

PRESS RELEASE FROM THE INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP FORUM
February 23, 2018
Ottawa

We are the participants of the Indigenous Women's Leadership Forum, gathered in Algonquin territory in Canada's capital city of Ottawa. We are women of Indigenous nations from Ontario and beyond, who have come together to share our knowledge and support one another in our journeys. As part of our connection and responsibility to the waters and land, we support life.

We want to express our deep sorrow at the death of Tina Fontaine, and our outrage that three and a half years later, there has not yet been justice for her. This is especially difficult coming so soon after we have also had to mourn for other young people including Colten Boushie and Joey Knapaysweet, and have had to revisit the tragedies of losing Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Robyn Harper, Paul Panacheese, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrisseau, and Jordan Wabasse in Thunder Bay.

We honour Tina's life and gifts, and know that one day she could have been here with us as an Indigenous woman change-maker in her own right, had her journey not been cut short.

We send our support to Tina's family and loved ones, who have been forced to bear the unbearable pain of her death, followed by the agonizing trial and acquittal of Raymond Cormier. We see your heartbreak, and know that Tina was treasured and will always be missed.

We send our solidarity to Sagkeeng First Nation, to the Indigenous peoples of Manitoba, and to the Anishnaabek, who have had a precious part of your community and future stolen from you.

We send our care to all of our relations who are grieving, and for whom Tina's death and the jury's decision yesterday triggered painful memories of the generations of trauma and injustice Indigenous people have endured, and fear for the safety of yourselves and your loved ones. We are grieving with you.

As mothers, aunts, grandmothers, daughters, and sisters, when we think of Tina, we also think of the many other children stolen from us since the first point of colonization right through to today: children missing and murdered; children killed by disease and starvation; children driven to suicide; children lost to residential schools; children taken by "child welfare" agencies; children fostered and adopted out of their nations; children lost to the substances they used to cope with their trauma; children taken by the penal system; children preyed upon by adults; children made sick by the pollution of their environments; children hurt by the people in their lives who were also hurt; children forced to leave their communities to receive basic education or healthcare; children buried in unmarked graves;

children who died fleeing violence; children lost to the actions and inactions of Canada and the colonial entities that came before it.

Far too many of these children have also not yet received justice. Thinking of them wreaks havoc on our hearts.

To Tina's family, and to all of our Indigenous relations, we say that we are committed to doing what we can to protect our babies, heal our peoples, and ensure that all Indigenous people can one day live healthy, free, and safe lives, guided by self-determination and respect for the relationships that make all things possible. We acknowledge that Tina's family has asked that there be no retaliation in response to the violence Tina experienced.

To Raymond Cormier, we say that whatever the truth is about Tina's death, as an adult with a duty to protect her as a young person, you instead exploited and utterly failed her. This truth will be with you for the rest of your life.

To the child welfare system, police, and the legal system, we say that we demand justice for Tina and for all Indigenous people impacted by your institutions and organizations. We condemn the ways you failed Tina in the time leading up to her death, and call for accountability. We condemn the number of unsolved cases of violence against our people and call for them to be given the attention and resources they deserve. We condemn the imposition of culturally inappropriate values, processes, and systems upon us. We condemn the racism, misogyny, and disrespect for our Two-Spirited and LGBTQI people that have shaped your systems and fester within them. We condemn the ways in which you too frequently harm us, and too infrequently help us. We demand systems that are culturally appropriate for our peoples, and that we can fully participate in at all levels.

To the Canadian government, we say that we demand legal reforms to address the aspects of the legal system that make it harmful for our peoples. We already know many of the changes needed, such as reforming the peremptory challenge process in jury selection that allows juries to be shaped by racist considerations and that denies fairness to both victims and accused. All such legal reforms should be part of a longer-term path towards the broader recognition and restoration of Indigenous legal practices.

We further call on all levels of government to ensure that our young people are provided the resources necessary to address the issues they are too often unfairly burdened with, and to ensure that they are given the same opportunities for health, life, and success that other children are given, and that they are supported to flourish within their cultures.

We further call on all levels of government to work together to ensure Indigenous control of Indigenous child welfare.

Recognizing that the harm towards Indigenous children is inseparable from the harm against all Indigenous people, nations, cultures, and lands, we also call on the Canadian government to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to honour all of our treaty and Aboriginal rights. In particular, we want to note that it is inexcusable that so many Indigenous people are made more vulnerable to violence through poverty and homelessness in the very country that has been built on our lands, made wealthy with our resources, and benefited from both our contributions and our displacement.

To the Canadian public, we say that Tina's death is in part your responsibility, and represents a failure in the relationship between us. As Prime Minister Trudeau has said, "Our efforts to build a better relationship with indigenous peoples in Canada are not only about righting historical wrongs. They are about listening and learning and working together. They are about concrete actions for the future." We call on you to recognize our pain, and to take action to address the injustices that continue to hurt and kill our people.

We send our prayers and love to Tina's family and to the Indigenous people of Manitoba.

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