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# Why Does Canada Care More About 'Honour Killings' Than Missing Aboriginal Women?

10-13 minutes



*Loretta Saunders, screencap via.*

February's murder of Loretta Saunders, an aboriginal woman who was researching murdered and missing aboriginal women, is the final straw for Michèle Audette, the president of the Native Women's Association of Canada. Now Audette is calling for a public inquiry into the deaths and disappearances of aboriginal women, who have largely gone ignored.

“To be frank, when we told [the government] that the native women of Canada wanted to work with them to see what we can do together, they didn't respect or take into consideration our expertise,” Audette said. “They laughed at us.”

According to Audette, the government is avoiding a public inquiry because it's too expensive for taxpayers. And it's not for a lack of pressure. All of Canada's provincial premiers have called for an inquiry, and at the June 2013 General Assembly of the UN Human Rights Council, 11 countries, including the United States, Finland, and Iran expressed concern for the high number of murdered aboriginal women in Canada, before recommending a national plan of action.

Since 2000, Audette has noticed a disturbing pattern. As each year passes, the annual number of victims rises while their average age falls. While between 12 and 84 native women go missing or are murdered every year, Status of Women Canada—the government organization tasked with promoting “equality for women and their full participation in the economic, social, and democratic life of Canada”—spends its money elsewhere. In the last fiscal year, the department gave out 34 grants to programs targeting violence against women. Of those grants, two target violence against aboriginal women. Nine target “honour-based violence” or crimes committed due to “harmful cultural practices.” That means while \$335,000 was spent on ending violence against aboriginal women, \$1.7 million was spent on “honour crimes”—a problem that some experts say doesn't exist at all.

"Honour killing" is the term given to crimes that occur to a person killed by a family member (or member of a similar social group), due to the belief that the victim brought dishonour or shame to their family through behaviours perceived to cross the family's religious or cultural boundaries, like refusing an arranged marriage, being a victim of rape or sexual assault, having relationships outside of the religion or marriage, homosexuality, or dressing in "revealing" clothing. The cases have dramatically captured the attention of the Canadian public, through well-documented incidents in [Kingston, Toronto](#), and [British Columbia](#). But according to the Minister of Status of Women Kellie Leitch, honour crimes are "very infrequent in our country." She said there have been 13 of these murders since 2004 and called them "heinous crimes" that "need to be stopped."

The executive director of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Alia Hogben, said the very concept of an honour crime is a myth, and an offensive one at that.

"There haven't been 13, there haven't been 14, there haven't been three," she said. "There should be money poured into stopping violence against women and girls... however spending money on this one aspect of it is offensive and racist."

Hogben said the media and government use the term arbitrarily in the murder cases of female victims who have a few things in common—they're brown, they likely come from South Asia, and they're probably Muslim.

The focus on "honour crimes" shows the government is being reactive to the media instead of bring proactive, she said. She mentioned the Shafia family trials—which found a husband, wife, and son guilty of four counts of first-degree murder—as an example of the issue "flaring up" in the media. The trial dragged on for four months between 2011 and 2012, dominating front pages and the top of news broadcasts. But if it's not a real criminal charge, who decided these would be filed under honour killings? The media? The government?

"Who has gone back and decided that those are what they will be labeled as? I can go back to the 14th century and decide that every killing that happened in Timbuktu was an honour killing, and who's going to contradict me? Here we've done the exact same thing," she said.

A search of a database of 338 Canadian publications showed the term "honour killing" was used 360 times since 2010, most often in 2012. The phrases "murdered aboriginal woman" and "murdered aboriginal women" were only used a combined 162 times in the same period. The murders and disappearances of native women get about 27 times less print news coverage than those of white women, according to a January article in the *Toronto Star*.

Minister Leitch noted that there is no such thing as an "honour killing" in the Canadian Criminal Code, but she said the term does exist in another government document: the guide for new citizens. The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship section of Discover Canada states, "Canada's openness and generosity does not extend to barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, 'honour killings,' female genital mutilation, forced marriage or other gender-based violence." Leitch said she is proud her government has taken a strong public stand.

