



Terri Brown addresses reporters after a native cleansing ceremony in honour of missing Aboriginal women. Photo: Richard Lam, Canadian Press

Where are Canada's Disappeared Women?

OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN SLOW TO INVESTIGATE, OR HAVE IGNORED THAT 500 WOMEN HAVE GONE MISSING IN THE LAST 20 YEARS.

by Lauren Carter

In December 1991, a few days before Christmas, Shirley Lonethunder vanished. The 25-year-old mother of two was in the process of moving back to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan from the White Bear First Nation. At the same time, John Martin Crawford had been released after serving time for the December 1981 murder of 35-year-old Mary Jane Serloin, an act diminished to manslaughter despite evidence that included the imprints of his teeth on her chest, neck and breasts. Crawford would eventually be charged and given a

life sentence for the 1992 murders of three Aboriginal women.

Lonethunder has never been found. And no one's bothered to look in a long time.

"The police weren't any help.... They found nothing, no trace of her. They weren't going to do any more," says Doris Lonethunder, Shirley's mother.

This indifference isn't unusual. Terri Brown, past President of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) spent much of her two-year term acting to bring national and international attention to

the fact that aboriginal women in Canada go missing and are murdered at an alarming rate. Her sister was killed in Prince George, British Columbia in 2001 while she was involved in a violent relationship. No one has been charged in connection with her death.

"She died of an aneurism, and when we went to claim her we could barely recognize her, she'd been beaten so badly," Brown recalls. "The police said she died of natural causes."

Ada Elaine Brown is the first name on a poster listing 191 murdered and missing women NWAC fought for through Sisters In Spirit, a year-long campaign that ended in March 2005. Co-organized by the United Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, the campaign called on Canada's government to invest \$10 million in education and research projects addressing violence against Aboriginal women. On May 17, the federal government announced that Indian Affairs and Status of Women Canada will grant NWAC \$5 million over the next five years for the project.

"Research, education, policy development and sustainability are the four main areas [being funded]," according to NWAC president Beverley Jacobs, who served as lead researcher on *Stolen Sisters*, an Amnesty International report on Canada's missing and murdered Aboriginal women that was released in October 2004.

"Part of the research section is [focused on] developing research tools. One of them is a database to input all of the information of the missing and murdered women," explains Jacobs. The Amnesty report noted that racism and sexism "flavour" police investigations of missing or murdered native women. It recommended a national, coordinated approach to track the missing women of the last 20 years.

Over the last year, 50 or 60 women's names have been added to the previous estimate of 500 women who have gone missing or been murdered in the last 20 years. Jacobs is looking forward to clarifying the count.

"We were just basing our estimate on an anecdotal scan of numbers across the country," she says. "I'm actually thinking 500 is low."

She's not alone.

**"MEN WHO MURDER
NATIVE WOMEN ARE
LEAST LIKELY TO GET
A LIFE SENTENCE
WITHOUT PAROLE."
— AMBER O'HARA**

Long before the Sisters In Spirit campaign began, Toronto resident Amber O'Hara began trying to count the missing and murdered women. As a young girl, O'Hara was deeply affected by the 1971 slaying of Helen Betty Osborne, a teenager brutally murdered in The Pas, Manitoba. Four men were eventually implicated in the events that lead to Osborne's death, but it took 16 years to bring the case to trial. Three of the men went free.

"I was appalled," recalls O'Hara.

Set on a life of activism, O'Hara found herself touring First Nations communities delivering AIDS workshops. She would regularly notice posters of missing women.

In the works for a decade, her findings are posted on her website, (www.missingnativewomen.ca).

Her list has reached 350.

"Men who murder native women are least likely to get a life sentence without parole. Many law enforcement agencies still refuse to take reports of missing native women seriously, and some police departments don't list the victims as anything but 'white' or 'other.' This makes it difficult to get accurate statistics," O'Hara explains.

During her term as NWAC President, Terri Brown travelled through several communities to raise awareness of the missing and murdered. Together with Bev Jacobs, they are now estimating that the number is closer to 1,000.

Why don't people report women when they go missing?

"There's a lot of fear [of authority]," Brown explains. "We're finding that people just kind of wait, thinking their loved ones will come home. We held events and people came and said, 'Yeah, we heard about this and my aunt's been missing for 10 years.' It's very overwhelming."

