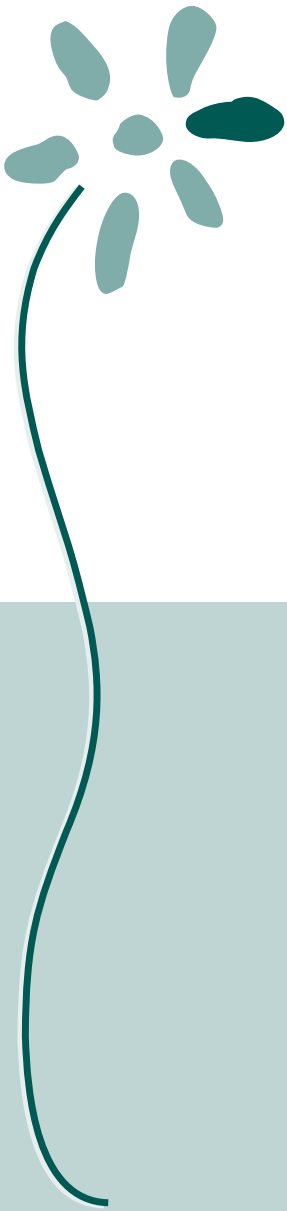
Government of Canada
Gouvernement du Canada



Aboriginal Women and Family Violence

Canada

The original version of *Aboriginal Women and Family Violence* was prepared by the Ipsos-Reid Corporation for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. It is available on-line through the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence web site at: http://www.nacafv.ca/en/pdf/family_violence_report.pdf

The Public Health Agency of Canada prepared this condensed version with the permission of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Également disponible en français sous le titre: *Les femmes autochtones et la violence familiale*

The opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Public Health Agency of Canada.

Contents may not be reproduced for commercial purposes, but any other reproduction, with acknowledgements, is encouraged.

Recommended Citation:

Canada. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Aboriginal Women and Family Violence. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008.

This publication can be made available in alternative formats upon request.

For more information, please contact:

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence
Family Violence Prevention Unit
Public Health Agency of Canada
(Address Locator: 1909D)
9th Floor, Jeanne Mance Bldg., Tunney's Pasture
200 Eglantine Driveway
Ottawa, ON K1A 0K9

Telephone: 1-800-267-1291 or (613) 957-2938
Facsimile: (613) 941-8930
TTY: 1-800-561-5643 or (613) 952-6396
Web Site: http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn
E-mail: ncfv-cnivf@phac-aspc.gc.ca

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, represented by the Minister of Health, 2008

Cat.: HP20-10/2008E HP20-10/2008E-PDF
ISBN: 978-0-662-47678-8 978-0-662-47679-5

Aboriginal Women and Family Violence

Table of Contents

Introduction

In recent years, family violence has become a prominent area of social research. However, no comprehensive studies have detailed the scope of this crime within Aboriginal communities. As well, scant documentation exists analyzing the attitudes and perceptions of victims, their abusers and the community at large within the Aboriginal context.

In 2006, the Ipsos-Reid research firm prepared a report entitled "Aboriginal Women and Family Violence" for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The research project on which the report is based studied the attitudes and opinions of Aboriginal women, and the professionals who work with them, on the issue of family violence, specifically intimate partner violence against women.[1] This report is a condensed version of the larger report.

The following aspects of the issue are addressed in this report:

- The importance of intimate partner violence compared to other issues facing women in Aboriginal communities – that is, perceptions of incidence and severity of violence;
- Causes of male violence against women in Aboriginal communities, including opinions on the role of factors such as poverty, familial experience, parenting skills, substance abuse, familial and community indifference, and gender stereotyping;
- Consequences of male violence against Aboriginal women – in terms of the effects on the emotional, physical and financial status of the victims and the effects on children, extended families, community relationships and the abuser;
- Sources of help for Aboriginal women who experience violence (such as shelters, crisis centres and social services) in terms of accessibility, privacy, safety and reliability;
- Resources available for the families of both victims and abusers, including educational preventative initiatives and long-term counselling;
- Gaps in resources and community supports needed to end male violence against Aboriginal women; and
- Perceptions of effective ways to disseminate information and provide assistance to families experiencing this form of violence.

1 In this report, intimate partner violence refers to violence and abuse that occurs within an intimate relationship (e.g., married, common-law, dating relationship). Intimate partner violence may be in the form of acts of physical aggression, controlling behaviours, psychological abuse and/or sexual abuse.

Methodology

This research was designed to capture information from two categories of respondents: Aboriginal women and those working with them (or first responders).

With regard to the first category, a series of eight two-hour focus groups were held, each with 10 First Nations and Métis women, in the following locations:

- Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
- Val-d'Or, Québec
- Prince George, British Columbia
- Sydney, Nova Scotia

Focus group participants were evenly divided between First Nations women living on reserve, and First Nations and Métis women living off reserve.

With regard to the second category of respondents, professionals working with Aboriginal victims of intimate partner violence, telephone interviews were conducted with 15 key informants. These key informants, or "first responders," included police (both the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and those employed by provincial governments), health care workers, social workers, and crisis centre staff from Aboriginal communities across Canada, both on and off reserve. More specifically, five of these first responders worked with Inuit women in the North; the remaining 10 worked with First Nations women living on reserve and in urban centres in Southern regions across Canada.

Key Findings

Despite the fact that no effort was made to recruit victims of violence, many participants in the focus groups had personal experience with intimate partner violence. While intimate partner violence is perpetrated in many ways, physical and emotional abuse were the two most common forms described by the participants.

Incidence and Causes:

Confirming other research findings, first responders expressed the perception that there is a higher incidence of intimate partner abuse in Aboriginal communities than elsewhere.

Although many factors are perceived as root causes of violence (loss of identity and way of life, continued impact of residential schools,[2] a "learned cycle," etc.), nearly all participants pointed to drug and alcohol consumption (by both parties) as an aggravating factor.

Consequences:

All participants identified a variety of physical, psychological, financial and social consequences of male violence against Aboriginal women. For victims and their children, those consequences include:

- diminished self-esteem and sense of security;
- damage to physical and emotional health;
- negative impact on children (nurturing a sense of fear and insecurity and the intergenerational perpetuation of the cycle of violence);
- negative impact on financial security;
- loss of matrimonial home and sometimes relocation outside the community; and
- self-blame.

In contrast, the impact of the criminal justice system's response on the abuser is often seen as minimal and ineffective. A common view expressed by women within Aboriginal communities and among first responders is that community sanctions are mild, and those delivered by the corrections system are inconsequential. Although some laws and

2 The Canadian residential school system consisted of a number of schools for Aboriginal Children operated by churches of various denominations and funded under the *Indian Act*.

policies allow police officers to lay charges against a perpetrator without the consent of the victim, neither victims of violence nor first responders feel that relevant laws are adequately applied. All participants in this study called for the imposition of increased accountability on perpetrators of violence and reform of the justice system to allow for more punitive measures.

Nevertheless, some first responders see reason for optimism in what they perceive to be a gradual opinion shift among Aboriginal leaders, some of whom are beginning to condemn male violence against women. Focus group participants, on the other hand, had mixed perceptions of community progress in this regard. Although some feel that community opposition to male violence may be increasing, others worry that unless steps are taken to develop greater awareness and accountability, abuse may simply go further underground within the still prevalent culture of secrecy surrounding this issue in Aboriginal communities.

Key Resources for Aboriginal Women Victims of Violence:

Key resources discussed include:

- On reserve and in settlements: informal networks of family and friends; health care professionals (nurses); Health Centre referrals to off reserve and urban resources, including counselling, shelters and other victim service programs; and police.
- In urban centres: informal networks of family and friends; crisis centres and shelters; hotlines; Friendship Centres; and counselling services.