"This high moral ground we're taking with immigrants, why doesn't it extend to our own aboriginal women?" Hogben asked. "We call them our First Nations, and it's true." Even using Leitch's numbers on so-called "honour killings," her department spent five times more money on that issue than it did on murdered aboriginal women last year—a problem somewhere between eight and 58 times larger. No exact numbers are known because Statistics Canada doesn't collect ethnicity of murder victims. So even activists fighting to draw attention to the high number of murdered native women can't say for certain how high that number really is.

In fact, there aren't many concrete numbers available about any type of violence against women in this country. There hasn't been a national survey on the issue in 20 years, according to Kate McInturff, a researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, who wrote a 2013 study called [The Gap in the Gender Gap: Violence Against Women in Canada](#).

"The data that does exist tells us three things very clearly: this problem is big, it comes at a high cost, and we are making little or no progress in putting a stop to it," McInturff says in her study.

When it was pointed out to Leitch that Status of Women's funding is disproportionate to the actual violence that happens, she said there was, in fact, a national plan on violence against women. She also said there are various other departments, such as Public Safety and Aboriginal Affairs, that also work on native women's safety. Leitch noted a \$25-million commitment made in the most recent federal budget to decrease violence against native women over five years. She said that "women should be very pleased with" her government's focus on safe communities.

McInturff laughed at the suggestion that a national action plan exists. "There isn't one," she said. "I can say definitively that there is not."

At the time of publication, Leitch's media team had not returned repeated follow-up requests for more information or a copy of the aforementioned plan. Her communications team said many of the questions had to be answered by either the RCMP or Justice Canada. Neither department returned a request for comment, though a Public Safety Canada spokesman J.P. Duval called back on their behalf. He said the questions would have to be answered by the department responsible—Status of Women Canada.

So without a public inquiry or overarching plan on violence against women that anyone has actually seen, what is the government doing? Back to the recent \$25-million promise: it was made in 2010 and renewed again this year. Leitch said the funds will support a national police centre for missing persons and DNA tracking to identify missing and murdered individuals. What difference will DNA tracking make? How will this make native women safer? These are the questions that Status of Women wants the RCMP and Justice Canada to answer, and the RCMP and Justice Canada want Public Safety to answer, and Public Safety wants Status of Women to answer.

Both Audette and McInturff pointed out that the missing persons database includes all Canadians. Some of these missing people just "happen to be aboriginal and happen to be women," said McInturff. So to call it an investment in missing aboriginal women is a misnomer. Audette called the \$25 million, "another slap in our face." Adding, "it is already money committed for family violence, and they just took the same money. It's nothing new. Nothing new, they just add the title."

The investment is really just \$5 million a year, \$4 million of which will go to the RCMP. But the Mounties aren't exactly famous for their helpful response to the families of missing indigenous women. "With all respect to the RCMP, I'm not sure that's where I would put 80 percent of my money," said McInturff.

McInturff included a breakdown of the \$25-million investment made in 2010 in her report. It estimated the federal government's total spending on violence against women at under \$80 million a year, or \$2.77 per capita. This doesn't come close to solving the problem of gender-based violence, which costs the country roughly \$9-billion a year in lost productivity and healthcare costs, she estimates.

"What we're doing financially, politically, and policy-wise isn't lowering rates of violence and that's what we need to do," she said. The government's own measures show a very slight decrease in partner abuse and no improvement in sexual assault at all over the last decade, she said. The money isn't working. It's not enough and it's given to the wrong people. Money invested in police services will only help the small minority of victims who report violence to the police, McInturff pointed out.

"The violence that is ever reported to the police is factional. So investing a lot of money in police responses is investing a lot of money in ten percent of the problem. It's not going to reach the 90 percent of people that never report," McInturff said, suggesting where the money might be better spent. "It's not going to people who provide services, it's not going to indigenous rights organizations, it's not going to women's organizations. Very little of it is actually going to the places most likely to address the problem," she said.

Hopefully the sad irony of Saunders' highly publicized murder will change that. "For the first time we're having national attention," Audette said, and the government "can't stay quiet this time. They just can't."

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