



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Indigenous Women Survivors of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation**

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) is the oldest and largest Indigenous women's organization in Canada. For over 50 years, ONWA has worked to end all forms of violence against Indigenous women, improve Indigenous women's safety and restore our leadership. Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and ONWA recognize that Indigenous women are the medicine needed to heal ourselves, families, and communities.

Despite the tireless grassroots efforts and advocacy from Indigenous women and our organizations, Indigenous women are still not safe from contemporary forms of slavery such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Our inherent rights continue to be undermined.

Since 2012, ONWA has walked alongside Indigenous women who have lived experienced of human trafficking and sexual exploitation to honour their voices (1). Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and ONWA acknowledge the bravery, wisdom, and leadership of all Survivors as they are the experts. Their advice and lived experience informs and directs all aspects of our anti-human trafficking work.

Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and ONWA appreciate the Special Rapporteur's 2024 report on his visit to Canada (A/HRC/57/46/Add.1) and especially its' dedicated section on Indigenous Peoples' experiences related to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

In particular, we echo the Special Rapporteur's findings highlighting linkages between the human trafficking and sexual exploitation of Indigenous women and girls and historical and ongoing colonial frameworks and the denial of Indigenous peoples' right to fiscal autonomy, (affirmed under Article 4 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)) and to sovereignty over public services (affirmed under Article 23 of UNDRIP).

We emphasize that the impacts of colonization, and its' lasting intergenerational legacies, have created the conditions for Indigenous women and girls to be targeted by human traffickers, including:

- **Child Welfare System:** Indigenous children and youth are over-represented in the child welfare system. In Canada, 53.8% of children in foster care are Indigenous, but account for only 7.7% of the child population (2). The system designed to protect children continues to place Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and youth at higher risk of being trafficked (3). The child welfare system, as a colonial institution, continues to perpetuate the conditions whereby Indigenous children are disproportionately placed at risk of being targeted by traffickers as they are often isolated from family, community, and cultural supports.
- **Mental Health and Addictions:** Human trafficking is strongly linked with other co-occurring complex care needs, including mental health, addictions, and severe trauma (which due to the legacy of colonization, and ongoing systemic discrimination, Indigenous women are at heightened risk of experiencing). In Canada, mental health and addictions programs often have extraneously long waitlists, and mainstream mental health and addictions programs often do not meet the unique needs of Indigenous women and girls, especially those who have been trafficked/exploited.
- **Resource Extraction:** There is direct correlation between the violent victimization of Indigenous women and the socio-economic changes created by the presence of extractive industries in proximity to Indigenous communities. Where extractive industries operate, Indigenous women and girls experience higher rates of gender-based violence, including human trafficking (4).
- **Heightened Experiences of Violence:** Indigenous women are 3 times more likely than non-Indigenous women to report having been a victim of a violent crime; and approximately two thirds of Indigenous women have experienced physical or sexual assault in their lifetimes (4).

- **Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG):** Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to go missing or be murdered than any other women in Canada (5). The rate of gender-related homicide of Indigenous women in Canada is more than triple that of gender-related homicides of women and girls overall (6). The MMIWG crisis in Canada is directly linked to human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

While Canada has a National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019-2024, this Strategy expires this year and there has been no public indication of its continuance. To date, funding from Canada's Strategy has focused on anti-human trafficking education, training, and public awareness campaigns. There have been no commitments of core funding to Indigenous women's organizations that support Indigenous Survivors (e.g., crisis, exits, long-term healing).

Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and ONWA remain concerned that Canada is not upholding its commitment to, and obligations under, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or UNDRIP. Responses to prevent and address the human trafficking of Indigenous women must be developed and led by and for Indigenous women. Yet, Canada has adopted a nation-to-nation/distinction-based policy approach for Indigenous relations that excludes Indigenous women and our agencies as equal and legitimate partners in decision-making and beneficiaries of core federal funding.

