

VIOLENCE IN THE LIVES OF ABORIGINAL GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN CANADA THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Violence in the lives of Aboriginal girls and women has received increasing attention in recent years especially in the wake of growing concern about how Canada's social and legal institutions have turned a blind eye to this issue. All across the country, many girls and young women living in Aboriginal communities and urban centers are struggling to cope with violence and its aftermath. According to the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996), violence is the most important issues facing Aboriginal communities. This fact sheet provides a glimpse of some of the information that is available about violence in the lives of Aboriginal girls and young women in Canada.

ABORIGINALS IN CANADA

¹In 2006, approximately one million people who participated in the census identified themselves as Aboriginal (North American Indian, Métis and Inuit), representing 4 % of the total population in Canada. Nearly half of Canada's Aboriginal people is aged 24 and under; 43% of this population is female (Statistique Canada, 2008). In Canada there are enormous disparities between Aboriginals and the rest of the population with regards to health status, revenue, employment rates and educational attainment. This is also the case between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women. As far back as 1996, the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) alleged that these disparities, in conjunction with factors related to colonialism, systemic racism, rupture in traditions and unequal access to resources and power are directly linked to violence against Aboriginal girls and young women.

INTERSECTING SITES OF VIOLENCE?

In general, the expression intersecting sites of violence refers to the idea that the lives of girls and women are so diverse that they do not experience violence and inequality solely on the basis of gender but also on the basis of cultural heritage, physical ability, social class and sexual orientation. This means that girls and young women often find themselves at the crossroads (intersecting sites) of various systems of oppression such as patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism as they encounter different forms of violence related to these systems simultaneously.

This different way of understanding girls' experiences, better known as intersectionality, enables us to focus on specific populations that have been marginalized in Canada, such as Aboriginal girls and young women. For instance, it is useful for examining how structural factors related to political, historical and socio-economic contexts that are specific to Aboriginal communities intertwine and shape girl's and women's' lives and thereby possibly: 1) increase their exposure to both systemic and interpersonal violence in the home and in the public sphere, 2) influence how they perceive and make sense of the violence in their lives and 3) determine the range of

options available to them to resist violence and ensure their safety and the safety of their children². Intersectionality also provides analytical tools to identify impacts and outcomes of: 1) dominant discourses about violence and Aboriginal peoples, and 2) social policy and intervention practices in the field of violence against women. Through an intersectional lens one can examine interactions that occur between Aboriginal women and practitioners in the health, education, social service and justice systems to determine how these encounters can be sources of strength and empowerment or stress and harm.

VIOLENCE AGAINST ABORIGINAL GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Violence against Aboriginal girls and young women is not incidental, it spans over generations and lifetimes (Monture-Agnes, 1995). According to CRI-VIFF (2009), violence is defined as:

“the abusive use of power by which an individual in a position of force aims to control another person by using different strategies to keep this person in a position of inferiority or to compel this person to adopt behaviors in compliance with the individual's own desires. Because violence can be exerted in larger systems, this definition is not limited to individual conduct but also includes violence imposed by social and structural systems.”³

Following along the lines of this definition is the idea that the various forms of systemic violence engendered by colonialism and its aftermath such as racism, poverty and marginalization need to be taken into account in order to fully comprehend violence in the lives of Aboriginal girls and young women.

The statistics regarding violence against Aboriginal girls and women in Canada are disconcerting.

- ❖ Estimations of violence against Aboriginal women vary between 25% and 100% depending on factors related to how the study was conducted (i.e. the type of measures employed and sample composition) (Brownridge, 2003). Estimation rates include between 75% and 90% of

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² This interpretation of intersectionality is inspired by the writings of Corbeil et coll (2007), Crenshaw (2000), Oxman-Martinez et coll. (2004) and Davis (2008).

³ <http://www.cririff.qc.ca/cms/index.php?lang=fr&accueil=1>, consulted on June 21st, 2010.

