



Eskasoni



Networks for Change and Wellbeing - Addressing sexual violence: Eskasoni Being fear-less in the face of sexual violence

The larger study

This study forms part of a larger Canadian-South African partnership that asks what approaches, mechanisms and structures would make it possible for Indigenous girls to influence social policy and social change in the context of sexual violence against Indigenous women? Both Canada and South Africa house significant differences between legal frameworks and lived realities for marginalized populations of young women. Both countries also have similar histories in relation to racialized colonization and segregation and continue to come under scrutiny by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations for their failure to create safe and secure environments for girls and young women.

With regards to Canada the following concerns have been raised:

- The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has raised concern about Canadian government breaches of the Convention including violence against children, and the high levels of violence against Indigenous girls. A key recommendation is that Canada develop a national strategy to prevent and address violence against children, with special attention to the gender dimension¹.
- There is an estimated 25–50% child sexual abuse prevalence rate in Indigenous adults surveyed in several communities across Canada during the past 20 years².
- Indigenous women are eight times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be killed by an intimate partner³.
- Indigenous women and children are being trafficked in the sex and drug trades within the country and from Canada to the United States⁴.
- Across Canada, commercial sexual exploitation of Indigenous children and youth forms more than 90% of the visible sex trade⁵.
- Indigenous women confront a constellation of factors that contribute to sexual violence: colonization and its components of patriarchy, racism, and sexism; residential schools; and historical trauma; Bill C-31 that determines Indian status and its accompanying band compensation, infrastructure, support, as well as access to their community of origins.

The overall goal of this study is to answer the question “What can we learn about sexual violence (effects and solutions) from the use of participatory visual and other media and arts-based work with Indigenous girls?” and “What impact can this work have on changing the policy landscape for girls in relation to safety and security?”

In the first phase of our research we have explored the world we envision for ourselves and our sisters, what sexual violence is (i.e. what it encompasses) and where it is located, perceptions of Indigenous girls and women both within our community and the broader Canadian content, and the causes and effects of sexual violence on young women themselves as well as the broader community. Here we report on one of the core findings emerging from this first phase of work: the complex web of factors within which girls and women decide to respond or not to respond to acts of sexual violence.

Our Community

The Eskasoni First Nation is a band government of the Mi'kmaq located alongside the Bras d'Or Lake on Eastern Cape Breton Island, a rural region of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. This island is the Unama'ki district of Mi'kmaq territory. Our community has a population of approximately 3,752 on-Reserve and 660 off-Reserve or on other Reserves. Eskasoni is the largest Indigenous community in Atlantic Canada and is accessible only by road. We have our own community-operated school system from kindergarten to grade 12.

Our community struggles with the legacy of colonialism and settler government legislation aimed at cultural genocide. The intergenerational trauma experienced by our community is reflected in significantly higher rates of mental health concerns, substance abuse, suicides as well as domestic and sexual violence.

Researcher participants

We are nine young women from Eskasoni (aged 18-23) who have worked with staff at Eskasoni Mental Health Services and an academic researcher to better understand how sexual violence is experienced by young women in our community and what can be done about it.

Method

The larger study accommodates the principles of indigeneity, decolonizing methodologies⁶ and is also a rights-based social justice agenda where young women like ourselves play a key role in investigating and raising awareness around experiences of sexual violence as experienced by Indigenous girls and young women.

This study uses participatory approaches that facilitate exploration of the issues where we can learn 'from the ground up'⁷. While we have used a variety of reflective approaches in the first phase, the findings presented on here emerged from a collage activity that explored perceptions around Indigenous girls and women. For the activity we worked in small groups or teams of about 2 to 3 participants. In our groups we selected images from a random selection of "women's magazines" that we used to create collages with. Each team then shared their collage with the larger group, explaining why particular images or phrases had been selected. Once a team had presented their collage, a larger group discussion was had about the contents and what it reflected about local and broader perceptions of Indigenous women and how this impacts girls in particular.

Findings

There is a complex web of factors within which girls and women decide to respond or not to respond to acts of sexual violence:

1. Girls and women exist in a community that has an intergenerational "code of silence" in which experiences of violence and abuse are not discussed. This code of silence has been established by historical experiences such as colonialism and legislated acts of cultural genocide (residential schools, Indian day schools, the 60s scoop, etc). The code of silence has also been entrenched by past experiences with formal services such as police and social workers where families have often been broken up and disrupted as a result of formal intervention by these service providers.
2. This community "code of silence" is aggravated by contemporary settler service systems related to formally reporting sexual violence. These systems include the medical system

(emergency response personnel, as well as nurses and doctors in hospitals), police services, and the legal system. In addition to the high risk of re-traumatization as reported on by many people who have experienced sexual violence, irrespective of race, ethnicity or culture, racism and racist stereotypes within these systems significantly increases the risk of these re-traumatization. Further compounding this the lack of cultural sensitivity and culturally inappropriate responses by these various service systems.

3. While local resources do exist, and are supportive, the larger context (See points 1 and 2 above) in which these resources are situated does limit their effectiveness for girls and women. Also, more often-than-not, the perpetrator remains in the community and/or it is the victim who is obligated to leave the community in order to secure safety. This further reduces access to community-based and culturally relevant resources.

Conclusion

In order for girls and young women to be able to “feel the fear and report their experiences anyway”, a significant education program is required targeting both community and settler provided formal services:

1. Existing community based service providers that also provide meaningful supports (such as EMHS and the RCMP) can engage in these education efforts. Given their positions of authority and power in the community, they are also well positioned to include the Eskasoni school board in these efforts as well as provincial services (such as the medical system and legal system).
2. Youth in the community, including young men, can work collectively to disrupt the “code of silence”. They can work against stereotypes in the community (“she asked for it”), they can model respectful behavior (e.g. calling out peers who verbally harass girls and young women), and support victims of sexual violence rather than perpetrators (e.g. when inappropriate photos are shared on social media or rumors spread).

Visit <http://www.networks4change.ca/> for more information

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