## Recommendations

In alignment with the Special Rapporteur's report, we recommend that Canada immediately take the following action to disrupt the human trafficking and sexual exploitation of Indigenous women and girls and better ensure our safety:

1. Implement a nation to nation/distinctions-based PLUS approach to uphold Indigenous women's inherent leadership rights and right to participate in decision-making on issues that impact their lives, as affirmed under UNDRIP and CEDAW General Recommendation 39.
2. Create and fund an Indigenous women-led Anti-Human Trafficking Coordination Body to coordinate service providers addressing and responding to human trafficking, promoting healing, and sharing best practices.
3. Provide core, sustainable funding to Indigenous women's organizations to create and/or maintain culturally grounded safe spaces and services for Indigenous Survivors of human trafficking/sexual exploitation and co-occurring issues such as mental health.
4. Implement the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery's recommendation to ensure full economic/financial, social and cultural and political self-determination of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and the fulfilment of the National Inquiry into MMIWG's Calls for Justice related to preventing and addressing contemporary forms of slavery.
5. Fund Indigenous women's organizations to undertake research on Indigenous women-led community development models to address sexual exploitation in the context of resource extraction and to develop strategies to ensure Indigenous women's safety and wellbeing.

Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women and ONWA recognize that Indigenous women and girls are strong and resilient, despite the systemic, physical, and emotional violence that they have been subjected to and the multiple barriers they experience when seeking help and restoring their leadership.

If we are to achieve sustainable change, then the current systems that perpetuate violence and discrimination against Indigenous women must be deconstructed and reconstructed with Indigenous women's voices so that Indigenous women's leadership, honour and empowerment can be restored.

Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

#### Endnotes

(1) ONWA's Courage for Change program is the largest Indigenous-led anti-human trafficking program in Canada and supports Indigenous women at risk of human trafficking or leaving a situation of trafficking. It is a strengths-based cultural intervention program designed to meet the specific needs of Indigenous women through a continuum of culturally-based, trauma-informed interventions and healing practices that honour the courage and resilience of those who have experienced sexual exploitation and human trafficking. In 2018, ONWA engaged over 3,360 community members and service providers, including 250 self-identified Indigenous human trafficking Survivors. The truth, honesty, and courage of their storytelling resulted in the creation of ONWA's report, *Journey to Safe Spaces*, which provides clear recommendations and a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of Indigenous women and girls who are Survivors, or are at risk, of human trafficking ("*Journey to Safe Spaces*", ONWA, 2018.

[https://www.onwa.ca/\\_files/ugd/33ed0c\\_1a2b7218396c4c71b2d4537052ca47cd.pdf](https://www.onwa.ca/_files/ugd/33ed0c_1a2b7218396c4c71b2d4537052ca47cd.pdf)

(2) "Reducing the number of Indigenous children in care", First Nations Child and Family Services, Government of Canada. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1541187352297/1541187392851>

(3) Dubé, P. (2023). *Missing in Action: Misty's Story*. Ombudsman Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.ombudsman.on.ca/Media/ombudsman/ombudsman/resources/Reports-on-Investigations/Ombudsman-Ontario-Missing-in-Inaction-April-2023-Report-accessible.pdf>.

(4) Standing Committee on the Status of Women. (2022). *Responding to the Calls for Justice: Addressing Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls in the Context of Resource Development Projects*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/FEWO/Reports/RP12157710/feworp05/feworp05-e.pdf>; and, Amnesty International. (2016). *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Gender, Indigenous Rights, and Energy Development in North East British Columbia*. Retrieved from: "*Journey to Safe Spaces*", the Ontario Native Women's Association.

[https://www.onwa.ca/\\_files/ugd/33ed0c\\_1a2b7218396c4c71b2d4537052ca47cd.pdf](https://www.onwa.ca/_files/ugd/33ed0c_1a2b7218396c4c71b2d4537052ca47cd.pdf)

(5) Statistics Canada (2022). *Violent victimization and perceptions of safety: Experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00004-eng.htm>

(6) National Inquiry into MMIWG. (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into MMWIG, Vol 1*.

(7) Sutton, D. (2023). *Gender-related homicide of women and girls in Canada*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00003-eng.pdf?st=GmNftZLK>

(8) Nation to Nation/ Distinctions-Based PLUS is an inclusive approach to relationship building with Indigenous Peoples and addressing matters impacting our rights and self-determination. It recognizes that many Indigenous Peoples, particularly Indigenous women and Indigenous Peoples living outside of their home community, are excluded from the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit governance structures that represent Indigenous Peoples affiliated with specific lands and territory. Nation to Nation/ Distinctions-Based PLUS goes beyond these governing organizations to include organizations that amplify, and are accountable to, the voices of Indigenous women and the growing population of Indigenous Peoples living in urban, rural and remote areas outside of government defined First Nation, Métis and Inuit territory.