

The larger study ... is part of a Canadian-South African partnership exploring sexual violence (effects and solutions) using PAR with Indigenous girls and the impact this work can have on changing policy and community in relation to safety and security. Canada and South Africa have both come under scrutiny by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the United Nations for not creating safe, secure environments for young women.

In Canada:

- Commercial sexual exploitation of Indigenous youth forms more than 90% of the visible sex trade⁵.
- Indigenous women and children are being trafficked in the sex and drug trades⁴.
- The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted Canadian government breaches of the Convention including the high levels of violence against Indigenous girls¹.
- There is an estimated 25–50% child sexual abuse prevalence rate in Indigenous adults².
- Indigenous women are 8x more likely than non-Indigenous women to be killed by an intimate partner³.
- Indigenous women are made vulnerable by: colonization, patriarchy, racism, and sexism; residential schools; historical trauma; Bill C-31 that determines Indian status and related compensation, infrastructure, support, and access to community of origins.

We are 9 young women from Eskasoni (aged 18-23) who are doing this research in Eskasoni, partnering with Eskasoni Mental Health Services and an academic researcher.

Our Community...

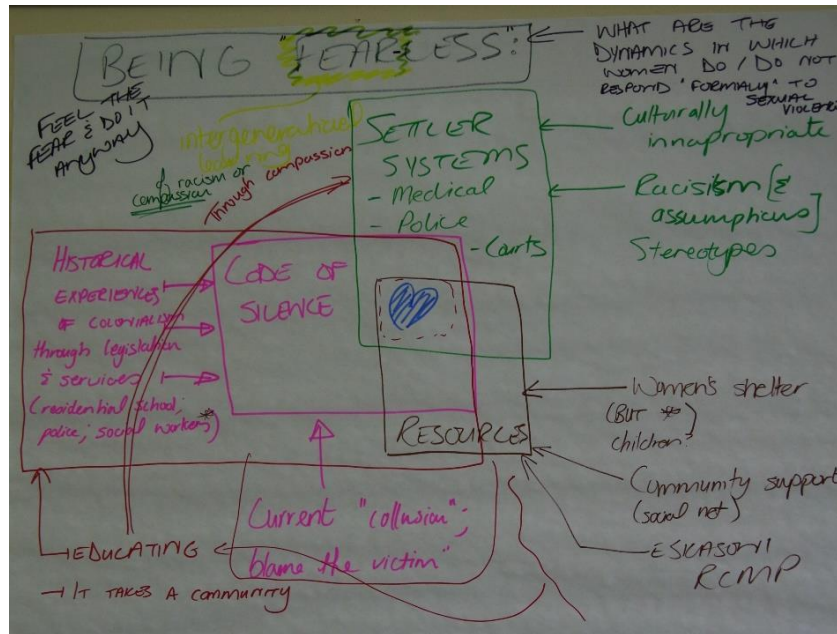
- Is the Eskasoni First Nation is a band government of the Mi'kmaq
- Is located alongside the Bras d'Or Lake in the Unama'ki district of Mi'kmaq territory (Nova Scotia, Canada).
- Is the largest Indigenous community in Atlantic Canada with approximately 3,752 people on-Reserve and 660 off-Reserve or on other Reserves.
- 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.



Eskasoni



Being fear-less: Understanding why women don't report sexual violence



Method

This study uses... the principles of indigeneity, decolonizing methodologies⁶ and has a rights-based social justice agenda together with participatory reflective approaches that help us learn “from the ground up”.

In the first phase of our research we have focused on several issues, but here we focus on the findings of a collage activity exploring perceptions of Indigenous girls and women both within our community and the broader Canadian context. We worked in teams of 2 - 3 participants, then shared our collages with the full group, explaining why we selected images & phrases, followed by a larger group discussion.

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:

- Our community has an intergenerational “code of silence”; we don’t talk about experiences of sexual violence.
- This “code of silence” stems from
 - colonialism and legislated acts of cultural genocide (residential schools, Indian day schools, the 60s scoop, etc);
 - past experiences with formal services (e.g. police, social workers, courts, etc.) where families have often been disrupted as a result of service intervention.
- This “code of silence” is entrenched by contemporary settler service systems including the medical system (emergency response personnel, and nurses and doctors in hospitals), police, lawyers and courts. These services are characterized by
 - A lack of cultural sensitivity and culturally appropriate responses
 - sexism
 - racism and racist stereotypes.
- Local resources exist and are supportive. However, the larger context (See points 1, 2 and 3) limits their effectiveness.

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:

- 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).
- 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).

References

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