



**ON THE EDGE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
COMMUNITY NARRATIVES ON THE VULNERABILITY OF
MARGINALIZED INDIGENOUS GIRLS**

Office of the Children's Advocate
MANITOBA
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When we fight sickness in our bodies, our minds, our spirits, and in our relationships, we fight colonial violence. Or, instead of the word “fight”, let’s call it what it really is: *self-love*. And so we have to find the courage to believe that we are worthy. That we belong. We have to find the courage to do the work of planting, growing, harvesting, and honouring the relationships. In this work, it is kind to ask for help.

We are such pitiful beings, there is nothing we can do on our own.

- Danette Jubinville- Cree, Saulteaux

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On the Edge Between Two Worlds: Community Narratives on the Vulnerability of Marginalized Indigenous Girls

Executive Summary

Abused. Trafficked. Exploited. Easy prey. Missing. Murdered. These days, this litany of depressing descriptors dominates most media stories about indigenous girls. Online, in print, on air, or in daily conversations, being young, female and indigenous seems to be assumed synonymous with a bleak existence and an uncertain future. Consider, then, how it feels to actually *be* a young indigenous girl today. Imagine if the only narrative you ever hear about yourself is that you likely grew up in violence, were victimized by those around you, and are likely to repeat this nefarious cycle once you become a partner and a mother. Growing up, you don't hear stories of strength from the outside world. You know strong and beautiful women in your family and community but when you step outside in the morning that is not the way the world sees you; your inherent value, the role you can play in the lives of those around you is diminished, unacknowledged, dismissed.

The lack of positive messages *about* young indigenous girls, and *for* them was the inspiration for this special report. As a province, we have failed this population of youth when the compendium of concerns we can list vastly outweighs our collective understanding of their inherent worth. We have forgotten – or maybe some of us never really learned – the incredibly powerful role that indigenous girls on the edge of womanhood can play in the world. Women are life givers. Indigenous or not, women have long been the primary influencers of the developing generation. And even in these days, when so many women are beaten and broken, they continue to influence and shape the minds of the little ones who are always watching, always learning. Indigenous girls who are in the care of Child and Family Services represent some of the most vulnerable youth in our communities. The years of racist and gendered violence that has been allowed to fester and grow in our communities shows its terrible face in the numbers of girls who are targeted, trafficked, and exploited. We see it in the ways young girls see themselves, and it lives in the headlines of the missing, some who are found, others who are not.

This report is unique in many ways. It is not just a retelling of the history we have come to better understand of Canada's First People, of disastrous newcomer government policies, of residential schools, and of the current child welfare system. Certainly each of those is found within the pages of this document as their influence on the current situation is undeniable, but this report is a narrative. We created thirteen questions about the experiences of indigenous girls and went to community members to ask them to share their wisdom and learning with us on what is happening, and what is needed to repair relationships and build up young women so they can once again become the anchors and

influencers of a healthy and healed society. To accomplish this, we asked Dr. Marlyn Bennett, well-respected researcher and community builder to lead this project of collecting stories and stitching them together to create this choir of voices. We invite you to allow the narrative to unfold; to hear the voices of those who offer their words. At times the words are empowering and gentle and at times they roil with understandable anger and passion.

Ultimately, what we learned is that the key lies in the strength of relationships – between nations, between members of a community, within partnerships, and inside ourselves. The health of our communities is tightly tied to the strength and tenacity of those bonds. And enriching this simple view are the ideas and solutions for real and positive change that were shared with us by the community. We have focused this report on the experiences of young indigenous women, because this issue is both racialized and gendered, however, there are just as many lessons applicable to all youth and to all Manitobans who want our province to be repaired and renewed.

We have made four recommendations in this report based on our research, the voices of community leaders, and our ongoing work supporting vulnerable indigenous youth. The first recommendation we make in this report is for a cultural audit and overhaul of foster care licensing standards and regulations. Safe, temporary caregivers exist in communities throughout the province, but many do not qualify as foster care providers because of the current regulations which do not reflect an understanding of cultural diversity and community norms. Safety must never be compromised, but much more can be done to develop safe foster homes around Manitoba so that children and youth in care have more options of staying close to home while services are being delivered to the family.

The second recommendation we make in this report is for the Manitoba government to develop resources and tools for foster parents who are caring for children who are not of their own culture. While nearly 90% of the children and youth in care are indigenous, foster families reflect a broader diversity of the general public and cross-cultural placements of children in care is common. To ensure that children in care have open and supported access to their own culture and traditions it is important that the child welfare system ensures that families who foster have access to those resources that can best equip them to ensure any child placed in their home is able to understand and explore their own cultural identity. This connection to culture is not only a protected right under international law, it is also strongly supported by research that the best outcomes for children in out-of-home care are correlated with strong cultural identity.

The third recommendation we make in this report calls on the Manitoba government to provide a significant new investment in hiring cultural workers who can be utilized by the child welfare system and who can work primarily with children and youth, but also with their families. The messages we heard throughout the development of this report have been that cultural exploration and building cultural knowledge are the pathways that can lead to stronger individuals, stronger communities, and ultimately this will improve the outcomes for children and youth involved with child welfare. As noted, these community views of the importance of cultural training are reinforced by wide bodies of social research.

Our final recommendation focuses on acknowledging that when community values are reflected in the structures of public services, service quality and accessibility are improved for marginalized populations. To that goal, we recommend the government look to the wisdom of people who have long held positions of influence and wisdom within indigenous culture and we recommend the government work with indigenous leaders and cultural advisors to establish a Grandmother's Council that can provide guidance at this time of incredibly important social reconstruction. The council would provide guidance and wisdom to government as it creates and improves services that respond to the needs of communities. The advisory council, or *Ganawenamig*, would be established to be a resource and asset to any government department but most specifically be a council to guide the departments that deliver services which impact the lives of children and youth across Manitoba.

**Ganawenamig:
An Oji-Cree word
meaning "looking
after the children."**

Our province and our country face an incredible time of opportunity. This is the time where we must honestly acknowledge the disgrace of how Canada's indigenous people were treated at the hands of those who came here from away. We have heard the stories of racism, abuse, and genocide. We see the effects of that collective history everyday across our province and we all have a responsibility to do our part to heal relationships and build up those who have been hurt. This is the most basic form of humanity – to be kind to others simply because we are all humans.

"The role of Aboriginal women in the health of family systems from one generation to the next was one of immense power...In traditional Aboriginal society, it was woman who shaped the thinking of all its members in a loving, nurturing atmosphere within the base family unit. In such societies, the earliest instruments of governance and law to ensure social order came from quality mothering of children...It is the fierce love at the centre of our power that is the weapon our grandmothers gave us, to protect and nurture against all odds. Compassion and strength are what we are, and we have translated these into every area of our existence because we have had to...Let this be known as the truth to all, so that we might all come through to a world once more in balance and harmony. I pray for that and struggle for that, for my great-grandchildren to come. To you Aboriginal women out there, to you survivors, I congratulate you, I encourage you, I support you, and I love you."

Jeannette Armstrong- author, educator, artist, and activist

Introduction and Background

For Indigenous women and girls, the individual accounts of abuse and descriptions of community-wide violence exist alongside well-known and publicly acknowledged dramas of disappearance and murder. In recent years, there have been high-profile assaults and homicides of young indigenous girls in Manitoba that continue to underline the growing tragedy. The racist and gendered violence, vulnerability and oppression that Indigenous girls and women have faced for well over 250 years unite these more recent local tragedies with many others who have died as a result of the ongoing violence perpetrated against Indigenous girls and women.

In its widely publicized report, *Stolen Sisters* (2004), the global human rights organization Amnesty International profiled many girls and women, all Indigenous, and all victimized by various forms of violence. Although these cases of murder and disappearance represent the extreme end of a continuum of violence, the evidence lead the authors of the Amnesty International report to conclude that there are myriad oppressive forces – or *intersecting sites of violence* – that culminate to create untenable living conditions for the majority of Indigenous women and girls in Canada today. One of the possible intersecting sites of violence rarely considered and analyzed, at least until more recent years where high profile tragedies have captured the attention of the public locally and beyond, is that of the child welfare system. A significant number of young Indigenous girls are in care through the Indigenous and non-Indigenous child welfare systems both within the province of Manitoba and across Canada. Factors such as historical and ongoing colonialism, intergenerational and unresolved trauma, racism, violence, poverty, substance use, and neglect, evidence many of the reasons why these young girls and their families become engaged with child welfare systems within this country. During their time in care, some Indigenous girls become increasingly vulnerable and are at risk of being exploited, trafficked and possibly murdered. While this research began with examining and exploring narratives about the overall experiences of Indigenous girls in care, it expanded to look more broadly at how many public systems interact with indigenous girls to get an understanding of the unique factors that can increase vulnerability of children when they become involved in public services.

Methodology and Analysis of the Data

To understand perspectives on the vulnerability of marginalized Indigenous girls in care this research relied upon a qualitative approach. Narrative inquiry was applied to this research because of its congruency with the Indigenous value of oral traditions. Oral traditions are central and foundational to Indigenous societies and Indigenous cultures for transmitting and preserving knowledge, heritage and ways of being amongst generations (Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008; Todd Ormiston, 2010). A narrative research methodology has also been selected for its function of including the participant in the research process. Andrews (2007) explains that although there is the possibility to create harm with a narrative research approach, there is also the opportunity for beneficial and positive outcomes for the participants:

[D]epending on the intention of the researcher, narrative can lead to illumination - activity that makes a just difference in the lives of people - or it can lead to parochialism. The challenge is to

develop complementary approaches to indigenous narrative so that it is neither exclusive nor insular but instead inclusive and dynamic. The goal, then, of indigenous narrative is to invite participation of native people and their communities in the narrative process. This participation engages the researcher/scholar and native/indigenous people in building relationships that bring to the surface stories of experienced phenomena - concrete evidence - around pressing issues (e.g., historic hurt and pain). Making visible and loud what has been silent and invisible - transcending the concrete - has the power to promote a generative learning process ... that might lead to community transformation. (Benham, 2007, p. 517)

The elements of narrative research methodology have therefore been relied upon in writing up the findings of this report. This research project had a small sample size to meet the criteria of depth versus breadth, which aligns with narrative research methodology. As such, the study relied upon a sample size of eleven Indigenous individuals in order to capture in-depth narrative data.

