The Contours of Family Violence in Indigenous Communities:
The Prevalence and Effectiveness of Initiatives Implemented to Address Indigenous Family-Based Violence

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Executive Summary:

Family violence and sexual assault are reported to be at crisis levels across many indigenous communities internationally. There has been a recent shift in the paradigms and approaches to development on the international scene with respect to the formulation of conceptual frameworks, policies and guidelines. In contrast, however there still remains a gap in both academic and grey literature empirically documenting the prevalence of family violence, the means of addressing this form of violence, and the mechanisms in place for evaluating the effectiveness of pre-existing programs targeted toward alleviating indigenous family violence. Such information concerning this form of violence is better documented in developed countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States. However, information is severely lacking with respect to the examination of family violence that takes place beyond a developed country context. What could be surmised from the limited literature available is that most initiatives directed at one or multiple forms of family violence in indigenous communities are most successful when they take a preventative approach, collaborative with the state and the community, bridge aboriginal with non-aboriginal models, and are cognizant of the larger historical context which recognizes that family violence is tied to indigenous peoples’ experience of colonialism.

Introduction—The Current Situation Facing Indigenous Communities:

Family violence in indigenous communities has become a topic of discussion across numerous international forums. For example, in 2006, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues posed several recommendations directed at States, United Nations agencies and bodies, indigenous peoples, and civil societies. This forum’s objective was to identify and work toward resolving the factors that have come to distinctly marginalize indigenous people both socially and economically. Some of these recommendations include addressing interpersonal violence in the form of family violence which presently plagues many indigenous...
communities globally (UNPFII 2009; Kuokkanen 2012). More specifically, part B of section 10(a) of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues recommends that action be taken to address

[v]iolence against women, by including indigenous women in high-level United Nations studies on violence, and calling States to combat violence against women, including forced prostitution and trafficking of women and girls as well as domestic violence; and calling for consultations with indigenous women to address violence and trafficking (UNPFII 2009: 4, emphasis added).

Although these recommendations represent a larger shift in the paradigms and approaches to development on the international scene with respect to the formulation of conceptual frameworks, policies and guidelines, there still remains a gap in both academic and grey literature empirically documenting the prevalence of family violence, the means of addressing this form of violence, and the mechanisms in place for evaluating the effectiveness of pre-existing programs targeted toward alleviating indigenous family violence.

Existing information concerning family violence is better documented in developed countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, and is severely lacking beyond a developed country context. This may be, in part, due to a lack of government resources directed toward this form of research in these countries (Campbell, Lindhorst, Huang, and Walters 2006). The few studies that do highlight family violence tend to look at it as it pertains to heterosexual adults rather than other family configurations. Moreover, in this limited area of research, there is also an absence of documentation of the impacts of family violence in relation to child and elder abuse in indigenous communities, beyond simply focusing on violence that arises among couples (Shea, Nahwegahbow, and Andersson 2010). The limitations in the literature arguably detract from the understanding of the consequences of family violence as a whole, especially as it may be linked to the deterioration of social cohesion in the
larger community. In addition, much of the literature on family violence is released from international agencies, such as the United Nations, and the category “indigenous peoples” is used to describe the *general trends* common to most indigenous peoples globally. Although this literature is immensely informative in indicating the commonalities of family violence across indigenous communities worldwide, this level of abstraction misses much of the social, political, economic, and historical contexts unique to each country, which may account for the specific ways in which family violence manifests itself within a particular community. The above limitations of the broader literature are, to varying degrees, reflected in this report. Effort has been put forth, however, to minimize the impact of these limitations. Where possible, for example, country-specific data have been supplied in order to emphasize the nuances across indigenous communities in an attempt to avoid the homogenization of impacts that family violence has had in a given indigenous community.

This report is constructed from a systematic review of the literature published on indigenous family violence. The review included searching, collating, interpreting, and summarizing data from both original studies examining family violence, as well as policy reports written on the subject area. Although this report draws from a wide variety of contexts and levels of abstraction, there is a heavier focus, where possible, on trends found in developing countries as a compensatory effort to draw attention to the information that is otherwise limited in this area. Worth noting is that this report is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the prevalence, foregrounds leading to, or means of addressing family violence. Rather, in its entirety, this report is intended to serve as an overview of the issue of family violence found in
indigenous communities and will examine the ways in which effectiveness of interventions have been evaluated with respect to family-based violence in an indigenous context.

