

# *Beyond the Inquiry*

## **ONWA's Journey 5 Years After the National Inquiry Final Report**

June 2024



Ontario Native Women's Association

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## Introduction

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) prioritizes the safety and healing of Indigenous women and girls. The five-year anniversary of the National Inquiry final report is a significant milestone for Indigenous women for several reasons:

1. **Remembering and Honoring:** It serves as a moment to remember and honor the lives of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people who have been victims of violence and have gone missing. We acknowledge all the courageous Indigenous women who spoke out on the violence they experienced, shared their stories about their families or lost loved ones, and bravely brought this issue to the forefront. We admire these women for their tireless grassroots efforts no matter how often they thought they were unheard.
2. **Raising Awareness:** The anniversary helps raise awareness about the ongoing issue of violence against Indigenous women and girls. It brings attention to the systemic issues and challenges we face, including marginalization, discrimination, and inadequate access to justice.
3. **Advocacy and Action:** It provides a platform for advocacy and action. Organizations, community leaders, and grassroots community members often use these milestones to push for policy changes, improved support services, and justice reforms to address the root causes of violence and prevent future tragedies.
4. **Supporting Families:** For families and loved ones of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit (MMIWG2S<sup>1</sup>) the anniversary is a time of solidarity and support. It acknowledges their grief and their ongoing fight for justice and accountability.
5. **Accountability:** Is an opportunity to reflect on our commitments and actions taken on addressing violence. It is also about accountability for government's in addressing the recommendations put forth by Indigenous women in reports, research, engagements, and policy submissions.
6. **Indigenous women's resilience:** It highlights the resilience of the Indigenous women's movement in the face of ongoing injustices. It underscores the importance of cultural revitalization and healing in addressing the trauma caused by violence.

For hundreds of years, patriarchy and colonialism have been impacting Indigenous women and their families. This has resulted in physical, sexual, psychological violence, and murder which was documented in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Inquiry and Report.

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<sup>1</sup> ONWA welcomes and has always been inclusive of self-identifying Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirit people. This includes welcoming the many social identities that we each hold.

ONWA acknowledges that achieving progress for Indigenous women and girls necessitates deconstructing existing systems and reconstructing Indigenous women's leadership, voices, dignity, and empowerment. As an organization, ONWA holds itself accountable to its members and communities. In fulfilling this accountability, the organization is dedicated to examining the systemic issues that erect barriers and detrimentally affect the lives of Indigenous women and girls which is why we created and are sharing this report.

## About ONWA

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) is the largest and oldest Indigenous women's organization in Canada, with over 50 years of experience and expertise in amplifying Indigenous women's voices and advocating for solutions created and led by Indigenous women. ONWA is both an association with 14 Chapters (incorporated Indigenous women's organizations providing front-line services) and 23 Councils (grassroots Indigenous women's groups supporting community development models) and a direct, front-line service provider delivering over sixty-six culturally grounded services and programs for Indigenous women and their families in twenty-three sites across the province.

The safety of Indigenous women is central to ONWA's advocacy, policy and program development. ONWA focuses on nine strategic issue areas identified by Indigenous women as integral to their safety: Mother Earth, Family Violence, Sexual Violence, Child Welfare, Human Trafficking, MMIWG, Housing and Homelessness, Justice, and Health. ONWA acknowledges that the challenges faced by Indigenous women are intersectional and must be addressed in a holistic manner, considering they are all interrelated. ONWA focuses on healing at an individual, family, community, and nation level as we know that this is how we will restore balance.

## Acknowledgement

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) would like to acknowledge all the courageous Indigenous women, past and present, who bravely speak their truth on the issue of violence against Indigenous women and girls. The Indigenous women's movement has been critical in raising public awareness and demanding action to address violence against Indigenous women and girls. We admire the Indigenous women working in communities for their tireless efforts to end violence against women and girls. Much of the work to address MMIWG2S remains unfunded, and despite these challenges, Indigenous women continue to do the work. We also thank our Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Traditional Knowledge Holders. They remind us everyday to care for each other while we do this work and they ground us in matriarchal knowledge, ceremony, and community.

## ONWA's Historical Legacy: Addressing MMIWG2S

Ending violence against Indigenous women is a cornerstone of ONWA's work since our inception in 1971. The first report on violence against Indigenous women that ONWA published was in 1989, based on extensive research with Indigenous women across the province. The report, *Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Family Violence*,<sup>2</sup> highlighted the extremely high rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women in the province. This report was ground-breaking at the time, as there was a lack of concrete data on the violence experienced by Indigenous women. The report made several recommendations about what was needed to address violence against Indigenous women, which remain just as vital, and applicable today as they were 35 years ago.