The use of such resources and services, however, is compromised by:

- low awareness of them;
- their distance from the home community;
- the lack of transportation;
- poor relationships with the police;
- lack of faith in the effectiveness of the resources;
- lack of privacy in communities and the consequent shame about accessing resources;
- complex relationships among the victim, the abuser, their families and other community members; and

- the desire to keep the family intact at all costs (because of fear of the unknown and of losing face, as well as the possibility of losing one's children, home and assets).

What Still Needs To Be Done:

Although community-based resources would be ideal, smaller reserves and Northern settlements often do not have the means to sustain crisis centres or shelters, and all respondents noted that privacy and safety are significant concerns.

Locating services and resources in close proximity to communities would be appropriate if residents also had access to adequate transportation and if the resource services were staffed by experienced and well-trained personnel. However, respondents raised concerns about the qualifications of staff, and the low numbers of Aboriginal personnel (especially the police) staffing such services in some communities. Even when Aboriginal personnel are recruited for policing among Aboriginal people, respondents felt that their presence does not guarantee that women will be treated in a culturally sensitive manner.

In addition, respondents suggested that women need to be helped to become more aware of the resources that are available. Women who live on reserve and in small settlements have a particular interest in receiving information without having to seek it out, given the chronic lack of privacy in such communities. Furthermore, although the Internet can be useful to a small minority of people, it is only a supplement to other means of acquiring information. Most Aboriginal women would not think to look to the Internet, given the low incidence of computer ownership and web access. Not a single first responder mentioned the Internet as a likely candidate for future educational or support initiatives.

Instead, suggestions from participants regarding communications include the use of:

- local papers;
- local radio;
- directories of services;
- advertising and educational programs in schools;
- advertising through Friendship Centre bulletins;
- inserts in government mass mailings; and
- integrating information about male violence against women into regular women's meetings, as a means of educating women about this issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following points were suggested as potential means by which both Aboriginal women and first responders may become better informed about and assisted in dealing with the problem of male violence against Aboriginal women:

- Increased funding for resources to assist Aboriginal women victims of male violence, encompassing:
  - Educational programs to teach Aboriginal women about healthy relationships
  - Short-term and long-term housing for victims
  - Short-term and long-term counselling for victims
  - Counselling and provision of basic resources (e.g., food and clothing) for children
  - Interim financial assistance for victims
  - Affordable transportation to available services
- Emergency 24-hour, 7-day crisis hotlines
- 24-hour, 7-day access to assistance from first responders within reasonable proximity to communities
- Increased convenience and privacy in reporting acts of violence on reserves and in settlement communities
- Cultural sensitivity training for all first responders (police, health care professionals, educators and others who directly assist women victims of intimate partner violence or otherwise work with communities to reduce the incidence of such violence)
- Strong incentives or mandatory training for community leaders to ensure that they treat the issue of male violence against women as a high priority and a serious community-wide problem
- School-based activity to teach Aboriginal children about the issue and to reach out to parents
- A “piggy-back” use of existing programs (such as Friendship Centres and medical facilities) or government sponsored mailings (such as regular mailings of payments) to provide information on this issue and spare women from having to seek it out

- Encouragement of word-of-mouth dissemination of information about coping with and stopping such violence
- Training for personnel dealing victims of abuse about privacy issues and the consequences of failing to respect the confidentiality of women dealing with this sensitive issue in communities with tight and overlapping familial ties
- Both short-term and long-term assistance and relapse prevention for abusive men, including:
  - Educational programs, including community-based education on the issue
  - Substance abuse programs
  - Job training and job-search assistance
  - Mandatory participation in community-based education programs as part of treatment and counselling for perpetrators, with immediate, predictable and reliable punitive consequences for repeat offences or failure to participate
  - Long-term engagement with perpetrators by the corrections and parole systems, including following release, to facilitate long-term change. This should include:
    - Development of Aboriginal community-based support programs for men
    - Development of sentencing circles and application of the principles of restorative justice[3] to foster culturally sensitive means of determining consequences for acts of violence and to develop a sense of individual *and* community responsibility for the issue of male violence against Aboriginal women.

3 Restorative justice is a generic term used to describe approaches to working with offenders that promote accountability, healing and social justice. Typical restorative justice processes include community or family group conferencing, victim-offender mediation, circles and programs categorized as alternative measures. See www.restorativejustice.org for more information.

Detailed Findings

MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Incidence and Severity of Violence against Women in Aboriginal Communities

Respondents identified intimate partner violence as a major problem facing Aboriginal women. Focus group participants described abuse as verbal and physical, sometimes having severe emotional and physical effects and sometimes causing death.

> *"My, you feel small and dirty. They won't look at you … they put you down and then they tell you they love you."*
>
> *"I almost got killed last year; he tried to choke me to death."*
>
> *"Physical violence is bad and it hurts on impact, but verbal abuse stays and it destroys." [Translation]*
>
> *"My husband killed my baby and he got away with it. I was three months pregnant … that's why I can't live up there."*
>
> *"There's lots of tragedy behind our lives. Nobody sees it, it's nothing to laugh at … every week I had different coloured eyes."*

First responders typically deal with multiple acts of violence in any given month, with estimates ranging from a few to more than 300, depending on the size of the community.

> *"It's difficult to characterize because there's such a range. It can be from what I would describe as torture, to psychological and emotional abuse."*
>
> *"They are honestly beaten up just like they are men. There would be bruises everywhere, death threats as well. It isn't just a shove."*
>
> *"I've seen the whole gamut of levels of violence, from throwing boiling water onto a woman or hitting her with a chair, to a slap."*
>
> *"I guess the most severe that I have on my caseload now is someone who has brain damage. On occasion we've had to deal with a couple of homicides as well."*

Several women made a point of saying that violence can go both ways.

> *"I was beaten by my ex-partner. I was defending myself and beating him also. I was trying to hurt him as much as he was hurting me." [Translation]*

Some participants see violence against women as having dissipated somewhat in recent years. This decrease may be reflective of gradually shifting attitudes about the acceptability of such abuse. Other participants suggest that, while abuse continues, abusers may now take greater care to conceal it.

> *"It used to be more normal to beat up a woman."*
>
> *"It still exists, it's not as hidden but it's still hidden. It's not everybody that would talk about it." [Translation]*
>
> *"Abusers have toned it down. Abusers will keep you in the home until the bruising goes down."*

The Victims and the Perpetrators: Common Characteristics

First responders point to a few factors that are often shared by women victims of intimate partner violence. Many come from violent homes and low self-esteem is thought to be a common characteristic of these women. Many have substance abuse histories, although substance abuse may be more the result of the violence than a preceding factor. Foetal alcohol syndrome among women victims of violence was also mentioned.

> *"Quite often they came from families where similar abuse – violence, alcohol and substance abuse – was prevalent."*
>
> *"I would say self-esteem. There's not the strength there to say no, you can't do that to me."*
>
> *"Alcohol was a big issue; they would drink a lot and do drugs as well. So mostly the ones that had alcohol in the house or frequented the bar a lot."*
>
> *"They are extremely vulnerable from other things like foetal alcohol syndrome."*

Low education levels, poverty and being of a young age are also thought to characterize women victims – although first responders are also quick to point out that there are many exceptions. Others said that victims include women from all levels of education and income and all ages.

