

Response to the VPD review

of the mistakes in the cases of the Missing Women and the Pickton Murders

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In a four hundred page report in the cases of women missing from Vancouver, Doug LePard of the VPD reveals year after year of failure after failure to arrest or aid the conviction of killer "Willie" Pickton. The astounding foolishness and multiple missteps revealed in this internal review were leaked through the B. C. Attorney General's office, where the review has languished unattended and hidden for five years.

Of course it is not the fault of the police that women on reserves are so poor that they migrate to the city ghettos. It is not the fault of the Vancouver police that violence on reserves including prostitution is neglected. It is not the fault of police that women on welfare are so impoverished that they are turning to prostitution. And the police do not write the federal law.

But only now in the aftermath of the unresolved murder cases, in the heat and light created by the mourning families of mutilated women, in the rage of equality advocates and in the demand for a full public inquiry do we see this review. This is only the first of the air tight officially authorized versions of what is wrong: the RCMP version, the sex industry version, the criminal justice system version and the version of the elected officials of the Vancouver and BC Government are all yet to come. Nothing short of a full public inquiry that questions those versions of the roles of all the authorities, open to the public for information and query will satisfy our need to know.

At Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter, we sat over coffee the day before the release and cynically predicted the list of categories of failures according to the police: mismanagement, jurisdictional wrangling, mistakes of other police forces or branches of government, "shortages" of money and staff and lacks in training and coordination. This is always their list, dragged out at every coroner's inquest and moment of public accountability to demand more power and more resources. It is a list that diverts us from systemic changes in policing.

We also guessed what would not be in this review: the category or group of discriminatory ideas and practices governing the VPD policing of Violence Against Women and in particular these fifty and more cases of deadly prostitution.

The missing were Women, many Aboriginal Women, the friends and neighbours and even beat cops who reported them gone feared Violence against Women. Those fears were based on the vulnerability of women in prostitution, the violence of men buying sex, the viciousness of sexualized racism toward Aboriginal women on Vancouver streets and the prevalence of all forms of Violence against Women. Their fears have been proved horribly insightful.

The review lacks the recommendations that might improve police interference with Violence against Women. LePard in spite of his apologies still did not use an understanding of racism, and racialized sexism in modern BC nor did he apply an understanding of women's oppression through violence to examine the police ignorance and failures. Without that understanding of inequality and an

examination of how current VPD police practices work against women and Aboriginal women, and work to undermine women's use of law against sexist and racist violence, this report simply recreates the problem. The VPD were blinded by sex and race discrimination and still have not removed the blinders.

According to the review, Vancouver police did not take the absences and "missing" stories seriously. Dementia in old age, childhood adventuring, and illness can make people wander off. But when so many adult women are missing it is different and more suspicious. Officer Dave Dickson worked the area for years and with many in the neighbourhood, he has a personal reputation for compassion. LePard says that Dickson's contact allowed him to conceive of these people as women with families and connections that they would not just abandon and Dickson knew that even those badly addicted and broken women had commitments and attachments and people who loved them. He claimed they would not just disappear, VPD bosses overruled him. That the missing were **women** was unusual and required the police to think differently about why and how they might go missing. For years the VPD would not accept this idea.

Obviously those including parents, lovers, friends and children reporting **women** as **missing** did so because they were worried about **violence against these women**. But according to LePard in the VPD review, reports of "missing women" were not handled by those charged with solving "serious crime". The suspicion of violence in a society where violence against women is so prevalent should make it a matter of serious crime!

When they finally paid attention, the VPD knew that many of the missing women were poor. Some had been reported to go with men who wanted to buy sex and others to go with men who offered drugs and alcohol at "parties" where the women rendered drunk and stoned were expected to return the favour by being sexually available.

Police clung to their preconception that prostituted women were somehow different than other women. The VPD imagined this other kind of women as not missing but wildly transient. They might be on the circuit or off to dry out they imagined. On the other hand they ignored what was particular about these women: that they were poor and Aboriginal and therefore more vulnerable to johns

The police were not thinking of the missing as women as just like their sisters and aunts and daughters but caught in a more deadly dangerous situation. In the review, they are called "sex workers". Police imagined willing prostitutes instead of seeing them as destitute, racialized women. That one fiction; that some women are different, more willing to suffer violence, led police to convince themselves that these named and missing women were not missing at all but just more transient, more willingly living as LePard says in the review, "a risky lifestyle".

