

Crisis of **missing** and **murdered**

Indigenous women hits home in Northland

By Abigail Blonigen

While the sight and sound of ships in the Duluth harbor bring joy to countless locals and tourists, to many in the area's Native American community, the harbor represents the continued exploitation of Native women through systems such as human trafficking.

According to research done by University of Minnesota-Duluth researcher Christine Stark in 2013, Native Americans of all ages are trafficked both domestically and internationally in the Duluth harbor and throughout the Great Lakes region.

Tragic as it may be, the trafficking of Native American women on ships is only a small snapshot of the global issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, often abbreviated as MMIW.

"Everyone knows somebody who has been murdered or gone missing," said Moira Villiard, arts and cultural program coordinator at the American Indian Community Housing Organization (AICHO).

Though the Department of Justice's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System database (NamUs) identifies only 144 cases of missing American Indian and Alaska Native

women, a study done by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) reported 5,712 cases of MMIW were reported in 2016.

This study identified Minnesota as ranking ninth in the country for most MMIW cases with 20 total. However, this number is likely an undercount due to underreporting, racial misclassification, and the general lack of data pertaining to the issue.

Both the NamUs database and the UIHI study identify one missing Native woman in Duluth, which is consistent with the Duluth Police Department's Violent Crimes Unit database. This



Millie Richard speaks at a May Day gathering honoring and remembering missing, murdered and trafficked Native American women in 2017.

woman is Sheila St. Clair, who was 48 years old when she went missing in 2015 after telling family members she was headed to the White Earth Reservation. Despite local search initiatives, Sheila — a mother, grandmother and sister — has yet to be found.

Though the exact causes of why Native women are being murdered at a rate 10 times higher than the national average is unclear, experts trace this exploitation back to the colonial period. In conquering “The New World,” Europeans imposed a patriarchal society on the more egalitarian cultures of Native Americans.

Mildred Richard, a Native elder from Winnipeg, Manitoba, who resides in Duluth, explained that traditionally in her culture, women made the community’s decisions while men enforced them.


“Women were listened to and heard,” she said. Richard described this cultural shift as a “deep loss of matriarchy” for Native women.

From a more pragmatic standpoint, the maze of federal, state, local and tribal jurisdiction makes it difficult to prosecute perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual assault, which could also lead to these higher rates of violence.


According to Stark’s research, Native women are the

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only group predominantly abused by men of another race. Despite this statistic, non-Natives could not be prosecuted on tribal lands until a revision to the Violence Against Women Act passed in 2013.

This lack of protection continues to make women in tribal communities feel like “anyone can come up to you and treat you any way they want,” Richard said.

Marcia Kitto, a sexual assault advocate at the Fond du Lac Reservation, said that the gaps in protection take a toll on Native women’s self-esteem, which can make them more vulnerable to abusers and has “a lasting effect for generations.”

The Minnesota Legislature has begun to address this issue by passing a bill to establish a task force to collect data on the MMIW issue statewide, research reasons for the violence and come up with ways to support survivors.

This bill was spearheaded by Representative Mary Kunish-

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SHEILA ST. CLAIR

Sheila was last seen on security video of 8/15/15 in a hallway of the apartments located at 101 West Third Street in Duluth.

If you have any information into the disappearance of Sheila, please call the violent crimes unit at 218-730-5050

CALL 911
www.MissingInMN.com

Podein, who is a descendant of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The task force will be established by September this year and will release a report to the Legislature by December 2020.

“We can’t argue solutions until

we know the data,” said Karen Diver, former special assistant to the Obama White House on Native American Affairs and former chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. “We need to ask more questions.”

The Native communities surrounding Duluth have faced a number of tragedies already this year, in addition to St. Clair’s case. In April, Cheré Morgan, a 19-year-old Native woman, was killed in a school zone in Grand Rapids.

Ausineese Aubin Dufault, a 16-year-old, was shot in Duluth’s Lincoln Park neighborhood in May. The same week, 31-year-old Wahbinmigiisi “Pennie” Robertson, went missing in Cloquet. She was later found dead on the Fond du Lac Reservation. Both incidents were determined to be suicides.

Robertson’s body was found by the Gitchigumi Scouts, a grassroots group based in the Twin Ports dedicated to raising awareness about the crisis of MMIW and taking a “boots on the ground” approach to looking for missing friends and relatives.

The Scouts meet weekly to pass out flyers with information about St. Clair as well as Michial David Annamitta Jr., a 27-year-old man who went missing from Sawyer, Minn., in 2013. They also use their platform to advocate for safety and sobriety within the Native community.

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Jeremy Davis Onestanding performs a round dance on a hand drum at the gathering for a "Day of Remembrance" in 2016, a little over a year after Sheila St. Clair disappeared. About 20 people attended the event, including Duluth police chief Mike Tusken.

PHOTO BY BOB KING / DULUTH TRIBUNE

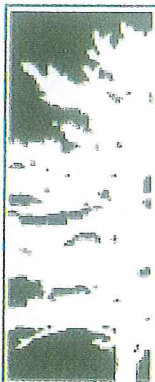
“When you lose a person, especially in a culture where we believe we are all connected, it has huge implications for the community as a whole,” Villiard said. “It disrupts the connection.”

Diver said a key part of the issue is the historical erasure of American Indian culture and lack of a modern narrative surrounding the community.

“We like beads and feathers,” she said, referring to the

stereotypical way Native Americans are often portrayed, “but that’s not all we are.” ❁

Abigail Blonigen is a Duluth freelance writer and photographer. She researched the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the Twin Ports for her undergraduate thesis in the Global Cultural and Language Studies Program at the College of St. Scholastica.



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