

Letter to Premier Okalik of Nunavut

PAUKTUUTIT INUIT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

Cette lettre au Premier ministre de Nunavut a été envoyée par Pauknuitit de l'Association inuit du Canada pour protester contre les récents événements dans la législature de Nunavut. Voilà un exemple de ce que peuvent les groupes de femmes pour indiquer aux officiels de leur gouvernement que la violence faite aux femmes ne sera pas tolérée.

This letter to the Premier of Nunavut was sent by Pauktuutit the Inuit Women's Association of Canada, to protest recent events in the Nunavut Legislature. It is an example of the way in which one women's organization has taken steps to indicate to government officials that violence against women will not be tolerated.

Preface

Pauktuutit is the national association that represents all Inuit women in Canada. Incorporated in 1984, issues of violence have dominated the agenda for action set by Inuit women in all six Arctic regions of Canada.

In 1999, the map of Canada was redrawn for the birth of Nunavut. While the Nunavut government is a public government, as opposed to a self-government structure, it is based on the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement and is seen by many Inuit as a *de facto* form of self government.

The Association employs a number of strategies in implementing its mandate. It regularly meets with federal government officials on the issues and priorities of concern to Inuit women. It also undertakes many projects, on a number of issues ranging from violence against women and child sexual abuse, to the protection and promotion of traditional Inuit midwifery in the communities to bring about positive change for Inuit women. The equality of Inuit women, both within Inuit society and as full and equal citizens of Canada, is central to Pauktuutit's mandate and activities.

The following letter to Premier Okalik of Nunavut describes a situation that is almost impossible to believe in Canada in the year 2000. While Inuit as a people have made substantial advances in terms of self-governance and self-determination in the larger Canadian society, Inuit women have not enjoyed similar success with regard to gender-based equality.

This letter was published in the major weekly newspaper in Nunavut, and it stimulated much public discussion of the related issues. Pauktuutit feels this letter contrib-

uted to a series of events that has recently culminated in the community of Coral Harbour publicly stating that violence against women will not be tolerated by that community, and it has called for the resignation of the Member for that riding.

While Premier Okalik and the House have responded to some of the more technical issues relating to the functioning of government, there has not yet been an acknowledgement of the high levels of violence against women and children in the communities, and a meaningful plan of action to eliminate gender-based violence. As of September 19, 2000, the President of Pauktuutit had not received a response to her request to speak to the Nunavut MLAs on the consequences of gender-based violence on behalf of all Inuit women and children in Nunavut.

August 28, 2000

The Honourable Paul Okalik
Premier
Government of Nunavut
Iqaluit, Nunavut

Dear Premier Okalik,

I am writing about the recent events in the Nunavut Legislature. As the President of the national organization representing all Inuit women in Canada, I must voice my concerns about the situation and all of the related issues it brings into the public debate. This letter is also an open letter to all residents of Nunavut, so that we may continue to discuss the critical concerns that have been raised by the events of the past few weeks.

A couple of weeks ago, we were informed that an MLA who had been convicted of sexual assault wished to keep his seat in the Nunavut Legislature. I had been concerned about the lack of an immediate response from the Speaker of the House and other members of the Legislative Assembly stating that violence against women would not be tolerated in or by the Nunavut Government. Fortunately the Member for Quttiktuq chose to take the only honourable course of action, and resigned his seat in the Legislature.

We have now learned that the Minister of Education

has been charged with a very serious act of violence against a woman in Coral Harbour. Mr. Arvaluk has resigned from Cabinet but will be keeping his seat as an MLA until his case is dealt with in court. I understand that at the present time Mr. Arvaluk is presumed innocent, and that the charges are at this point allegations. I do, however, look to you and your colleagues in the Nunavut Legislature to acknowledge the seriousness of the allegations, and address the fact that another leader has been charged with a very serious offence. I am deeply concerned that in your statement of August 28, the nature of the events that lead to Mr. Arvaluk's resignation was referred to as "an incident", rather than specifying that charges of assault causing bodily harm were laid by the RCMP in Coral Harbour. By not stating that serious criminal charges had been laid, and by saying that the Minister would be missed by his Cabinet colleagues, all women in Nunavut can only interpret this message as saying that Nunavut Government does not take seriously the issue of violence against women.

