

Aboriginal Women's Action Network Speaker at the One is Too Many Summit, March 26, 2009, Vancouver.

The Aboriginal Women's Action Network was in attendance at the One is Too Many Summit held in Vancouver. Typically we do not ask our women to tell their stories because we do not wish to exploit their stories and their lives. However, there are women amongst us, and in our communities, who want to tell their stories, and this is one woman who insisted on telling her story about her life and sharing her thoughts, feelings and opinions about her experience. We give her thanks and honour her courage to offer her life story, because as she says, "it's too important to not tell, and people need to understand."

"Hello, I am of Kwakwaka'wakw and Coast Salish ancestry. I want to acknowledge the Coast Salish people for allowing us to be on their unceded territories. I come from a long line of people who were oppressed by the governments and the churches. Both, parents and grandparents, were products of Indian Residential Schools. Myself, I was an extension of the government's plan to break down our people. I was apprehended in what is now known as the 60's scoop, and I was placed in abusive and violent foster homes.

Here in our homelands, we've seen violence and sexual violence learned from these systemic forces, (fucked) incested and molested by our fathers, uncles and foster parents .. this sexualized violence was the training ground for what was to come later in our lives. At fourteen I started to run from these foster homes. I came to Vancouver at 15 years old, where I found my Mom in a small rundown hotel called the Sunrise Hotel. She was broken down and beaten by the residential school, which was the breeding ground for what was to come later in her life; violent men and prostitution.. My mother cried 'til the day she died. At fifteen I found a family down in Vancouver's skid row with people like myself, a family that I created – or was created for me.

I felt like a burden to my mom who was living on a small welfare cheque. I knew my Mom was frustrated with the financial burden, I didnt have many choices.

So when I met the man who was to become my pimp and boyfriend, I was willing to do anything I had to do to survive. I was groomed, trained & encouraged to prostitute myself with his 'nice' words of "Everyone is doing it," and that he promised he would "love me no less." I remember

being prostituted as a very young woman, still a child.. crying myself to sleep.. full of shame and remorse. I started using drugs and alcohol to push these thoughts and feelings down. At that time in my life, I thought this was my destiny, and I would find no better. My pimp at the time confirmed these thoughts when he said, "no one would want you anymore." So I made the best of a difficult situation. The difficult situation being my life had been a nightmare, and the nightmare continued here in the city.

During my time on the street I was abused so many times, I couldn't count if I tried, with knives and guns.. physically and sexually. Many times I found my self with black eyes and no where to turn. I was assisted by organizations who gave me condoms, bad trick sheets and false hope. I even volunteered my story and campaigned with organizations like the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes... I wore shirts that said "a blow-job is better than no job." They gave me condoms to protect me from disease and pregnancy – but they did not offer me hope. Nor was I offered any real exiting strategies – this also confirmed that this was my so-called destiny.

Housing, training and jobs weren't available.

I remember hearing about women that were going missing or were found dead when they were "working" the street. "Working," I don't even like to say that word in the same sentence, it wasn't a job. There were no benefits. I didnt get high risk or danger pay – but then again it wasn't a job – men were paying to violate me. If it wasn't for my rule that I wouldn't leave the city with a trick I would be dead too. I was approached my men who wanted to take me out of the city boundaries.

My friends never had the chance to tell their story because they were found dead in places like the Pickton farm. I cry for them, I even helped carve a memorial pole for those ones that disappeared or were found dead. Our sisters are still going missing all the time.

In this last year I 've learned two of our youth have committed suicide rather than continue to be paid to be raped. They jumped off balconies to escape from the violence of prosititution. These youth lived in places like Beach Avenue and they worked in high end so called safe escort services. It's sad when suicide seems the only option, but it happens all of the time.

What we know is; Aboriginal women and children are being harmed as we speak. Women and youth are turning to alcohol and drugs to cope.

When my Mom passed away at thirty eight, I was twenty two years old. This was a turning point in my life. I no longer had a reason to be in the downtown eastside.

I tried to find help for myself through detox and treatment centers and the AA program. There were no services that were designed to help women exit the streets.

Just the harm reduction model, condoms and bad trick sheets. The issues we have to face when we leave the streets are many. Shame, post traumatic stress syndrome, displacement, lack of self esteem. I had no education, no experience to find a job and safe, affordable housing was not available to me.

So when you say you want to offer us assistance, we say: "We want real jobs, not blowjobs."

Some say they have the Aboriginal peoples voice to promote the brothels and the legalization or decriminalization of prostitution. We, the aboriginal women, say that we want more than that. Do we want to leave this as a legacy for the future of our children and grandchildren? I heard it said that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, then how come Aboriginal people can't even come up with a name for that in our traditional languages? It's not our culture, it is not what I want to leave for my children. Prostitution is nothing but violence against women, why would we want to leave that for our children? As Native people, we think of healing using the medicine wheel, the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Prostitution affects all those areas and takes many years to mend afterward. After many years I still cry and mourn for that child that lost her innocence.

I was living in the downtown eastside last year, I saw a fifty something year old woman, a grandmother, working the streets because of the two year welfare cutoff period.

Prostitution should not have been her only option. It's shameful that a country so rich in lands and resources cannot offer a guaranteed liveable income to a woman indigenous to these lands.

Housing, better welfare rates, more job training, education opportunities without the risk of being cut off welfare. We want more detox beds and real opportunities for the women still out there. We need better exiting programs. Not a brothel so the millionaire white men who come for 2010 olympics can have better access to violence against woman.

Shame on you if you think that we, the Aboriginal women, are going to advocate for and promote the pro pimp agenda.

I am using my own experience to let you, the public, know what happened and continues to happen to our Aboriginal women and children. I want to be a voice for the the ones that cant speak out for themselves because of the circumstances they are in.

When I was fourteen and running away from sexually violent foster homes, I was looking for my Mom. I was in search of safety, protection and love.

When I finally found help – it was from women in the feminist movement. They helped me name the violence that was committed against me. They had the radical notion that that I was a human being; a human being worthy of safety, respect, dignity, a home and a job or career.

I do live with painful memories of my past, but I am not ashamed of who I am. Today, I am a Proud, Aboriginal Feminist. And I am proud to stand with my sisters who oppose violence against women and children and demand that we be treated with respect and dignity in our homelands!

Not only do we fight for the rights of our Aboriginal women and children, but we fight for the rights of all women and children to live violence free and without the threat of becoming prostituted or trafficked. We fight for the rights of all women and children, because what happens to Aboriginal women and children happens to women and children globally.

I want to thank you for being here today and for listening to my words and joining in the struggle to end violence against women and children."