As ONWA grew, we partnered with other Indigenous organizations and collaborated with provincial government to continue the work to address violence against Indigenous women. ONWA played a lead role in the creation of the Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy in 1994, which brought First Nation, Métis and urban Indigenous partners together with multiple ministries to reduce family violence and violence against Indigenous women and children, and improve Indigenous healing, health and wellness. The Strategy led to investment into a continuum of culturally appropriate and Indigenous-designed and delivered programs and services that remain in place today. ONWA also partnered with other Indigenous provincial organizations to convene five Ending Violence against Aboriginal Women Summits that each brought together approximately 150 Indigenous women to share best practices in addressing the violence experienced by Indigenous women. The first Summit produced the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Indigenous Women*<sup>3</sup>(2007), which continues to be used as a foundational framework for ending violence against Indigenous women in Ontario.

Long before the National Inquiry on MMIWG2S+, it was Indigenous women and their families who were sounding the alarm about the violence and high numbers of disappearances and murders of Indigenous women. It was Indigenous women, families, and community organizations, such as ONWA who began to call for an Inquiry. Initially there was a lack interest from the public and institutions such as police, community leaders, and politicians.<sup>4</sup> In 2004, ONWA, along with other Indigenous women's organizations, went to the United Nations (UN)

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Native Women's Association. 1989. *Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence*. Retrieved from: <https://www.onwa.ca/reports>

<sup>3</sup> Ontario Native Women's Association and Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centers. 2007. *Strategic Framework to End Violence against Aboriginal Women*. Retrieved from: <https://www.onwa.ca/reports>

<sup>4</sup> Ontario Native Women's Association. 2020. *Reconciliation with Indigenous Women: Changing the Story of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. p. 4. Retrieved from: <https://www.onwa.ca/reports>

to demand action from Canada. Indigenous women's advocacy gathered international attention, and in 2004, Amnesty International published its report *No More Stolen Sisters*, which identified violence against Indigenous women in Canada as a human rights issue. In 2015, the UN Committee to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) conducted an inquiry into the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls in Canada, and provided over thirty recommendations to Canada, including a national inquiry and plan of action. Without the tireless grassroots efforts of Indigenous women and Indigenous women's organizations, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit people likely would have never happened.

In 2015, the National Inquiry on MMIWG2S+ was announced and finally our calls had been answered. ONWA participated and provided extensive advice during the pre-inquiry engagements, regarding how to keep Indigenous women and their families safe and supported during the Inquiry process. ONWA was granted standing as a party to Inquiry and submitted testimony and recommendations on what needed to happen to change the violence that Indigenous women and girls continued to face. The recommendations that ONWA made were based on decades of engaging with, and listening to, the voices and experiences of Indigenous women in community, including our staff and board members who have lost loved ones. During the inquiry, ONWA became highly concerned with the way the process was unfolding. We were concerned that a trauma-informed approach was not taking place with community, there was a lack of connection with Indigenous families and loved ones of MMIWG2S as well Indigenous support agencies working with families on the ground, particularly Indigenous women's agencies. In July of 2017, ONWA wrote an open letter to the Inquiry Commissioners, publicly withdrawing our support of the process.

ONWA believed then and now, that Indigenous women are the experts in their lives and hold the solutions for the issues impacting them. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, four years after the Inquiry was launched, the final report of the National Inquiry was published. The report, titled *Reclaiming Power and Place*, contains over one thousand pages of narrative on the issues and 231 Calls for Justice. At the time of the report's release, ONWA was hopeful that we would see the results of increased public awareness of the MMIWG2S crisis, and increased political and public will to take concerted action. In the five years since the release of *Reclaiming Power and Place*, ONWA has continued to advocate for Indigenous women and their safety. We have achieved some successes, but Indigenous women are still not safe.

## 5 Years After Reclaiming Power and Place

### Ongoing challenges

Indigenous women are still not safe and continue to have to negotiate their safety to meet their basic needs, often because of systemic barriers (e.g., lack of safe, affordable housing and access to culturally safe healthcare). Current challenges in addressing MMIWG include systemic racism, inadequate resources for support and prevention, and the need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive policy reforms and a lack of implementation on the Calls for Justice and the National Action Plan.

