Trafficking of Aboriginal girls and youth: risk factors and historical context

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A/ Introduction

When you ask Aboriginal women about violence in our communities, it's like opening up a flood gate. We move from issues of racism to poverty to police negligence to child abuse, the problems all winding around one another. The complex issues surrounding violence in our communities seem overwhelming. For years, Aboriginal people in Canada have been in a situation of crisis, but it has become commonplace to the extent that inaction is the norm. How, then, to discuss human trafficking with a focus on Aboriginal women and children, without getting caught up in all the other issues? I don't think it's possible. And so, today, I will touch on a range of issues related to human trafficking, which will hopefully add to our discussion over the next day.

One of the challenges we face in discussing the trafficking of Aboriginal girls and women is a lack of information. In 1997, when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Victoria, I took a class called "Poverty, Patriarchy, Prostitution" with Jyoti Sanghara of GAATW Canada. We studied human trafficking of indigenous women from other areas of the world, and as a Kwakwaka'wakw woman, I was moved to write a paper on the situation for Aboriginal women in Canada. However, what I found was a lack of research, a lack of information about domestic trafficking, despite the obvious over-representation of aboriginal women in survival sex work and the large numbers of Aboriginal women missing from across Canada. Ten years later, we are still in this position. Although the police and the general public have had increasing awareness of these issues through the media surrounding the missing women from Vancouver's Downtown East Side, the Highway of Tears in the north, and the national Sisters In Spirit campaign being carried out by NWAC, there is still a lack of academic and community-based research to support what we already know.

I'm sure we are all aware of the overwhelming statistics which paint a despairing picture of the lives of Aboriginal people. While I will provide some information on the rates of victimization in Aboriginal communities, I also believe it is not enough to focus on the trajectory of victimization. We must also focus on the big picture, tracing our way back to the roots of colonial violence and structural inequality. Additionally, we must adopt an intersectional analytical framework which accounts for the complexities I previously mentioned, which are impacted not only by axis of race and gender, but also by class, geographic location, and so many other compounding factors. Although Aboriginal women and girls are particularly at risk of sexual violence and trafficking, it is important not to separate them out from the rest of the Aboriginal community, and, indeed, from indigenous people's struggles internationally.

B/ Context of Colonization

Aboriginal people's relationship to trafficking is as long as our history of colonial contact. First Nations have been forcibly moved from our traditional lands on to

government-created reserves, our children forcibly removed from our communities to attend residential school. We and our sacred ceremonial regalia have been taken abroad to be put on display in museums and private collections. Forced relocation, migration and labor are not unknown to us in a historical context and have been integral to the colonizing process.

One of the better-known tools of colonization in Canada is the residential school system, which forcibly took Indigenous children and youth from their home communities, to be "educated", socialized, and supposedly integrated in to larger mainstream society. We know that the residential school system resulted in intergenerational trauma, which is still facing Aboriginal communities today, due to the physical, spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse of the children who attended. Underlying this system was the forcible breakdown of Indigenous familial systems, cultural traditions, languages, gender roles, and traditional economies.

However, colonization is about more than residential schools or the Indian Act or the creation of reserve systems. It is about the imposition of an entirely different worldview in to the lives of Aboriginal people, and the forced breakdown of traditional worldviews. Concepts of race, gender, spirituality, sexuality and identity that we take for granted today have been brought here through colonial practices, and we now face the challenge of untangling our traditional knowledge from the frameworks we now have with which to view them. Aboriginal women's roles in society, their value and worth, have been hugely impacted by colonial practices and ideologies, particularly in traditionally matriarchal societies. The government-imposed systems have resulted in largely male-lead band systems, with paternalistic ideologies underlying many of our current governance structures. These systems have a significant relationship to violence prevention and wellness in rural areas, where women who speak out about violence against them may be ostracized or penalized, especially if the offenders are in positions of power. These are complicated structural inequities which will not be easily undone or recreated.

Historically, we know that concepts of race and gender have served to disempower Aboriginal women, and to stereotype us as hypersexualized, dirty drudges. In her book *Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*, Janice Acoose traces the lineage of these stereotypes which excuse and invite violence against Aboriginal women. She says that from the early days of colonization, images of Indigenous women have been constructed in relation to images of settlers, portrayed as sexually available, lustful and out of control. Acoose says that "stereotypic images of Indian princesses, squaw drudges, suffering helpless victims, tawny temptresses or loose squaws falsify our realities and suggest in a subliminal way that those stereotypic attitudes are us. As a consequence, those images foster cultural attitudes that encourage sexual, physical, verbal or psychological violence against Indigenous women" (55).