Interviews were conducted over the months of July and August 2015. Interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes in length. All interviews were audio recorded. Participants were asked to formally consent to being interviewed for this report prior to the start of the interview, however, a number of the Elders interviewed provided verbal instead of written consent and the researcher was reminded that "that's the way it is with our people." Copies of the interview questions were made available in advance as much as where possible. The interview questions were provided to all participants at the beginning of the interviews so that they could follow along as the interview proceeded.

In keeping with Indigenous traditions, all of the participants were gifted with tobacco and presented with a small gift such as a painted rock. Interviews were held at various locations, some interviews were held in private homes and/or at outdoor coffee shops, parks, offices, and one interview was conducted in a parking lot.

The transcripts from the interviews yielded approximately 300 pages of narrative content. The textual analyses of the narrative data involved multiple readings and interpretations that were generally inductive in nature. Inductive analysis is an approach that uses detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes or a model of interpretation made from the raw data by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). This way of analyzing the data provided a quick and convenient way of analyzing themes emerging from the narrative content. Organization of the data from the interviews was conducted using NVivo, a software program for organizing qualitative data.

The Interview Questions

This report is based on the responses provided to the following thirteen (13) questions:

1. Why are Indigenous girls so vulnerable when they come into care?
2. Why are so many young women mistreated and exploited?
3. What messages do we need to communicate to other people about the roles of young girls and women?
4. If indigenous girls cannot live with their birth families and there are limited safe options for these girls to live with extended family or trusted community members, where else can they find support, development, and teachings?
5. What is missing in how we teach boys to interact with girls?
6. How can the public systems (child welfare, justice, health, education, etc.) be improved so outcomes for young girls get better?
7. Are there elements of traditional parenting or traditional family structures that would help improve the situation for young women who are vulnerable?
8. What do communities need to be able to provide more safe and nurturing homes for young girls?
9. What are some of the things that can be done to keep Indigenous girls safe when they come into care of child welfare?
10. Are there any programs that need to be developed to address the vulnerability of Indigenous girls in care?
11. What do you believe young girls need to thrive in life?
12. What suggestions do you have that would make all Indigenous girls safer?
13. If you could pass a message to young girls, what would you want to tell them?

Limitations

As with most research, there are limitations to research that uses primarily qualitative approaches, which must be acknowledged. Firstly, the number of individuals who participated in this study is small and their narrative stories and their specific reflections cannot be generalized or replicated among other populations within Canada. Secondly, the analysis of the narrative content from the transcripts involved interpretative judgments on the part of the researcher and therefore it should be noted that readers looking at the same data might arrive at different interpretations.

There were some additional limitations noted. These briefly include:

- The research focused on the wisdom and perspectives of Indigenous adults who were identified as possible sources of wisdom on the specific issue and thus, research was not conducted among Indigenous girls who would consider themselves to be vulnerable, nor with Indigenous girls in care;

- Interviews were not undertaken with non-Indigenous participants, which consequently excludes a perspective that might shed more light on the present issues and themes;

Given these limitations, the approach to understanding the issue of the vulnerability of Indigenous girls as presented in this report is therefore not complete. With that said, the noted limitations should not be taken to devalue the approach taken or the findings reported herein. Most of these limitations are natural to research that is qualitatively based.

Note on Terminology

It is important to be aware of the definitions reflected in this report. Throughout, the terms “Aboriginal,” “First Nations” and “Indigenous” have been used interchangeably, however, preference has been given to the use of “Indigenous.” The collective noun to describe the original inhabitants within Canada is somewhat contested. The term “Indian” is used in the *Indian Act* but has largely been replaced by the term “First Nation” to refer both to those who have “status” under the *Indian Act* and those who do not. The term “Aboriginal” has largely replaced the term “Native” and over the years the term moved into popularity as the correct collective noun for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples,¹ which was widely adopted by government and many national groups. This distinction was made legal in 1982 when the *Constitution Act* came into being. It has become more common recently to use the term Indigenous, which is also a preferred term in the international context. This term is also referenced in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* to recognize the sovereignty characteristics that distinguish Indigenous people from other racial or ethnic minority groups, a factor that imposes particular obligations on government.² In addition, it hints at the shared oppression caused by colonization. However, it is acknowledged that the term Aboriginal identifies people solely by their political-legal relationship to the state rather than by their own self-identified cultural and/or social ties to their communities (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). When citing the work of others (whether titles or direct quotes), the integrity of the reference has been maintained by using the original terminology.

¹ “First Nation” is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and ‘80s and generally replaced the term “Indian,” although unlike “Indian,” the term “First Nation” does not have a legal definition. Métis people are a people from mixed European and Indian ancestry. Inuit are Aboriginal peoples of far northern Canada. These Aboriginal groups of peoples have unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs, as well as unique current and historical relationships with Canada (Bartlett, Iwasaki, Gottlieb, Hall & Mannell, 2007).

² The federal government has recently moved to embrace the term “Indigenous” and all of its legal ramifications and the department responsible for Indigenous populations has been renamed Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). By recognizing First Nations, Inuit and Metis as “Indigenous Peoples,” the government is acknowledging their internationally legal right to offer or withhold consent to development under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada endorsed with conditions under then Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and which the federal government under current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has as of May 2016 now fully endorsed and removed its former objector status.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter starts with the literature on the history of colonization, an overview of the dispossession of Indigenous people and women specifically; the residential and Sixties Scoop eras, and lastly, child welfare and the continuing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the system.

Colonization and Assimilation

Colonization has had a devastating effect on the lives of Indigenous people in Canada. Attempts to assimilate Indigenous people started shortly after European contact as “colonists viewed the Indigenous people as impediments to the cultivation of the land and to civilization generally” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2012, p. 4). By assuming control over all aspects of their lives and assimilating Indigenous people into the new European (British) Canadian culture, the government hoped to get rid of “the Indian problem” (Royal Commission, 1996) – which threatened the Crown’s aspirations of expanding control over the vast area of land that Canada now encompasses (Fleras, 2010, p. 178). The *Indian Act* (which consolidated various pieces of legislation from around the country) was passed in 1876, and came to control every aspect of Indigenous life (Miller, 2004). The Act defined who was an Indian and how they could either gain or lose this status; where they could live; the activities that they could partake in (religious and cultural ceremonies were banned); and how they governed themselves (Frideres & Gadacz, 2012). Indigenous people could not own land and were not able to participate in economic activities to sustain themselves and their families. It also regulated the consumption of alcohol, prohibited Indigenous rights to vote in federal, provincial and municipal elections, and prohibited the sale of agricultural products without permission, as well as consolidated the creation of reserve lands (Walmsley, 2005).

Discrimination Against Aboriginal Women

The *Indian Act* also greatly disadvantaged Indigenous women, as it was based on western patriarchal beliefs (Anderson, 2000). Thus, Indigenous women who were once considered at the centre of the family were greatly respected within the community, and who lived in a matrilineal society and had political power were now disempowered and devalued as a result of colonization (Anderson, 2000). Patriarchal beliefs and the *Indian Act* stripped women away from their honored and valued position in indigenous societies, as the Act disadvantaged women with respect to land surrender, wills, band elections, Indian status, band membership, and enfranchisement (Anderson, 2000; Walmsley, 2005). Historical catalysts to the current problem of violence against Indigenous women includes social policy and the imposition of value systems through the Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the list of racist and sexist legislation is long and continues to grow, but the *Indian Act* (1876) is certainly the most harmful legislation still in effect today which continues to oppress Indigenous women and girls.

Aboriginal Women have been, and continue to be the most victimized group in Canadian society. From birth, the Aboriginal woman must confront all forms of discrimination –gender, race and class. She is frequently the victim of systematic emotional, sexual and physical abuse, perpetuated since childhood by fathers, foster and adoptive parents, husbands, teachers, priests, social workers and police (Frances, 2006).

The colonization of Turtle Island brought with it many policies, values, and belief systems that were in direct opposition to the values, norms, traditional laws, customs and relationships of Aboriginal peoples.

Within the new colonial systems were imbedded beliefs that women were of lesser value than men. Women were seen as property to be owned, controlled, and punished as the 'property' owner saw fit. Extreme injury and death were accepted outcomes when women were punished. In the colonizing government's eyes, women were not people, and therefore any rights afforded to women were removed and transferred to men, who were thus viewed as holders of property: women. These policies pushed Indigenous women off of their traditional territories and away from their communities (Salomons, 2010).

Smith (2005) argues that the main objective of residential schools toward girls "was to inculcate patriarchal norms into Aboriginal communities so that women would lose their place of leadership in Aboriginal communities" (p. 37). The subjugation of women's bodies, victimization of women, the domination of men, hierarchical categories, and violence against women were imposed as the norm. These Eurocentric values and belief systems were in direct contrast to the traditional roles, responsibilities and values placed on Indigenous women. Indigenous women traditionally played a central role within the tribal community.

Women are also central to almost all Turtle Island creation legends. For the Anishinaabe, it was a woman who came to earth through a hole in the sky to care for the earth; it was a woman who taught the original man about the medicines of the earth; and it was a woman who brought the pipe to the people that is used in the most sacred of ceremonies. In most Indigenous communities, the women play the leading role in child education and food gathering, but both sexes share the roles of healers, lawmakers, performers, and custodians of traditional ways of life. Among the Iroquois nations, women had the political right to nominate and recall chiefs, they controlled their families, had the right to divorce and could determine how many children they would raise (Buffalohead, 1983).