#### 1. Canada's Nation-to-Nation and Distinctions-based Policy

ONWA is concerned that Canada's Nation-to-Nation/Distinctions-Based policy to Indigenous relations and funding formulas prioritizes National Indigenous Organizations representing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit interests, and leadership established through the *Indian Act*. This policy excludes Indigenous women and their organizations as legitimate and equal partners in decision-making on issues that impact their rights and their lives, which constitutes a human rights violation and contravenes Articles 18 and 19 of the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). For example, despite being the largest and oldest Indigenous women's organization in Canada, ONWA is not represented within the federal government's Nation-to-Nation/Distinctions-Based framework, which leaves the thirty-seven Indigenous women's organizations and groups that ONWA represents without a voice in decision-making on, or access to services and funding for, issues of importance to Indigenous women's rights and wellbeing. With the vast majority of Indigenous women in Canada now living off-reserve and outside of their home communities, the government's distinctions-based funding policy also fails to align with the current reality of where Indigenous women live and access services, contributing to ongoing service gaps and unmet needs.

ONWA advocates for a **Nation-to-Nation/Distinctions-Based PLUS approach** to Indigenous relations and funding that ensures Indigenous women, and their organizations are informed, involved, consulted, and benefit from resources being allocated to address key issues of concern for Indigenous women and their families.

#### 2. Inadequate investments

Greater investment from all levels of government is required for prevention to prioritize and protect Indigenous women's safety. While Canada's 2021 Budget committed \$2.2 billion over five years, there is a lack of transparency about where this investment is going and how it is improving Indigenous women's safety.

The National Inquiry recognized the lack of core funding for Indigenous women's organizations as a significant barrier for provision of services and the protection of safety of Indigenous women. Call for Justice 1.8 called upon governments to provide core and sustainable funding to Indigenous women's organizations, yet this crucial recommendation has still not materialized. Instead, Indigenous women's organizations continue to operate with funding that is insufficient to meet the needs of their communities and must continually compete against one another for short-term project-based funding. This competitive process is not reflective of Indigenous worldviews and replicates colonial structures that seek to divide us. Indigenous women's lives are not projects, and we cannot address systemic change through project-based funding. ONWA was disappointed to see that Canada's 2024 Budget did not commit any specific and dedicated funding to improving Indigenous women's safety. From ONWA's analysis, the budget does not reflect an ongoing commitment to implementation of the NAP, nor is there support for Indigenous women's organizations advancing the critical safety needs of Indigenous women across Canada. Indigenous women were mentioned only twice in the 2024 Budget, and both times it was in relation to initiatives dealing with the aftermath of the violence – a Red Dress Alert to notify the public when an Indigenous woman, girl or two spirit person goes missing (\$1.3M over three years), and funding to search the Prairie Green Landfill for Indigenous women's remains (\$20M).

Core and sustainable funding for Indigenous women's organizations should be understood as central to reconciliation with Indigenous women, as this will enable Indigenous women to take up their leadership roles in their communities and Nations and allow for solutions provided for and by Indigenous women.

### **3. Slow implementation of the Calls for Justice and National Action Plan**

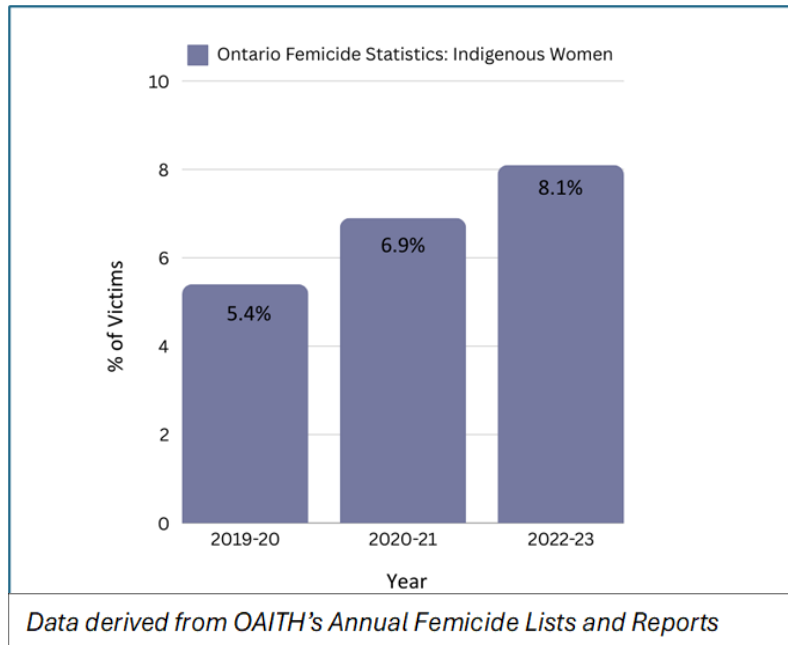
ONWA remains concerned about the slow implementation of the Calls for Justice and the National Action Plan. Indigenous women continue to see little, if any, sustained action from governments to keep them and their families safe, restore their leadership and address the specific and unique barriers they face that contribute to violence.