Aboriginal women in Northern communities (McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995), up to 48% of Aboriginal women living on reserves in rural southern Ontario (Dumont-Smith & Sioui-Labelle, 1991) and between 70% and 100% of Micmac women living in Nova Scotia (Statistiques Canada, 2006).

- ❖ Aboriginal women are eight times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be killed by an intimate partner (Statistique Canada, 2006).
- ❖ According to a survey done by Statistic Canada in 1999, 57% of Aboriginal women who were victims of conjugal violence indicated that their children witnessed the violence (Statistique Canada, 2001).
- ❖ There is also growing awareness among NGO workers of Aboriginal women and children being trafficked for sex or drug trade within the country or from Canada to the United States (Oxman-Martinez, Hanley & Lacroix, 2008).
- ❖ A large proportion of youth involved in prostitution is of Aboriginal descent. Across Canada, commercial sexual exploitation of Aboriginal youth and children forms more than 90% of the visible sex trade (Kingsley, & Mark, 2000).

As Downe points out (2008), girls and women are particularly vulnerable to violence because often the racism that is directed at them is sexualized. The sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women and girls is an example of an intersecting site of violence, wherein racism, sexism, poverty and historical dislocation and devaluation collide. Violence against girls and young women is grounded in political, historical and socio-economic contexts specific to Aboriginal populations (Downe, 2008). In the following section, certain dimensions related to these contexts will be discussed.

Political context

The impact of colonialism on Aboriginal peoples has been cited as a contributing factor to the high rates of violence in Aboriginal communities. The 19th century Indian Act forced Aboriginal peoples to assimilate into the dominant White European society. Assimilation practices included the establishment of Indian reserves and the interdiction of certain traditional practices (Downe, 2008). According to RCAP (1996), this created a situation where Aboriginals were excluded from mainstream society and over time Indigenous peoples lost their lands, their culture, their language and their spirituality. This triggered a long heritage of trauma and loss that has been transferred from one generation to another (Downe, 2008).

Historical context

Residential Schools

The residential school system, which saw 150,000 Aboriginal children aged five through fifteen pass through its doors between the years 1840 to 1980, was part of the Canadian Government's overall strategy to assimilate Aboriginals. In these residential schools, the last of which closed in 1996, violence was institutionalized as children were forced to adhere

to rules and endure severe punishments that included physical, psychological and sexual abuse and neglect (Blackstock, Trocme & Bennet, 2004; Downe 2008). A significant number of children died from disease and maltreatment (Blackstock et al, 2004). Many girls were subjected to extreme forms of sexual abuse and they often left the system having internalized the oppressive notions that to be an Aboriginal woman meant being a sexual object to be controlled and disciplined. These traumas have affected multiple generations of Aboriginal families (Blackstock, 2004).

Child apprehension by child protection services

During the 1960's, large numbers of children were removed from reserves and placed in distant non-Aboriginal homes. In some Canadian localities, child welfare services even hired buses to go into communities and apprehend large numbers of children at once (Blackstock et al, 2004). In the late 1980's the apprehension rate of Aboriginal children was six times that of the national average. Often, these children were taken from their communities without proof of abuse and neglect and no effort was made to reunite them with their families. These practices seriously undermined the role of women and girls in the community (Downe, 2008).

According in Indian and Northern Affairs, between 1995 and 2001, the number of on-reserve status Indian children in child protection care increased by 71%. Today, Aboriginal children represent up to 40% of the 76,000 children and youth placed in out- of-home care in Canada (Blackstock et al, 2004). According to Amnesty International (2009), there are three times as many Aboriginal children in placement today than when the Residential School policy was most rigorously enforced. Structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, unstable housing related to today's post-colonial context have been cited as possible explanations for this over-representation of children and youth in placement (Blackstock et al, 2004).

This practice of child apprehension has resulted in the disruption of relationships between Aboriginal children, their families and communities, as well as a break in traditions. It has also weakened traditional subsistence activities of Aboriginal societies (Downe, 2008; Amnesty International, 2009). As a consequence, children, particularly girls, are socialized away from important roles within their community causing abrupt shifts within family dynamics. There is a lack of counseling resources to help them and other family members deal with the emotional and psychological effects of these upheavals (Downe, 2008).