> *"Most have a Grade 11 education, or lower. A lot of the women also have issues with alcohol and drug abuse, as well as mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder issues. There are also a lot of financial difficulties; a lot of them are living below the poverty line."*
>
> *"Education was a part of it. Typically it would be women who were uneducated, probably not completed high school. I found that educated women often wouldn't get victimized, or not more than once, because they would go after the guy."*
>
> *"The age really varies, it happens to old, old people too."*

First responders also identified many of these characteristics for male perpetrators. Substance abuse problems, in particular, are almost universally considered to be a characteristic of abusive men. A domineering attitude toward women is also common. Finally, a lack of self-esteem (seen to stem from the loss of traditional roles and identity, and sometimes from direct or indirect experience with the residential school system) was mentioned as a characteristic of abusers.

> *"A lot of the offenders, maybe half, have not graduated and live off social assistance. They may also have come from dysfunctional backgrounds. I believe violence is a learned behaviour, and a lot of them are repeat offenders."*
>
> *"They would drink a lot, so alcohol was a big issue. It was mostly alcohol and drugs. Marijuana, or gas, also."*
>
> *"Male Aboriginals in the community have lost some identity and self-esteem, as they get away from the traditional lifestyle. Residential schools had both positive and negative effects on males, in particular … there's a big loss there … They don't have many responsibilities now, so the loss of those traditional values is common."*

Of course male violence against women does exist outside Aboriginal communities. However, a series of important characteristics that contribute to this type of violence exist in higher proportions within Aboriginal communities, including poverty and its correlates (limited education, substance abuse) and the "legacy impact" that residential schools have had on traditional gender roles and family structure across generations. Each of these adds a layer to the likelihood of Aboriginal women experiencing intimate partner abuse.[4]

Drivers for Male Violence against Aboriginal Women

Most focus group participants felt that among the main drivers of (or factors that explain) male violence against Aboriginal women, alcohol and drug abuse rank very highly.

> *"Alcohol. There's nothing else to do here except drink. We're a town of 35,000 and there's 42 bars." [Translation]*

First responders said that, in the long term, substance abuse contributes to other problems such as the breakdown of the family and an increase in poverty, which in turn

4 For information on rates of violence against Aboriginal women, see: "Victimization and Offending among the Aboriginal Population in Canada," by Jodi-Anne Brzozowski, Andrea Taylor-Butts and Sara Johnson, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada – Catalogue no. 85-002-XIE, Vol. 26, no. 3 (http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-002-XIE/85-002-XIE2006003.pdf), and "Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006," by Holly Johnson, Statistics Canada – Catalogue no. 85-570-XIE (http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/85-570-XIE/85-570-XIE2006001.pdf).

feed back into the cycle of violence. In those communities in which access to alcohol is controlled, occasional bingeing is more problematic.

> *"This is especially important for the degree of violence. I think if you take away the alcohol, they'll still be violent, but the degree goes down."*
>
> *"Alcohol is more of a bingeing issue, because the community is controlled. It's only accessible by air, so alcohol can be either smuggled in or ordered in controlled amounts."*

Poverty itself is also seen as a contributing factor. First responders explained that this is not only because of the inherent difficulty of living in poverty but also because of the complexities involved when men are unable – or in some cases unwilling – to provide for their families and take advantage of women who are able to hold down jobs.

> *"When there's not enough money it does increase the stress in a household, and if there's a propensity for violence already then having this extra stressor might make it more likely."*

Violence may also be nurtured, in part, by the economic insecurity of men and the lack of financial independence among women. Focus group participants explained that these factors can lead to disputes over finances and how to deal with poverty. They can also promote insecurity and low self-esteem on the part of the victim and abuser, as does the frustration resulting from the boredom and monotony associated with being unemployed in a small community.

> *"Being unemployed leads to abuse. If they don't have anything to do, they beat us up."*
>
> *"They try and blame you. If he cheats, he thinks you did the same thing."*

Participants echoed the perception of first responders that loss of the traditional way of life (and identity) is also a contributing factor. This loss is seen to be exacerbated by the related erosion of the traditional role of the male within the community and household, and the legacy of residential schools. Both the abuser and the victim may have attended, or had parents who attended, residential schools where abuse took place.

On the matter of residential schools, there seems to be some difference of opinion between first responders and women who took part in the focus groups. Some first responders point to the residential school experience as a contributing factor to intimate partner violence, but this was not generally considered to be a major problem, at least for current generations. They felt that the residential school experience may, however, have contributed to the poor parenting skills of the victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Focus group participants were much more likely to stress the impact of the residential school experience on the victims and perpetrators of male violence

against women. They believe the residential school system has had ripple effects on family structure and parenting skills across decades, while first responders were less likely to directly link male violence against women with residential school experience.

> *"There are people I know who attended residential schools who are successful … and will openly admit that there were benefits to the residential schools, like structure and discipline."*
>
> *"If you come from a place where nobody ever said 'I love you' and so you never learn to express it and you just mimic the disciplinarian attitude you grew up with, including physical punishment, it would just be natural for you to bring that into the family environment where it's just not appropriate."*

A lack of parenting skills can also contribute to violence. Participants suggest that abusers may have had a violent upbringing by parents who were poorly equipped for the job; as a result these men grew up with a faulty understanding of the impact of violence on their own children.

> *"They learn what they live. Everything they are demonstrating is from the grass roots."*
>
> *"The daughter sees this from her father, and she thinks this is supposed to be the way. She's not shown the right way."*

Participants think that violence is a learned behaviour: both the victim and/or the perpetrator, having grown up in violent homes, learned to associate violence with love. For them, violence may be seen as normal, perhaps even inevitable and unpreventable.

> *"The first time I was abused by my husband, he said 'it's not my fault; I'm doing what my father used to do. I'm following in his footsteps.' Same genes."*

According to first responders, intergenerational experience with family violence goes hand-in-hand with poor parenting skills and poor relationship skills in contributing to male violence against Aboriginal women.

> *"A lot of it has to do with the changing of roles in the community. They used to get guidance from the elders in the community … now maybe there's less resources for young married couples … without the elders to go to for the benefit of their wisdom that could be part of the problem as well."*
>
> *"There's a lot of foetal alcohol syndrome, and a lot of general poor parenting."*
>
> *"I definitely think if you grow up seeing that kind of violence in the house, it has more of an influence. You could be a drug abuser and not be violent if you didn't grow up seeing it."*

Community indifference, reinforced by sexist attitudes about women's role in precipitating acts of violence, can be a further contributing factor. Some first responders think it is less a matter of sexist attitudes than simple resignation to what appears to be an irresolvable issue.

> *"There's kind of an acceptance that that's the way it is … and it's almost out of the norm not to have violence. It also contributes to people not being able to leave the situation."*
>
> *"I don't think the communities are 'indifferent'. It's more of a learned helplessness."*
>
> *"I think the view that you see up here is that although it's a matriarchal family structure up here, the fathers feel that it is their right to discipline their wives to make them change their ways."*

Some first responders were reluctant to ascribe significance to such contributing factors, suggesting instead that there is no excuse for the behaviour and that a stereotypical attitude of male dominance is at the root of the problem.

> *"Maybe this goes back to the stereotypes again, but I think that sometimes the idea that the man is the head of the household and should be in control and has more importance than the woman, I think that is a big contributing factor."*

So first responders and the women they assist may have different perceptions of the issue of male violence. In other words, the women and their communities may be less able to view the issue with clarity or resolve, having yet to fully come to believe that male violence against women is inexcusable.

THE IMPACT OF MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST ABORIGINAL WOMEN

When Violence Occurs

Focus group participants said that, in the short term, women often turn to family and friends, particularly on reserves and in small Northern settlements where other resources may not exist. Other women may leave the community on their own, with the help of the police, family and friends, and/or a crisis centre worker. Temporary assistance and accommodation can be found at crisis centres and shelters in some communities, and these resources can provide a needed sense of safety, albeit only temporarily.