ONWA continues to call on all levels of government to prioritize Indigenous women's safety and implementation of the National Action Plan and/or provincial/municipal safety plans as a fundamental human rights issue. This advocacy happens through our participation in the annual Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Roundtable on MMIWG; bi-lateral meetings with federal government departments, provincial ministries, and municipal partners; and international human rights forums such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and annual sessions of the UN Committee on the Status of Women.



#### 4. Violence continues and is increasing

The murders and disappearances of Indigenous women have not stopped. Families and communities are still dealing with trauma, and Indigenous women are still experiencing disproportionately high rates of violence. In 2021, the rate of gender-related homicide of Indigenous women in Canada was more than triple that of gender-related homicides of women and girls overall.<sup>5</sup> In Ontario, the proportion of femicide victims who are Indigenous has steadily increased since the National Inquiry. We need action now.



#### Accomplishments

ONWA recognizes that if we want sustainable change for Indigenous women and girls, we need to deconstruct the current colonial systems, and reconstruct Indigenous women's leadership, voices and ways of doing. Our approaches work to unpack the systemic issues leading to the violence against Indigenous women, and build Indigenous women led approaches.

ONWA's Indigenous Gender Based Analysis Framework was developed for us to gain a deeper understanding of issues facing Indigenous women and the multiple systems they navigate. Twenty-eight (28) systems were identified from listening to Indigenous women as the experts in their own lives. In their current practice, these systems



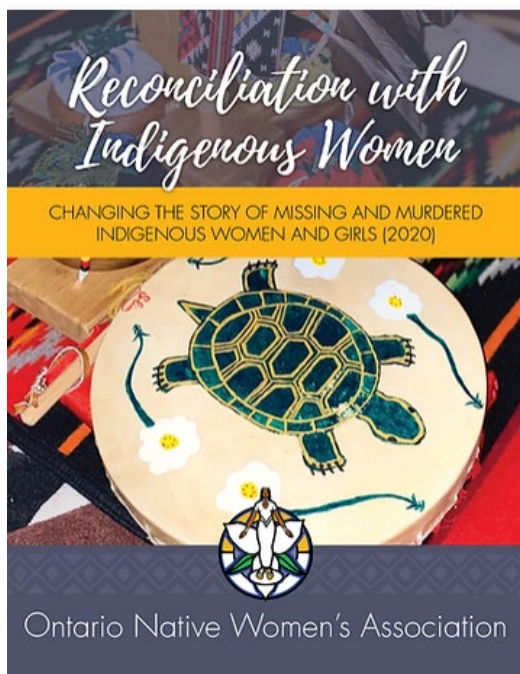
<sup>5</sup> Sutton, D. (2023). Gender-related homicide of women and girls in Canada. *Statistics Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00003-eng.pdf?st=GmNftZLK>

contain racism and continually perpetuate violence against Indigenous women. An intersectional approach recognizes systems like patriarchy and colonialism harm people, but especially Indigenous women.

The IGBA offers a lens through which Indigenous women's lived experiences are viewed. It is a tool to see the colonial systems Indigenous women navigate every day and to highlight the unique experiences Indigenous women have when navigating those systems.

## 1. Reconciliation with Indigenous Women Report

Following the release of *Reclaiming Power and Place*, the Government of Canada gathered Indigenous organizations to work together on the development of a National Action Plan (NAP) on MMIWG2S+. Despite our best efforts, ONWA was not included in the series of Working Groups that were convened to inform the NAP development. This was disheartening, but ONWA continued to advocate for Indigenous women's organizations from across Canada to be included.



ONWA conducted our own engagements with Indigenous women in recognition of the critical importance of our voices and our solutions. In October 2020, ONWA launched our report *Reconciliation with Indigenous Women: Changing the Story of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. The report centres Indigenous women, their knowledge and experience, as not only the focus of the National Inquiry, but as leaders with the right solutions. The report and subsequent recommendations were based on what Indigenous women and their families reported to ONWA through, community and membership engagements, ONWA's programs and community submissions from Indigenous women and families. Our report emphasized that Indigenous

women and Indigenous women's safety must be at the centre of the NAP.

Using ONWA's Indigenous Gender Based Analysis Framework, *Reconciliation with Indigenous Women* offers thirteen recommendations covering twenty-eight systems while incorporating teachings from the 12 Grandmother Moons. These strength-based recommendations are intended to foster resilience, healing, and environments in which Indigenous women and girls are respected, not dehumanized, and therefore their fundamental right to safety is supported.

