



Eskasoni



Networks for Change and Wellbeing - Addressing sexual violence: Eskasoni Stuck in the middle: The role of media in the sexual victimisation of women

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 role of media in dominant discourse around the sexuality of girls and women, and the continued inequality that exists based on constructions of gender and gender roles.

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 women and girls. 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. The role of the media was prevalent in these discussions.

Findings

The media shapes the dominant discourse of female sexuality and gender roles in core ways:

1. The media equates [healthy = skinny = sexy] and packages this in ways that suggest [healthy = skinny = sexy] means girls and women are sexually available.
2. The objectification and sexualisation of girls and women is pervasive in the media and occurs across advertising, news and sports reporting etc.
3. Double standards for girls and women, where representations of body size (too skinny vs. too fat), skin pigmentations (not white enough), and beauty ("embrace your face" but do it with cosmetics, and alter who you really are) leave women in an impossible situation.

4. These double standards flow over into public discussions where for example, women are too covered (e.g. Muslim women) or not covered enough (school policies and action targeting the dress of girls at increasingly younger ages).
5. Double standards intersect with the responsabilization of girls and women, where girls are encouraged to “be themselves” but “asked for it” when they are assaulted; where girls are taught “how not to get raped”, but we fail to teach boys how to treat girls with respect. Indeed, violent behavior by boys is more-often-than-not excused and justified.

Additionally, the media plays a key role in perpetrating racial stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the subsequent ways in which Indigenous girls and women are treated:

1. News reporting focuses almost exclusively on bad news stories, ignoring community successes and celebrations. Additionally, stories are very seldom contextualized, perpetuating racial stigmas.
2. As stigmas are perpetuated so too is the notion of “the savage squaw” and sexual availability of Indigenous women.
3. By ignoring the successes and celebrations of Indigenous peoples, youth are left without publically recognized positive and culturally relevant role models.

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

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