Inuit women have been saying for many years that our priorities and concerns are not adequately addressed by elected representatives and other decision-makers. The situation now facing the Nunavut Legislature only reinforces those concerns.

The fact that Mr. Barnabas was not convicted of an indictable offence, which would automatically require him to resign his seat, did not mitigate his moral or ethical obligation to resign. Mr. Barnabas was elected to represent both the men and women of his riding. Further, as a legislator, he is in a position of authority and trust, and obligated to act in the best interest of all residents of Nunavut. By pleading guilty to sexual assault, Mr. Barnabas has clearly demonstrated that he is not able to represent the best interests, or legal rights, of half his constituents. His remorse after the fact does not compensate for his lack of judgment or criminal behaviour.

This situation raises many questions and concerns. Our elected officials are looked to as role models, for both youth and adults. What message are we sending to young boys when the Speaker of the House is charged with sexual assault and receives a standing ovation from his peers in the Legislature? What are we saying about the moral and ethical atmosphere of the Legislature when the Premier does not immediately demonstrate leadership and call for the resignation of the Member for Quttiktuq?

What message is the court system sending to both youth and women by giving a sentence that has been commonly perceived as a slap on the wrist? We expect better of both our elected representatives and the justice system in Nunavut.

We know that Nunavut has an extremely high rate of sexual assaults, and we know that the actual rates of crimes of violence against women and children are much higher than those reported to the police. It took great strength and courage for the victim in this case to lay charges,

particularly against an individual who held such a powerful position with the Nunavut government. As Inuit, we are very tolerant and forgiving, placing much value on a person's well-being and personal integrity. However, our values of tolerance and forgiveness must not compromise the rights of the victim. We must show victims at least the same support and respect as is too often only given to offenders. When we see that the justice system appears to have again favoured the offender over the victim, and that those whom we have elected in good faith to represent our interests in government are not willing to act in our best interests by stating that crimes of violence against women will not be tolerated, our faith in our leadership and our belief that we are entitled to equal protection under the law are destroyed.

Clearly the justice system failed to adequately represent the rights and interests of the victim in this case, who did not see it as a "minor" crime. The victim in this case was quoted in *Nunatsiaq News* as saying "I thought for sure he was going to go to jail." Justice must not only be done, but must be seen to be done, and sentencing must also serve to send a clear message about criminal behaviours that will not be tolerated by the community and society. It seems to be the general feeling that Mr. Barnabas received more lenient treatment by the courts because of his position, and that the case was prosecuted by summary conviction in order for him to keep his seat in the Legislature.

Those who we elect or appoint to positions of trust and authority have an obligation to hold themselves to the highest possible standards of conduct. The Members of the Legislative Assembly themselves recognized this duty, and in March, 2000, signed an oath of Member's Obligations, acknowledging that they "have been entrusted with a great responsibility and duty," and pledge to "refrain from behaviour that may bring dishonour or disrepute to myself, the Legislative Assembly, or the people of Nunavut." The members further committed themselves to "work with determination, in a spirit of goodwill and good faith, to find solutions for the problems that create hardship for our people." Issues related to violence against women and children have repeatedly been identified as among the most serious problems in contemporary Inuit families and communities, and in keeping with their commitment to find solutions for the problems in our communities, MLAs must seriously and immediately work towards eliminating violence against women and children.