> *"The woman always has to leave. The man keeps the house. If you try to get the house, and your husband owes money, you have to pay it first."*

In the longer term, the women frequently return to the relationship and the home, following a "cooling off period" that is characterized by a temporary shift of power in the relationship (also known as a cyclical "honeymoon" period). According to focus group participants, there are many factors that may lead a woman back to an abusive relationship, including distance from extended family, children and friends; lack of financial resources or job and life skills to enable her to cope outside her home community; and, often, simply a profound sense of loneliness.

"Abuse is something familiar, so women keep going back."

"It's very difficult for women on the reserves who try to leave and go to town. In the community there's mutual help; in town, you are on your own. If they survive a month, they're good." [Translation]

"I would end up in the hospital, but I kept going back for my daughter's sake."

First responders point out that available supports and services are certainly not accessed every time women experience an act of violence against them. Instead the resources may be used as a last resort.

"No one really leaves. Hardly ever. We usually have to ask them if they want to go to a shelter, but they hardly ever go. We have to arrest the perpetrator if there's any evidence, so they know they'll be okay for the rest of the night."

Barriers to Reporting Violence

Aboriginal women face a wide variety of obstacles – psychological, social and logistic – to reporting acts of violence against them and in seeking help and legal recourse. Focus group participants said that when violence occurs, it must be very severe – often nearly fatal – before the woman will report it to the police or leave the home. First responders agree that often by the time women call the police, they have suffered a series of incidents of escalating violence culminating in what is often a severe beating.

"Seventy-five percent of the time abuse against women isn't reported."

"Me, I was scared he would get mad again the same way." [Translation]

"A lot of times you'd finally get one where there was enough to warrant a weapons charge and then the victim would say 'well, last week he slapped me' … there were many previous incidents, patterns of getting worse and worse, but you couldn't use them because they were too dated."

Reporting is compromised by distance from police and support resources, by what is often a poor relationship with the police, and by fear of reprisals. The fear of reprisal

is a significant barrier for any woman considering reporting an act of violence to the authorities. Acts of reprisal, or the threat of them, may come from not only the abusive husband but also from members of his family; these relatives often exert pressure on the woman to leave the incident unreported and to return to the relationship.

> *"Someone from the family might get mad and get involved. The family is against you. You feel like the argument is with the entire family rather than the person you're dating."*
>
> *"They are scared of the other … Scared of what he could do." [Translation]*
>
> *"You report it to your friends and family, yes."*

First responders also expressed an appreciation of the concern about reprisals.

> *"They might not want to piss off all of his family in the community. The community is just 200-300 people, and if you piss off half of them it can cause you all kinds of grief. There's probably more reasons not to call than there are to call."*

Few participants were aware that laws and policies exist in most provinces to allow police to lay charges in cases of intimate partner violence without the consent of the victim. Moreover, many felt that the police were unsympathetic, ineffectual and sometimes cynical about the often-recurrent cycles of male violence against women and the apparent reluctance of some women to help themselves by reporting the matter, pressing charges or leaving. Focus group participants suggest that police may tire of women who seem unwilling or unable to help themselves.

There seems to be a kind of vicious circle at play here: these perceptions mean that many women have little faith in the efficacy of reporting an act of violence to the authorities because they have little faith in the authorities' ability or willingness to act effectively. Furthermore, allegiance to and dependence on an abusive partner sometimes leads women to attempt to protect the partner from the legal consequences that police can set in motion.

> *"Women will stick up for the men, don't leave it up to the women. Have the police charge him and put him in jail."*
>
> *"Even after I complained to the police and I went through everything, five years after he would phone me with threats: 'You will pay attention because I'm watching you.'" [Translation]*
>
> *"He just gets a slap on the wrist."*

Among the first responders, police confirmed the cycle of cynicism that other participants described. They agree that, after a while, cynicism does grow among their members, feeding into the belief that there is little they can do in the long term to fix

the problem. Women's expectation of police cynicism may itself contribute to a distrust of police, and to a reluctance to seek assistance or follow the recommendations of the attending law enforcement officer – the very behaviours that in turn increase police cynicism.

"At first I was shocked and everything, but since it happens so often, it becomes routine. We become desensitized to it. In the end it's always the same outcome, they get released, so you go deal with it, but you can't really help that much."

"For police, I think they've gotten a lot better about charging and not blaming the victim – it really depends on the individuals though …"

Another barrier to reporting acts of violence is the fear of losing children to child welfare authorities when violence in the home is disclosed. Focus group participants explained that one cannot assume that friends or members of the extended family will be able to take in women and their children who wish to flee an abusive man.

"Most women don't want to report it. They don't want the children to see the violence."

"We don't report it because we have to keep the family together – it's an important value for Aboriginals." [Translation]

"I have lived a lot of violence. I didn't complain because I was afraid to lose my children. I would go to the shelter to rest a little and then return. If the police intervene often I'm afraid to lose them because of the violence at home. That's what we see often." [Translation]

"You have nowhere to go."

Some first responders noted that, in the past, children were often removed from the home when police were called to respond to a violent incident, and although the approach has shifted in many communities – to keeping children with parents wherever possible – many still have this fear. Although first responders now strive to preserve and support family units as much as possible, they note a common perception among Aboriginal families, more or less historically justified, that losing children to social services is a distinct possibility following a report of violence, and that getting the children back may be very difficult.

"They certainly might not want to get children services involved, there's a policy here that if the children have seen the violence, they have to get services involved. It might cause the violence to escalate."

Another significant barrier is, simply, shame.

"It's difficult to go get help and it's embarrassing. It's my mother that forced me to get help." [Translation]

"They wouldn't want people to know they're getting beaten." [Translation]

The Impact on Women

PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS:

Not surprisingly, participants reported that violence negatively impacts on the victim's self-esteem and sense of security. They also felt that victims often blame themselves and conceal the violence from others as best they can to avoid the stigma that is attached to being a victim of intimate partner abuse. Some participants said that a "code of silence" prevents many victims from disclosing abuse outside the family unit. Turning to alcohol or drugs as an escape is seen to be a common coping mechanism.

"You're scared no one else will want you."

"You're isolated, you're alone."

"It's a feeling of failure." [Translation]

"You're told, 'You are worthless.' To hear that for years, it goes in and it stays." [Translation]

"They think it's their fault, they carry it for years."

"I don't deserve any better."

Participants also described women's concern that their parenting is affected by the experience of violence. Women may feel that they have nothing left to give to their children emotionally or physically – after dealing with violence. Some participants said that women feel a huge sense of failure, betrayal and hurt when the children side with the abuser against them. A few participants said that the sense of failure is often accompanied by feelings of hopelessness when patterns of male violence and abuse emerge in subsequent generations, reflected in the behaviour patterns of both victims and perpetrators.

"You're less likely to take care of your children because you have to take care of yourself." [Translation]

"Some children side with the abuser."

"They use the children as a weapon. She'll come back because they want their dad."

"The children don't know the fighting is going on. It takes place when they're in bed. They think the dad is a good guy."

According to first responders, the impact of intimate partner violence on women is primarily felt in their physical and emotional health. Respondents generally rate these as the most serious consequences of violence. For some, the consequences for emotional and mental health radiate into other areas of their lives, impacting the ability to function normally at work, or in their role as parent, or within the community in general.

"If you get beat up all the time, you can't be healthy."

"The person often remains anxious for a very long time … and when you're really anxious, it can impact you in other ways, your relationships with other people, whether or not you can actually get a job …"

The impact on the woman's social relationships can also be quite serious.

"There often seems to be more sympathy for the 'good victim' who doesn't have substance abuse problems, who will go through the courts, and do everything that's required. But if the abusive relationship continues, the system becomes less responsive. Kids may be taken away if the victim doesn't follow the recommended path of dealing with the problem."