To date, our report *Reconciliation with Indigenous Women* has not been formally accepted by the federal government. These recommendations remain just as relevant today as in 2020 so we continue to call on Canada to accept ONWA's report as key to moving forward on addressing the MMIWG2S crisis and all efforts to ending violence against Indigenous women. Our full report can be accessed at: <https://www.onwa.ca/reports>

## 2. Grandmother Earth Dress

The Grandmother Earth Dress is a traditional red jingle dress, created by ONWA in 2017. Our Grandmother Earth Dress honours and acknowledges MMIWG2S. She also serves as a sacred item of healing for families as well as communities to commemorate their loved ones. She is meant for families to visualize their loved on in beautiful traditional regalia. The 365 red jingles of the dress represent a year-round call for justice and safety for Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people. While the colour red is not normally part of the Journey Ceremony, this specific dress was born out of vision and ceremony through the guidance and consultation of Elders, Healers, and Knowledge Keepers, where she received the name “Grandmother Earth Dress”. Through ceremony and teachings, guidance and explanation told that Grandmother Earth Dress came from the Southern



Direction to honour women, girls, and Two-Spirit people as missing loved ones and as mothers, daughters, aunties, sisters, grandmothers, nieces and cousins. They will know the dress is made for them. They will know that they are loved. Grandmother Earth Dress travels throughout Ontario to support families and communities. She is never meant to be worn in this realm but is symbolic of those in the spirit world. ONWA cares and provides ceremony for her four times per year, when she travels, and to prepare her for the community she will be visiting.

The dress was inspired by Jaime Black's REDress Project, which was created to call attention to the gendered and racialized nature of violent crimes committed against Indigenous women and to evoke a presence through the marking of absence.

### 3. Indigenous Women's Accountability Table

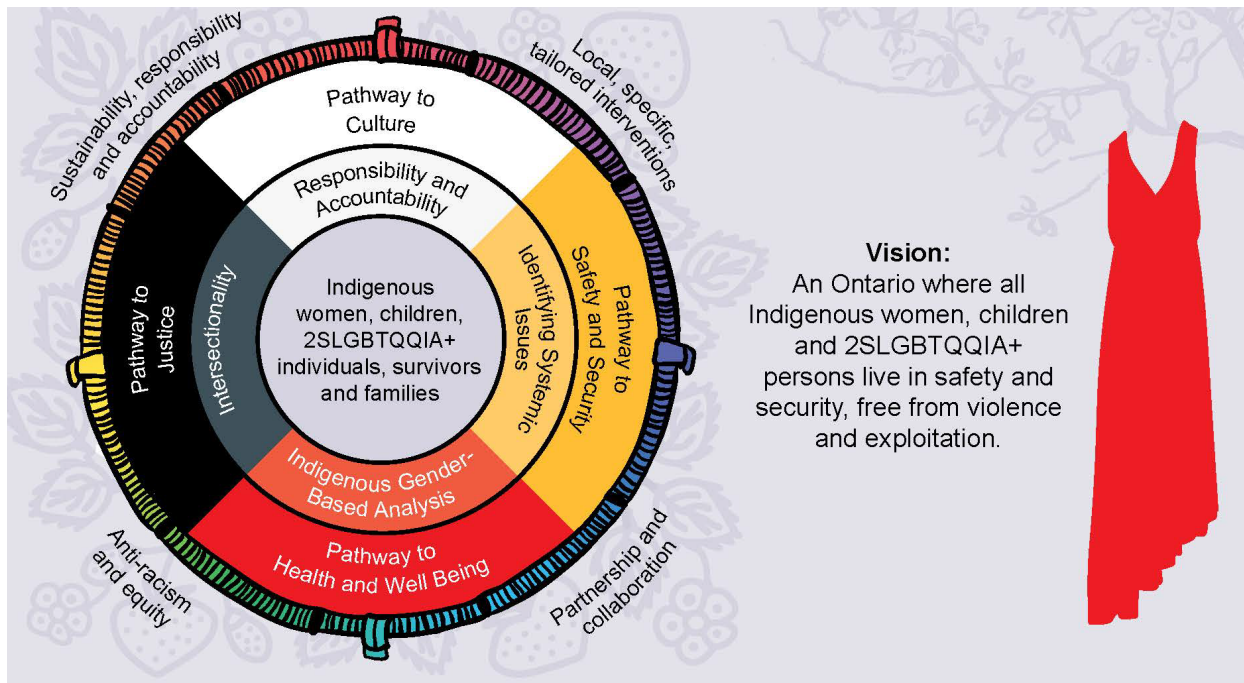
In response to the exclusion of Indigenous women and our organizations from the NAP, in December 2020, ONWA established a national Accountability Table. The Indigenous women that agreed to come to the table are from across the country with knowledge and expertise on MMIWG and the delivery of front-line services. The purpose of this table is to: a) define, measure and advance Indigenous women's safety, b) monitor the implementation and outcomes of the NAP, and c) hold the federal government accountable for its commitments to addressing MMIWG2S. All members of the Members of the Accountability Table want the same outcome: the improvement of Indigenous women's safety and healing through the provision of concrete recommendations for systemic change.