Residential Schools

The residential schools can be considered one of colonial Canada's first child welfare institutions geared towards Indigenous persons (Mandell et al., 2003). The residential school system was first implemented in the 1880s as an institution to assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream Euro-Canadian society (Miller, 1996). Usually church-owned and government-funded, these residential schools were designed to eradicate Indigenous cultures and promote Christian and Euro-Canadian values instead (Milloy, 1999). A total of 130 residential schools were constructed across Canada, whereby over 150,000 children were removed from their homes and forced to attend these schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Children were exploited, and in many instances were physically and sexually abused by the residential school staff (ibid.). The last of these residential schools closed in 1996 (Blackstock, 2007). However, even with the dismantling of residential schools, there has been a long and lasting legacy of social, psychological, and economic problems amongst Indigenous peoples as a direct result of their forced attendance at these schools. Residential schools became the first level of oppression that

attacked the spirit of most Indigenous children. In these schools both genders came to understand the power of violence (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The intergenerational trauma from the experience of residential schools produced generations of individuals who did not have an opportunity to heal from the childhood traumas of psychological, physical, and sexual abuses inflicted upon them (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

The Sixties Scoop

In 1951, when residential schools were still operational, revisions were made to the *Indian Act*, which called for the provincial government to provide Indigenous people living on reserves with programs such as health, education and social welfare services (Heinrichs & Hiebert, 2009). However, even with these laws passed, there was minimal action taken by the provinces to improve the welfare of Indigenous children and their families. For example, according to Heinrichs and Hiebert, (2009) the provincial "approach for child welfare for Indian people in Manitoba was to apprehend kids" (p. 113). There was no attempt to try alternative solutions or address the root cause of the problem (i.e., the systematic oppression of Indigenous people). The provincial child welfare authority cited jurisdictional issues as a reason for providing limited social services to Indigenous peoples living on reserves (Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, n.d.). And then, the child and family services system began to expand in the late 1960s. These services were largely carried out by non-Indigenous social workers with little to no understanding of the various cultures of Indigenous people. This gave rise to ethnocentric, culturally insensitive practices, often reminiscent of those found in residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). During this time, many Indigenous children were taken from their homes and communities and placed off reserve, in non-Indigenous homes as adopted or fostered children (Heinrichs & Hiebert, 2009).

This practice became ubiquitous throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and was thus famously labeled the Sixties Scoop. Because these children were removed from their families, they often suffered from psychological and social problems. Many of these children were placed into foster homes where they were unable to "assimilate" because of the racism they experienced, the loneliness they felt due to the knowledge that they did not belong and grappling with internalized racism adopted from mainstream stereotypes of Indigenous people (Heinrichs & Hiebert, 2009, p. 126). Essentially, this new form of child welfare supplanted the residential schools as a means of colonizing Indigenous children. Additionally, in all of these cases, no Indigenous people or Elders were consulted or asked to provide feedback or recommendations on improving the child welfare system (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Commission [AJIC], n.d.).

Because of this history of abuse and neglect on the part of these child welfare institutions and the failure of the government to enact any meaningful changes, one can easily understand why many Indigenous peoples then as well as today are fearful and distrustful of non-Indigenous agencies that attempt to provide welfare services to their communities (Region of Waterloo Social Services, 2010). These non-Indigenous agencies can be a painful reminder of the past, where Indigenous children were

forcibly removed from their homes and separated from their culture, which left both families and communities devastated.

Much like the residential school era, researchers have pointed to the fact that child welfare has been used as a tool to continue the colonization of Indigenous peoples (McKenzie & Hudson, 1985; Blackstock, 2007). While there was a Sixties Scoop, there were also seventies, eighties, and nineties scoops. In fact, many have argued that the scoop of children from First Nations and other indigenous communities has not stopped. Children continue to be removed from their homes in such high numbers that the term “millennium Scoop” (Sinclair, 2007) has been increasingly used to emphasize the extent of the problem, which Fast and Collin-Vezina (2010) and other researchers (McKenzie & Hudson, 1985) also contend is a “continuation of the residential school system, only under a different pretense” (p. 128). Many of the children apprehended during this era are broken and have fractured identities (Spears, 2003). The number of children in care continues to rise even though they may be serviced by Indigenous child welfare agencies (Trocmé, Maclaurin, Fallon, Knoke, Pitman & McCormack, 2006).

Overrepresentation

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the care of the provincial child welfare systems across Canada is reflective of colonial practices that have not ended (Richardson & Wade, 2009). The number of children in care continues to rise even though Indigenous children are increasingly serviced by Indigenous agencies. As of March 2015, Manitoba had 10,295 children in care, 87% of which are Indigenous (First Nation and Metis) children (Government of Manitoba, 2014, p. 88). According to information supplied on request by the Department of Family Services to the OCA indicates that exactly 50% of the children in care are female (Child and Family Services Division, personal communication, January 28, 2016).

National studies (Trocmé, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004) have found that the majority of Indigenous children are taken into care because of “neglect”, which may be difficult to assess and involves more chance of bias than assessment of abuse. de Finney, et al. (2011) note through their critical exploration of children and youth who are “minoritized” (those who fall outside the normative ideals of family) demonstrates that those who end up in care and why they end up in care is neither a coincidence or the exclusive result of individual failings, but rather it is the “outcome of a system designed to reproduce normative roles (i.e. civilized roles) for children, youth, and families and for those who serve them” (p. 362).

The best estimate is that there are well over thirty thousand Indigenous children in care on and off-reserves in Canada (Blackstock, 2007). While these numbers are astronomically high, attention to the concentration of Indigenous girls in this system is warranted given the number of girls who appear among the numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) across the country. The lack of publically available data, as well as in other provincial jurisdictions, is troubling given the frequency of sexualized violence against Indigenous girls and women (Brennan, 2011; Pearce, 2013).

In Canada, most Indigenous children are placed in non-Indigenous settings, where it is very difficult to learn about Indigenous teachings and develop a cultural identity. Being removed at an early age and spending years in care can lead to attachment disorders, which can magnify the impact of childhood maltreatment and increase the vulnerability of children and youth to a host of maladies: involvement in commercial sexual exploitation, gangs, and exposure to the juvenile and adult correction systems (Totten, 2009). The second key pathway that disadvantage Indigenous children and youth is experiencing multiple out-of-home placements in child welfare and correctional facilities (Kelly & Totten, 2002; Totten, 2000 and 2008). These facilities are known to be prime recruiting grounds for gang members, and a significant number of gang members report that they only became gang-involved following placement in such facilities (Totten, 2008a and 2008b). Currently, one in ten Indigenous children are in foster care and group homes compared to one in two hundred non-Indigenous children and youth.

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

The social phenomenon of girls being sexually abused while in the custody and care of the government is not a new issue (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2008). The literature on Indigenous children experiencing sexual abuse while in the custody of the government is vast, as it tends to pertain primarily to the residential school era and its effects (Dallaire, 2014). Following this is the body of literature on the Sixties Scoop where thousands of Indigenous children were placed into non-Indigenous homes (Sinclair, 2007). As many Canadians now know, residential schools were used as a form of foster care and many children in these institutions experienced sexual abuse (Blackstock, Brown & Bennett, 2007).

Indigenous children in the child welfare system are the "most vulnerable children in Canada" (Canadian Council, 2010, p.1). Indigenous girls are particularly vulnerable when placed in under-resourced foster care and alternative placements without adequate supervision. The task of supervising marginalized Indigenous girls, when delegated to untrained caregivers increases their vulnerability to the risks of sexual violation, exploitation and exposure to drug and alcohol addictions (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2008).

Female children face the greatest risk for negative effects, responses, and outcomes because female children face the highest risk of sexual abuse. The literature has established that children and youth placed in care may be exposed to greater risks, which include being sexually exploited and trafficked into the sex industry (Kingsley & Mark, 2000), physical and mental health concerns (Courtney, Dworsky, Brown, Cary, Love & Vorhies, 2011; van Vugt, Lanctôt, Paquette, Collin-Vézina & Lemieux, 2014), pregnancy (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006), involvement in the justice system (Representative, 2009), and having suicidal behaviours and thoughts (Elias, et al., 2012) among others. These negative effects are not exhaustive.

Not only has research established that sexual abuse in the foster system increases the risk of Indigenous girls being sexually exploited, but there is extensive research suggesting girls sexually abused while in

the foster care system are at an increased risk of intravenous drug use and that usage occurs at a younger age than their non-fostered and non-abused counterparts (Craib, Moniruzzman, Norris, Pearce, Patterson, Schechter, Spittle & Christain, 2008; Fuller, Garfein, Ikeda, Ompad, Shah, Strathdee, Vladhov & Baily-Maslow, 2005; Frankish, Laliberte, Li, Mille, Schechter, Shovellor & Spittal, 2003). A study published by Miller, Spittal, Li, Lalibert, Frankish, Shovellor, et al., (2003) entitled *Foster Care, Sexual Abuse And Being Female Predicts Young Age at First Injection*, based on interviews with more than 1400 participants, looked into the initiation of female youth into injection drug use. The authors noted that despair caused by sexual abuse and being raised in the foster care system, particularly among young females, may provide insight into why youth begin to inject drugs. *The Cedar Project*, which explored trends of sexual assault among young Indigenous women (14-30) who used drugs over a seven-year period in Vancouver and Prince George, BC, revealed a high prevalence rate of sexual assault among young Indigenous girls and women who use drugs in urban British Columbia. The authors of *The Cedar Project* say the odds of being sexually assaulted are significantly higher (two times) among women who had at least one parent who attended residential school. Information about *The Cedar Project*, published by Pearce, Blair, Teegee, Pan, and Thomas, et al. (2015) also indicates that participants who were sexually abused in childhood had a nine-fold increased risk for experiencing additional sexual assault.

Research conducted by Saewyc, et al. in a 2008 study with over 1,845 youth across British Columbia found that many of the participants (over one-third were Indigenous youth) had had experience with child welfare services. For many, foster care or a group home was their first site of sexual exploitation. As Sawewyc et al. note, sexually exploited youth were significantly more likely to have been in care than their non-exploited peers (p. 40). The researchers highlighted the following statistics:

Among younger street-involved youth in 2006, 44% of sexually exploited youth had been in care, compared to 33% of non-exploited youth. Similarly, among older street-involved youth in 2001, 66% of exploited youth had been in care, compared to 41% of non-exploited youth. Youth in custody in 2000 had even higher rates: 75% of sexually exploited youth had been in care, while 59% of non-exploited youth had been in care. (Saewyc et al. 2008, p. 40)

A literature review and research with key informants regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women conducted by the Native Women's Association of Canada (2014) is quick to point out that being in care does not necessarily equate with being sexually exploited as such incidences could happen prior to or after having left child welfare care. Sikka (2009) has drawn parallels between the overrepresentation of Indigenous children's time in child welfare with the overrepresentation among those involved in the commercial sex industry. As Sikka notes, Indigenous children are pushed into the child welfare system at three times the rate compared to other Canadian children and consequently their involvement in commercial sexual exploitation increases given their exposure to the child welfare system. There is a strong link between poverty, poor housing, systemic discrimination, educational disruptions, isolation, and low self-esteem that heighten Indigenous women, girls, and children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Faced with poverty and poor housing, and underfunding to family supports, Indigenous families become targeted and profiled as high risk within the child welfare system (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2014).