While we must work to address the very real, daily violence perpetrated against Aboriginal women and children, we must be careful not to reproduce these stereotypical

images of Indigenous women as pure helpless victims. We have voices, and we use them. The question is whether or not our voices are being heard.

C/ Contemporary issues and risk factors

Canada routinely places in the top ten of the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), a basic comparative measure of the quality of life in countries around the world; in 2005, Canada ranked fifth. However, a 2004 United Nations report criticized the significantly lower quality of life experienced by Canada's Aboriginal population (Stavenhagen). The report estimates that the quality of life among Aboriginal people is comparable to forty-eighth on the HDI (Latvia's rank in 2005): "poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention, children on welfare, women victims of abuse, and child prostitution are all much higher among Aboriginal people than in any other sector of Canadian society."

The report warned that the status of Aboriginal people is "the most pressing human rights issue facing Canada." The UN report found that:

- Poverty affects 60% of Aboriginal children.
- The annual income of Aboriginal people is "significantly lower" than other Canadians.
- 20% of Aboriginal people have inadequate water and sewer systems.
- Aboriginals make up 4.4% of the Canadian population but account for 17% of the people in prison.

Research also tells us that victimization rates are higher amongst Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people in Canada. Just to touch on a few key points:

- Aboriginal people are three times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to be victims of violent crime, specifically sexual assault, robbery and physical assault.
- Aboriginal women and children are most vulnerable to violence. The overall mortality rate due to violence is three times higher for Aboriginal women than non-Aboriginal women, a rate that rises to five times higher for Aboriginal women aged 25 to 44 (Health Canada, 2000).
- Despite higher rates of violent victimization, Aboriginal people are no more likely than non-Aboriginal people to report violence to the police. About 60% of incidents of violent crime that are committed against Aboriginal people are not reported to the police.
- Health Canada research released in 2001 reported that 75% of Aboriginal women and up to 40% of children have experienced violence

Aboriginal youth face a particularly grim situation.

- The risk of self-reported violent victimization is highest among young Aboriginal people aged 15 to 34, whose rate is about 2.5 times higher than the rate for those who were 35 years or older.

- The suicide rate for adolescent Aboriginal girls is 8 times the national average of non-Aboriginal adolescent girls (National Forum on Health, 1997).
- Aboriginal youth are also involved in the justice system at higher rates, as they are almost 8 times more likely to be in custody compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Department of Justice Canada, 2004). This early involvement in the justice system creates a barrier for youth reporting violence against them, as they do not see police and other justice officials as supportive or safe.
- In research I conducted with the Justice Institute of B.C., released in 2006, we found that many rural youth saw violence as a normal, expected part of life. A large number of the girls we spoke to for the research, which focused on violence and sexual exploitation, had experienced sexual assault, sexual abuse and physical violence on a regular basis throughout their lives and said they would not report these incidents unless they felt their life was at risk. Even in these situations, many Aboriginal youth said that they would not go to the police if they decided to report, but would seek the support of a trusted adult instead.

On a National level, the Native Women's Association of Canada has been working to educate the public on the large numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls through their Sisters in Spirit Campaign. When the initiative began, they estimated that 500 women had gone missing or been murdered. After several years of gathering antidotal information from families, following newspaper stories and gaining access to police records, NWAC estimates that the numbers are in the thousands.

Locally, we all know about the slow police response in investigating the missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. In northern BC, the justice system response has been equally slow, although the factors facing the missing girls and women are quite different. The stretch of highway between Prince George and Prince Rupert has come to be known as the "Highway of Tears" after at least eighteen young women, most of whom were Aboriginal, went missing or were found murdered in this area in the last forty years. The numbers may be higher than officially acknowledged, as Amnesty International estimates that 32 Aboriginal women have gone missing in the last three decades. These cases were introduced in to the minds of the public in 2002 after a young non-Aboriginal woman who was tree planting in the area went missing while hitchhiking in to town. In these communities, people must hitchhike in to neighboring communities for food, services and to visit family. The geography of the north is very different than that of the lower mainland, and we must not forget the diversity of risk factors in these communities which stem from extreme isolation and lack of resources.

