



Decriminalize Sex Work

For immediate release

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FIRST denounces arrests of DTES violence against women activists *VPD refusing to meet with Missing Women Committee*

VANCOUVER — FIRST was shocked to learn that Vancouver police arrested three violence against women activists attempting to deliver a letter to the city’s chief of police that called for a thorough investigation into the death of Ashley Machisknic, a 22-year old Indigenous woman from Saskatchewan. Ashley was found brutally murdered behind the Regent hotel in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) in mid-September.

“After the near unfathomable bungling of the VPD/RCMP investigation of the Missing Women case, this VPD action is truly beyond belief,” said FIRST spokesperson, Esther Shannon.

“Outside our police department, we have a peaceful assembly of Aboriginal people in the midst of prayer and healing ceremonies and inside we have forty uniformed police officers forcibly arresting three women for trying to get police to act on violence against women. We think the public want the police to arrest predators, not women.”

Adding insult to intransigence, today the Committee announced that Chief Chu has broken his promise to meet with the group to discuss the violence against DTES women. Chu is now saying the police will host a Friday community meeting to address concerns.

“If you’re serious about accountability to the community, you make it an immediate priority to meet with the women who are bringing these concerns forward, said Shannon.

“Chief Chu’s cynical attempt to avoid accountability is noted. Also noted: Less than two months ago, his Deputy, Doug LePard, told the world that what happened with the Pickton investigation would never happen again. Then, women repeatedly fought to bring their concerns about the missing women to the police only to be ignored time after time. Now, it is happening again. We demand the VPD make addressing violence against women in the DTES their highest priority.”

The three women who were arrested - Alice Kendall, Harsha Walia and Angela Marie MacDougall – are members of the highly respected February 14th Women’s Memorial March Committee, a Vancouver group established 30 years ago to demand police action on the missing and murdered women of the DTES.

The Committee’s October 4th letter to VPD Chief Jim Chu pointed out that “Ashley’s murder is the latest in a string of clearly suspicious deaths of women that too easily get labelled as overdoses or suicide. This is a continuation of the daily systemic violence that takes the lives of women in the Downtown Eastside. Government and police apathy towards women in this neighbourhood only compounds the ongoing risk to our women.”

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FIRST is a national coalition of feminists that advocates for the complete decriminalization of sex work for both sex workers and clients. FIRST believes that Canada’s prostitution laws rob sex workers of their livelihood and prevent them from creating safe and empowering working conditions.

www.firstadvocates.org