**Conceptualizing Family Violence—Definitional Quandaries:**

Family violence can broadly be defined as the “serious abuse of power within family, trust or dependency relationships” (RCAP 1996). There is a preference for the term “family violence” over “domestic violence” in literature documenting the intimate forms of violence that arise in indigenous communities. “Domestic violence” has been heavily used in non-indigenous communities to describe male perpetrated violence against women, however, indigenous groups have critiqued the term for being overly individualist and devoid of any conception of colonization’s link to the prevalence of violence in indigenous communities. Arguably, “family violence” serves as a better concept to signify “all forms of violence in intimate, family and other relationships of mutual obligation and support” (PADV 1998, cited in Gordon, Hallahan and Henry 2002). Family violence, therefore, reflects the suffering of all family members (including the perpetrator) and encompasses the impacts of this abuse on children, often in the form of increased risk of developing personality disorders, mental health problems, poor self-esteem, and low educational achievement (Shea, Nahwegahbow and Andersson 2010).

Greer and Laing(2001) point out, however, that the term family violence is not without critique by some feminists and indigenous women’s collectives alike. They have instead advocated for the use of the term “male perpetrated violence against women” as they fear that “family violence” glosses over the gendered dynamic that is often associated with this form of violence. While many service agencies that address intimate violence in indigenous
communities recognize these concerns, they caution that “male perpetrated violence against
cwomen” shares many of the same pitfalls as the term “domestic violence” – it neglects to take
into consideration the broader context of colonization and the devastating impacts this
violence has on family cohesiveness. For these reasons, “family violence” is becoming
commonly used and accepted in the literature depicting the prevalence and impacts of intimate
violence in indigenous communities globally (Keel 2004).

The Prevalence and Conditions Associated with Family Violence in Indigenous Communities:

Family violence and sexual assault are reported to be at crisis levels across many
indigenous communities internationally. According to Campbell et al. (2006), 40% of aboriginal
women will experience interpersonal violence at some point during their lifetime. This trend is
evident when examining the prevalence of family violence in the context of specific countries.
For example, in Australia, indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be the victims of
assault than non-indigenous women, and the perpetrator in both instances is often someone
who is known to the victim (Keel 2004). Similarly, in Ecuador, according to the 2004
Demographic and Mother and Infant Health Survey, 45% of indigenous families were affected
by family violence (Sieder and Sierra 2010). The 2008 Survey on Indigenous Women’s Health
and Rights in Mexico found that one third of indigenous women involved in the survey reported
experiencing spousal violence during the previous twelve months (Pequeño Bueno 2009).

There have been a number of interrelated factors linked to an increased prevalence in
family violence in indigenous communities across various countries. Blagg’s 1999 meta-analysis
of the literature on indigenous family violence identifies several of these factors, including:

- marginalization and dispossession;
- loss of land and traditional culture;
- breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law;
- entrenched poverty;
- racism;
- alcoholism and drug abuse;
- the effects of institutionalisation and removal policies and;
- the “redundancy” of the traditional Aboriginal male role and status, compensated for by an aggressive assertion of male rights over women and children.

(quoted directly from Blagg 2000, cited in Keel 2004: 8)

Blagg acknowledges that, for indigenous people, the above factors have been conceived of as embedded in and exacerbated by a colonial history. Thus, the above factors refer to a historical picture of disadvantage and oppression rather than individual isolated causes of violence (Keel 2004). For example, according to the Australian Women’s Task Force report (2000), alcoholism has been a major factor associated with increased violence in indigenous communities. However, it is not implied that alcoholism causes violence in and of itself. Rather, higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse often coincide with poor socioeconomic conditions, systemic discrimination, and serve as a coping mechanism to trauma and intergenerational cycles of violence that result from a residential school legacy (as is the case, for example, with Canada and Australia) and the impact of colonialism on traditional values and culture (Shea et al. 2010).

In addition, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) emphasizes the role globalization (more specifically, economic restructuring to export-oriented economies) has played in heightening the prevalence of violence in indigenous populations. This is especially evident in developing countries that have been required to seek out economic alternatives (such as trade liberalizations in the form of trade agreements) as a result of mounting national debt. Globalization, manifested in the form of trade liberalization,
privatization and deregulation, has drastically affected traditional economies by weakening the subsistence base of indigenous communities (UNPFII 2009). Moreover, globalization has been considered by many indigenous groups to be a continuation of colonization perpetrated against them since the beginning of capitalist expansion (referred to by some as neo-colonialism, see Barndt 2008).