POVERTY IMPACTS:

Participants talked about women being trapped by their sense that violence in a relationship is normal and may represent love. They are also trapped by their lack of knowledge about options and access to information and resources to deal with the problem. Participants living on reserve were especially likely to indicate a poor understanding of what "healthy" relationships are and especially unlikely to have had access to relevant information and resources. Fear of the unknown can keep women from seeking help, as can fear of losing a home and income.

"It's a way of being loved. You saw your parent being beaten every day, now you get the same."

"If you leave, you lose your housing. You'll find yourself at the bottom of the list. There's pressure from the council that administers housing." [Translation]

"Most people are told, 'If you leave, you won't get a penny and you won't have the children.'" [Translation]

"You leave everything behind. You have no money, no self-esteem, poor education."

"I didn't realize the women's shelter was for me."

"[If] the woman is the name on the lease, you have the right to stay. Maybe women don't know that."

Some first responders suggest that the financial impact of violence can actually be less of an issue than it might at first appear, given the higher employment levels among Aboriginal women and the fact that, at least for First Nations women, housing can sometimes be provided by the Band. Nonetheless, most acknowledge that the potential financial consequences certainly play a part in determining Aboriginal women's reactions to male violence. This is of particular concern if the woman does not reside in her own community.

"I think that what a lot of men do is they financially abuse women. They don't work themselves, but they'll go out and drink all the money."

"She may find other housing, but a lot of the time the abuser will constantly harass her, and it often happens that he'll eventually move into the new housing with her."

The Impact on Family Members

There is a clear sense that the impact of inter-parental violence on children is a serious consequence of such situations. In the short term, their school performance may fall and substance abuse can become an issue. Children are scared and scarred by the violence, and eventually violence becomes a behaviour that they themselves learn. This may be the most feared impact – that of children replicating the behaviours they have observed. One woman spoke of her dismay at seeing her child and the neighbourhood children playing "grown-ups" by pretending to stagger around drunk.

"It's emotional hell for the children. The children don't have the skills to deal with it. Kids wonder if they are the cause, they're in the middle."

"Now it's my son that tells me, 'Leave him, you know it's going to happen again.'" [Translation]

"When they live in that environment, the children only see that, they only live that. For them, it's normal. How can they have goals in their life later on? It stops them from living their childhood." [Translation]

"My son is at school and he sees his dad go by completely drunk. He's scared; he knows what's going to happen. Do you think he can work? And he has problems with aggressive behaviour and cries all the time." [Translation]

"They see normal families, and see that they are different."

"They act out at school, and get labelled as a bad kid at school."

For first responders, the impact on the children is particularly egregious. In addition to the direct short-term impact on emotional and physical health, in the long-term, the future parenting and relationships skills of children are at stake.

> *"They tend not to do very well in school, they tend to be really anxious, it impairs their ability to relate well to other people, they end up with a lot of serious emotional problems … And they're more likely to either become victims or perpetrators in their adult life."*
>
> *"They learn from seeing it happen to the victim that sometimes that is the way to treat women. They may learn from it that that is not the way to treat women if the police and other agencies get involved."*

Another consequence of the conflicts that stem from violence is tension between parents and children. Children's loyalties may be torn between their mother and father, and being taken from the family home to a shelter can lead them to inadvertently re-victimize the woman by blaming her for the situation.

> *"The kids end up blaming the mom as well, which makes it more difficult for her. The kids end up saying things like 'I hate you, why can't we be with Dad?'"*

The effects on other family members can also be serious. They may have to take in or financially support victims of violence and their children. The safety of extended family members may be compromised. Other family members, friends and even neighbours may be drawn into the conflict and seek to punish or protect the abuser. Some relationships with friends and extended family members come to be characterized by frustration when the victim refuses help.

> *"The neighbours … I would always run to the neighbour's house, he wouldn't come after me there."*
>
> *"She'll drop the complaint until the violence starts again." [Translation]*
>
> *"How can you help someone beaten down, who keeps going back?"*

First responders agree that the consequences are serious for the family unit as a whole. The breakdown in expectations and roles, the lack of trust and the soaring resentment involved in family violence can negatively affect generations of a family.

> *"Violence is kind of the final step in the family breakdown … We've been to an assault where someone beat up his dad who was 65, and you always see that the dad was violent and beat up the mom when the guy was young."*

First responders also point to the complexity of family relationships in small communities, where abusers and victims are well known to all, and extended families can be drawn into conflicts. Privacy concerns are fundamental, with a general sense that in such small inter-related communities everyone knows everyone else's business.

> *"The violence doesn't stop with the abuser, it continues with the extended family members … The families on both sides of the victim often become abusive, partly because the abuser's family are going to protect and be supportive of their family member. Many times the victim's family wants to re-victimize for fear of reprisal from the abuser's family, or for fear of financial responsibility."*
>
> *"Parents often get involved, siblings … Some people are believed, some aren't, and some are seen as troublemakers, there's a stigma for being a rat."*

The Impact on the Perpetrator

When asked about the male perpetrator, participants expressed the view that they had often been victims of violence themselves and that it was typically a learned behaviour. Some felt that, in the short term, the perpetrator often felt remorseful about the violence.

> *"Women drop the charges. He's sorry, he loves her …"*
>
> *"You forgive and forget."*

Focus group participants see police as reluctant to deal with or to remove the man from the scene or to charge him with an offence. Occasionally participants mentioned racist attitudes among police, including some Aboriginal officers. Some even speak of friendship and familial ties between police and abusers that compromise the objectivity with which victims are treated.

> *"The abuse was going on for twenty years. I tried to use the justice system, but the justice system failed me. You can't use it. Abusers just get a slap on the hand and get community service."*
>
> *"I used to call the cops, but they used to drink with him, so they wouldn't do anything."*

In response to a question about what usually happens to the abuser, first responders mentioned a variety of legal proceedings that can take place as a result of a victim reporting the violence. Legal sanctions can range from a night in jail to a sentence of several months or more, depending on the severity of the incident. In some communities, alternative treatment-based programs are an option for those who plead guilty. However,

it is recognized that reporting is much less frequent than the violence itself and that many offences go unpunished. Treatment programs and jail terms are viewed by many as insufficiently punitive to discourage future violence, even if the offender is genuinely remorseful at the time.

> *"We see the perpetrator being charged and sent to the specialized court, which is treatment-based. If he takes responsibility, he goes into treatment. But if it's a repeat offender, they're kept in jail overnight until they can do a bail hearing."*
>
> *"The jargon now is 'relapse prevention', so talking about it as an illness takes a lot of the responsibility away from the perpetrators. It really ends up giving mixed messages to the community."*
>
> *"Sometimes nothing happens to them at all, and they get away with it unfortunately, and they don't learn anything from it."*

Logistically, imposing consequences on the man can be very difficult in some communities, particularly in more isolated areas. For fly-in communities in the North, residents' access to the criminal justice system is often remote and infrequent. According to first responders, this can discourage victims from pursuing charges against the perpetrators because of the difficulty of physically reaching the courts and the length of time between the incident and any trial that ensues. In many cases, women victims of violence and their abusers return to the same home long before any legal repercussions are felt. Furthermore, the geographical obstacles to women obtaining legal representation can inflate the fear of reporting acts of violence and of losing custody of children. That is, it may take exponentially longer for a woman in such an isolated community to find a lawyer to help press charges or to regain custody after an incident.

