



FIRST LIGHT

St. John's Friendship Centre

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Statement on Recent Media Coverage**

*Wednesday, October 23, 2019*

First Light is deeply disturbed by recent media coverage suggesting that provincial government officials participated in a coordinated campaign to silence critical voices on women's issues. Maintaining a healthy democracy requires that all government officials – but in particular members of the police – respect and support the freedom of all citizens to express their views without fear of retaliation or reprisal. That some officials may have failed in this regard undermines the development of evidence-based policy and threatens democratic norms in the province.

For many years, First Light has worked alongside the St. John's Status of Women Council (SJSWC) and other like-minded organizations to seek an end to violence against women and to promote the rights of those who are most vulnerable to gender-based violence, including Indigenous women and girls and those who engage in sex work. Doing so necessarily means to challenge the status quo by empowering those who have too often been marginalized, silenced, and ignored. It also means that government will sometimes find itself challenged by members of civil society who are working to promote systemic change. This is normal in a healthy democracy, and should be welcomed by those who are committed to building a more just society.

First Light also recognizes that ending gender-based violence in Newfoundland and Labrador requires the complete dismantling of the systems of colonial oppression that allow such violence to flourish in the first place. For this reason, earlier this year we launched the St. John's Urban Indigenous Coalition – one of 32 such coalitions across the country – with the support of the federal government. A multi-stakeholder network, the St. John's Urban Indigenous Coalition brings together community organizations and all levels of government to take action on a wide range of issues. As an action-based effort, it aims to fulfill the promise of truth and reconciliation by facilitating partnerships among organizations that are committed to that cause.

It is the responsibility of our elected officials to set the tone for free and constructive dialogue between government and members of civil society. We call upon the honourable Andrew Parsons, Minister of Justice and Public Safety, and the honourable Carol Anne Haley, Minister

Responsible for the Status of Women, to hold accountable anyone who stifles critical voices on women's issues. We also call upon the provincial government to commit to creating civilian oversight of police services in Newfoundland and Labrador. Until movement is made in this direction, First Light will be suspending its participation in the Minister's Committee on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG-NL) and will be re-evaluating the extent of the provincial government's involvement in the St. John's Urban Indigenous Coalition.

Troubling as these circumstances are, we believe they ultimately represent an opportunity to expand the conversation and move forward on ending gender-based violence in Newfoundland and Labrador. As we have always done with our community partners and allies, we look forward to collaborating with any and all such departments of the provincial government that are ready to commit the necessary time, talent, and resources to bringing about real and lasting change.



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*Formerly known as the St. John's Native Friendship Centre, First Light is a registered non-profit that has been serving both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in St. John's since 1983. The organization provides programs and services rooted in the revitalization, strengthening, and celebration of Indigenous cultures and languages in the spirit of trust, respect, and friendship.*