Although this trend appears to be reversing more recently in some countries, by and large poverty has been on the rise since the implantations of economic restructuring in the 1980s, particularly in developing countries. However, the consequences of globalization have not been experienced to the same degree across all groups (Barndt 2008; Acker 2004). Most often globalization increases the hardships faced by indigenous communities. In Mexico, for example, 13 % of the population is indigenous. Yet, according to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy, in 2009, while 50 % of the total Mexican population lived below the poverty line, 75 % of the indigenous population lived below the poverty line, and 40 % of those lived in extreme poverty (cited in IGWIA 2010). In Ecuador, poverty affected 87 % of the indigenous population in 1998 and 96 % of indigenous people were severely impoverished in the rural Sierra region (Sieder and Sierra 2010). These patterns may help to explain family violence, since studies show that there is a strong link between poverty and spousal violence. Changing economic circumstances in the form of joblessness, income insecurity and increased poverty can threaten prevailing models of masculinity and aggravate male alcoholism and violence. Frustration due to a lack of job opportunities and perceived or actual inability to adequately provide for family is expressed through reasserting masculinity and male dominance in other, often violent ways (Barndt 2008). Overcrowded living conditions, especially in
communities facing heightened economic insecurity, has also been tied to an increase in various forms of family violence ranging from spousal violence to child assault and incest (Sieder and Sierra 2010). Lastly, another circumstance tied to heightened poverty and family violence prevalence rates is economic migration. Under circumstances of financial insecurity, families are generally separated. When familial division occurs, spousal accusations and instances of infidelity generally increase. Male suspicion of female infidelity is closely tied to heightened rates of intimate violence (UNPFII 2009).

Factors associated with economic globalization have distinctly affected indigenous women. Erosion of indigenous women's roles and a corresponding devaluation of women's status in indigenous communities can largely be attributed to the compounding factors of the loss of natural resources, the degradation of ecosystems, the transition of their economies into export-oriented enterprises, the change in local, social and decision-making structures, and, as is the case in many countries, the lack of indigenous women's political status nationally and within their local community, which is also linked to economic restructuring associated with economic globalization. A loss of status and a lack of a voice in the community (and in society at large) have been factors tied to making indigenous women particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence, including gender-based domestic violence (Appendini 2009). It therefore becomes evident that any attempt to address family violence in indigenous communities should take into consideration the broader context of oppression surrounding indigenous communities.

**Responses to Family Violence:**
As indicated earlier, Sieder and Sierra (2010) state that “perspectives that emphasize a narrow definition of “gender-based violence” – which tend to dominate the field and characterize most studies—are insufficient. Rather it is important to understand the intersectionality of violences affecting indigenous women” (12). Women are not subject to violence simply because of their gender. Instead, indigenous women experience heightened vulnerability to gendered-based violence as a result of their ethnicity, class, history and corresponding socioeconomic marginalization. ¹ This distinct form of oppression faced by indigenous women has been referred to as *triple discrimination*: discrimination that results from gender, ethnicity, and class marginalization (Sieder and Sierra 2010). Along similar lines, the International Forum of Indigenous Women has emphasized the need for a perspective on violence against indigenous women which studies violence in “relation to aspects of identity beyond gender, using an approach that accounts for the ways that identities and systems of domination interact to create the conditions of women’s lives” (FIMI 2006: 12). Although the need to understand the systems of oppression that perpetuate violence in indigenous communities has been recognized throughout the literature focusing on indigenous peoples (particularly in a developed country context), there are several overlapping socio-cultural and economic barriers tied to the larger context facing indigenous peoples which make addressing such violence extraordinarily difficult.

**Barriers to Addressing Family Violence:**

¹ It is worth noting that “hegemonic feminism” is a term that has been used by scholars such as Aida Hernández (2001) to refer to feminist interpretations that, even when they do take cultural and social contexts into account when exploring gender issues, still tend to overlook the needs of indigenous women that might contradict a feminist agenda. Hernandez points to issues of gender violence and reproductive rights in indigenous communities as examples of areas that are under-recognized in the broader feminist literature. This, in conjunction with a number of factors listed in the introduction of this report, have contributed to and perpetuated the under-examination of family violence in indigenous communities, especially in developing country contexts.
The following constitute the common key barriers to addressing family violence in indigenous communities:

- there is a “normalization” of sexual violence that is now becoming intergenerational;
- the issue is widespread and “endemic”;
- very few victims report the issue to police or seek assistance; and
- child sexual abuse is still very much hidden.