In 2007, the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada (“Caring Society”) and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) filed a human rights complaint against the federal government regarding the discriminatory treatment of First Nations children in child welfare. On January 26th, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the federal government discriminated against First Nation children on reserve by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services and funding that exist elsewhere in Canada. In its ruling, the tribunal agreed with the Caring Society and the AFN that the federal government’s funding model and management of its First Nations child and family services resulted in denials of services and created various adverse impacts for many First Nations children and families living on reserves. The tribunal decision states that the government must cease this discriminatory practice and take measures to redress and prevent this ongoing discrimination. The tribunal calls for a redesign of the child welfare system and its funding model and a proper implementation of Jordan’s Principle,³ urging the use of experts to ensure First Nations are given culturally appropriate services.⁴ The new federal government has indicated that it will not appeal the tribunal decision. This ruling is a huge victory for Indigenous children in Canada.

Conduct and Mental Health of Vulnerable Girls

The connection to mental health problems is high among females who report prior foster and residential care experience (Collin-Vézina, Coleman, Milne, Sell, & Daigneault, 2011). Females tend to present higher levels of mental health problems than males (Connor, et al., 2004). In fact, research conducted by Russel & Marston (2010) indicates that more than 75% of females within the juvenile justice system meet diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health disorder, in comparison to 65% in males. The most common disorders among females are conduct disorders and major depression (Fazel, Doll & Langstrom 2008). Collin-Vézina, et al. (2011) note that 62% of female adolescents in a residential intervention centres self-reported sexual abuse as being connected to their mental health issues. Females who have child welfare experience and mental health issues are often presented in the literature as having severe conduct problems (Fazel, et al. 2008). Conduct problems place young women at greater risk for a variety of mental health problems in adolescence and during the transition to adulthood (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001). Even in adulthood, mental health problems are more common and more severe among young women placed for conduct problems compared to their male counterparts and the general population (Lanctôt, 2005; Lanctôt, Cernkovich & Giordana, 2007). Childhood maltreatment is also related to mental health problems in emerging adulthood among female adolescents who have previously been in care (van Vugt, et al. 2014).

³Jordan's Principle is a child first principle used in Canada to resolve jurisdictional disputes within, and between governments, regarding payment for government services provided to First Nations children, especially those with disabilities (Johnson, 2015).

⁴See ruling at <http://decisions.chrt-tcdp.gc.ca/chrt-tcdp/decisions/en/127700/1/document.do>

Overrepresentation Among those Reported Missing

Although the vast majority of children and youth who enter into the foster care system eventually return home to their families, other children in long term care eventually “age out” of the foster care system at the age of 18, or exit care by means of one of several less auspicious routes such as running away or being incarcerated (Courtney & Barth, 1996). On any given day in Winnipeg, the police services issue a news release identifying a vulnerable young person who has gone missing. More often than not, because of the high percentage of Indigenous children in care, those highlighted in such police notices, the majority, who are missing, are Indigenous girls. The phenomenon of Indigenous girls who go missing while in care has not been adequately examined in the literature or in Manitoba. Research conducted by Kiepal, Carrington, and Dawson (2012) came the closest to examining this issue, although there is other research that has looked at the issue of runaways and street involved youth (Saskatchewan, 2010). This research explored the intersections of age, gender, and Indigenous identity in light of social exclusion and provides more detail about who is at risk of being reported missing. The characteristics of individuals who are overrepresented among those who go missing include: youth (particularly girls aged 15-19), Indigenous people, homeless people, those who are not active in the labour market, youth placed in residential care facilities, and women escaping domestic violence. These collective groups of people tend to be the most socially excluded in society.

Among youth, Kiepal, Carrington, and Dawson (2012) found that young women aged 19 years and younger faced a higher risk of being reported missing compared to young men. A Canadian report on missing children (Dalley, 2009) reported that more females than males run away and most often they run away from their family. The possible reason for higher statistics among girls versus boys is that people are more likely to file a missing person report when a young girl goes missing compared to if it is a boy or a man that was to go missing (Kiepal, Carrington & Dawson, 2012). The Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) reported that youth disappearances are related to family violence and abuse and young women are more likely to report that they left home to escape family violence compared to men. The RCMP report (2014) on missing and murdered Indigenous women identifies a “run away” as someone under the age of 18. The Native Women’s Association of Canada (2010) emphasized that involvement in commercial sexual exploitation,⁵ however, is not a cause of disappearances or murders; rather, their research contends that many women arrive at that point in the context of limited options and after experiencing multiple forms of trauma or victimization. Downe (2005) indicates that it is the intersection of multiple factors such as gender, race and violence, which make young Indigenous girls the most vulnerable to various levels of victimization and sexual violence.

Indigenous people were the next to be identified as being overrepresented among the sample of missing persons in the research by Kiepal and colleagues (2012). For Indigenous people, in particular Indigenous

⁵ Child sexual exploitation occurs when a second party benefits through a profit or through a quid pro quo through sexual activity involving a child. This may include sexual exploitation as the exchange of sex or sexual acts for drugs, food, shelter, protection and other basics of life primarily through street-level survival sex, brothel sexual exploitation, trafficking for sexual purposes and child sexual abuse imagery (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2014, p. 5).

women, a history of colonization and discrimination have exposed them to low levels of labour market participation, poverty, social isolation from culture and community, and other problems associated with going missing (Amnesty International, 2004). Kiepal, Carrington and Dawson (2012) also found that people not in the labour force and those who rely upon shelters, are also overrepresented among those who are missing. Shelters can be either a shelter for the homeless, domestic violence, and/or a child welfare placement. Indigenous women and girls are highly represented among those who do not work (Gerber, 2014) and who rely upon shelters (Mazowita & Burczycka, 2012), specifically if they are seeking refuge from domestic violence (Daoud, Smylie, Urquia, Allan, & O'Campo, 2013). Of significant concern is the number of youth in care who are greatly overrepresented among people reported missing. The research by Kiepal, et al. (2012) highlight that youth in care were more than 200 times as likely to be reported missing than youth not in care. A nation-wide study in Canada found that in 2006, 34% of all missing youth had been in foster care (Dalley, 2009). International research focusing on runaway youth also confirms these statistics (Newis, 1999; Dedel, 2010). These numbers are further supported in a report prepared for the Winnipeg Police Board (2015), which highlights that the vast majority of persons reported as missing are short-term chronic runaways and mostly involving vulnerable Indigenous youth (girls) in the care of the Child and Family services. This report notes that the top 19 addresses associated with missing persons reports are from Child and Family Services facilities (Winnipeg Police, 2015). In Canada, over 80 per cent of runaway children have a history of repeat or chronic running episodes (Dalley, 2009). Teens who chronically run away tax resource-strapped police departments especially when they have to search for the same teen multiple times over (Hoffman, 2014).

Kiepal, Carrington, and Dawson (2012) highlight that social exclusion plays a part in the disappearance of those who are young, marginalized, poor, and Indigenous. Going missing emerges often as a response to stressful life events and is more common among people who have few resources to rely on to cope with stressful events. They indicate that:

Access to family relationships, employment, and other activities can shield people from stress and harm, or at least, provide people with resources that help them to cope with various misfortunes. People, who are excluded, on the other hand, lack access to one or more of these relationships and activities and, as a consequence, may resort to running away or going missing in the face of extreme adversity. Social exclusion can also expose people to circumstances that are risk factors for going missing. For example, excluded youth may end up in foster care and a high number of youth go missing from care facilities (p. 158).

In other words, Kiepal and colleagues feel that social exclusion leads directly and indirectly to peoples' disappearances. Furthermore, they note that if individuals belong to two or more disadvantaged groups, the risk of being reported missing increases. Social exclusion, they say, explains how structural disadvantages leave people unable to cope with adverse life events and, as a result, some people perceive running away or going missing to be the only option. Those who go missing are at risk of experiencing problems that expose them to further exclusion and disengagement from mainstream society. A U.K. study on runaway youth found that these youth faced a high risk of encountering problems later in life (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). "Going missing," say Kiepal, Carrington and Dawson,

serves as an important indicator of people at risk of experiencing social exclusion; providing programs and services for these people and groups is one way to reduce peoples' experiences of social and economic disadvantage (p. 162). The importance of social capital is not lost on resilience researchers who have established that separating young people from their social supports can weaken the resilience of young people (Ledogar & Fleming, 2008). Youth who are more resilient are individuals who have the most social support (Metzger, 2008).

Transportation

Nine days prior to her death, Tina Fontaine was found to be a passenger in a vehicle along with a man who was arrested on suspicion of being impaired (Lambert, 2014). Like Tina Fontaine, many children and youth in care may not or do not have transportation or the means to access funds for transportation. The issue of transportation is an important consideration, particularly for young girls in care, but has not been adequately addressed in the literature. For instance, many young girls along the Highway of Tears in BC, lacking their own means and/or sources of transportation, relied upon hitchhiking to get around to and from their communities.⁶ Parallel to what happens here in Manitoba more obviously as hitch hiking outside the urban centres (sometimes in an effort to return to family in community), but also more informally with girls who 'catch rides' wherever they are headed within the city. Indeed, the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry identified transportation as a key issue increasing risk to women and girls in BC (Oppal, 2012), as has the Highway of Tears Initiative (Human Rights Watch, 2013) and in other research examining youth health (Smith, Peled, Leadbeater & Clark, 2010). Clark (2012) notes that a lack of policies around transportation has compounded violence and works against efforts to address violence against Indigenous girls living in diverse geographies. Having affordable, reliable access to safe modes of transportation is important to the safety of women and their families (Clark, 2012).

Human Trafficking versus Voluntary Engagement in Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Much of the literature addressing human trafficking⁷ of young women into commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) fails to address the underlying reasons why Indigenous girls in particular, are sexually exploited and/or may go missing in Canada. Sethi (2007) indicated that Canada is rarely seen as country of origin from which girls, especially Indigenous girls, are trafficked – rather Canada is seen more as a transit and destination country for other trafficked girls and women. Poverty is one of the main reasons why Indigenous girls and women are forced into CSE at disproportionate rates. Unfortunately, people continue to wrongly believe that girls and women choose to be sexually exploited instead of appreciating that poverty and consistent public/media messaging that Indigenous girls and women are commonly involved in CSE often forces these women and girls into sex work in order to get their basic needs (food and shelter) met. Sethi's article highlights important issues identified by the grassroots

⁶From 1989 to 2006 nine young women went missing or were found murdered along the 724 kilometre length of highway 16 in British Columbia – now commonly referred to as the Highway of Tears. All but one of these victims were Indigenous women. For more, see: <http://highwayoftears.org/>

⁷“Human trafficking” is just the new name of a historical problem: colonization and ongoing exploitation by outsiders (Sweet, 2014).

