

The B.C. CEDAW Group

March 12, 2009
The Honourable Wally Oppal,
Attorney General of British Columbia
Province of British Columbia
P.O. Box 9041
STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, B.C., V8W 9E1

Dear Attorney General Oppal,

We appreciated meeting with you on February 24, 2009, and thank you for stating your willingness to engage with us in a process to move towards implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. We have written a separate letter proposing a next step in this process.

However, as a priority we wish to reiterate our request of February 24 that you set up a public inquiry into the failure of law enforcement agencies in the Province to adequately protect Aboriginal women from violence, as well as their failure to investigate, promptly and thoroughly, the disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women. We note that the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, the United Native Nations and the B.C. Civil Liberties Association have recently made this request also. A full public inquiry is now seen by many people in the Province, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, as essential if Canada and B.C. are to establish a social and legal environment in which Aboriginal women and girls are treated as human beings of equal dignity and worth.

We drew your attention at our meeting to the fact that when Canada's human rights performance under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) was reviewed at the United Nations in Geneva in October 2008, many Canadian non-governmental organizations, including the Native Women's Association of Canada, Amnesty International, the Canadian Feminist Alliance and the B.C. CEDAW Group, raised the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada, and in British Columbia in particular, as a massive and systemic human rights violation in need of priority attention.

In its Concluding Comments on the review, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination expressed concern about the "hundreds of cases involving aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in the past two decades" and urged Canadian governments to examine the reasons for the failures of the justice system to deal with these cases and give them priority attention. The Committee asked governments to "remedy the deficiencies in the system" and to report back to the Committee on this urgent matter in one year - that is, by October 2009. It is important to move forward now.

In addition, as we pointed out when we met, the violence against Aboriginal women cannot be separated from their social and economic conditions. Aboriginal women have high rates of poverty, and many live on inadequate social assistance - when they can qualify for it. Some enter into survival prostitution in order to get by, and a disproportionate number of Aboriginal women have their children apprehended. Many of the murdered and missing women in British Columbia were in these situations. Their extreme social and economic disadvantages have made them easy prey for violent men, but have also made them unable to draw the protection and concern of police and officials.

The UN CEDAW Committee recognized the severe disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal women and recommended that “a specific and integrated plan [be developed] to address the particular conditions affecting aboriginal women, both on and off reserves,...including poverty, poor health, inadequate housing, low school-completion rates, low employment rates, low income and high rates of violence.” We reiterate our request that the Government of British Columbia, at the same time as instituting a full public inquiry into the missing and murdered women, undertake the development of a strategic, multi-dimensioned plan to address the social and economic inequality of Aboriginal women in British Columbia.

We look forward to working with you on both of these initiatives.

Sincerely,

Carrie Humchitt, Aboriginal Women’s Action Network
Kasari Govender, West Coast Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund
Annabel Webb and Joanna Czapska, Justice for Girls
Daisy Kler, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter
Lee Lakeman, Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (B.C. Region)
Judy Darcy, Hospital Employees’ Union
Susan Harney, Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC
Shelagh Day, The Poverty and Human Rights Centre