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## **Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs' Study: *Sex Trafficking of Indigenous People***

### **Introduction: About us**

The Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) represents 30 community-based sexual assault centres across Ontario. Centres' services include counselling to survivors of sexual violence, accompaniment to hospital, police and court, advocacy, crisis support and prevention education. Sexual assault centres' capacities in supporting trafficked persons include:

1. Longstanding expertise in working with those surviving sexual violence from a trauma-informed framework.
2. An understanding of intergenerational and colonial violence<sup>1</sup>.
3. Support practices that are framed by the understanding that *different people experience sexual violence differently*: that is, we know that a person's race, religion, socioeconomic status and age can affect their level of risk for being targeted for acts of violence, as well as resources accessible to them to escape or recover from violence. As example, the national inquiry found that Indigenous women and girls are *12 times more likely* to be murdered or to go missing than members of any other demographic group in Canada —and 16 times more likely to be slain or to disappear than white women<sup>2</sup>. Sexual violence affecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples also reflect these realities.
4. The capacity to support survivors of sex trafficking who choose *not* to engage with the criminal justice system (as well as expertise, resources and supports for those that *do*)<sup>3</sup>. While it is important that survivors of crime have access to the legal system, survivors of violence also need access to alternative supports.
5. Awareness that trafficked persons have complex confidentiality and safety needs. In particular, Indigenous survivors of violence in rural or remote communities face unique challenges to confidential support. A community or band office may be the only location where a person can meet privately with a worker – or access the internet for remote support -- and if a sexual violence advocate is meeting with a community member, everyone knows. Offenders are often local community members as well, creating unique conflicts for local leaders and safety planning challenges for victims. In this, community-based support must be aware of and adaptable to these circumstances.
6. An understanding of the complex needs of trafficked survivors, and the skills to help them to navigate health, justice, housing, income support and other systems. Trafficked survivors present a multitude of confidentiality, safety, shelter and access needs, and service providers must be prepared to respond to these. For example, the Ministry of Community Social Services in Ontario

<sup>1</sup> Nonomura, Robert. (2020). *Trafficking at the Intersections: Racism, Colonialism, Sexism, and Exploitation in Canada*. Learning Network Brief (36). London, Ontario: Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children. Online: <http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/briefs/brief-36.html>: 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Report released June 2019. Online: <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>

<sup>3</sup> According to Canadian research, just 33 out of every 1,000 sexual assault cases are reported to the police<sup>3</sup>, and just 29 are actually recorded as a crime See: Patel, A. October 30, 2014. for Huffington Post Canada. 460,000 Sexual Assaults In Canada Every Year: YWCA Canada. Online: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/10/30/sexual-assault-canada\\_n\\_6074994.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/10/30/sexual-assault-canada_n_6074994.html)

found that women facing violence *typically access more than one service*, with 39% using between five to seven services and 22% using eight to nine services. With this in mind, worker expertise in available violence recovery and transitional resources is key, as is an understanding of barriers to service access for Indigenous survivors of violence, and an ability to advocate for victims.

We believe that a community-based approach is the most effective way to support survivors of sexual trafficking, and those at-risk of being trafficked. In addition, we support the leadership and expertise of Indigenous organizations and leaders in identifying promising practices for preventing and responding to the trafficking of Indigenous people.

Last, sexual violence is most commonly understood through a *criminal justice, trauma or mental health* lens. We believe, in addition, that sexual violence cannot be separated from a broader *social context*: one in which the victim-survivor, the offender, and the violation itself (or threat of the violation) exist in a larger system of social norms, relations and inequities.

### **Sex Trafficking of Indigenous People**

Like sexual violence overall, sex trafficking affecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada is a form of class, race and gender-based violence.

The legacy of exploitation and white supremacy faced by Black, Asian, and Indigenous Peoples is thoroughly documented<sup>4</sup> in North America. Racial oppression includes many mechanisms through which white-skinned and colonizing forces benefitted materially from people of color: for example, through the forced labour of Black and Indigenous persons, through increased monetary opportunities over communities of color, and over decades of unequal distribution of resources. Historically and today, racial inequity includes an intentional *material aim* as well as ongoing “capitalist expansion”<sup>5</sup>, based on the exploitation of others.

In addition to material gain, intentional violence perpetrated against racialized persons is also a part of our colonial legacy: “violence—including sexual violence—that the colonial project imparted upon Indigenous Peoples was normalized through the propagation of degrading cultural and sexual myths concerning Indigenous women and men”<sup>6</sup>, and little to no recourse for those that harmed them.

In sexual trafficking today, victims are commodified in ways that benefit the *seller* and *purchaser* of sexual services, at the expense of the person forced to provide the service itself. Commodification serves to further gender, racial and class inequities by reducing persons into purchasable objects. Historically, enslaved women and children were also bought and sold to privileged populations for labour and sexual purposes. In this, commodification reduced Indigenous women and girls and people of color into objects to be consumed and owned by white persons; formally, this arrangement was sanctioned by the state<sup>7</sup>. From here, colonial history in North America and the accompanying “grotesque abuses of slavery” linked the lives of women of color with a constructed legacy of sexual accessibility, commodification and exploitation<sup>8</sup>. Like past colonial violence on Indigenous communities, sex trafficking includes the act of recruiting, grooming and receiving Indigenous persons for the purpose of their sexual exploitation, as well as the use of force, coercion or deception to maintain and profit from this arrangement. In addition, traffickers benefit from the economic marginalization, social marginalization, isolation and discrimination experienced by

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<sup>4</sup> Nonomura, Robert. (2020). *Trafficking at the Intersections: Racism, Colonialism, Sexism, and Exploitation in Canada*. Learning Network Brief (36). London, Ontario: Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children. Online: <http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/briefs/brief-36.html>: 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Hillman, Philipia Lauren. L. *Negotiating the Dominant Script: Middle-Class Black Girls Tell Their Story*. Unpublished diss. Faculty of Arts & Sciences, American University, Washington, DC. 1999. .