Additionally, the Canadian public has become more aware of the sexual abuse and exploitation of Aboriginal girls in the north through the Judge Ramsay case in Prince George. In June 2004, a provincial court judge was found guilty of one count of breach of trust, one count of sexual assault causing bodily harm and two counts of buying sex from a child. His victims were all Aboriginal girls between the ages of 12 and 17 (four victims came forward, but undoubtedly there were more who remained silent). His assaults included beating and raping a teenage girl and leaving her for dead in a wooded area outside of town. During the investigation process, reports of abuse from RCMP

officers and other high status members of the local community emerged, but no further charges were pressed. The question remains, then: What has come out of this case? There have not been any systemic changes made to ensure this doesn't happen again, or that similar situations are uncovered.

In a recent study of more than 500 BC youth who had been sexually exploited, one-third to one-half of sexually exploited youth were Aboriginal (Saewyc, 2008). This is merely the tip of the iceberg, as these youth were interviewed in urban centres where sexual exploitation is more visible and at-risk youth are easier to identify. In rural areas, sexual exploitation is rarely street-level and rarely for money. Youth in these areas engage in sexual acts in "exchange" for transportation, housing, and other necessities, as well as drugs, alcohol, etc. We also know that Aboriginal girls are increasingly at risk of exploitation due to having wide-spread access to the internet, without education about how to stay safe from online predators. I have spoken to many people who have stories of young girls being sent bus tickets or arranging to meet up with a boyfriend they met online. The internet provides potential exploiters, abusers and traffickers with increased access to Aboriginal youth, who are looking for a way out of their community. Youth in small communities consistently talk about being bored, having nothing to do and wanting a way out. Meeting someone online provides that escape.

I believe it is the hidden, unnamed, normalized exploitation that puts Aboriginal communities most at risk. The daily trauma, the daily violence, the expectation of violence. How do we begin to address these risk factors and abuses if we cannot identify and talk about them?

I would like to offer a brief story to illustrate this point: an Aboriginal police officer in the interior told me about a teenage girl who had reported a violent sexual assault against her, perpetrated by a number of older men. When the police officer asked her if this was the first time this had happened, the girl told her that she had been assaulted about a dozen times in the last few years but hadn't reported them because "it wasn't that bad". This normalized violence is so pervasive, so widespread among Aboriginal communities.

Human trafficking is not an issue that most Aboriginal communities are naming. Although all of the factors I've already touched upon—sexual exploitation, poverty, systemic discrimination, daily violence, historical trauma, isolation—put Aboriginal women and children at particular risk of human trafficking, we have not yet begun to investigate the extent to which these issues may all be related to trafficking, at either domestic or international levels. We do know, from stories passed on by service providers and concerned family members, that Aboriginal girls are being targeted by recruiters who have been spotted on rural reserves, following young women, trying to get them in to their cars.

Before we can definitively talk about the scope of the problem, we must hear from girls and women (and their families) who have been impacted by trafficking. And in order to facilitate that process, we will need to increase education at all levels as to what trafficking is, and how it interacts with related human rights abuses. How can we identify

this issue in our community if we don't know the scope or definition of trafficking? How can we keep an eye out for it when we are not able to name it?

Trafficking is in our minds as we look ahead to the 2010 Olympics, to the influx of visitors to BC. Not only are urban Aboriginal people at risk in Vancouver, but there are many small communities on the coast of BC who will be greatly impacted by the increased traffic through the area. What is being done to work with communities like Mount Currie, Pemberton, and the other small outlying areas around Whistler to educate local youth? Is transportation for local people being improved? No. Will youth continue to hitchhike from rural to urban areas? Yes. And the risks will only increase.

Finally, I would like to offer a word of caution: There is a tendency to equate the issue of missing and murdered girls and women with sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, however I believe we must be cautious not to conflate these issues. Many of the girls and women who have gone missing from the north were hitchhiking in rural areas when they disappeared. Their fate may be linked to trafficking, certainly to violence of various forms, but we can't assume that they were street involved or sexually exploited. We must be aware that the issues facing northern and rural communities are not the same as those in urban centres. It is not enough to look at the sexual exploitation issues in relation to violence and trafficking, but we must look at the big picture to see the less visible factors facing our women, youth and communities.

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