The missing women were different mostly in that they were destitute and Aboriginal and therefore in more need of protection from opportunistic and predatory men. The review makes note of the evidence of increased risks of abuse from men buying sex but does not account for why that risk was not steering the force to suspect and arrest johns and pimps as the likely source of the dangers. It is against the law for men to buy sex from women, any women. It is against the law to arrange for men to buy sex from women or to supply women to men for sexual purchase. But most men acting as johns

were not arrested and still are not. In a city that has suffered sex trafficking, sex tourism, prostitute torture, confinement and murder aside from Pickton, that has suffered Olsen and Bakker and Ng and on and on, where is the policy change?

The police ignored the reports of women missing even as numbers grew to monthly. Patterns of disappearance emerged for those who looked: that the reports were about women, disproportionately about Aboriginal women was clear. Four or five women police officers are named in the review as fighting for some recognition of this huge problem, of the danger of violence against women, of the possibilities of a serial killer of women, of the possibility that murderers would escape by police losing evidence to competitive territorialism. Why didn't their hunches as women have extra weight? What internal sexism made these versions of reality, these reports from female officers less believable?

According to the review, the VPD hierarchy did not use the public information available about the conditions of women about violence against women and about racism. Saying "She chooses a risky lifestyle" encoded permission for victim blaming. The term "Survival sex worker", encoded her blame for poverty and addiction. "Missing women" are still blamed for being available outdoors instead of in licensed brothels where their abuse could not be seen. This is just like saying she "was wearing a short skirt" or "she drank too much" or "she should not have been in that bar" or "why does she stay with a violent man".

Brothels, private for the johns, where violence is hidden by a pimp or owner to protect the profitable license, where women's security is privatized to the highest bidder, the VPD imagined women would be safe from going missing. Safe from men like Pickton? In a Vancouver trial this year a john was convicted of beating Nicole Parisien to death in a three minute explosion of anger in the brothel on Burrard St. This university aged drunken john was outraged that he was not getting his money's worth when Nicole could not maintain his erection.

Police need to blame the violence of prostitution on the johns for demanding sex for pay. Instead of suspecting the obvious, that johns like Pickton would be implicated in the disappearances and the violence, the VPD settled for collecting DNA from prostituted women to be able to identify their bodies and distinguish between the three serial killers operating at the same time.

For more than thirty five years Vancouver women have been complaining of inadequate police response to all forms of violence against women. In 2007 equality experts gathered in Vancouver to discuss how to press for improvements and consulted internationally on effective methods of civilian oversight.

This report like many before it reveals that like many other complaints of violence against women these reports of women missing and the suspected violence were minimized, deemed unfounded, diverted from prosecution. Survivors, witnesses with horror stories of hanging bodies and flayed flesh were accused of exaggeration, reports were lost, DNA evidence wasted and significant corroboration ignored and obvious leads dropped. For too long it was not considered serious crime.

Since Vancouver feminists organized Vancouver Rape Relief in 1973, Canada's first rape crisis center, data has been available that Aboriginal women get the worst of Violence against Women and the worst

of the police response. Aboriginal women suffer sexist violence within the family and close community as do all women but Aboriginal women also bear the brunt of men placed above them in the racist and economic hierarchies. The particular form of that oppression by white men and men with money is both sexual and violent and in prostitution it is life threatening. In this case it was deadly. But none should think it is the only case.

The VPD claim that they have stopped criminalizing women trapped in prostitution. Apparently they finally believe that women selling sex are being victimized. Great! But that alone will not end the violence in prostitution. That police protection is withheld is scandalous. They ignore even the public admissions of bawdy house profiteers. Johns, pimps and bawdy house owners have to be effectively charged and prosecuted.

This review of the VPD is damning but partial. We need to open the closed boxes where the versions of this story are housed and look at them in the light of day in a full public inquiry. Authorities must answer for the carnage. Apologies and hindsight are not enough. Relationships must change. We must construct mechanisms where diligent civilian oversight of policing can attend to women's constitutional and human rights to peace and equality under the law.