> *"The justice system is a little different here. If they do report it, we'll come and take the report, but the travelling court doesn't fly in for a couple of months so they know that nothing will happen for a while."*
>
> *"We have telecourt, so we can do it by phone, but they don't even see the suspect, it's hard to judge a person like that. The people on the other end will hear the perpetrator sounding really sorry, so they often don't take it further."*

On reserve, especially the smaller reserves, as well as in isolated Northern settlement communities, enforcement of restraining and other protective orders becomes very difficult. The perpetrator is often allowed to stay in the home while the women and children are forced to leave. Furthermore, the legal consequences are seen as insufficient and not in keeping with the severity or impact of the crime. This perception is likely derived from personal experience, word-of-mouth or an inadequate understanding of existing abuse related laws and legislation. Participants also suggested that victims of

violence, or their families and friends, occasionally resort to vigilante justice, and that this might be more effective than the legal consequences.

> *"I went to the police, got a restraining order, but the police didn't enforce it."*
>
> *"Zero tolerance against violence didn't change anything. The guy is supposed to be taken away right away. Instead the woman is taken to a transition house or a friend's house."*
>
> *"It's a joke. We send them to jail for two years less a day. The sentences for them are too light in comparison to the long-term effects on the victims." [Translation]*
>
> *"Imprisonment – probation … But the man comes back home. Your violent partner comes back to the community, and because of the lack of space he can live across from you! The reserve is small. It's difficult to be physically separated." [Translation]*
>
> *"The cops won't help like a friend would."*

Most first responders agree that it is usually the victim who moves out of the family home when violence occurs. Nonetheless, there are at least some communities in which the perpetrator is encouraged to leave, particularly when legal proceedings are instigated.

> *"Here it's usually the perpetrator now. The ones we see who have gone through the court systems, anyway."*

Within the larger community, however, participants said that there is little responsibility or accountability assigned to the perpetrator. People are aware of the violence but "tend to their own business."

> *"Something tragic happens, and it only lasts for a month. Someone comes to talk to you but then they leave and it's forgotten about."*
>
> *"Everybody knows about it, nobody does anything. There's a lack of solidarity. In reality, everybody's involved in your business, but when you need help, no one wants to get involved." [Translation]*
>
> *"The woman gets beaten, and the man holds his head high, but the woman has low self-esteem, and hangs her head low."*

Among first responders, there was a clear view that the community sanctioned the violence to some extent. First responders suggest that in many Aboriginal communities, male violence against women is seen by some as an unpleasant but inevitable aspect

of the relationship between a man and a woman. Some stated that even Band Council leaders are not universally innocent. In terms of community sanctions, there has been little for the abuser to fear.

> *"On the surface it's frowned on, but the leaders themselves do it … it's accepted, it's almost part of their culture now. On the surface, if you were to ask them, they would say it's bad, but they also do it."*

However, first responders also point to encouraging signs that attitudes are shifting within their communities. Violence against women is gradually becoming less socially acceptable, and community leaders are beginning to favour educational initiatives that spread this message. Nonetheless, currently, little stigma is attached to the man as an abuser.

> *"It's becoming less and less tolerant of violence against women, and we're looking for more and more ways to combat it … we're looking at it from more of a restorative approach instead of a criminal one, which I think is helpful … I think Aboriginal leaders are becoming less tolerant, and pressures are increasingly applied to people at all levels … People talk about it now."*

EXISTING RESOURCES

For Victims and Their Children

Knowledge of support services and resources was lower among women who live on reserve, and there was a sense that there was not a wealth of available resources (with the exception of Val-d'Or).

> *"There's no women's centre on the reserve."*
>
> *"In terms of resources, they mostly turn to family and friends." [Translation]*
>
> *"There's a shelter with five spaces – it fills up quickly." [Translation]*
>
> *"I don't know the location of the transition house."*
>
> *"I've never been there."*

Nonetheless, participants were able to list a variety of resources for women victims of intimate partner violence. A number of participants had personal experience with these resources and some spoke approvingly of the way they were treated and the support and security they were given.

"These places are for everyone and anyone."

"You can stay as long as necessary. There are decent houses with security for natives and non-natives. Lots of security."

"It's locked at night, there's a curfew, and a direct line to the police."

The most commonly cited resources were:

- transition houses, women's shelters or crisis centres (municipal, non-profit or associated with a church); and
- crisis hotlines.

Services provided by such facilities include:

- temporary accommodation and assistance with longer-term housing;
- financial assistance;
- counselling services for victims and children;
- life skills courses;
- security and safety;
- drug and alcohol treatment and counselling (although there was uncertainty about the adequacy and allocation of these services);
- exposure to and companionship with other victims; and
- transportation.

Some participants decried what they feel is a tendency to refer them from program to program without any longer-term solution.

"There's the game of referrals – where to go to get help when you need it. You're referred from place to place, it's difficult." [Translation]

First responders also described some resources specifically designed to deal with intimate partner abuse, such as special courts that deal only with incidents of family or intimate partner violence. Programs that work hand-in-hand with such courts often allow perpetrators to receive help prior to sentencing.

"Quite often it has a real mitigating factor on the sentence. Sometimes women really want their guys to get some help but not to go to jail, and this provides an option for them to get treatment and not to go to court right away."

In some places, a special Aboriginal constable has been able to develop a good relationship with the community over time. This relationship allows for a higher level of comfort in dealing with the police.

Most first responders thought that these services were accessed by women victims of male violence much of the time, when they actually choose to seek help or report the incident. However, the frequency with which women choose not to report acts of violence means that these services are probably underutilized in relation to the actual incidence. On the other hand, it is important to note that the demands on these services are often at or over capacity. Should the many unreported incidents and unmet needs be reported, they could further overwhelm existing resources.

For the Perpetrator

Knowledge of resources for abusive men was low among focus group participants. Many felt that the men are reluctant to seek help, for reasons that include:

- a low sense of accountability or responsibility for acts of violence;
- a need to be seen to control the family;
- implications for the family and his personal reputation;
- expected financial impact;
- concern for privacy;
- inability to express personal thoughts and feelings with others;
- distance from resources; and
- lack of resources, particularly outside the criminal justice system.

Focus group participants felt that men would change their abusive behaviour patterns only if the consequences of their acts were severe (e.g., losing the family or receiving criminal charges and imprisonment).

> *"When we get into these situations, it's because men are drinking or on drugs. The men want to go into rehab or the 28 day program."*

For those men who do wish to change, participants recommended accessing support groups, education and counselling services. However, participants suspect that men only agree to participate in these programs when faced with a court order, not because of a sincere desire to change.

> *"Men will only go to the counselling if it is court ordered. Even if it is court ordered, they only go because the court is telling them to. They're not dealing with the problem. They're not doing it from the heart."*

Information on Support Resources

Participants said that the main sources of information on support resources are:

- posters in health facilities or elsewhere in the community;
- "word-of-mouth";
- the telephone book; and
- brochures or pamphlets.

> *"The police might direct you."*

As mentioned above, reference to web-based resources was almost non-existent.

> *"Most people can't get to locations to access computers because they don't have computers at home. So no, web-based services are not useful."*

First responders said that a primary channel for information should be the schools. Stopping the inter-generational cycle of violence by educating children at a young age that violence against women is not acceptable is seen to be crucial.

Funding and Management of Resources for Aboriginal Women

Knowledge was mixed as to how the resources for victims of violence are managed. Many participants were aware that governments help fund the support services, although some expressed skepticism about government commitment to women's needs. Fewer understood that charities and fundraising also play a role.

> *"The government won't give us money for a women's centre on the reserve. They'll give you the run-around."*

Although it is important that Aboriginal people are involved in the creation and provision of services and resources to victims, participants also see professional expertise, empathy and direct personal experience as significant in terms of funding and management of resources.