The Accountability Table continues to meet quarterly, to discuss issues of concern to Indigenous women; track and analyze the implementation of Canada's NAP and the \$2.2 billion dollar investment into MMIWG2S; discuss and inform measurements for Indigenous women's safety; and engage on pertinent policy recommendations to the government on how to end violence against Indigenous women and girls.

### 4. Indigenous Women's Advisory Council

The provincial Indigenous Women's Advisory Council (IWAC) was created in 2020 to provide expert advice on violence prevention actions and the development of Ontario's response to the National Inquiry's Final Report. IWAC is comprised of 11 Indigenous women members representing First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous organizations within Ontario and senior officials from Ontario ministries. Currently, ONWA's Chief Executive Officer, Cora McGuire-Cyrette Co-Chairs the Council along with Sandra Montour, the Executive Director of Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services in Six Nations.

IWAC members played a significant role in the creation of *Pathways to Safety: Ontario's Strategy in response to the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, which was launched in May 2021. The Council's mandate has been extended to 2026, and the members continue to inform implementation and measurement of the Ontario Strategy. The Council is the only table with the Ontario government focused exclusively on ending violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2S and addressing the crisis of MMIWG2S. The table has informed numerous initiatives across multiple ministries such as child welfare redesign, anti-human trafficking, residential school burial site investigations, Ontario's anti-racism strategy, and more recently the development of a Red Dress Alert System.



## 5. MMIWG2S – Supporting Families Program

The **MMIWG - Supporting Families Program** provides support to families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls through group-based healing activities and/or by providing direct family supports that promote healing and honour loved ones. This program supports community-based healing activities such as Sisters in Spirit, Honouring MMIWG2S Pow Wow and ONWA's Annual Strong Hands Stop Violence Poetry Night.

### *Sisters in Spirit Vigils*



Every year, on October the 4<sup>th</sup> ONWA hosts community vigils in memory of MMIWG2S for Sisters in Spirit Day. These vigils were originally launched in 2005, and support families, loved ones, and communities in honouring Indigenous women who have been lost. The vigils are also designed to raise public awareness of the ongoing gender-based violence against Indigenous women and girls.

### *Commemorative Art Project*

ONWA's *Medicine Lines of Womanhood – MMIWG Commemorative Art Project* brought together family members and loved ones of MMIWG2S to develop art pieces in commemoration of their respective loved ones. The artwork was undertaken with the support of Art Therapy Helpers, Grief Counsellors, Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and a network of family

members who gathered during the project. The goal of the project was to create a space of healing for those directly connected to the trauma of MMIWG2S and to bring awareness of MMIWG through stories and art pieces.

The exhibit launched in Thunder Bay in May 2023 and has since travelled to Ottawa, Sioux Lookout and Kenora.



*Medicine Lines of Womanhood – MMIWG includes "I AM HERE" by Elsie Sutherland.*

### **Honouring MMIWG Pow Wow**



Each year since 2018, ONWA has held an Honouring Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Pow-Wow. The MMIWG Pow-Wow honours the lives of the MMIWG, provides a space for healing and solidarity among Indigenous communities affected by MMIWG, and brings awareness to Indigenous women's ongoing calls for systemic change and justice.

### **Poetry Night**

Each year, the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) hosts Poetry Nights across Ontario to raise awareness of violence against women in support of the [United Nations International Day of Elimination of Violence Against Women's #orangetheworld](#) campaign.



Poets, storytellers, writers and spoken word artists are invited to help raise awareness of violence against Indigenous women and girls, and participate in healing with community through speaking their truths. Poetry Night includes readings from both emerging and established poets, live musical performances, and a collective art project.

Poetry Night provides an opportunity to create a space where Indigenous women and families can gather and celebrate their shared strength and resiliency. Art as healing trauma is a strong foundation of the work ONWA does, addressing violence from perspectives rooted in cultural teachings. ONWA is committed to supporting communities and providing hope to those on their healing journey.

## 6. She is Wise Magazine

On June 21, 2024, National Indigenous People's Day, ONWA celebrated the release of our 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the She is Wise Magazine. Since the bi-annual magazine's official launch on October 18, 2019, it continues to be a platform that empowers Indigenous women and actively supports ONWA's on-going work to end racism and violence, as well as, celebrating Indigenous women's accomplishments and success.

*"The magazine framework centres on Indigenous Women's leadership. It honours collective wisdom by reclaiming that which colonization had targeted, our inherent knowledge as leaders in our families and communities."* ONWA CEO Cora McGuire-Cyrette.

