Angela Lavallee

**Personal experience with NIMMIWG**

            As a family MMIWG family member who was directly involved with providing a testimony to the NIMMIWG inquiry and feels the effects of IRS, originally, I was hopeful.  Prior to the unexpected death of my granddaughter Zaylynn, I was also a participant of the Manitoba (MB) Coalition for MMIWG.  This coalition comprised of MMIWG family members, survivors, Indigenous non-profit organization leaders, advocates and local service providers.  At the coalition’s circle, I contributed by bringing the voices of Indigenous women and girls who experienced family violence.  I was a representative for the Indigenous non-profit organization Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Inc.  As well, my experiences surviving of all forms of violence led me to volunteering and working in this capacity.  In the early discussions related to the NIMMIWG, the voices of grassroots women were adamant with communicating the significance of having Indigenous peoples lead the NI, specifically Indigenous women.  After years of Indigenous people advocating for NIMMIWG, I was anticipating the spirit of the NIMMIWG finally being born.  Due to my granddaughters being exposed to violence and injustices, the tragedy and loss steered me in a different direction and I found myself joining as a MMIWG family member.    I expected the NIMMIWG would be a safe, empowering and unbiased place for me to carry their voices.

            The primary message I made to the NI was through email on February 1, 2017 inquiring about the process.  I waited a week before I sent a follow-up and their response stated that a legal representative would be in touch.  The chain of emails led me to a conference call with the legal lead representative Susan Villa.  Through this process, I was in constant worry because I was resonating with the reality of what some of my Indigenous community members were living, the struggle to connect with the NI.  The communication was not clearly understood or presented in a manner that was safe, nor was it motivated with an Indigenous perspective as the core.  I was already conscious of many legal western processes and shifted my way so I was capable of interacting the NI representatives on the other side of the email and telephone.  Lack of inclusion and communication were some major critiques of the NI “The formalized nature of the proceedings has also been denounced for creating communication barriers for families’ who report being confused by the legal jargon used by the Commissioners” (Walsh, 2017, p.8).  I considered myself to be a proficient individual when I am collaborating with governmental officials because English is my only language and I had some understanding with working and being exposed to the pyramid governmental structures.  However, I could not leave my heart and spirit disconnected from the NIMMIWG because my Indigenous roots wanted to lead my family’s story.  My heart and mind felt a sense of distress for MMIWG and survivors, especially the ones who could not find a way to connect with an inquiry that was supposed to be there to empower the voices.

            My main concerns following a two hour statement with Villa were not only to recount the traumatic parts of our lives and the lack of an Indigenous-led presence, it was the legal expression that existed in all of our discussions.  Prior to my first statement, I spiritually and emotionally prepared myself.  Before the conference call, I decided that I would be at my place of peace and made the conscious decision that I would be physically running while I shared the injustices and violence that me, my girls and granddaughters have endured.  It was still upsetting for me because I could not run away from the fact that I was on the phone with someone across the country and this was a person I have never met.  It was disheartening to feel the emotions after Villa took a personal and heartbreaking portion of our story and made it clear that she was going to determine if it was logistic for a NI testimony and if both girls’ voices can be heard.  As prepared as I tried to be, my spirit was aching by the touch of the NIMMIWG and my hope in it began to slowly dissolve.

            The NIMMIWG was setting its foundation similar to the bureaucratic style of standing government agencies that were already expecting Indigenous circle people to fit within their hierarchy ways.  The questions surfaced as to why our local non-profit Indigenous led organizations were not overseeing the NI.  Indigenous organizations and programs, such as Ka ni Kanichihk’s Medicine Bear Counselling program, that already had an existing relationship with many of the families of the MMIWG and survivors, were also feeling excluded and confused by the NIMMIWG.  The MB MMIWG Coalition family members and co-chairs became disturbed by NI staff’s lack of communication and vague responses to share information concerning the hearings.  Six months into the inquiry the MB MMIWG coalition families, co-chairs and local Indigenous representatives openly talk about their worries.  Angie Hutchinson, who is one of the primary advocates and supporters to the families of MMIWG and at the time was working for Ka ni Kanichihk’s medicine bear program, was quoted by the Winnipeg Free Press “For example, an email list she and others have joined to get updates from the inquiry has so far sent no messages to recipients other than confirmation their addresses are registered” (CBC, 2017, para 9). There is a beauty that lives within these organizations and although many of them are funded by the government, the people working within them lead from the heart and have resilient relationships with Indigenous peoples.  It was disheartening to know they were being left in the dark because these organizations are the core where families of MMIWG find their advocacy, healing and empowerment.  Indigenous organizations are the places where families choose to place their ladders for support.

According to the*Recommendations from the Symposium on Planning for Change: Towards a National Inquiry and an Effective National Action Plan* it was imperative to include a systematic focus.  It was documented by the Native Women’s Association and Canada and Feminist Alliance for International Action (2016) the importance to examine the way police respond to Indigenous women and girls “the systematic review must examine (2) the failures of police and the justice system to protect Indigenous women and girls and to appropriately prosecute and punish perpetrators of violence against them” (p. 416).  On the other hand, this was a key component that was not included in the primary mandate for the NIMMIWG.  It was an obvious element that was brought forward prior to launching the NI and it was being consciously overseen.  Survivors, families, Indigenous leaders, advocates identified that this was another form of injustice “Furthermore, policing has not been explicitly included in the Inquiry’s terms of reference, sparking anxiety that this exclusion will contribute to the muted discourse surrounding police transgressions” (Walsh, 2017, p. 8). The resistance and actions by grassroots people have made change and to date, the NI has included policing hearings “After the inquiry was pressured by families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls to look at police actions, a news release Thursday said staff have assembled a forensic team that is currently reviewing police files.” (CBC, 2017, para 2).  Once again, there was a lack to honor clear recommendations from Indigenous people, women and children related to the protection and rights to Indigenous people. When the NIMMIWG chose not to include government bodies like policing as part of their review, it questions impartiality and sincerity “The absence of powers of legal enforcement has raised concerns that the Inquiry will become another trivial exercise in cheque writing that is not followed up with any meaningful form of action” (Walsh, 2017, p. 8).  Once again I am left to wonder if the tapping away at government funding calculators are drowning out the cries of the women and children.

            The National Inquiry into the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls is coming to its final stages and seems to be guided by the Government of Canada, however; many people are aware that the birth of the inquiry was due to the resistance from Indigenous women, leaders and advocates.  There were and will continue to be several statements that will surface through the grassroots voices, mainstream media and until the hearings are concluded, a final report.  My personal journey with the NIMMIWG will not end when the final report is submitted.  Like so many who shared, our hope is that someone, somewhere will hear our stories and they will make a positive change in the lives of people.  Many survivors and families if the MMIWG went in with a selfless goal to try to make a difference and with the hopes that people will live towards preventing and intervening on violence to our Indigenous woman and children.  The energies to also have the stories heard and told in a way that would leave an encouraging and hopeful influence on survivors and their families.  With women and girls like Helen Betty Osborne who died a tragic death and the little girl like my granddaughter Zaylynn, they left a legacy and it is their spirit that many people choose to focus their courage.  The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples United Nations is written so that Indigenous people and the lands can use it to stabilize their rights.  Canada has more than enough inquires, studies and stories to reflect on.  It is time for western systems to fully honor, accept, include and value the Indigenous way of knowing “Many Indigenous principles foreground the interconnectedness of that which Western science often seeks to separate” (Lopie, 2007, p. 277).  Everyone matters in a circle and most importantly for me, my granddaughter Zaylynn.  She matters!