> *"We need someone who is honest to manage the money."*
>
> *"The Band Council gets all the money for the programs. [Is that right?] Frankly? Sometimes no. [Translation]*

Views on the management of resources were varied. Some focus group participants perceive a lack of transparency and accountability and suspect there may be problems of favouritism or corruption. Clearly, community leaders do not always enjoy the whole-hearted trust of all members of the community. Many participants believe that neutral, uninterested individuals should have control over managing resources. Few First Nations participants favoured placing funds directly into the hands of the Band Council, suggesting instead that a "third party" should administer the funds.

> *"Ask INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) for their money instead of the money being sent to the Band."*
>
> *"If you leave the reserve, you don't see any money. Please give me the money instead and maybe I can buy a good home."*

Gaps and Problems in Resources

Focus group participants believe there is a lack of resources in their communities. Many victims feel cut off or abandoned by their community, and a sense of loneliness resulting from leaving to seek help may drive them to return to the abusive situation. Participants mentioned the need for nearby accommodation for their children while the mothers are receiving counselling or other treatment off reserve.

> *"Women are part of the community; they shouldn't put the centre outside the community."*
>
> *"There's something missing for the children, so they'll be ready during therapy." [Translation]*

Support services may only provide short-term accommodation, counselling and security, leaving women vulnerable in terms of ongoing support and physical safety. In some communities, services are offered only on a 9:00-5:00 basis or are located in a remote area and may therefore be inaccessible at the time abuse occurs.

> *"Putting the transition house on the reserve will only cause more problems. We can't feel safe because the abuser can see you go."*
>
> *"The Mounties who work on our reserve work Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and after that you're on your own."*

In addition, the police (RCMP) may be hours away. Often they are also associated with racism; with favouring the perpetrator over the victim; and with simply not caring.

> *"I don't find them helpful, but it depends on the type of call. Someone who is stabbed, they'll come within ten minutes. Someone is killed; they'll be there in five minutes. If you call saying I'm about to be killed, you can end up dead."*

In some communities as well, available resources provide little follow-up or after-care, leaving victims without long-term support or an ongoing guarantee of safety. (Other focus group participants did note, however, that some centres provide a tracking service for several months to ensure that women are financially stable and that their children are all right.)

"Long term support is really important. You need exposure to something different, something to strive for."

"Money given goes to prevention. There's a lot of prevention programs. Funded programs are doing well, but the follow up isn't there because there is no funding." [Translation]

"There's no follow up at all. You can be referred to detox centres, but when you return there is no support." [Translation]

"There's a twelve week tracking period after the shelter. Are the kids okay? Is the job okay?"

In some communities, available resources have limited admittance quotas. Focus group participants have found that women are occasionally turned away without receiving assistance.

"You can't just walk in, even if you're an abused wife. You're turned away if the program is full."

As well, available resources often do not employ Aboriginal staff. Focus group participants suggest that non-native staff leave them feeling less comfortable than if they were able to deal with Aboriginal counsellors and social workers. This discomfort is caused by cultural and linguistic differences as well as a sense of displacement that accompanies their moving to an urban community.

"We'd like to see it run by one of our people, and not by white people."

"It's very important that it's an Aboriginal woman. I have nothing against white women but I don't think they understand and sometimes they judge." [Translation]

First responders also acknowledge there is often a lack of Aboriginal staff, particularly among police officers, and this can be discouraging for Aboriginal women seeking help for this sensitive matter. They also note, however, that hiring Aboriginal staff in small communities may mean that the victims would be related to the staff, thereby compromising client privacy.

"I know that was a big issue in the police force, there is a lack of Aboriginals in the police force, so they didn't trust us that much … I don't think it stopped them from calling us though, they just wanted to get the guy out of the house."

"A female Aboriginal RCMP officer who is based in the community can be quite judgmental and brutal with the victims, because she believes she has empowered herself, and that these victims should be taking more control of their lives."

"In some communities they'll have a worker there who's from the outside, so there's no conflict, but then there's less trust. If there are services within the community there will be a number of people there to whom you are related."

"Confidentiality here is a big issue, because we've had bad workers over the years, who have given information out after they leave the centre. We really need to respect their confidentiality when we stop working here. It's a really big problem."

Some first responders point to the culture shock that some Aboriginal women experience when they leave their home community to seek help. This is often most acute for Inuit women from isolated communities in the North.

"Fear of the unknown is a big thing, if you're a traditional woman from a small community in the North and you've never been to a large centre."

Crisis centre and counselling service staff may also include women who do not have first-hand experience with male violence. Participants have perceived judgement and a lack of sympathy among some women staff of crisis and counselling services. Some participants, on the other hand, praise the available resources that do employ culturally sensitive women who have themselves experienced male violence.

"We need people who have dealt with it – people who can fully understand what they are going through."

"I talked to this sister one time, a social worker. She made me feel like it was my fault. 'Did you do something wrong?' This person made me feel small … She was putting the blame on me. She made me feel a lot worse. I didn't talk to her any more."

In addition, childcare and transportation services may be sporadically available or unreliable, so women who leave reserves or small rural communities to arrive on their own in the city may be at an increased risk, especially if they are hitchhiking or adjusting to life on the street. Among focus group participants from Prince George, this is considered to be a particularly important issue, given that region's proximity to the "Highway of Tears."[5]

5 This refers to an isolated stretch of highway 16 that runs between Prince George and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, on which at least nine young women, eight of whom were Aboriginal, have been murdered or kidnapped while hitchhiking since 1974.

"Transportation is a barrier for getting to these sessions. Bus tickets would help."

First responders cite a similar variety of barriers to women accessing the resources available to them.

"I know for our office, we'll pay for taxis for people to come. So we tried to eliminate that barrier. But for some others, say, you can't get a taxi to legal aid."

"The shelter can only give transportation in a certain area. So often women in outlying communities would need the RCMP or a social worker to transport them. Then if the woman isn't comfortable with the social worker because they're judgmental, the woman may not report the violence."

They also note that a lack of staff training can be a barrier for some potential clients who perceive inexperience at some service agencies.

"Most staff have little knowledge about things like social assistance, or where other services are located … Knowing things like the differences in the system for status and non-status women, and how to appeal funding decisions, can be quite complicated."

"Not everybody knows what's available and how to access services. We try to give them some education, but lots of people still don't know."

According to participants, Band and community leaders are not adequately engaged in the issue of family violence generally. Lack of trust – in both service providers and other members of the community – is a major obstacle to women reporting and acting on abuse.

"There's a clan problem. If the problem occurs in the family that is not the good clan, there will be no interest to help them." [Translation]

"They don't want to talk to people they know. You might as well put an ad in the paper, the whole community will know. The counsellor should be someone who doesn't live on the reserve."

"Knowing someone in the talking circle is risky. They could share what happened during the session."

"Men are prejudiced, every time I call for help I get no help from the Band. And once you leave the reserve, you have no access. You still have your band card but you have no help."

"[What does the Band Council do in these situations?] Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. They don't get involved in these questions." [Translation]

First responders working with First Nations women living on reserve also see the lack of involvement in dealing with the issue by the Band leaders and the rest of the community as problematic. The lack of engagement can lead women to believe that their community is not interested in the problem. However, others point to encouraging signs that the tide is turning, with Band leaders and community members becoming more aware that male violence against women is unacceptable.

"Women always think that the community doesn't care. In the past, the community has given more support to the man, so women might think they won't get involved now."

"They're becoming more and more cognizant of the needs within their own communities, and there's more of an effort to deal with these social problems … they're looking for healing within the communities, and they recognize that family violence is part of that."

Suggested Ways to Increase Reporting and Access to Services

PUBLICITY AND AWARENESS:

Many communities have already launched a variety of educational and awareness raising efforts to encourage women to report violence. Focus group participants suggested several methods by which awareness of resources can be increased and violence against women can be discouraged; for example, publicizing names of offenders, educating children about all forms of family violence, expanding available resources and changing funding allocations.

