



VANCOUVER WOMEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE

July 22, 2021

Submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act

My name is Bina Salimath and I am the Board chair of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective, that I will refer to as 'The Collective' in this presentation. Originally from India, I identify as a Hindu woman on the unceded, ancient, and ancestral lands of Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-wautauth, I acknowledge I am a settler here and my presence on this land is because of the intersection of colonization of India and Canada.

The Collective is a non-profit organization helping those who identify as women and gender non-conforming foster health, wellness and equity through feminist approaches to advocacy, shared knowledge and low-barrier programs and services. We value shared information and experience over authoritative knowledge, especially when it comes to our own bodies. We support women's right to make informed choices about their health and health care, and we strive to provide gender-affirming health and wellness support.

We were compelled to submit to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act as one of the community organizations that has to 'pick-up the pieces' in the aftermath of (re)traumatizing encounters between community members and the Vancouver Police Department.

Amongst the examples we outlined in our written submission, I would like to emphasize and link the following situations as some that highlight how the VPD lacks an intersectional – including racial, lens and a lack of understanding that diversifying VPD with Indigenous and Bipoc representation without actively deconstructing the colonial policing causes greater harm than good. The VPD is shaping white supremacy inherent in policing to be multi-cultural.

Examples:

- a male officer attending a disclosure of sexual assault, who stood in 'military' position, an attitude that is not conducive to building a trusting and safe environment for disclosure;
- a mother in possession of an updated court order allowing her to see her child at school was apprehended on school grounds because neither the principal nor the police took the time to look at the updated court order she had in hand.
- a grand-mother carrying food we had donated to her was apprehended nearby and accused of stealing the food she was carrying.
- calls to ACT teams (car 87) resulting in police intervention (including handcuffing of women in crisis and attempts to intimidate our staff who advocated against use of symbols of police power) in mental health support.



VANCOUVER WOMEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE

All the above have in common how the current policing model disproportionately disadvantages and victimizes Indigenous people, Black people, Brown people, people of colour, people living in straitened circumstances, and with varying physical or mental abilities, and amongst them, women are at a greater disadvantage.

Back in 2012, in the *Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry*, Commissioner Oppal conceded that police had (I quote) “the mistaken belief that the [missing and murdered Indigenous] women were transient, [had] ‘high-risk lifestyles’.” He also stated (I quote) “faulty stereotyping of street-involved women in the DTES” by police and “discrimination in the form of systemic institutional bias and political/public abandonment.” In 2019, seven years later, other reports continue to highlight “systemic and widespread police bias against Indigenous women” (Red Women Rising 2019), (the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)) - Which begs the question: what has changed?

According to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), “there has been very limited movement to implement recommendations from previous reports. What little efforts have been made have focused more on reactive rather than preventative measures. This is a significant barrier to addressing the root causes of violence.

We are past the time for raising awareness and implementing anti-oppression trainings. We come to the sad conclusion that the police institution has not learned because it is resisting change, and is still in the state of ‘general failure to pursue preventive strategies’ and ‘inadequate accountability structures’ that the *Forsaken* report outlined.

Having diversity within the institution will not change the oppressive systems as folks who are recruited and are members of marginalized communities have to apply laws that are created and benefit the wealthy, able-bodied, gender conforming white people. The rift within Indigenous and ethnic communities is significant when their own members have to intervene as police officers, not to mention the vicarious trauma carried by police officers who witness the colonial impact of systemic racism and discrimination in their daily work.

Any white privileged person would refuse to become part of an institution that negates the basic human rights of their community members; and exerts oppressive measures on the folks it is supposed to protect – yet, it is expected that any other person would gladly do so in order to join the police force.

The recruitment efforts of police, fire and military institutions are bound to fail for as long as the focus is on representation. When the Indigenous/women/people of colour do go into policing to make a change; opportunities for advancement are fewer and the risk is much greater that, by the time they get to a leadership role, they will have been ‘formatted’ to comply with the mainstream model.



VANCOUVER WOMEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE

We support divesting in the police and moving toward more community-led approaches to safety and wellness in our community – with the emphasis on **community-led**. Commissioner Oppal was a supporter of “this new approach [which] places the emphasis on *proactive* rather than *reactive* policing”; further stating : perhaps most importantly, community policing cannot work in a situation where there is deep distrust and a sense of alienation between the community and the police.” The Commissioner’s report cites SisterWatch as an example of how “community-based policing means real community involvement by the police in a partnership with the community.” The 2019 Red Women Rising report paints a more nuanced portrait of SisterWatch as “[un]successful in building trust between the VPD and women residents in the DTES. Furthermore, in the DTES women’s safety audit (...) only 15 percent of women in the DTES said they would go to the police if they felt unsafe” (though it is acknowledged that “it is significant that several DTES agencies now have greater organizational trust with the VPD as a result of this project”, according to an independent evaluation).

Community-based policing is different from community-led policing alternatives. The issue is that when police is involved, things have to be done as police wants it done – not how community would do it. The voices of Indigenous women, Black women, Brown women, women of colour, women living with disabilities, as well as transgendered, gender nonconforming, and non-binary peoples need to be prioritized and are fundamental in eliminating violence in law enforcement. We cannot stress enough the importance of recognizing that the sole existence of a police institution is based on colonial, patriarchal, hetero-normative oppressive views and the importance of applying decolonizing, intersectional and racial lens to the review process.

We urge the BC government to act on its commitment to reconciliation, justice, and redress by implementing recommendations from the previously published reports* and boldly transforming an archaic institution rather than tweaking it to continue to serve the privileged few it was founded by.

* the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry Calls for Justice,
The Truth and Reconciliation: Commission of Canada: Calls to Action
the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre Red Women Rising report.
Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (2012)

On behalf of the Collective I thank you for this space and time.