<sup>8</sup> Hillman, Philipia Lauren. L. *Negotiating the Dominant Script: Middle-Class Black Girls Tell Their Story*. Unpublished diss. Faculty of Arts & Sciences, American University, Washington, DC. 1999: 13. .

Indigenous people today—particularly Indigenous women and girls, and “cases where individuals are seeking an escape from extreme poverty or marginalization”<sup>9</sup>.

OCRCC member sexual assault centres note that Indigenous people face more barriers to utilising mainstream services and support, have increased vulnerabilities due to various social contexts and geography realities, and face systemic discrimination in structures meant to help victims of violence, such as police services, victim services and child protection services.

Young Indigenous women are often transient in communities, travelling from one place to another, or from one’s home community to a city. With this, they face catchment area limitations to accessing supportive, housing and other social services. Colonial boundaries created by mainstream funders and service organizations therefore *prevent effective work* with nomadic, transient or vulnerable Indigenous youth, who may move from one community to the next, and get turned down for services as a result. Natural social supports – for example, family, friends, community members or elders – face similar barriers to accessing victim response programs for this reason, or cannot secure the financial resources to travel to help a relative to leave an exploitative situation. For many Indigenous people, home is located in a northern or remote location, and the city is many hours away, such as from outside Thunder Bay to Toronto or Hamilton. Transportation across vast geography, as well as to helping services, are impacted by one’s access to public bus lines, fee for service taxis, or another person who can provide a ride. In all of these options, Indigenous women and youth are forced to choose between *no transportation*, and *unsafe circumstances*: i.e. taking a ride from a person one does not trust; accepting a ride from a person who may make exploitative demands in exchange; dealing with racist and misogynist harassment while using public transit; or utilising a taxi service that refuses to drive into Indigenous communities, forcing women and youth to end the ride early and walk the rest of the way<sup>10</sup>.

Many Indigenous women are at risk of being trafficked across Ontario, as well as into the United States. The contexts mentioned here are just some examples that inform the *push* and *pull* factors that make sexual exploitation possible, and inform who is most vulnerable to trafficking. An understanding of these contexts must be present in order to effectively plan and implement supportive, community-based practices for preventing and responding to the trafficking of Indigenous people.

## Recommendations

OCRCC believes that a race and gender analysis is critical to devising relevant policy, strategies, programs, service-planning and allocation of resources to address trafficking.

Our recommendations:

- A community-based approach is the most effective way to support survivors of sexual trafficking, and those at-risk of being trafficked – including those who choose not to engage with the criminal justice system
- Engage the leadership and expertise of Indigenous organizations and leaders in identifying promising practices for preventing and responding to the trafficking of Indigenous people
- Community-based sexual violence support service approaches should include: believing survivors as a foundational approach to support; culturally safe services and trauma-informed services; applied anti-racist, anti-oppressive, intersectional approaches<sup>11</sup>; and the importance of agencies delivering dedicated sexual assault services, offering a continuum of support options<sup>12</sup>
- In addition to crisis and transitional support, practical assistance – accessible transportation, resources for basic necessities (medication, food, clothing), shelter, and financial support – are

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<sup>9</sup> Nonomura, Robert. (2020). *Trafficking at the Intersections: Racism, Colonialism, Sexism, and Exploitation in Canada*. Learning Network Brief (36). London, Ontario: Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children. Online: <http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/briefs/brief-36.html>: 17.

<sup>10</sup> These examples provided by Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services, located on the lands of the Williams and Robinson Huron Treaties.

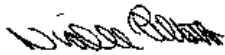
<sup>11</sup> Ontario Ministry of the Status of Women and Shore Consulting. November 14, 2017. *FINAL REPORT: Review of Sexual Violence and Harassment Counselling Services and Helplines*: 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 10.

necessary in helping Indigenous people, particularly those in rural, remote or northern locations, to escape exploitative situations. Practical assistance for victims and their families must be an integrated component of trafficking prevention and response

- Remove colonial boundaries to service access created by mainstream funders and service organizations that prevent or limit effective work with nomadic, transient or vulnerable Indigenous youth and women
- A coordinated response to human trafficking is needed in local communities so to increase capacity in addressing the complex supportive, practical and safety needs of trafficked persons. A variety of community-based organizations need to be involved in order to assist with everything from safe housing to to practical and emotional supports<sup>13</sup>. In addition, coordinated response to human trafficking in local communities ought to be led by gender-based violence organizations and Indigenous leaders/organizations, so to best reflect the complex needs and trends affecting these at-risk groups.

We thank the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs' for the opportunity to contribute to the Study on Sex Trafficking of Indigenous People. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.



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<sup>13</sup> *Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives: Ontario's Sexual Violence Action Plan*. 2011. p. 16-17.