Throughout the years, some key headlines have included *Inspiring a New Generation, Dorothy Wynne's extraordinary life of service; The Healing Power of Art, insight from Métis Artist Christi Belcourt; Celebrating 50 years: The Journey of Indigenous Women's Leadership; Cindy Blackstock: A champion for Indigenous children; and Global Spotlight: Indigenous Women Making a Difference Worldwide.*

## 7. She is Wise Conference



ONWA holds an annual Nibwaakaa inaadiziwin (She Is Wise in Ways of Life) conference about wise practices on addressing violence against Indigenous women. It references the wisdom of women, as well as the life-giving power every woman carries within her. The She Is Wise Conference represents ONWA's commitment to strengthening and building Indigenous Women's Leadership and to creating safe spaces

for Indigenous women's storytelling that are culturally grounded, gender-based, and trauma-informed. ONWA recognizes that those of us in the helping professions must also engage in our own healing journeys, so that we are able to best support Indigenous women when they come to us for support. The conference helps to support frontline workers to build their own bundles, participate in healing practices so that they, in turn, can bring healing tools back to their communities.

The She is Wise Conference provides training to build upon the work of Indigenous women; retelling a story that has gone untold and replenishing our bundles with wise practices that will support efforts to heal and build Indigenous women's leadership. This conference supports the development of actionable recommendations that encapsulate our vision of empowering women taking up their leadership roles, strong families, and safer and healthier communities.

## 8. She is Wise Research

ONWA's *She Is Wise: Sexual Violence Research Project* is now in its final year. The project has been guided by a 16-member advisory committee that consists of urban Indigenous, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit women who ONWA recognizes as knowledge holders around sexual violence through their professional and personal lives.

The project is identifying specific ways to support Indigenous women access to culturally relevant, trauma-informed services, and to support communities to address sexual violence against Indigenous women. It will showcase wise practices to support Indigenous women and communities who have experienced, or who are working with sexual violence survivors.

## 9. ONWA's Program Successes

The **Courage for Change Program** addresses the unique needs of the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous women, youth and girls affected by human trafficking. In 2020, because of the program's success, ONWA further expanded the program across the province. The expansion addresses gaps in specific services for Indigenous women and girls and focuses on both immediate safety needs and ongoing healing. Since ONWA launched the Courage for Change Program in 2017, it has supported over two thousand exits from human trafficking/sexual exploitation. It is now delivered in **ten sites** across the province: ONWA service delivery sites in Thunder Bay, Toronto, Ottawa, Kenora, and Timmins, and within ONWA Chapters in Sioux Lookout, Niagara, Midland, and Hamilton.

The **Indigenous Victim and Family Liaison (IVFL)** provides support to families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and those who are experiencing or have experienced violence. IVFL supports women and their families and raises awareness in the community on violence related issues. In 2023-2024, the IVFL Program made referrals to addiction services, provided women with cultural interventions, and supported women to secure independent housing post-domestic violence and reunify them with their child/children. In addition, the IVFL Program assisted 81% of Indigenous women and youth referred to the IVFL Program to navigate the justice system post-sexual assault, completed 6,205 direct outreach supports, and created 180 safety plans to support individual healing journeys.



The **Nihdawin “My Home” Program** developed based off the Housing First framework - a recovery model that focuses on ending homelessness by placing individuals who are facing chronic and/or episodic homelessness into permanent housing. As Nihdawin continued, ONWA developed an “Indigenous Women’s Housing Framework” that has led to success of the program in supporting Indigenous women and their families to gain access to housing within the province. In 2022, the Nihdawin expanded to Timmins, Hamilton, Ottawa, Kenora, and Peterborough due to the success in Thunder Bay and high demand for housing supportive services across the province. During 2023-24, Nihdawin assisted 976 individuals into housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unique challenges to communities, and ONWA’s service delivery quickly shifted to meet the needs of Indigenous women and their families across the province. The multiple ways in which ONWA had to think about safety for community members and staff shifted quickly. The need for food, cleaning supplies, and medicine became essential. The need was so great that ONWA opened our mandate to ensure all Indigenous people that needed support could receive it with zero barriers.

Critical to this work, ONWA created a provincial **centralized intake** department using a coordinated access response that provided community members with one number to call and a place within ONWA that ensured community member’s needs were met when they needed services. Virtual programming, contactless services and community development supports were all done through the new centralized intake that supported immediate and brief needs of community members. This community coordination method assisted and continues to assist in eliminating waitlists and gaps in services, ensures safety planning is a priority, and provides advocacy and support to Indigenous women and their families.