(quoted directly from Keel 2004)

Under-reporting is a common phenomenon with rape, sexual assault, and family violence cases across most cultures. This is especially the case with respect to the forms of intimate violence facing indigenous peoples. In Ecuador, for instance, 32 % of indigenous women sought help after experiencing violence at the hands of their partners as compared to 46 % of non-indigenous women. Of the small percentage of Ecuadorian indigenous women who did report interpersonal violence, only 4.5 % resorted to those state institutions that directly respond to women’s access to justice in cases of family violence (Sierder and Sierra 2010).

Perpetuating the under-reporting of family violence in Indigenous communities is the lack of reliable data on various forms of violence distinctly affecting indigenous people. This lack of reliable information has been attributed to strained relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Under-reporting can be due, at least in part, to this tension between indigenous and non-indigenous groups resulting in a lack of trust in authorities. Abuse at the hands of authorities is not unfamiliar to marginalized ethnic groups and, especially in light of indigenous communities who have faced the forcible removal of children from the home via residential school policies, the reporting of family violence that involves children is significantly low. Furthermore, there is often a lack of culturally appropriate support services and research
methods which contribute to the lack of available data on indigenous family-based violence (Keel 2004).

Lastly, the normalization of gender ideologies toward behaviours that constitute family violence in indigenous communities is common, especially in light of the intergenerational nature of several forms of violence experienced in these communities. Justifications for family violence on the part of the male perpetrator often involve accusations that his female partner inadequately fulfilled her roles of mother and wife. Moreover, family members and community justice authorities may stress the cultural importance of keeping the family intact rather than encouraging women to move forward in persecuting their violent partners. Instead, indigenous women are frequently expected to tolerate certain forms of violent acts, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities and privileging the maintenance of the family over the well-being of the affected family members (Sieder and Sierra 2010).

**Ineffective Approaches to Addressing Family Violence in Indigenous Communities:**

Approaches that have been less effective in reducing family violence prevalence rates in indigenous communities tend to share one or a combination of the following characteristics:

- policies that are top-down and paternalistic (Sieder and Sierra 2010);
- interventions that reinforce gender inequalities and privilege the maintenance of the family over the abuse survivor’s wishes (Sieder and Sierra 2010, and as discussed above);
- policies that embrace a “one-size fits all” approach that models gender relations from a western liberal perspective and stands in opposition to the traditional roles found in indigenous cultures (UNPFII p 7);
- Approaches that are unstable resulting from poor funding and lack of capacity (Keel 2004); and
- Initiatives that do not address the analytical tension between universalism and relativism. This has typically been borne out in terms of a “geopolitical interplay between 'international', state-level, and local community political concerns when
addressing issues related to family violence in indigenous communities” (UNPFII 2009: 9)

- Especially on a national and international level, sometimes there is a “reluctance to address the gendered dimensions of issues facing indigenous communities since to do so is feared to be ‘interfering with culture’ or ‘imposing western values’” (UNPFII 2009: 1)

According to the International Forum of Indigenous Women (2006), the best way to reduce violence against indigenous women and violence that takes place in the family is through the recognition of indigenous people’s collective human rights. It is insufficient, however, to assume that the recognition of indigenous human rights alone will effectively ensure that the rights of indigenous women and children are upheld and protected in all communities. Although both indigenous and women’s groups have made advances through universal human rights paradigms, indigenous women have frequently found themselves marginalized by women’s movements and indigenous movements alike.

With respect to addressing indigenous women’s rights, difficulty arises in relation to how indigenous rights are conceived of and implemented in a given community. This concern has been recognized by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (2007) who critiques the shortcomings of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples with regards to the promotion, implementation, and maintenance of indigenous self-governance on the grounds that it remain unclear what legal recourse indigenous women would have to confront a male-dominated council, particularly in instances where indigenous women’s social status in their communities has been eroded during colonization. Also worth noting is that some indigenous communities are traditionally patriarchal and, for this reason, it is important to understand the gender structures of a particular community before assuming that customary indigenous laws are in the best interest of all people, including women and children. For example, in the
Bolivian highlands, land (which constitutes one of the most valuable resources in agrarian societies) is often inherited patrilineally. Thus, should indigenous women from these communities choose to leave an abusive relationship, customary proceedings often result in the land titles remaining in their (male) partners’ name. This, in turn, leaves indigenous Bolivian women without a vital means to support themselves under these circumstances (Crespo 2008).² Overall, indigenous justice systems, when legally sanctioned without giving credence to other forms of marginalization in their communities, pose a serious risk of perpetuating gender inequalities rather than addressing the underlying issues that manifest themselves in the form of family violence.

