

Remembrance and Reconciliation for Indigenous Women

In April of 2021 Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first Native American cabinet secretary, announced the creation of a new Missing & Murdered Unit within the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Justice Services. The unit was established to provide leadership and establish cross-departmental and interagency work around missing and murdered American and Alaska Natives.

Native people in the 21st century are continuing to face discriminatory governmental policies and actions that perpetuate oppression, also known as settler colonialism. Some ongoing examples of settler colonialism that haunt Native American communities include higher rates of police brutality, racism and discrimination, unemployment, post-traumatic stress disorder, large populations of children in foster care systems, and low median household income. Haaland's statement, however, and the creation of the special investigation unit is a long-awaited action for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement.

The U.S. Department of Justice reports that Native women are 10 times more likely to face murder and sexual assault compared to the national average. Furthermore, according to the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, four out of five Native women are affected by violence today.

Poor record keeping combined with lack of publicity regarding murdered and missing Indigenous women has been influenced by racism and historical prejudice. Additionally, poor relationships between tribal governments and law enforcement have increased underreported cases in media and government documents. If the disappearance or deaths of Native women are reported in the media, then the stories often include stereotypes, racist language, or utilize criminalizing diction. One study published in the Journal of Feminist Media Studies found that the disappearance of a white woman was mentioned six times more often in media and featured in longer articles compared to a story on a Native woman. Furthermore, a study from the Urban Indian Health Institute reports that two-thirds of incidents against Native women in urban areas are "invisible," meaning that they receive no media attention. Not only is the lack of documentation hurtful to victims' families and tribal communities, but it averts communal

dialogue and public awareness, making it harder for tribal nations, communities, and legislatures to make informed decisions to prevent further violence against Indigenous women.

The lack of media coverage and inaccurate reporting has led to the use of social media and social projects to raise awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women by sharing stories of oppression and resilience. For example, the Walking with Our Sisters exhibit opened in 2012 to honor Indigenous women with a moccasin installation. Similarly, the hashtag #MMWI first started in 2014 on Twitter and encouraged Native women to pose with signs that read #AmINext, and the hashtag soon developed into the hashtag #ImNotNext. These are examples of grassroots campaigns and projects that seek to challenge colonization, racism, and patriarchy, but are they the extent of justice for Indigenous women? How does society seek practical and effective change for Native women?

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Information gathered from: “MMIWG2S,” The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women (www.csvanw.org/mmiw); “Native Developments in the late 20th and 21st centuries” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2021); Kaitlyn Watson’s “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in the Role of Grassroots Organizations and Social Media in Education” in *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol.33, no.1-2, June 22, 2018; Erik Ortiz’s “Lack of Awareness, Data Hinders Cases of Missing and Murdered Native American Women . . .” in *NBC News*, July 30, 2020; U.S. Department of the Interior’s “Secretary Haaland Creates New Missing and Murdered Unit. . .” in *The U.S. Department of the Interior*, April 1, 2021; “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, “Native Hope” (www.nativehope.org); The Urban Indian Health Institute’s “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls” (Seattle Indian Health Board, n.d.); Kim Anderson, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt’s *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (The University of Alberta Press, 2018).