There's no such thing as a child prostitute.

When discussing the exploitation of children and youth it is important that we recognize certain terms can reflect our compassion or our judgment of young people who have been victimized by others. The use of terms like "prostitute" or "sex worker" in relation to children and youth are examples of terminology that can reveal a lack of understanding of the power imbalances and dysfunction at play when adults profit (financially or by other means) from the sexual exploitation of children and youth.

As advocates for young people we intentionally use phrases such as "sexual exploitation" and "commercial sexual exploitation" in relation to young people involved with the sex industry. In this report however, we include quotes and citations from secondary sources and in some of those cases we have retained the author's original wording even when the preferred term would be different today.

organizations working with sexually exploited Indigenous girls and contextualizes their experiences within the trafficking framework in order to educate the public that most girls involved in CSE are being sexually exploited.

Kingsley and Mark (2001) embarked on a long journey of interviewing young Indigenous girls who had been or were being sexually exploited. Their report entitled *Sacred Lives: Canadian Indigenous Girls Speaking Out Against Sexual Exploitation* (Save the Children Canada, 2010), summarized the stories of sexually exploited youth across many Canadian urban and reserve communities. The majority of the

participants in this study were female (75%). Their report identified that young Indigenous people who were commonly found involved in the commercial sex industry included those who came from "fragmented homes or care institutions and sexually abused as children" (p. 33). The youth in this report recognized the fragmentation of culture and family as being significant factors contributing to their involvement in CSE.

Busby, Downe, Gorkoff, Nixon, Tutty and Ursel (2002) sought to focus research on the most vulnerable of girls – those exploited through CSE. The sexual exploitation of girls, they note, has never been fully accepted in Canada, but neither has it been fully rejected either as this ambiguity is reflected in the legislation. They note that the exploitation exists on a continuum, ranging from sexual slavery to survival sex, through to the more "bourgeois" sex trade (p. 91). "Prostitution" is not limited to adults, but among youth it has a very different meaning and requires a different response. The buying of sex from youth is a form of child abuse and the law clearly separates youth exploitation from adult prostitution. Children and youth must be protected from becoming involved in the commercial sex industry because it is an issue of preventing child abuse rather than controlling prostitution. The authors of this study note that there is no concrete information that reflects on the number of youth who are exploited largely because of its underground nature. They do acknowledge that the intersection of abusive experiences within the family, running away, lack of viable alternatives, and the failure of the child welfare system to protect girls from exploitation, all cumulatively "create a situation that sets the stage for children to become involved in prostitution" (p. 92). Young indigenous females tend to be overrepresented among those who are exploited through CSE and furthermore, these youth end up involved in prostitution because they come from unstable homes and because of the child welfare system's inability to assist them.

The economic situation of young people is not the only factor behind why young people experience CSE, but that other factors must be taken into account. One main factor for involvement in CSE is running away from home or a group home or institution. The authors note that the majority of the children on the street have been involved with the child welfare system and many report having had bad experiences within the system. Another is the need to have personal needs met. Young people in this study indicated that they resorted to the sex industry because job opportunities were not available as they were too young to work. But most of the participants and the service providers who work with them acknowledge that childhood abuse usually precedes their path to the sex industry and the streets. Other participants noted that they became involved in sex work through female friends, through roommates from their group homes or from institutions in which they stayed, or by family members who were already involved in the sex industry. Drug use was cited as another major factor as to why vulnerable youth become involved in CSE. For many of the youth, continued involvement in CSE also resulted in increased drug use that escalated from marijuana to harder drugs like cocaine, speed, heroin, and crack. Many of the young women participating in this study indicated that they needed to be intoxicated or high while involved in CSE because of their fear while others noted the need to remain sober and cognizant in case they needed to escape dangerous situations. As some of the young women noted, they preferred to work openly on the streets than be hidden in trick pads, massage parlours, or hotels simply because they feel less isolated, can learn the ropes from one another, and act as look outs for each other.⁸

A number of intervention strategies that have been developed in other jurisdictions to deal with the issue of protecting children and youth exploited in the sex industry were also examined by Busby, Downe, Gorkoff, Nixon, Tutty and Ursel (2002). There are three major sources of program delivery to deal with this issue: (1) those developed through child and family services agencies mandated to provide child protection services; (2) those developed through legislative initiatives, like the *Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act* (PCHIP) in Alberta that focuses on secure confinement, and (3) those developed through non-government organizations (NGO), which provide a range of services from generic street youth programs to prostitution and gender specific programs (p. 107). The success of these services is largely dependent upon access to secure funding. Programs with a legislative foundation will be more successful where there is secure funding which allows the organization to meet its mandate. However, the young "experiential" women involved in the Busby et al. (2002) study note that they don't use many of the mandated programs simply because of prior negative experiences with child welfare agencies specifically and because they were "suspicious" of any "helping" agency. Those who have had the experience of being apprehended by child welfare and placed in secure confinement are extremely suspicious of mandated services whereas those who have never had this experience tended to be more supportive of voluntary services. Another reason why street involved youth don't use these services is that many of them lack knowledge of the available services. Street involved youth tend

⁸"Trick pads" have been defined as hidden rooms or apartments run by gangs where youth are kept for exploitation (Sethi, 2007). Both the media and researchers have reported hotels as a common venue for the sexual exploitation of youth (Saewyc, Miller, Rivers, Matthews, Hilario & Hirakata, 2013).

to prefer services provided by community-based non-government organizations but according to Busby, et al. (2002) these organizations tend to be the most insecurely funded.

In a study conducted by Sikka (2009), young adults involved with the sex industry were found to have left care or were still in the care and custody of the provincial child welfare system. Sikka further noted that the single most shared characteristic among girls in the commercial sex industry was their previous or current child welfare involvement. In addition, Sikka reports that the findings suggest there is an association between child welfare involvement and encounters with the justice system. According to Sikka's research, the primary reason women become involved with the legal system is as a result of an offence committed against a girl while she resided in alternative care. Among the 47 women interviewed in their study Nixon, Tutty, Downe, Gorkoff, and Ursel (2002), state that considerable childhood sexual abuse was often committed by a family member or by caregivers when these women were just children and youth living in foster care or group homes.

Policies that Fall Short of Protecting

Indigenous girls in the child welfare system are vulnerable to the violence that is inherent in the very systems that are intended to protect them. The report entitled *What Their Stories Tell Us* (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010) intended to educate policy makers on how it has come to be that so many Indigenous girls and women become victims of violence and worse, murder. Research by the Native Women's Association of Canada suggests, "the intergenerational impact and resulting vulnerabilities of colonization and state policies – such as residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the child welfare system – are underlying factors in the outcomes of violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls" (p. 9).

The authors of this report note that the root causes of racialized and sexualized violence against Indigenous girls and women are systemic and gendered racism. When Indigenous girls or women highlight or bring attention to the violence they experience, whether this was experienced in the child welfare system, or later through the justice systems, they have often been individually blamed for the violence that has been perpetrated against them. Many Indigenous women have experienced racist responses from the law when they report incidences of violence. For example, Indigenous women who call police after being assaulted by an intimate partner are more likely to be accused of engaging in the violence and more likely to be arrested when police intervene (Richardson & Wade, 2009). Such circumstances lead Indigenous women to believe that it is unsafe for them to call police to report such violence (McGillvray & Comaskey, 1999). Furthermore, Indigenous women tend to blame themselves for the abuse (Richardson & Wade, 2009).

Allnock's (2010) research addressed reasons why children do not report sexualized violence. The leading factor noted is that children think that they will not be believed if and when they disclose. Where one is not believed, the tendency is to self-blame. Women, who, as girls, received negative social responses to early disclosures of abuse are less likely to report abuse as adults and more likely to avoid authorities (Andrews, Brewin & Rose, 2003; Richardson & Wade, 2009). Clark (2012) has noted that policies

designed to protect children can often further victimize them. Furthermore, Indigenous girls who have disclosed instances of sexual abuse have been labeled and pathologized, diagnosed as having mental health issues, accused of using drugs and drinking, and questioned about the ulterior motives behind making such disclosures rather than being protected like other non-Indigenous girls who disclose similar abuses (Clark, 2012).

Berman and Jiwani (2002) note that gender-neutral policies and legislation have failed to factor in the heightened risks faced by vulnerable Indigenous girls. The authors stress that the state is more invested in protecting the rights of girls when interventions are mandated by the criminal justice system (i.e. where laws have been broken). Berman and Jiwani further stated that when interventions would seem to be most preventative or appropriate, but no legal infractions have occurred, then these interventions rest largely on the shoulders of under-funded non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups. In particular, they emphasized that:

From a policy perspective there is a conundrum, the category of children most in need of services are for the most part children 'on the run' from 'controlling' agencies ... which are the agencies most securely funded to provide the services. Thus the evolution of securely funded programs with a mandate to protect child sexual abuse victims may have the unintended effect of frightening these children/youth away because of their fear or aversion to the 'control' components of these services (p. 10).

Nor do existing programs and policies embrace an intersectional analysis of the multiple forms of oppression that impact on the lives of these girls (Clark, 2012). In particular this would include gender racialization with particular emphasis on racism as a form of violence (Berman & Jiwani, 2002).

In many instances, doubts are raised about the credibility and the motivations of a girl who has disclosed sexual abuse. A prime example can be found in the case of Judge David Ramsey and numerous RCMP officers who were accused of sexually assaulting a number of underage Indigenous girls in British Columbia (Eby, 2011). Judge Ramsey was eventually tried, convicted and sentenced to seven years for having sex with three minors and violating public trust (Armstrong, 2004). As part of the RCMP investigation, the involved girls and their social workers also made a number of allegations against local RCMP officers. To date, no RCMP officer has ever been arrested or charged or disciplined for conduct arising from this investigation; however, one officer was suspended and eventually fully reinstated (Eby, 2011). A code of conduct investigation into allegations against ten different RCMP officers was never concluded due to limitation period issues and delays in the RCMP self-investigation that stretched over more than two years (Milne, 2005).