**Effective Approaches to Addressing Family Violence in Indigenous Communities:**

A number of elements have been highlighted in the literature as present in successful initiatives that address aspects of family violence in indigenous communities. These are:

- Reconciliatory efforts that harmonize policies and interventions across the international, national, and local community-based levels of government (UNIANGWE 2006);
- Approaches that are holistic by means of understanding the relationship between discrimination and violence against indigenous people, particularly the distinct *triple discrimination* faced by indigenous women (Sieder and Sierra 2010);
- Approaches that involve the community in the development, design, and implementation of family violence initiatives (Shea, Nahwegahbow, and Andersson 2010);

² The above scenario highlights a very sensitive issue with respect to how contradictions between human rights and cultural norms should be resolved and by whom. Kalev 2004 discusses these questions in relation to female genital mutilation where she highlights two diverging ideological camps. The first camp encompasses the Kukathas model which “suggests that cultural minorities [including indigenous groups] be permitted to determine their own norms without state interference” (341). In contrast to the first model, however, the Kymlicka model espouses the idea that the rights of groups within liberal societies themselves derive from individual rights to autonomy. Therefore, under the second model, the state actors are morally (and, in many cases legally) bound to intervene in cultural practices that infringe on the individual’s mental and physical health and well-being (Kalev 2004). Feminists and women’s advocacy groups tend to support the latter Kymlicka model in cases where traditionally patriarchal cultures block women’s access to autonomy and justice, especially in cases of gendered violence and divorce. Thus, the ideological bend underlying a given country’s legal structure (i.e. the model it ascribes to) will have a significant impact on the kinds of interventions that are employed to address family-based violence found in indigenous communities.
• Interventions that take preventative approaches to addressing family violence (Shea et al. 2010)³;
• Initiatives that include the perpetrator (generally male) in the conflict resolution process;
• Interventions that promote non-violent masculinities (Sieder and Sierra 2010); and
• Approaches that draw on elements or whole parts of traditional indigenous culture (Puchala, Paul, Kennedy, and Mehl-Madrona 2010).

Initiatives that tend to be effective are those that overcome at least one or a combination of the barriers (mentioned earlier) that are linked to an increase in the prevalence of family violence in indigenous communities. It is important to note, however, when examining social issues endemic across indigenous communities, there is a risk of “studying down” indigenous people. This involves conceptualizing indigenous individuals solely as passive recipients of oppression rather than being seen as resistant, resilient, and active change-making agents (Shae et al. 2010). Although, as mentioned earlier, there are risks associated with prioritizing indigenous collective rights over women’s rights when addressing issues that arise in an indigenous context, some have argued that drawing from aspects of indigenous culture and integrating them into mainstream initiatives can be successful in providing culturally appropriate options for indigenous communities facing family violence. The inclusion of aboriginal leaders and elders in the healing process can therefore function as a means of minimizing “studying down” and providing an avenue to build on the social capital that may already be present. Doing so may also, in turn, strengthen the community’s social cohesiveness (Puchala et al. 2010).

³ Shea et al. (2010) divide prevention initiatives into three typologies: primary (reducing the risk factors for family violence), secondary (where risk factors are present, reducing outbreaks of violence), and tertiary (preventing recidivism). From the limited literature available documenting the success of a given intervention, the authors found that programs that employed primary and secondary prevention models were the most effective in addressing family violence. However, most family violence initiatives tend to adopt reactive tertiary family violence models.
For example, case study reports by Puchala et al. (2010) illustrate that the inclusion of traditional healing elders (THE) in interventions had a positive impact on reducing domestic violence in numerous Canadian indigenous communities. Of the 76 individuals who agreed to participate with the THE initiatives, 49 participants saw a reduction in domestic violence during the course of their involvement with the elders. Furthermore, 29 of the 49 participants saw the violence disappear entirely in their relationship. The group of individuals who entered the study but later refused elder involvement in their treatments saw no change in their experience of domestic violence. Therefore, it becomes clear that providing interventions that integrate indigenous cultural elements have the potential to be effective in reducing instances of domestic violence (Puchala et al. 2010).