Rebecca Guno, another woman named on the Sisters in Spirit poster, has been missing for 25 years. Guno is one of 69 women who have disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Many of them were Aboriginal. The DNA of at least 27 of these women has been found on the farm of Robert Pickton, who has been charged with 22 counts of first degree murder. Pickton's property is the site of

Canada's largest serial murder investigation.

By all accounts, response from the police was slow when the numbers of missing women started to climb in the 1990s. The slow police response caused outrage in the downtown community.

"The police said, 'There's nothing we can do. Maybe they left town. Maybe they went on vacation.' We're talking about inner-city folk!" says Brown, who lived and worked in Vancouver at the time.

Relatives, Aboriginal groups and women's organizations demanded that attention be turned to the missing women through actions like the Valentine's Day March, an annual event that started in 1992, says Suzanne Jay, a rape crisis worker at Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter. It was a way to keep the issue front and centre.

According to Jay, it took six years before a second officer was assigned to the case. Three years later, in the spring of 2001, the RCMP and Vancouver police

started Project Evenhanded, a task force that continues to investigate the missing women.

Meanwhile, haunting echoes are sounding in Edmonton, Alberta. In May 2005, the body of 33-year-old Ellie May Meyer was found. She was the seventh sex trade worker to be discovered slain in the area since 2002. Roughly half of the women were of Aboriginal descent.

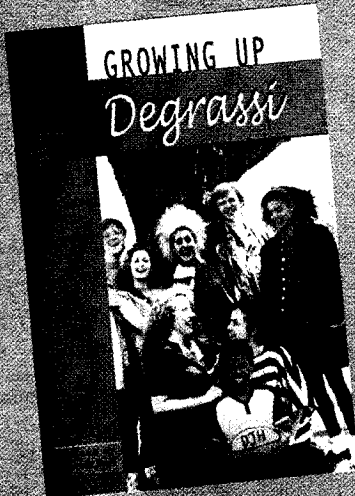
All of the victims fall under the jurisdiction of Project Kare, a task force born out of the wider High Risk Missing Persons Project. The High Risk Project emerged following the gruesome discoveries made by Project Evenhanded's investigations in B.C.

"The criminal operations officer in the province of Alberta said, 'We need to take a look at what's happening in our backyard,'" says Cpl. Wayne Oakes, an Edmonton-based spokesperson for the RCMP.

**"THE POLICE SAID,
THERE'S NOTHING
WE CAN DO. MAYBE
THEY LEFT TOWN."
— TERRI BROWN**

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Some of my sex cues are also more male now that I've been on testosterone for a year. My jawline is wider, my shoulders are wider, and my hips are smaller. I'm a man unlike other men. I'm a man who wants to be welcome in lesbian spaces. I'm a man who used to be a dyke, who is now bisexual and dates gay men. What label is there to accommodate all that?

When I had a body that was much more overtly female, during the few times that I was with men intimately it was very obvious that I was with "men being with a woman." I couldn't handle that. When I was a woman with women, suddenly all the roles about what men were supposed to do with women were tossed out the window. We were just two people fucking, and that was okay. I wanted freedom from those roles. I could have that freedom with women, but I didn't feel I could have it with men, which was frustrating, because I wanted it with men, too.

Now that I feel free from the gender-role stereotypes, I date men without that baggage. I have shifted. I'm more comfortable with my body now.

Not that there aren't still issues for me to deal with. People are always wondering, "Who exactly would want you? You're a man without a dick." It comes up a lot—"Who would ever want that?" The truth is, I don't know. I don't have an answer. I don't know if many people will, and I have to live with that.

If my choices are either to be a person who can't stand his own body but is deemed attractive to others, or to be a person who's much happier with who he is and has to be patient in finding a partner who's truly attracted to him as he is, then it's not a hard choice. I'd rather be happy with myself.

I think I now have a much better chance of attracting the kind of person who will be attracted to me, because I'm out there. I'm an activist. I'm more self-confident. I feel more comfortable with my body. It may take a while for all the pieces of my puzzle to fit into place, but I'm confident that they will, in time.