ONWA’s **Mindimooyenh Health Clinic** was launched in 2020 to respond to the lack of timely access to COVID-19 vaccines for urban Indigenous people in Thunder Bay. The Mindimooyenh Clinic quickly became the largest Indigenous-led COVID-19 vaccination clinic, providing access to culturally safe care by incorporating ceremony, culture and tradition in the vaccination process. In the last four years, the scope of the Clinic’s services has expanded beyond vaccinations to address critical health service gaps for Indigenous women and their families. In 2024, the Mindimooyenh Health Clinic successfully secured funding to offer Indigenous women’s health services more broadly, including specialized safe supports for Indigenous women experiencing or exiting from human trafficking/ sexual exploitation.

## **10. ONWA’s Advocacy**

ONWA remains a critical proponent for Indigenous women’s safety. We have continued to advocate at municipal, provincial, national and international levels for action on the prevention

of violence against Indigenous women and girls; investments into healing for Indigenous women, their families and communities; and core and sustainable funding for Indigenous women's organizations to address and respond to the violence Indigenous women and girls continue to experience. ONWA advocates to deconstruct the current systems and reconstruct Indigenous women's leadership, knowledge, and stories.

**Recent advocacy highlights include:**

- Implementation of MMIWG Call for Justice 1.7 – recommending the creation of an Indigenous and Human Rights Ombudsperson that prioritizes Indigenous women's safety; applies an intersectional Indigenous gender-based analysis in their approach; is transparent and accountable to Indigenous women and their families; and incorporates traditional models of achieving justice
- Red Dress Alert – supporting a system focused specifically on Indigenous women, girls, and 2S people but also calling on all levels of government to urgently increase investment in the prevention of violence.
- Testimony at the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Status of Women on how to prevent and address the trafficking on Indigenous women and girls.
- Ending Sex Discrimination in the *Indian Act* – participating in the Indigenous Advisory Process to identify legislative solutions to the second-generation cut-off; drawing attention to the links between historical and ongoing discriminatory provisions in the Act and the high levels of violence against Indigenous women; and calling for 6(1)a all the way and an end to the one-parent rule.
- Urban, Rural and Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy – advocating for improved and priority access for Indigenous women to safe and affordable housing options across the housing continuum, particularly when they have experienced human trafficking/sexual exploitation and other forms of violence, and investments into culturally appropriate holistic wrap around housing support services.
- Implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – calling on the federal government to advance Indigenous women's right to safety in its UNDRIP Act Action Plan.

ONWA increased our international advocacy as well, with the development of an international strategy and advocacy at United Nation (UN) sessions such as UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and Water Conference. ONWA's key messages focus on Indigenous women's fundamental right to safety and the need to hold governments accountable for the protection and safety of Indigenous women no matter where they live.



## Moving Forward

Ending violence against Indigenous women has been a cornerstone of ONWA since its inception in the 1970s. The upcoming year will see ONWA continuing to take action to promote Indigenous women's safety, leadership and hold governments accountable to families, survivors, and communities.

ONWA has recently begun work to develop measures for Indigenous women's safety, which will be used by the Ontario government to assess the impact of their investments under the Pathways to Safety Strategy. This work will be led by Indigenous women and draw on the decades of knowledge and wisdom that women have shared with ONWA, as well as foundational reports such as the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women.

ONWA is strengthening its relationships with municipalities to enhance their role in addressing and preventing violence against Indigenous women. Through a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), which represents Ontario's 444 municipalities, ONWA will help to raise awareness of municipalities'

responsibilities in protecting and advancing Indigenous women's rights, including their right to safety, and the need to collaborate with Indigenous women's organizations in their communities. Work is underway to finalize a similar Memorandum of Understanding with the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA).

ONWA is also spearheading the creation of an Urban Indigenous Community Safety Plan for Thunder Bay in partnership with Anishinabek Nation, City of Thunder Bay, Fort William First Nation, and the Thunder Bay Police Service and Board. This will be the first of its kind for an urban centre the size of Thunder Bay and demonstrates collective commitment to work together to address systemic issues affecting Indigenous women and girls, and to promoting safety, healing, and reconciliation. Our hope is that this community-driven initiative can serve as a model for other urban centres in Ontario and provide concrete actions they can take to address violence against Indigenous women.

We are continuing to amplify Indigenous women's voices internationally. ONWA will be attending the upcoming session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP), a subsidiary body of the *UN's* Human Rights Council, to advance Indigenous women's priorities and hold Canada accountable for their responsibilities in upholding our rights. The safety of Indigenous women remains critical in all of ONWA's program development, delivery, research, and policy advocacy. ONWA remains committed to advancing and implementing Indigenous women's calls for action. Our lives depend on it.

ONTARIO NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

# Empowering Indigenous Women Throughout Ontario

*A Voice for Indigenous Women's Issues*



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