An indigenous community in Cotacachi, Ecuador has also been successful in addressing high incidences of family violence by adapting elements of indigenous justice models. This was done by collaborating across the international, national and community-level of government, while also blending elements of indigenous conflict resolution methods with more formalized judicial proceedings. The statute in Cotacachi was developed with the support of the Integrated Center for Women’s Aid—a center promoted by the assembly of the canton, UNIFEM, CONAMU and the previous mayor of Cotacachi between 1998 to 2008. The blending of both indigenous and non-indigenous justice models in the statute involves the implementation of sanctions that seek to repair damage done (indigenous restorative justice models) while also drawing on larger non-indigenous human rights paradigms. The statute respects the jurisdiction of the state for particularly serious crimes, such as rape, but overall functions as a way to promote cultural change by confronting naturalized ideas about violence. In addition, the
statute aims to encourage new forms of behaviour based on respect between men and women (Lang and Kucia 2009). Men were included in dialogues surrounding the formation and implementation of the statute which, in turn, garnered greater support from the larger community for indigenous women’s movements targeting family violence. The statute has been supported by 43 communities outside of Cotacachi who are committed to developing similar community statutes in their own municipalities (Lang and Kucia 2009). Similar initiatives drawing from both indigenous and non-indigenous justice models to address family based violence have surfaced in other Latin American countries such as Mexico and Guatemala (see, for example, Tervan 2009; Chávez 2008; CEH 2000).

Due to the limited data available, however, it is uncertain as to what degree the same results would be seen in developing country contexts facing very different social, economic, and historical factors. Nonetheless, other indigenous communities in countries like South Africa have advocated for indigenous conflict resolution methods, such as restorative justice, to address the increasing domestic violence found in their communities. To them, despite legislative protections such as the implementation of the 1998 Domestic Violence Act, violence against women and children in South Africa remains unchallenged. Community-based restorative justice models are part of a larger ground-up agenda being propositioned as the women’s groups in these communities feel that the larger legal structure is passive when it comes to holding perpetrators responsible for violence that arises in the family (Hargovan 2005).

Although restorative justice holds the potential to be an effective intervention, especially given the fact that it avoids top-down interventions and can draw from culturally
appropriate customs, there are some concerns about how limited funding and inconsistent monitoring could lead to more harm than good for both parties involved. When restorative justice is implemented in the context of addressing crimes involving domestic violence, there are concerns with respect to whether the mediators are adequately trained in understanding the power relationships and overall complexity of the social dynamics leading up to this form of violence. Moreover, the lack of effective power-balancing techniques used by mediators throughout the proceedings could hinder women’s abilities to truly achieve voluntary and equal bargaining power, thus perpetuating systemic gender inequalities through the inadequate administering of restorative justice practices (Edwards and Sharpe 2004). Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of information regarding how indigenous cultural adaptations could be made to interventions beyond partner violence such as for violence that involves children and the elderly in an indigenous context (Strang and Braithwaite 2002).

**Success—How is it Measured?**

According to Shea et al. (2010), “[f]ew studies [on family violence] relate to Aboriginal and indigenous communities and those that do exist contribute only weak empirical evidence” (53). Based on a systemic review of 506 studies that involved interventions that address family violence in indigenous communities, Shea et al. (2010) found that most discussed whether their program was effective, but very few provided empirical evidence to support these claims. Moreover, Puchala et al. (2010) indicated that the lack of empirical data on effective measures in indigenous communities may, in part, result from an incongruence between indigenous world views and scientific models. For example, the principles behind controlled scientific

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4 For more information on the potential risks involved in Restorative Justice initiatives, see Strang and Braithwaite (2002).
studies stand in contrast to many indigenous groups’ world views, as several have articulated (see for example Keel 2004; Puchala et al. 2010; Sieder and Sierra 2010), such as that studies should administer assistance to all participants in the study, not just those in the group receiving treatment. Therefore, all of these factors combined, in addition to the barriers to studying family violence in indigenous communities mentioned earlier, contribute to an overall lack of empirical measures evaluating the success of a given imitative in an indigenous context. However, the following represent the few evaluation methods specific to an indigenous context which have been employed in the limited literature addressing indigenous family-based violence interventions:

*Declining Incidences of Family Violence:*

A decline in family violence rates has the potential to be a misleading indicator of how successful a given initiative has been with respect to mediating the factors that perpetuate family violence. *Reported* rates cannot be conflated the *actual* rates of family violence since, as mentioned earlier, many survivors of this form of violence do not report incidences to the authorities. Conversely, an increase in the reported rate of family violence could instead be indicative of the effectiveness of the family violence support mechanisms in place in forging a sense of trust with survivors, encouraging them to step forward to report their victimization. For example, Luna-Firebaugh (2006) noticed that when further protections (such as implementing tribal police and mandatory arrests of persecutors) were put into place through the STP VAIW Program for Aboriginal communities facing family violence in the north-western United States, family violence complaints *increased* 400 % from 1995 to 1998. Therefore, it is
important to understand the context in which a given incident rate occurs as the same rate obtained from different initiatives could signify drastically different results.

**Reoffending Rates:**

Data on reoffending rates can be particularly insightful with respect to whether a given intervention is effective in mediating instances family violence. Although these numbers still may not reflect all instances of family violence that occur in a given community, at the very least they indicate whether certain interventions are alleviating the violence faced by those who have already come forward to report these instances of violence. Reoffending rates seem to be the most popular form of evaluation in the literature. For instance, Duggan et al. (2004) assessed the impact of home visits in the prevention of child abuse and neglect for the first three years of life in families identified as at-risk of child abuse through population-based screening at the child’s birth in Hawaii. The home visits were meant to foster trust and provide direct services and linkages with community resources. The evaluation of these home visits was primarily measured through reoffending rates of the families involved in the program. The results from the study indicated that, when trust was established between the visiting councilor and the families, reoffending rate decreased.

**Narrative Description and Other Descriptive Qualitative Measures:**

Some studies draw from participants’ own insights regarding the effectiveness of a given initiative. These descriptive measures may be coupled with (pre, interim, and post-entry) surveys and questionnaires measuring participants’ sense of well-being while participating in a given family violence program. A qualitative method of evaluating was used in Norton and Manson’s study to assess the effectiveness a domestic violence intervention. The program
addressed family violence in an urban US Aboriginal health center that provided a range of services for American Indians including counseling, crisis housing, and transportation to appointments. The authors depended on the evaluative feedback from participants with respect to their overall sense of empowerment and well-being (Norton and Manson 1997).

Overall, further evaluation models specific to initiatives taking place within an indigenous context, such as those highlighted above, are needed in order to better understand whether a given initiative is successful in addressing the specific ways in which family violence manifests itself in indigenous communities.

Conclusion

In its entirety, this report involved a systematic review of data from original studies examining family violence that takes place within an indigenous context, with particular emphasis on indigenous communities outside developed countries. What could be surmised from the limited literature available is that most initiatives directed at one or multiple forms of family violence in indigenous communities are most successful when they take a preventative approach; collaborative with the state and the community; bridge aboriginal with non-aboriginal models; and are cognizant of the larger historical context which recognizes that family violence is tied to indigenous peoples’ experience of colonialism.

Furthermore, it appears as though there are many barriers that exist with respect to addressing indigenous family violence. Correspondingly, in order for a given intervention to be successful in addressing family-based violence in an indigenous context, it must therefore acknowledge the “normalization” of sexual violence that is now becoming intergenerational; understand that the issue is widespread and “endemic”; be concerned with the underreporting
of this form of violence; and realize that specific forms of family violence, such as child sexual
abuse, are still very much hidden in indigenous communities. Overall, much of the research in
this area stresses the importance of addressing instances of indigenous family violence in a
holistic way in order for any real outcomes to be achieved.

Taken as a whole, the conclusions drawn from this report must be tempered by the fact
that there are many significant limitations in the literature, especially as it pertains to family
violence that takes place in a developing country context. Consequentially, the literature
highlighted above may not be representative of the diversity experienced within as well as
across indigenous communities facing this form of violence. Recommendations for future
studies in this area involve providing country-specific information; including other forms of
family violence such as child and elder abuse; being explicit about how success is measured
within a given initiative; and exploring what occurs when states and communities’ goals for
addressing family violence stand in contrast to one another.
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