"I read the newspaper every day and never see anything about violence against women … Point out the abusers, 'so and so is a wife beater'."

EDUCATION:

Among focus group participants, education is a particularly preferred means of interrupting the cycle of violence. It can involve teaching adults to respect each other within relationships, and training children to understand that violence is unacceptable. Providing opportunities for teenagers to socialize in a sober environment is also seen as potentially very helpful.

"You have to educate boys. When they grow up to be men, they are good men. The school system should put it in their curriculum."

"Teenagers need a place they can call their own. No drinking or drugs."

Most first responders also strongly support the call for better education about how to deal with this issue, both for the women victims of male violence and for the next generation. Many suggest educational initiatives in the schools that are attended by the children of women at risk, in order to prevent the development of a new generation of abusers and abused. Others think it is really an issue of community education, of teaching Aboriginal communities to be self-sufficient and to treat each other honourably.

> *"I think we really have to do more work in the schools. To help children that are in those situations, but also to really teach other methods of working out your problems … I think we really have to start working with kids who have been damaged so we don't keep repeating the cycle all the time, so they don't keep feeling helpless. I think lots of education in terms of the fact that it's wrong, that it's not normal and it shouldn't be tolerated."*

SPECIALIZED WORKSHOPS AND PROGRAMS:

According to first responders, a variety of initiatives are in place to encourage reporting and prevent violence against Aboriginal women. Some victim services centres conduct workshops to raise awareness and teach Aboriginal women how to deal with and prevent violence against them. Others have created special programs and courts to deal with violence against women.

> *"Sometimes communities ask us to come in and do workshops. Recently there was a forum that was held that was for Aboriginal women, and we talked about violence in the communities and so on … We run a group here in the city, and probably a lot of people benefit from that."*
>
> *"We did have a 'Stop the Violence' night, there were probably 150 people there, we just gave out information about why family violence shouldn't be happening. We had all the students at the elementary and the high school do posters about family violence, and it was really an eye opener for people to see all these posters."*
>
> *"We're about to start a counselling group in the fall. We're going to start a violence education program, to make men and women aware."*
>
> *"Substance abuse workshops for both men and women. We're running a two-week program for women with substance problems now."*

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY TRAINING:

According to focus group participants, existing resources, such as crisis centres, should be expanded to reflect more sensitivity to Aboriginal women.

> *"There should be a transition house that can service Aboriginal women. Some women can't speak good English."*

GENDER BALANCE IN COMMUNITY INFLUENCE:

Focus group participants also suggest that more opportunities should be provided for women to hold positions of influence within the community. For instance, men dominate First Nations Band Councils, and participants think that allowing First Nations women to participate in Band and community decision-making would help to prevent abuse.

> *"There are no women Band councillors, they're all men. If they had more women leaders, women might get more help."*

CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONSEQUENCES:

Some focus group participants raised the possibility of more punitive criminal justice measures. Enforcing sentences and "peace bonds" is seen to be particularly important; some women point out that men are frequently able to dismiss the seriousness of the problem because the criminal justice consequences are light.

> *"It's [the justice system] too lean on the males."*
>
> *"If they have a peace bond, they don't really care. If they broke the peace bond, nothing is done to enforce it."*

A lack of consensus exists among first responders on the criminal justice aspect of this issue. Some suggest that harsher punishment from the courts is needed, but others believe that a more restorative and less punitive approach is called for. Sentencing circles, as a method of engaging the community and discussing the many issues, consequences and grievances related to interpersonal abuse, are considered by some to represent a particularly fruitful approach.

> *"Just stricter punishment, more severe punishment. And it needs to happen more quickly. If it was part of the education system from the moment they're little, if they were taught that it was wrong, that would help."*
>
> *"I think the courts have to take a more restorative approach to dealing with the issues of family violence, with more of a view to healing the community and families, instead of strictly enforcement and incarceration."*

FUNDING:

Women who fear losing shelter and the financial ability to care for their children are less likely to report abuse. Providing funding for women to purchase goods and services and pay for housing is thought to be a particularly useful way to encourage them to report

and act on incidents of violence. In addition to the logistical benefits of such funding, the psychological impact of knowing such a safety net exists would be extremely helpful.

> *"There should be a supplement for working families. People who aren't working don't qualify."*

First responders strongly suggest that insufficient financial resources constitute a significant part of perpetuating the problem. They call for increased numbers of crisis centres and services, and for having the justice system more closely focused on the problem. Ultimately, however, the consensus rests on the need to dramatically increase educational programs, both in communities and in schools, as the key to resolving the problem of male violence against Aboriginal women.

Implications

The findings of this study point to several challenges in providing assistance to both the Aboriginal women who experience intimate partner violence and the perpetrators of this violence. They include the extensive prevalence and severity of violence in the community, as well as the long-term effects on children in terms of learned behaviour. Providing explicit information and educational initiatives for all family members, not just parents and children, is essential to ending male violence against Aboriginal women.

These educational initiatives should address the matter of "what a healthy relationship looks and feels like." Many victims and perpetrators of violence lack a basic understanding of what constitutes a healthy or loving relationship. Within the focus groups, women who had "turned their lives around" indicated that information they had received about how a healthy relationship works helped them understand how to break away from the cycle of violence. Clearly, it is necessary to introduce and support such norms, not just for individuals who are experiencing intimate partner violence, but for the entire community. An approach that raises awareness among members of the whole community – including victims, perpetrators and community leaders, as well as the general public – is recommended for dealing comprehensively with violence against women in the long term. In particular, participants felt that a "culture of victimization" should not be treated as an excuse within Aboriginal communities – neither for committing abuse nor for accepting it as normal. Instead, it is believed that an increased sense of community and individual responsibility for the safety and security of Aboriginal women should be fostered.

However, even when information is available to women suffering in an abusive relationship, it can take time and repeated exposure for this information to be absorbed and for women to act on it. In many cases it takes an accumulation of violent incidents

to finally push a woman to overcome the barriers to seeking help. For other women, evidence of the effects on children can be an important impetus to their seeking help. Because children are often adversely affected by male violence against women, they represent a key audience for educational materials.

Trust is an especially important issue within Aboriginal communities. It takes time to develop trust, but the process can be facilitated in a crisis situation by a friendly and familiar Aboriginal face. In the opinion of some respondents, it can be further enhanced by knowledge that the helping professional has had personal experience with violence. Nonetheless, focus group participants expressed mixed views about the need to have Aboriginal staff managing crisis facilities. Women who do not live on reserve are more likely to give priority to expertise and personal experience. By contrast, women who live on reserve tend to think that an experienced Aboriginal woman would be better equipped to deal with Aboriginal women – and be more trustworthy.

It was the consensus of all respondents that funding, tools and resources are required to provide the means and the opportunity for women to look beyond the cycle of violence and rebuild their lives. Aboriginal women believe that financial help, access to affordable housing and transportation to enable them to access services that provide education and assistance, counselling and life skills education, are the ideal means by which to approach this problem. While community-based resources may be optimal, they may not be realistic or sustainable in smaller communities. In those communities, reliable, convenient and affordable transportation to a nearby safe shelter that offers accommodation for their children is of prime importance.

The inadequacy of the criminal justice response is also a key area seen to be in need of reform, especially with regard to what is felt to be the current leniency of sentencing and insufficient engagement with the issue by the correctional and parole systems.

At this point in time, given the rare ownership of computers within Aboriginal communities, web-based resources are not effective forms of information. Rather, crisis phone lines, posters in community centres and schools, brochures and direct mail were suggested as effective means of providing information about violence to women and their partners.