Those Who Take Us Away (Human Rights Watch, 2013) discusses violence perpetuated against Indigenous women and girls at the hands of Canadian police, including verbal abuse of a sexist and racist nature, physical and sexual assault, and inappropriate strip searches conducted by male officers. This report further identified eight incidents where excessive force has been used against Indigenous girls under the age of 18. The girls spoke of experiencing excessive roughness by police, arms being broken,

being bitten by a police dog, having handcuffs applied so tightly that skin peeled, beaten on the head by a baton, and pepper sprayed as well as tasered (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The Cedar Research Project out of British Columbia, also noted that 7% of young women that participated in their study in Prince George reported non-consensual sex with members of the criminal justice system. The authors concluded that given the reported rates of non-consensual sex, that the less serious acts of sexual misconduct with Indigenous women and girls (e.g., sexual harassment) may also be more prevalent than is reported (Pan, Christian, Pearce, et al., 2013).

Monasky (2014) notes that the report produced by Human Rights Watch demonstrates that some police neglect to protect Indigenous women from violence by others. Indigenous women have also publicly denounced inadequate investigative responses and the lack of protection from police despite the fact that many women had long suspected and had pointed out Robert Pickton as the person responsible for killing many women from the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver (Cameron, 2010).⁹

International Human Rights Legislation and Indigenous Girls

Aleem (2009) reviewed a number of human rights laws to determine how Canada is performing in its implementation of each of these laws in relation to Indigenous girls in Canada. The international laws reviewed included: Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹⁰, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR). All of these international laws require periodic reviews to be done by Canada in terms of how well it is proceeding in upholding these international laws. In all cases, Canada has been found to be lacking and failing in its ability to uphold these laws as they pertain to Indigenous populations, particularly as it correlates to the circumstances that lead to violence against Indigenous girls. Aleem (2009) notes that disparities exist between Indigenous people and the rest of the Canadian population, poverty rates remain very high among marginalized and Indigenous groups and youth.

International human rights bodies have expressed concern over the grave and systematic violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

⁹ In late 1997, Sandra Gail Ringwald (whose real name is under a publication ban) escaped from Robert Pickton with severe stab wounds. Although the RCMP questioned her about the events that had led up to her wounds, they did not identify Pickton as a serial killer until 2002, five years after almost killing Sandra Gail Ringwald. Pickton confessed to 49 murders. The police charged him with 26 counts of murder. On Dec. 9, 2007, he was sentenced to life in prison for murdering only six of those women (Cameron, 2010).

¹⁰ Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW), Available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>; Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Available from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Available from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CERD.aspx>; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR), Available from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ICESCR.aspx>.

Against Women (CEDAW), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the Human Rights Council in its Universal Periodic Review have all called upon Canada to address the root causes of violence against women and girls, and remedy the violations against indigenous women's and girls' rights (Sobko, n.d.). Aleem (2009) acknowledges that while the Canadian government has undertaken a large number of obligations to prevent violence against Indigenous girls and to realize their human rights, its record for doing so has been inadequate. Aleem (2009) further notes that had Canada signed the UN Declaration on Indigenous People,¹¹ it would require Canada to take measures, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, to ensure that "Indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination" (p. 23). This is the only statement at the international level that explicitly recognizes that Indigenous girls disproportionately experience violence and that Indigenous communities need to work within themselves and to take responsibility for combating violence. The potential of this statement is that not only does it hold member states accountable for working with Indigenous communities to end the conditions that lead to violence against Indigenous girls, but also in a broader sense, "it may serve to restore the importance and role of women and girls in Indigenous communities that have been eroded by colonization" (p. 23). Aleem cautions however that international law has not overtly addressed gender-based violence and that it takes more than adopting a new instrument like the Declaration to acknowledge the gendered rights concerns expressed by Indigenous women and girls. Unfortunately instruments like the Declaration do not change the structures and assumptions that perpetuate violence against Indigenous girls. In particular, Aleem (2009) notes that:

...the continued and widespread violence against Aboriginal girls, shows that the human rights law and other legal norms that Canada is obliged to uphold has not altered behaviour within Canadian society. Instead what may be needed is the development of a human rights culture within Canadian society and of a mind set that rejects physical and sexual violence against Aboriginal girls" (p. 27).

As it stands, Indigenous girls are subsumed under the rubric of women and children in both domestic and international law. Indigenous girls do not always receive distinct consideration although they certainly deserve it. Aleem (2009) states that other issues of broader concern to Indigenous peoples - including land rights, self-government and political representation - obscure the situation of Indigenous girls. These concerns are fundamental but Aleem emphasizes that it is "crucial that targeted action to safeguard the distinct identity of Aboriginal girls and to promote the realization of their human rights" (p. 27). As long as the rights of Indigenous girls are subsumed under the collective rights of Indigenous peoples, their human rights will continue to be marginalized under international law.

¹¹ The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) is considered to be a global standard for Indigenous rights. Originally, Canada was one of only four countries (Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand) to vote against the UN Declaration when it was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. In the three years following its adoption, the Canadian government aggressively campaigned against the UN Declaration, although it was finally endorsed by Canada in 2010. The outstanding challenge now is to implement the Declaration's provisions through concerted efforts at the domestic and international levels (Kirchhoff, Gardner & Tsuji, 2013, p. 8). At time of this report writing, Canada has now announced it will work to implement the UNDRIP, beginning by removing its objector status (<http://aptn.ca/news/2016/05/09/bennett-undrip-shift-putting-everyone-on-notice/>)

The United Nations-appointed Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous People echoed much of the concerns highlighted in Aleem's (2009) report and that expressed by the various international human rights communities. The Special Rapporteur examined the human rights situation of indigenous peoples in Canada based on research and information gathered from various sources, including various visits to Canada. During his second visit in 2013, the Special Rapporteur, James Anaya, met with government officials at the federal and provincial levels in six provinces as well as with Indigenous leaders. Anaya noted "numerous initiatives that have been taken at the federal and provincial/territorial levels to address the problems faced by indigenous peoples have been insufficient" (Anaya, 2014, p. 23). The Special Rapporteur supported and recommended the federal Government undertake a comprehensive, nation-wide inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada.¹² In particular, he noted that Indigenous women and girls remain vulnerable to abuse, and overall there appeared to be ineffective action by the government at both the federal and provincial levels to conduct a "comprehensive, nation-wide inquiry, organized in consultation with Indigenous peoples, that could provide an opportunity for the voices of the victims' families to be heard, deepen understanding of the magnitude and systemic dimensions of the issue, and identify best practices that could lead to an adequately coordinated response" (Anaya, 2014, p. 12).

Apathy and Indifference

Violence is perpetuated through apathy and indifference towards Indigenous women and girls (NWAC, 2010, p. 7). As Clark (2012) has noted, statistics demonstrate the outcome of this indifference: Indigenous women are five times more likely to die as a result of violence (p. 144). Apathy is also reflected in the media's failure to report high-profile cases. For instance, the John Martin Crawford trial in Saskatchewan into the murder of three Indigenous girls and young women (ages 16, 22 and 30) can be compared to that of the Bernardo case and the media circus that followed in the death of two non-Indigenous girls (Leslie Mahaffy, 14 and Kristen French, 15) (Clark, 2012, p. 144). Media coverage was virtually non-existent on what should have been front-page coverage. Juxtaposing on these events, Warren Goulding (2001), one of the few journalists to cover the trial of John Martin Crawford, commented: "I don't get the sense the general public cares much about missing or murdered Aboriginal women. It's all part of this indifference to the lives of Aboriginal people. They don't seem to matter as much as white people" (Purder, 2003).

Similarly, the deaths of numerous girls along the Highway of Tears in BC has received little media attention when contrasted against the widespread media reaction to Nicole Hoar, a white woman who went missing in BC around the same time (Amnesty International, 2004). The media often silences

¹² Since 1996, there have been at least 29 official inquiries and reports dealing with aspects of this issue, which have made over 500 recommendations for action (Native Women's Association of Canada, List of Reports and Recommendations on Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls (27 March 2013). A more recent report prepared on behalf of LEAF (2015) estimates that well over 59 reports (organized into 16 themes), containing over 700 recommendations have been tabled concerning the need to address the causes of violence against Indigenous women (Feinstein, P. and M. Pearce).

voices too. The power of the media has been used as a tool of oppression to silence Aboriginal voices on this and many other issues as well (Besharah, 2014). Besharah expressed that:

Had the media portrayed these women as beloved daughters and mothers, a common shared experience of loss would have been more likely and the larger community could have empathized with the Aboriginal families. In reality, the media have great power in silencing marginalized voices by virtue of being able to determine which stories will be highlighted and which stories will be relegated to back pages and thus mostly dismissed (p. 30).

Given the numbers of Indigenous women and girls who go missing, Indigenous women have started to partner with police services to reduce the risk of victimization for women, to find them quickly when they are missing (if they can be found), and to capture and incarcerate predators quickly so that they cannot continue to victimize women (Vancouver Police Department, 2011). Once such partnership created was *SisterWatch* in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver that was created between the Vancouver Police Department and the Women's Memorial March Committee. This committee raised concerns about violent drug dealers who were preying on addicted and marginalized women and girls. They were instrumental in developing a tip line where police dispatch staff have been trained to respond to calls when assaults on women have taken place or where concerns have been raised about vulnerable women and girls in the Downtown Eastside. They have been instrumental in having "911-only" telephones installed in the community after most of the pay phones had been damaged by drug dealers and removed by the city. Most recently, *SisterWatch* was instrumental in having a sexual predator (Timothy Beith) charged, convicted and incarcerated for sexually assaulting and preying on marginalized and addicted young women (Vancouver Police Department, 2011).

Government Resistance to the Calls for a National Inquiry

The first government inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women took place in the province of British Columbia. The Robert Pickton case drew national attention, which prompted the government of British Columbia to call an inquiry into missing and murdered women from the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Pickton murdered 27 women but only stood trial for six of these women. The Crown did not proceed with pursuing a case against Pickton for the other 21 cases, as it was felt that he would be in prison for the rest of his life on the six cases alone (Sayers, 2016). This decision was unsatisfactory to the families of the other 21 women. Enough of a furor was raised in British Columbia that the provincial government established a Missing Women Commission Inquiry in September 2010 (British Columbia, 2013), to be overseen by Commissioner Wally Oppal, into the missing women of the Downtown Eastside over a five-year period. The final report concluded that the police investigation into the murdered and missing women was a blatant failure. The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry was controversial from the start. The person empowered to carry out the inquiry, and the lack of funding given to the Indigenous families to be represented in the inquiry, were highly controversial and criticized decisions. Sixty-three recommendations resulted and to date, most of these recommendations have not been adopted or implemented (Sayers, 2016). Similar inquiries have not taken place in other provinces.

Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) has become a prevalent issue that has captured societal and mainstream media attention. Indigenous family members and organizations have been trying to get governments to act on MMIWG but, until recently, to no avail. Under the previous Conservative federal government, calls for a public inquiry into MMIWG have been denied and further, the federal government consistently ignored recommendations to put a national strategy into place to prevent violence against Indigenous girls and women. Instead, the federal government put \$25 million over 5 years into setting up some mechanisms to help with the issue, but no clear strategy and no real analysis resulted in which to determine whether these mechanisms would help to resolve the problem (Sayers, 2016). A special parliamentary committee report entitled, *Invisible Women: A Call to Action* (House of Commons, 2014) was widely criticized as maintaining the status quo and did not address the necessary actions the government needed to take (Sayers, 2016). Despite confirmation by the Canadian national police force of the high number of missing and murdered women and girls (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014), and despite the growing political demand for an official government inquiry into this phenomenon, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated that the issue of MMIWG was “not high on his political radar” and that the problem “shouldn’t be viewed as a sociological one but a criminal issue that could be solved by improving laws that prevent crime” (Kappo, 2014). This attitude and comment confirmed for many Canadians – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike that the federal government was indifferent toward and disrespected as well as devalued the lives of Indigenous women and girls (Bourgeois, 2015).

With the federal election in October 2015, the new incoming Liberal government announced that it would proceed immediately with an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The new federal government is currently in the first phase of an inquiry expected to cost around \$40 million and which will take at least two years (Paquette, 2015). The inquiry is led by the Honourable Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs; the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women; and the Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould, Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Since December 2015, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs has begun to meet with the families of MMIWG, seeking their input into what a national inquiry should look like and what it should attempt to accomplish. Over 1,300 people have been involved in these discussions to date. As at the final edits to this report (April 2016), the Liberal government has wrapped up consultations on how to best conduct an in-depth examination of the issue and has indicated its desire to develop the inquiry’s mandate by the summer of 2016.

PART 2: COMMUNITY NARRATIVES ON THE VULNERABILITY OF MARGINALIZED INDIGENOUS GIRLS

Introduction to the Participants and the Narratives

This report is based on the oral knowledge and conversations with 11 individuals from the Indigenous community within and outside of Winnipeg. The persons consulted in the creation of this narrative inquiry are community people, some well-known. The narratives for this report are comprised of the opinions, perspectives, experiences, and experiential knowledge of those that are young, middle aged, and Elders. Conversations occurred primarily with Indigenous women and community Elders but also included in the responses are the perspectives of a male Elder. The community people interviewed also identify as being students, parents, and grandmothers and grandfathers. The people who participated in these interviews are people with experience working in child welfare, both at the frontline and management levels as well as working in mandated and non-mandated agencies. A good majority of the participants are advocates for women dealing with violence and also have the experience of working and advocating on the behalf of families who are dealing with missing and murdered family members. Some of those interviewed also have the added experiences of working with sexually exploited girls and

Why did we ask 13 questions?

The number 13 is significant from an Indigenous perspective for two key reasons. There are 13 tiles on the turtle's shell, which is the symbol of the land mass known as North America within Indigenous creation stories. There are also 13 moon cycles within each year. Both are meaningful symbols for indigenous people. For more see: <http://infinity-codes.net/a.s.p./page256.html>

women, with youth at risk, with women who have been imprisoned and those dealing with addiction. Some of those who participated are experiential women themselves or understand what it means, "to have lived on the edge of life between two worlds." All of the interviewees for this report expressed deep-seated concerns about the safety and wellbeing of Indigenous girls in

communities, both within the province and across the country. The individuals reflected in this report talked with passion and some trusted enough to safely share raw emotions and one woman even offered a song as the 13 questions were put forward to them. The narratives presented reflect the strong views and opinions of 11 community members who are passionate about the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable Indigenous girls and women.

As readers reflect on the responses below, it should be noted that for many of the community interviewees the answers to the 13 questions posed¹³ lie within the cultural teachings and knowledges

¹³ Numbers have always played a significant part in traditional Aboriginal life. For example, four is one of the most sacred numbers recognized across many Indigenous cultures. Many aspects are seen in terms of four. Within Medicine Wheels there are many, many "rings" of teachings that exist. A ring of teaching is created by considering a part of the teaching from each of the four directions. These rings of teachings have significant meaning independently but are all the more powerful when understood as a collective of interdependent knowledge teachings and practices. Some of these rings include: seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter), times of day (morning,

of Indigenous peoples. This knowledge is rooted in the oral testimony and narratives of Indigenous peoples. From the beginning of this research process it was decided that Indigenous voices should be heard in their own right. In this section of the report, the voices of community members have been privileged over the voice of the researcher. Privileging the voices of Indigenous members' from within the community was critical in writing this report because for far too long, many Indigenous people have been silenced on the matters that have marginalized them. These voices represent community authenticity, authority and expertise on the fundamental understanding of why Indigenous women, girls, and people are so vulnerable in society. The manner of privileging their voices on the subject of vulnerability is also consistent with the oral traditions found in many Indigenous cultures. The narratives reflected in this report represent a culturally nuanced way of knowing and is a form of intergenerational knowledge transfer (Cruikshank, 1998). Stories that originate from oral traditions resonate and engender personal meaning and narrative as the primary means for passing along knowledge because it suits the fluidity and interpretative nature of ancestral ways of knowing (Kovach, 2014). Also implicit in the process of privileging the voices of community members was the important aspect of privileging relationship building¹⁴ as part of the way in which to inquire and conduct this kind of research in Indigenous communities (Wilson, 2008). As Kovach (2014) notes, stories that emanate from oral testimony are born of connections within the world, and thus are recounted relationally. The oral testimonies offered in this report are therefore tied to the past and the present and provide a basis for continuity with future generations. While specific quotes are not attributed to specific individuals, those who participated are identified and recognized in Appendix A.

As this report is constructed from various conversations, readers will note that the writing in the sections and paragraphs that follow reflect voices and perspectives culled from discussions with different community members instrumental to this report. The responses throughout are repetitive in nature and readers will note that any one response could stand in as a response to any one of the other questions posed during interview sessions. The repetitive nature of these responses reflects the way in which oral narratives reinforce memory through repetition and in the retelling of stories. In fact, repetition is one of the most important characteristics of oral storytelling because it helps reinforce the messages within the narratives contributed by these community members. These narratives tap into existing community knowledge, which is diverse and can create bridges, both culturally and motivationally, toward solutions for ensuring safety for vulnerable Indigenous girls. These responses

afternoon, evening, night), stages of life (infant, youth, adult, elder), and life givers (earth, sun, water, air). People's lives are organized through the 4 directions - north, south, east, and west. Different activities are carried out in each of the 4 seasons (see <http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/teaching-medicine-wheel>).

¹⁴Most of the community members interviewed for this report know the author of this report personally. Many of the narratives in this report were shared because a pre-existing relationship had already been in place. As part of the relational aspects of conducting this research, it has been an honour to be trusted with the task of voicing community perspectives on how to ensure safety and wellbeing for vulnerable Indigenous girls and women in the future.

also reflect the Debwehwin¹⁵ or the “truth” about the vulnerability of Indigenous girls as understood by each of the participants. The 13 questions asked of participants are reflected at the beginning of each of the 13 titles below.

A History of Vulnerability

I. Why are Indigenous girls so vulnerable when they come into care?

The vulnerability of indigenous girls and women began at contact with settler populations. While many people may think that the vulnerability is something that has just recently surfaced, it is in fact an experience that is rooted in the historical relationships based on early contact, forced religion, and residential schools. It was said to have started with mispronouncing and misinterpretation of the word “e-s-q-u-a-w” and the mistreatment of Indigenous women by early contact with European nations. Over time, Indigenous people, particularly men, began to take on ideologies, such as patriarchy, that do not originate from the teachings among Indigenous cultures. As one participant noted, among Indigenous men there is, “a lot of white male dominance, they have been violated, indoctrinated and now believe something that is foreign to them.” The idea of treating Indigenous women respectfully stopped a long time ago. It is rooted in the way Indigenous men have taken on the patriarchal ideology and in the fact that many of the cultural ways of respecting women were outlawed along with the Indigenous ceremonies that sustained the wellbeing of indigenous nations. The teachings that guided men and women have been lost; religion and the bible have replaced these teachings. In some communities within the province, Christianity has displaced traditional Indigenous knowledge. The mindset that Indigenous culture and traditional practices are considered evil and based on “witchcraft” is still evidenced in many First Nations communities. One participant who shared the following explained this perspective:

One time I was approached by a community here in Manitoba, they had heard about me and the work I had done with youth. They were willing to bring me into the community one week at a time and work with their youth. They were dealing with suicide, drinking, and drugs. I said I would love to do that and we met to discuss me coming into the community. Before the end of our time together he said there was one thing that we need to know first. We don't want any of that culture stuff here, that's not our way of life. So the mindset is still there. We are still dealing with that. There is a lot of awakening to do and our people are suffering. That is why our girls come into care, because they do not know who they are, they don't know where they belong, they have no language anymore and they certainly don't know about connecting to the great spirit within them that was given to them by the Creator. You don't have to go into a sweat or you don't have to go to Sundance because that is a personal commitment. But our children don't know any of that. I don't care how other people believe. This is our belief and we have to come back to that.

¹⁵“Debwehwin” is one of the Seven Grandfathers, or one of the seven sacred gifts or teachings of the Anishinaabek peoples. Truth is one of the core beliefs of the Anishinaabe worldview. The other gifts/teachings are known as wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty and humility (Benton-Banai, 1988).

Many of the girls that come into care are lost. Not only are they lost but their parents and grandparents are lost as well because they don't know who they are. Much of what families know about how to be a family comes from the experience of being in residential school. As one participant shared:

Now I know why my grandmother behaved the way that she did ... because she used to make us go and cut the willow and she would whip us with that willow. They learned how to do that from residential school. The nuns used to make them go and cut the willow.

