance policies) have led to the criminalization of Aboriginal women); some specialized services are available for Aboriginal women who experience violence and their children, but these services have nowhere near the capacity or funding they require to handle the volume of cases they are faced with; Aboriginal women and their representative organizations continue to be denied a voice or to be listened to in the context of social policy issues, such as property rights on reserve, band membership, child welfare, and responses to violence (which are all interconnected), the latest example being the federal government's [strategy](#) around missing and murdered women; in spite of being the experts on these issues, Aboriginal women's organizations have experienced core funding cuts at the hands of the federal government, and cannot continue to exist on project based funding; the public seems indifferent to violence against Aboriginal women, as shown by the lack of media interest in the hearings, and this is evident of a profound lack of respect and denial of full citizenship for Aboriginal women; there is a need to build capacity at the level of Aboriginal communities, and for integrated, multi-jurisdictional approaches to solving these issues, but the federal, provincial and territorial governments often pass issues off to one another and fail to work together; training, education and accountability is required for justice system personnel; training and education is also important for front-line workers; Aboriginal families need support rather than intervention, and Aboriginal youth require cultural and language education; anti-racism and cultural awareness education of non-Aboriginal youth is also required.

These issues were certainly not being raised for the first time, and many witnesses (as well as some Committee members) expressed frustration at the lack of action by the federal government. For example, Jean Crowder noted that the Standing Committee had recommended the reinstatement of funding to women's organizations several years ago, but things have only gotten worse. Muriel Stanley Venne pointed to the National Aboriginal Women's Summit of 2007, and the fact that no action had been taken on the [recommendations](#) made there. The Liberal, NDP and Bloc members all had questions relating to the impact on Aboriginal people of the government's law and order agenda and crime bills, and the resulting decision to build new prisons at a large cost to the public. Some members (e.g. Crowder and Demers) were critical of the ongoing federal policies of colonization and assimilation, with Demers asking in despair at one point, "Qui sommes nous?" ("who are we", referring to the settler society and all we have wrought). Demers also asked a question about whether the mandatory long form census should be reinstated as one way of gathering information about the circumstances of Aboriginal women. Witnesses agreed with this point, yet also noted that action rather than information gathering was required.

Minutes of the proceedings are available [here](#), and eventually the evidence of the proceedings and the Committee's report will also be available on the FEWO website. It is to be hoped that the Committee will develop concrete recommendations that truly respond to the submissions it heard on the pressing issue of violence against Aboriginal women, and that all levels of government will act upon those recommendations.