

US to extradite Canadian writer accused of faking own death and kidnapping son

Dawn Walker, who says she fled domestic abuse, is arrested and accused of stealing friend's identity to cross border



Dawn Walker with her son.

Leyland Cecco *in Toronto*
Thu 25 Aug 2022

An acclaimed writer who says she fled Canada to escape domestic abuse is to be extradited from the US, amid accusations she faked her own death, kidnapped her son and illegally crossed the American border.

Dawn Walker, an Indigenous author from Okanese Cree Nation in the province of Saskatchewan, was due to be driven to the border on Wednesday by US officials and handed over to Canadian police, more than a month after she first went missing.

In mid-July, her abandoned pickup truck was spotted in a park in the city of Saskatoon prompting fears that she and her son had drowned in the South Saskatchewan River.

Their disappearance spurred a search by the Royal Canadian Mounted police and Saskatoon police, as well as neighbouring First Nations. A GoFundMe was set up to help locate her son, raising nearly C\$50,000 (US\$39,000).

But on 5 August, Walker was arrested by Department of Homeland Security officials in the US state of Oregon, who accused her of stealing the identity of a friend to cross

the border into the US and open up a bank account. She was also accused of an “abduction scheme” to bring her seven-year-old son to the United States. He was returned to a legal guardian in Canada on 7 August.

Walker, previously the CEO of the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), issued a statement soon after she was arrested saying she “feared for my safety and that of my son”, and that she was “failed by the Saskatchewan justice system, the family law system and child protection”.

Her son’s father has denied any wrongdoing. The parents have been involved in a lengthy custody battle and Walker’s son was due to be with his father on 25 July. The Saskatoon police said any previous allegations made by Walker about the boy’s father were investigated, but no charges were laid.

Walker disagreed, saying police “only cared when they thought I was dead”.

“I am fighting systems that continuously fail to protect me as an Indigenous woman and protect non-Indigenous men.”

Walker has long been a staunch supporter of Indigenous women fleeing domestic abuse and a critic of the failure to address the sustained crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across the country. She unsuccessfully ran for federal office in the most recent national election and earlier this month was shortlisted for a prestigious Canadian literary award for her book *The Prairie Chicken Dance Tour*.

“It is heartbreaking that Dawn may have felt she had no other choice but to take the drastic action that she did,” the FSIN chief Bobby Cameron said in a statement following news of her arrest. “Let us not forget that Dawn is a champion of First Nations women’s rights and causes. She spearheaded many [missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls] campaigns and gatherings.

“If there’s anything we have learned ... [it] is the urgency of these MMIWG issues and our role in protecting our most vulnerable members in need.”

In an Oregon court on Tuesday, a public defender said Walker was the victim of intimate partner abuse and had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Ms Walker, most people in our courtroom arrive here after experiencing some trauma in their lives and that’s especially true for the women who end up in our courtroom. And I’m sorry that you weren’t able to get the support that you needed at home and that you ended up here in an Oregon courtroom,” district court magistrate judge Stacie Beckerman told Walker. “I hope that you are able to see your son soon.”

Walker waived her right to an extradition hearing that could have lasted months.

After investigating her finances, American prosecutors said in an affidavit that Walker had an “elaborate” plan that involved kidnapping her son and faking their deaths. “The plan is that Canada can proceed on their charges and then we will simply watch those unfold and as necessary deal with our charges in the future,” US attorney Scott Kerin told the court.

Walker faces charges in the US of felony aggravated identity theft and misdemeanour identity theft. The Saskatoon police have also charged her with mischief and parental abduction in contravention of a custody order.