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OPINION

A vision for Canada's mothers, sisters and daughters

By **Marion Buller** Opinion
Thu., May 9, 2019



As we approach Mother's Day, we send our love and support to the mothers of Indigenous daughters who were murdered or disappeared, to the children left behind and the families grieving the loss of a loved one.

We have been forever changed by our experience serving on the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

On June 3, 2019, we will present our final report to the governments of Canada and of each province and territory. We feel it is our duty to share what we learned as broadly as possible.

There was a time when First Nations, Métis and Inuit women had significant influence in governance, lands, economies and cultures. Indigenous oral stories from across Canada show women and gender-diverse people played key leadership roles, including as "mothers" of the nation; healers and medicine people who tended to physical, emotional, and spiritual health; and protectors who managed community resources, and acted as land defenders and water keepers.

Colonization affected Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people differently than men. The European systems relied on patriarchy, which undermined the traditional roles of Indigenous women and subjected them to economic, political and social marginalization imposed by Christian churches, and the government, most notably through the Indian Act.

Colonization created the ideas that continue to dehumanize Indigenous women and girls and make them targets of violence today. This is a hard truth to hear. As Canadians, we pride ourselves on being a just and principled society. We see ourselves as champions for human rights on the international stage.

Today, many Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people do not trust child welfare, justice, health, police, or education systems. Their encounters with these systems are often brutal and punishing.

We heard repeatedly how these systems regularly hurt the ones they are supposed to help.

The expertise and agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people is also too often ignored. In fact, the national inquiry itself is the result of decades of tireless efforts by Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people to be heard. They have the solutions to ending violence in their lives, at both the individual and community levels, and yet their voices have not counted.

This must change.

We see a Canada where a Mohawk girl in Akwesasne, or an Inuit baby girl born in Arctic Bay, Nunavut, or a Métis girl in downtown Regina, comes into a world that is ready to welcome her.

Before she is even born, her mother has access to prenatal care and nutrition and support programs in her home community that are culturally appropriate. In more remote communities, it may mean an Indigenous doula is there to help in the birth, so that new mother

does not have to travel hundreds of kilometres to have her baby among strangers.

That Indigenous baby comes home to a house that is properly insulated, where there is clean water and electricity, just like other Canadian children begin life. We see that little girl in school where First Nations and Métis and Inuit stories and language and world views and role models are part of the curriculum.

She learns that her mother and her aunties and grandmother are respected and valued and sacred members of their community, and this country. She learns that 2SLGBTQQIA members of the community and this nation are equally respected and valued and sacred.

When that little girl turns on the television or reads a newspaper or social media, she finds strong, positive, healthy images of herself and the community she lives in. She feels pride. We see a Canada where men and boys, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, stand in solidarity with their sisters, and help end the cycle of violence.

This is the Canada that is possible. It is not only possible, it is essential. Through our actions, let us honour and give life to the truth.

Marion Buller is the chief commissioner of National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Other commission members are **Michèle Audette**, **Qajaq Robinson**, **Brian Eyolfson**.

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