News

A woman with long beaded earrings and glasses holds a hand to her chest. Her braids are wra

An Indigenous woman reacts as Pope Francis meets with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities at Maskwacis, Alberta, July 25, 2022. Women leaders from among Canada's Indigenous nations were at the United Nations' New York headquarters March 8, 2023, seeking broad support, including from Francis, in their ongoing campaign to stop violence against their communities' women and girls. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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United Nations — March 16, 2023

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Women leaders from among Canada's Indigenous nations were at the United Nations' New York headquarters, seeking broad support, including from Pope Francis, in their ongoing campaign to stop violence against their communities' women and girls.

"We are united in our collective goal to end violence against Indigenous women," National Chief RoseAnne Archibald of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada said in her March 8 address to a nearly empty U.N. press room.

The national chief was speaking from the sidelines of a major U.N. conference on the global status of women, where much of the focus was on the plight of women in Afghanistan and other places thousands of miles away from the U.S.

But Archibald pointed out that much closer, in Canada, there are "thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls."

"It's a national emergency," said Archibald, explaining that this unresolved crisis is proof of "ongoing genocide."

Coralee McGuire-Cyrette, another Indigenous woman leader who addressed the press conference, echoed the national chief's remarks.

"Every day, 365 days a year, Indigenous women are facing violence. They're facing violence within systems, facing violence at an individual level, a family level, a community level," said McGuire-Cyrette, executive director of the Ontario Native Women's Association, a self-declared "survivor of violence, and a family member of missing murdered Indigenous women and girls."

Historically in North American Indigenous nations, women and girls culturally commanded respect and influence, both in society and government, and also were honored as uniquely partaking in the Creator's gift of life. Early Jesuit missionaries living among Indigenous nations shortly after European contact made the point that sexual violence against women was almost unheard of in their societies in contrast to the acts of violence perpetrated against women and girls by Europeans.

However, North American Native cultures and social norms, including traditional forms of governance that continued to be maintained after conversion to the Catholic faith up to the 19th century, were progressively attacked and undermined by the U.S. and Canadian governments. Colonialist policies eviscerated Native cultures and traditional social norms, particularly through the residential schools that were designed to break children's connections to their families and communities.

St. John Paul II condemned colonialism, and the church's involvement in it, as incompatible with the Gospel in 1983 on a pastoral visit to Canada, and declared the church had to be invested in the restoration of Indigenous peoples' values.

"Christ, in the members of his body, is himself Indian," the saint said. "And the revival of Indian culture will be a revival of those true values which they have inherited and which are purified and ennobled by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Anti-Indigenous racism in North America also plays a significant role in devaluing Indigenous women and girls and fueling horrific levels of violence against them.

A Canadian government-mandated report by independent researchers released in 2019 revealed disproportionally high levels of violence faced by Indigenous women and girls.

These "staggering rates of violence" were caused mainly by "persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses," according to a report titled "National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls."

"In Canada, we have been really advocating and fighting for the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls since ... the early 2000s," said Nahanni Fontaine, one of the other Indigenous women leaders who spoke at the U.N. press conference.

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She emphasized the significance of the national inquiry's findings, terming the report "one of the most historically important events that ever took place."

"You would imagine that folks within Canada, and provinces and territories and cities, and internationally would take that seriously and would be enraged and would mobilize," said Fontaine, a member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

Another Indigenous leader present, Michèle Audette, an activist and senator from Canada's Quebec province, agreed about the importance of the national inquiry.

She explained in her remarks at the press conference that the report had broken a former reluctance among Indigenous women and their families to come forward, including about abuses perpetrated by the Catholic Church.

"Many Indigenous women and families" were now filing class-action suits against the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, she noted.

"For too long something was happening (that was) hidden," Audette said of accounts still surfacing of sexual violence and other kinds of abuse against Indigenous women and girls by several of that Catholic order's priests, active as authority figures and spiritual leaders in Quebec for decades.

Audette said she hoped that the order and the Catholic Church at large would "do everything they can do to undo what they did" by holding those responsible accountable.

During a July 2022 trip to Canada, Francis apologized for the abuses, including instances of death, suffered by Indigenous children in the country's Catholic-run residential schools.

Francis also apologized at the time for policies of those schools that he said had "denigrated and suppressed" Indigenous culture.

The pope's Canada visit and subsequent apologies were useful in shedding light nationally and globally on abuses of Indigenous people that were "covered up" by Catholic authorities for years, said Audette.

"If the pope hadn't come, no one in other parts of the world would have even known," she told OSV News in a follow-up call from Quebec, where she returned soon after the press conference in New York.

However, she added that Francis should "make an official declaration … of what he saw and heard in Canada, and provide in this declaration all necessary measures for us to access the (Vatican) archives, and for the return to us of our sacred objects from Vatican vaults."

However, Archibald, the national chief, said Francis' trip to her country missed an opportunity to recognize the importance of Indigenous women and their voices.

"Women's voices weren't represented at the July 2022 events hosted by Pope Francis in Canada, therefore his impact on Indigenous women is minimal," she said in an email, following the U.N. press conference.

Archibald said the oversight was "a lost opportunity to influence and uplift Indigenous women.