



*Break the silence:
Be the change Eskasoni*



**Living by the seven sacred teachings:
Understanding and developing healthy masculinity in boys and young men**

The study

Break the Silence: Be the Change is a community-based project aimed at changing community dialogue and awareness around sexual violence. The project builds on research that nine young women and six young men (aged 16 – 22) from Eskasoni have carried out. This participatory action research began in 2016 as part of the Networks for Change and Wellbeing [<http://www.networks4change.ca/>] project. Drawing on these findings, we have designed a project that is aimed at initiating conversations around relationships, community and violence as it relates to sex, sexuality, and sexual violence.

This youth-led initiative brings a critical and fresh insight into the causes of sexual violence and constructive, relevant ways of addressing the issue. It does this by developing an understanding of sexual violence against girls and young women in Eskasoni today, from the perspectives of both men and women. Simultaneously, it accounts for the historical backdrop of colonization, intergenerational trauma and continuing legacies of socioeconomic marginalization.

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?”

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.

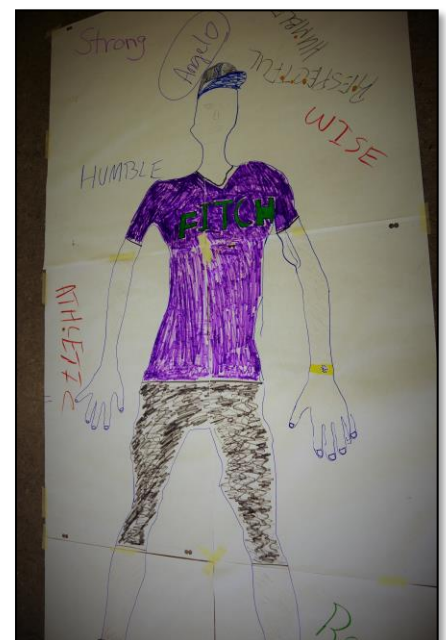
Research participants

We are six young men 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. Our work complements that of nine young women from our community who are also researching these issues.

Method

This study accommodates the principles of indigeneity, decolonizing methodologies⁵ and is also a rights-based social justice agenda where youth like ourselves play a key role in investigating and raising awareness around experiences of sexual violence as experienced in our community.

This study uses participatory approaches that facilitate exploration of the issues where we can learn ‘from the ground up’⁶. While we have used a variety of reflective approaches in the first phase, the findings presented on here emerged from the use of body maps and related discussion on what makes a “good man”. For the activity we worked in small groups of about 3 participants. After working on our separate maps, each team then shared their reflections with the larger group. Once both groups had presented their body maps, a larger group discussion was had about the contents. Following this, we used solution trees to explore what it is that boys and young men need in order to grow into “good men”.



Findings

Core characteristics of what makes a “good man” – positive notions of masculinity – include being loyal, being humble, and being respectful. Additionally, good men are supportive: they listen to, and talk with others, doing their best to be there for them through understanding and empathy. Good men are confident. Because of this they can acknowledge when they don’t know something or when they need help. At these times they ask for advice or support from family and friends. Reviewing these initial findings, we realized that they reflected the seven sacred teachings (see image below). These are teachings that should shape all our lives and should shape every aspect of our lives. When this happens, we will more meaningfully be addressing issues like sexual violence, but also issues like bullying and physical violence.



Given the importance of these teachings, we also focused on what boys and young men need in order to develop these personal characteristics. In exploring this through the solutions tree, we realized that relationships are core to such development.

Having varied and solid relationships with, especially with other adults, allows for young people’s personal attributes (such as self-respect, self-esteem and confidence) to be strengthened and nurtured. Children can gain healthy perspectives of themselves and learn how to have healthy interactions with others and their environment through the behavior of the adults around them. Adults model behavior to youth as they interact with each other, and through both positive feedback in the course of these interactions. Really important here, is teaching by example: young people need healthy role models. Role models include elders, immediate and extended family, people in the school environment (teachers, guidance counselors, the

principal, and friends), and community leaders (chief and council, grand council and religious leaders). When people like teachers respond to young people with empathy, connecting with young people and trying to understand their context, fundamental changes in how young people see themselves and others can occur. Often the children who are “acting out” the most, are the young people who most need care and nurturing guidance rather than punitive responses such as detention which enforces a sense of being “pushed away”.

“I learned to be the person I am from my grandfather. I watched him be respectful to others and people treated him with respect.”

Conclusion

In order for boys and young men to develop healthy notions of masculinity, as reflected in the seven sacred teachings, they require strong healthy role models within their community, and strong health relationships, especially with other adults. Adults have a duty of care for children

and adolescents, and they should be proactive in this duty. Adults show respect to children and adolescents when they establish these intergenerational connections with young people. Within these relationships, respectful adults don't put young people down, or make negative comments to them.

As young people though, we have a duty of care towards ourselves and others. We need to always show concern, care and empathy to those around us, by respecting what they have to say, listening attentively to try and understand, and responding with support and kindness in ways that people need, rather than in ways we think they need. We also need to do these things for ourselves; if we don't take care of ourselves and love ourselves, we cannot do this effectively for others.

When boys and young men have this, they can grow into good role models for other boys and young men. They can demonstrate empathy and what it means to hear others, to be kind and respectful. They can provide support to those who need it and help solve other issues in the community.

"If you don't believe in yourself how are you going to believe in someone else"

Visit www.changethesilence.org for more information

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