I like to remember something that happened fairly recently. I went to see an old friend and her mom. When her mom was saying good-bye, she did that thing that women often do with men: she put her hand on my chest and said, "It was nice to see you." Her hand just rested there. It felt more genuine than anything I'd ever experienced. No one would have made that gesture so casually before. No straight woman, especially not Kathy's mom, would have ever put her hand where my breasts used to be. That she did it so casually felt as if she had accepted the fact that I was a guy. Her touch on my chest felt fundamentally different. It was powerful, rewarding, sensual, comforting and ultimately affirming. ~

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Formed in October 2003, Project Kare is looking at 72 Alberta-based homicide and missing person cases dating back several years. The investigations are focused on those whose life circumstances, behaviour or work could increase their risk of being a victim of a violent crime. Three men are among the murdered and missing. Many of the women are native.

While only a small percentage of Edmonton's population is Aboriginal, the percentage of Aboriginal women that are part of the homicide and missing persons caseload is abnormally high, according to Oakes.

Health Canada reports that Aboriginal women are three times more likely to experience a violent

death than to non-Aboriginal women. The rate rises to five times for native women between the ages of 25 and 44.

Another flashpoint can be found on what is commonly called the Trail of Tears in B.C. Officially, this quiet stretch of highway between Prince George and Prince Rupert has swallowed six people, five of them native. Brown, however, says that investigations into area Aboriginal communities have brought the number of those missing up to 32. One of these individuals received a flurry of national media attention when she disappeared in 2002: Nicole Hoar, the first white woman on the list.

The circumstances of Canada's missing women is a sign of a society that treats Aboriginal women as if they just don't matter, says Shelagh Day of the Feminist Alliance for International Action, an alliance of more

than 40 Canadian non-governmental organizations focusing on women's rights. "They can be disappeared off the streets, they can be in prostitution because of poverty, because social institutions are not supporting them adequately ... and the justice system is absent," says Day.

In May 2004, native groups brought the case of Canada's missing women to the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues. Day was at an earlier UN appeal and watched as the United Nations Committee to End Discrimination Against Women questioned Canada.

"The committee members were shocked," says Day, pointing to some of the realities: "Forty-three percent of all Aboriginal women are living below the poverty line, and if you look at Aboriginal single mothers, the rate is 73 per cent. Think about being a young, Aboriginal mother in Canada, and you're essentially consigned to poverty."

Aboriginal women earn an average yearly income of \$13,300, compared to \$19,350 for non-Aboriginal women. Poverty is not the only problem. In order for the situation to truly change, Canada needs to take some bigger steps, says Jacobs.

One such step would be to ratify the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention,

Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women. Over a decade old, the convention was created by the Inter-American Commission of Women—part of the Organization of American States—and makes clear the obligation of each nation to uphold women's right to a life free from violence. Canada is one of eight countries which haven't signed. Twenty-six countries have.

Not signing this convention "causes a lot of questions as to the commitment that they say they're giving," says Jacobs.

Doris Lonethunder has first-hand experience of this lack of commitment. But in the face of her grief, the bureaucracy behind her experience doesn't mean much. "Nothing's ever going to make it better for me, unless she's here," Lonethunder says of her missing daughter, her voice heavy with pain.

The Sisters in Spirit campaign won't bring Shirley Lonethunder back. But NWAC and other Aboriginal women's groups are hopeful that the newest federal funding will help begin to gather case histories on missing women. The money will be also be used for research, public education and policy that pays attention to what has become one of Canada's biggest unsolved crimes against human rights. ~

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What did you find most shocking about the Somalia Affair?

SHERENE RAZACK: In the end, what I found most shocking was the way in which the understanding of what went on in Somalia was based on the idea that they were different from us, and that the difference meant that they were not as advanced and didn't have the same values as us. When people say that life is cheap in Somalia, there is a degree of inhumanity that continues to shock me, no matter how much I intellectualize it.

How do you suggest that we, as a nation, begin to look critically at who we are and who we think we are?

SHERENE RAZACK: I suggest that we stop taking ourselves out of history. That is, we need to understand that we are heavily implicated in what happens in parts of the world that are far from us. Peacekeeping is not a simple story of helping people less advanced than ourselves. It is not charity. The world's crises do not come about because Africans are strangely given to barbarism. We have had a hand in what happens. We have mining operations that destabilize human rights. We make the armaments for various military occupations. We support the superpower (the U.S.) as it conquers the world. As Susan Sontag put it: "We have to locate our privilege on the same map as their suffering." And it is this that we have most failed to do. ~

Chislaine Allyne is the website manager at the Canadian Women's Health Network and a Herizons board member.