Socioeconomic context

Discrimination against Aboriginal peoples and their communities has generated flagrant inequalities in employment opportunities and living conditions for Aboriginal girls and young women. With regards to education, according to the 2006 census, although more First Nations Women are attending University than in the past (7% in 2001 and 9% in 2006), the disparity between the number of First Nations Women and women in the general population with regards to attainment of

a University degree has increased (Milligan & Bougie, 2009). In terms of employment, in 2009, Aboriginal women's unemployment rate was 12,7%, close to double the rate of Non-Aboriginal women, which was 6,9% (Ferraio, 2010).

Moreover, often it is difficult for young Aboriginal women to obtain adequate resources and support to help them combat poverty, unemployment, racism, inadequate housing and lack of transport. All of these are key issues for those who are struggling with violence in their lives.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE?

These forms of violence can collide and intersect. For some communities, the consequences can be devastating. Suicide and increased drug use are documented issues among Aboriginal communities, which are partly attributable to economic hardship as well as cultural and social isolation (Santé Canada, 2001). First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities are continually disrupted by the incarceration of their members, including young women who are over-represented in the Canadian corrections system, mostly for petty crime or intra-family violent crime. (Downe, 2008).

In many cases, problems around family violence, alcoholism and drug addiction account for why young Aboriginal women decide to migrate to large urban centers. Yet in urban areas, due to lack of access to social and economic resources, some find themselves in precarious situations, which increases their vulnerability to violence (Jaccoud & Brassard, 2003).

INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE

Although there are many challenges facing Aboriginal girls and young women living in both urban and rural areas, there is currently growing resistance to violence.

The National Native Women's Association in Canada (NWAC) with the collaboration of other national women's organizations is leading a national campaign to raise awareness about violence against Aboriginal girls and women under the name of the "National Coalition for our Stolen Sisters". Other actions undertaken by the NWAC as part of their action plan include national law reform projects aimed to improve the response of the justice and social service systems in addressing violence, litigation activities and local education and awareness campaigns. In 2005, the NWAC signed a five-year agreement with the Federal Government, known as the "Sisters in Spirit Agreement". The goals of this initiative are to: make Aboriginal girl's and women's lives free of violence; address the root causes of violence; raise national awareness of the need to address multiple forms of oppression encountered by Aboriginal women and ensure that Aboriginal girls and women are integrated in processes around policy reform and development (NWAC, 2007).

Across Canada, a variety of initiatives have been implemented to address the effects of violence. In a number of aboriginal communities and urban centers, various community agencies

and women's groups have implemented a variety of programs such as Sunset Aboriginal Women's Circle, At'lohsha Native Family Healing Services, Kanawayhitowin, and the Ontario Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Strategy. Many of these programs integrate both contemporary and cultural traditions to respond to the healing needs of victims, those who use violence, extended family and communities. Some of these practices include: talking circles that enable young girls to share stories of strength and success and strategies of resistances; spiritual support; counseling provided by elders; participatory action projects on violence conducted by Aboriginal girls, emergency response teams, shelters and rehabilitation services for those who have used violence that incorporate both holistic therapeutic and learning opportunities⁴.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE:

Check out the Following websites:

Aboriginal Healing Foundation

<http://www.ahf.ca/>

Government of Canada: Aboriginal Canada Portal

<http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en-frames/ao04355.html>

National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence

<http://nacafv.ca/en>

Native Women's Association of Canada : <http://www.nwac-hq.org/>

Quebec Native Women Inc

<http://www.faq-qnw.org/index.html>

Sisters in Spirit

<http://www.travel-net.com/~nwacweb/en/background.html>

Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and Violence Against Aboriginal Women in Canada

http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php

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⁴ See Native Women's Association of Canada (2007) and Bopp, M., Bopp., Lane, P. Norris, J. (2003) *Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada*, The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Downe, (2008).

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