This situation also highlights the need for more women in government. In spite of the lively debate that was stimulated by the gender parity discussion in the days leading to Nunavut, only one woman was elected to the Nunavut Legislature. There are many reasons why more women don't run for public office, including family and community responsibilities, the need to maintain ongoing employment and lack of access to resources for campaigning. At the founding conference of *Qullitit*, the Nunavut Advisory Council on the Status of Women, held

in Rankin Inlet in March, 1999, delegates strongly reinforced the need to develop leadership skills among Inuit women. The Government of Nunavut must work with and provide resources to *Qullit* to encourage and actively support women to run for public office to create a Legislature that more truly reflects the population of Nunavut.

Pauktuutit is seen by Inuit women as an important vehicle for expressing their views and concerns with anonymity and safety. It is extremely difficult for women in small communities to be vocal in our opposition to the status quo, which appears to tolerate violence against women and children. Further, it takes great strength and courage to speak out about such personal and painful issues such as sexual assault, particularly when cases may involve high profile individuals in positions of power and authority, and many women look to Pauktuutit to advocate on their behalf. Therefore, on behalf of our membership, I am seeking the opportunity to make a collective victim impact statement to the Members of the Legislative Assembly when you reconvene on October 18, 2000, so that all MLAs and Cabinet Ministers may understand firsthand the impacts of the high levels of violence against Inuit women in Nunavut.

We cannot and do not assume that all of our elected representatives have an understanding of the dynamics and consequences of violence against women. I believe the Members of the Legislative Assembly would only benefit from learning first hand about what the individual and collective impacts of violence are, for we all suffer the consequences of this type of violence. The damage caused by sexual assault goes far beyond any physical injuries that the victim may suffer. It damages our very souls, and prevents us from being full and equal members of our communities and citizens of Nunavut. I will also be strongly encouraging all elected representatives and Inuit leaders in all regions to publicly commit themselves to working with us and state that violence against women and children is not a part of Inuit culture, and not part of our vision of Nunavut.

I look forward to your response at your earliest opportunity, and I look forward to meeting with you and your colleagues in the Nunavut Legislative Assembly.

Sincerely,

Veronica Dewar
President, Pauktuutit

C. J. SAGE

In the Shelter Where Battered Women Come

Ducking from their windy men, they
camouflage, and dodge the arms that spread
and hunt like lightning strikes, stalling flight.

His muffled lashes fold like wings
of dying moth pulled deep into her chest;
he is eight or ten, no more to give,

his mother hangs on tight
to words she makes him say.
'Tell me that you love me.'

His rain is talc to her yellowed blouse;
like baby powder, butterfly dust.
Cocoon layers dangle from their eyes.

Connections

Strong as any man, she'd seen
that new girl's clenched fist —
the thick veins headed for her face.
She in self-defense had returned
a punch in words; her words could break
an iron jaw, metal teeth, mirror,
mind. Now seven years later, resting
at her quiet partner's pool
reflecting missed connections
like that young girl who wouldn't break
free, she reruns the near misses
that used to dust her cheeks
— as if swarming doves
could mask her face's pain;
their flapping wings, erasers,
scratching the surface of things.
The counselor tried
to leave it all behind back then,
retiring to the safety of another's place.
But some men's arms are like feathers
of cloud-crests, or fairy tales
socked far far away.

C. J. Sage is a native of Northern California where she is the managing editor of Disquieting Muses. C.J. received a Phelan Literary Award for poetry earlier this year.



Canadian Woman Studies An Introductory Reader

Edited by Nuzhat Amin, Frances Beer, Kathryn McPherson,
Andrea Medovarski, Angela Miles, and Goli Rezai-Rashti
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A compilation of articles previously published in *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* over the past 20 years, this book offers a unique and historical perspective of feminism and feminist thought in Canada, as well as the development of women's studies as a curriculum and as a field of innovative, and practical, research. Articles are divided into the following sections: debates/perspectives on feminism; history; work/economy; public policy; race, class, and gender; violence/harassment; media stereotypes/constructing gender; education; health; religion/spirituality; and women writing: ver/visions of family. It is an excellent and invaluable introductory textbook for women's studies classes everywhere!

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