Indigenous girls come into care for a variety of reasons. As previously described, many children enter care for reasons of poverty and neglect, not necessarily for protection concerns. The vulnerability of Indigenous families is also rooted in the way the child welfare system views the way Indigenous children are parented. The system continues to misinterpret the way that Indigenous parents care for their children and is insensitive to the ways that Indigenous parents parent differently.¹⁶ This makes Indigenous families more vulnerable. As one participant observed, "the moment you take a young person out of their homes and away from their own systems of support, you create a situation that exponentially increases their vulnerability." Another interviewee noted:

The playing field isn't equal. The Indigenous families' dynamics are not considered when you are pulling a child from their home and placing them in another. I think automatically our young women start to develop shame and guilt associated with their families. In the end that doesn't really stop our kids from loving their parents or loving their brothers, sisters, or their uncles and aunts. I think that the clash of the system and the clash with Indigenous ways of living and being and really the whole history of Indigenous people are not considered. That makes our young people vulnerable...

I think that when the system takes a young girl into care, it tries to provide as much as possible for her as an individual, but that is not how we function as Indigenous peoples. We function as a community, as a family. So if you are taking a child away and you are not working with mom and dad, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, grandma and grandpa, then you are disconnecting that child even further, which creates vulnerability because now they don't have the connection to their identity.

Most social workers go into the field of social work to help but sometimes because of a lack of understanding, awareness, and empathy, some decisions made can do more harm than good.

¹⁶For instance, "The concept of autonomy was honoured by Aboriginal people from Canada, Australia and the United States as well. Sheperd (2008) found that Aboriginal parents from Canada more often than Euro-Canadian mothers, allowed their children to decide how much to explore their environment. The Inuit in Canada also viewed autonomy and independence as vital to parent and child interactions and as such, Inuit parents looked for indications from their children to guide their own responses (McShane et al., 2009). ... Allowing children to make their own decisions may not, in itself, be an indication of neglect, as often perceived by non-Aboriginal people (Ryan, 2011). ... In many Aboriginal cultures, autonomy is an ideal based on independence (and thus survival) but is counterbalanced by strong affection for the child." (As quoted in Muir & Bohr, 2014).

Indigenous girls become increasingly vulnerable when they are taken away from their only support systems of strength when they are put into care.

Based on consultations with youth prior to participating in the interview, one of the participants indicated that the youth felt that they are vulnerable when they come into care and are of the opinion that when in care they often do not have access to the right supports. As one interviewee noted: "This vulnerability is due to the history of colonization and racism in placements which further makes our young people at risk of being preyed upon through exploitation."

Those working with young Indigenous people say that many Indigenous girls are dealing with a loss of identity that in return results in the loss of spirit. They indicate youth need to be connected to their identities as Indigenous people. They need to be nurtured in developing their identities and need assistance in returning to their cultural roots in order to strengthen their identities as people and protect them from exploitation. As one person stated:

There's not enough effort at building the protective factors of girls at younger ages and that is a product of all of us not wanting to teach kids about important safety things for a lot of reasons. Our education system doesn't do it. So when we have a very real reality that there are very bad men, and there are lots of them, that target girls. So it's not necessarily the vulnerable ones that are easier to get, but you don't have to be vulnerable for bad people to get at you. We've normalized a society that has hyper-sexualized girls in the media. We have 5 year-olds who can wear bras now and a 7 year old can wear thongs. So there's a real hyper-sexualization that is really messed up about what we would deem as normal. So boys are growing up getting a warped sense of what a relationship is and how to objectify women at younger and younger ages and then you have girls trying to live up to an expectation, a reality that is not even possible. As a result we have people who will exploit that, but we will also have young girls looking for love in all the wrong places because we have all contributed to that vulnerability.

It was also noted that there was a market that targets Indigenous girls and that is why many of them go missing and is the reason why many of them are preyed upon. As one participant described:

A market exists first from the business side where there are exploiters who are making money and profiting from the sexual exploitation of Indigenous girls and then you have the consumer side, where the people who are actually sexual abusing children are getting away with it and it is easy to get away with it.

Well I think a huge part of this question as well is that we often don't recognize the fact that often many of our young people are coming from isolated First Nation communities that are not at the same speed as where our youth that are living in the city are, and so their vulnerability comes in multiple forms from physical, to listening to their accent, if they are speaking their language, how they are groomed. So those are all indicators that increase their risk when these perpetrators are out there preying on and recruiting kids.

As to why Indigenous girls are so vulnerable, another person shared:

I don't know that anybody has the answer. I think it is a combination of answers. I think for all the time that I have been in child welfare, when I was a kid on the streets, growing up in care, and just having the experience of working with young women, especially those coming into care, one of the biggest things is the legacy of understanding. And by that I mean people don't understand the history of young Indigenous women. Young women have lost their place both within the cultural and spiritual families that we have and also this mainstream family. There is no place for these young women. Most of them come from homes where their fathers are absent. They are not taught from a very young age to be nurtured, cared, valued, respected, and I think that is a big piece of it. When you see a young woman who has a strong father figure in her life, and it could be anyone, it could be an uncle or whoever, somebody that really takes an interest and treats that little one with respect and love and nurturing, these young women grow up to be amazing young women and strong and independent.

Participants believe it will take a lot of integrated services to stop the sexual exploitation of Indigenous girls, however it will be necessary to start making people aware of what it is like for Indigenous girls. As one person stated:

If you send a little white girl down the street that comes from a nice two-parent family you are going to see that she is treated very differently going into a store than a young Indigenous girl would be. Indigenous girls grow up devaluing themselves from a very early age. They grow up thinking that they are less than. I think that that is part of the complexity of the problem.

Young girls are vulnerable because those who prey upon girls are seen to be allowed to get away with the exploitation. When Indigenous girls go missing there is a perception of indifference in society and a feeling that they don't get the same consideration by the police or by society as non-Indigenous women who have gone missing in our city. As one interviewee stated, there are predators who:

... radar in on and target vulnerable Indigenous girls where they have given Indigenous girls a false sense of acceptance and belonging. So she is deceitfully led to believe that, 'Someone wants me and thinks I am worthwhile', but in reality, the person has other motives, and the young girl doesn't know that. She's just enjoying the material items and the affection and attention.

Another woman noted that this was the same situation for her when she was a young girl in care. She noted, "I remember a couple of guys approaching me and saying, hey beautiful, what are you doing today? They give you attention, but your spidey senses are up at the same time, you're like ... nobody ever pays attention to me, I'm just some kid in care and to hear someone who's giving me the attention I don't get in school and that I don't get in the group home I live in?" Perpetrators can see this and understand and take advantage of this vulnerability at every opportunity.

Relocating to an urban setting can also make Indigenous girls vulnerable because life in the city may seem exciting and fast-paced compared to where they originate. In the city, young people can become

exposed to drugs, alcohol, the Internet and phones, which may not always be present or accessible in some of the rural communities. Young people moving to an urban setting may not realize that they also have to be safe. As one Elder noted:

In the city, they can get lost in the environment and these things can be overwhelming. They don't know enough to slow down, look around, and to see how safe they are. They think they can just walk around like out in the country. Out in the country they can walk around anytime anywhere, if they're on reserve or in a Metis community or wherever. They think they can do the same thing here.

Indigenous girls are vulnerable today because social structures have been severed through colonization and Indigenous nations are not in a place of recovery yet. They have been impacted by colonialism, racism and the trauma of addictions and violence and how it has affected the populations holistically. All the things that have happened to First Nations have led to "disconnections from our nations, families, our homelands, so that we as Indigenous people are now displaced on our own lands." Today, many Indigenous girls are detached from their communities and don't have the security of a community, and don't know their community or where they come from and this has thrown them off balance making them all that more vulnerable in the city.

Participants believe genocidal bureaucratic practices have divided Indigenous peoples as nations, resulting in situations where Indigenous people have disassociated themselves from the core roots of who they once were as Indigenous peoples. These bureaucratic practices come from the *Indian Act* and other systems. Furthermore, it was noted that most people in mainstream Canada have not been taught the real history of Canada and this ignorance has shaped the social policies evident in Canada today, which has created many challenges for Indigenous peoples as one participant explained:

On reserves, the pressure of economic capacity is very limited and people get starved out. As a result they might migrate to the urban centres where they think they are going to have better opportunities, but of course, most Indigenous families cannot maintain urban living and everything begins to disintegrate. This may be a factor that can leave Indigenous girls vulnerable because then they become susceptible to being placed in care.

It was recognized that especially for the Indigenous girls who have been sexually abused or exploited when very young, they may have almost no concern for their safety and almost no fear of strangers. There is a belief that because of the abuses they might have experienced that Indigenous girls might not have the same sense of safety that someone else that has never experienced abuse would have. Many times this ability to listen to that "spider sense that tingles when you know you're in a dangerous place" is turned off when they are given drugs and alcohol. Exposure to drugs and alcohol makes Indigenous girls particularly vulnerable. Indigenous girls carry shame because of these experiences and the only way to get over the shame is "to drink or to use drugs so that they can try to survive another day." It was also said that for many young Indigenous women, it's not so much having fearlessness, but rather it is "hopelessness that they are grappling with and when there is nowhere to go and we bring them into care, we have to lock them up. So it is a sad situation."

Many Indigenous girls have experienced violence in their biological homes or have witnessed domestic violence, which most often will mean having seen a female family member such as their mother be abused and assaulted. As one community advocate suggested:

Chances are their mother is struggling with addictions. So they have seen that and that is what is ingrained in their minds, the violence and the addictions....I imagine that these young girls would feel lost and rejected in their lives. So that is what they are carrying with them when they come into care. They just want to feel loved and respected like any human being. That's what we all want to feel and that is where the vulnerability comes in because they gravitate toward undesirables out there and get involved with alcohol or what have you, and then they too themselves become victims, just like their mothers. It's just the pattern; it's the intergenerational reality of their lives. It just never stops.

What we are seeing today is the aftermath of colonization. This history has contributed to the vulnerability of Indigenous girls and all Indigenous people. The continued poverty of Indigenous people coupled with the intergenerational involvement of Indigenous families with both residential schools and child welfare is a part of this - it has made Indigenous families distrustful not only of the modern CFS system, but of each other as explained by one of the interviewees:

These two variables are a lethal combination. So you also have all these other lethal combinations that pull all our little girls into CFS and our families into CFS. Of course, intrinsically, they are going to be vulnerable because they have been taken away from their family. We have generations of families now that are CFS involved. I know that people think this child is just coming into the system for the first time, but her mom, maybe her aunties and her cousins and her grandma have been in the system. We always talk about the intergenerational effects of residential school but we are not necessarily applying that to CFS. You have generations that are involved in CFS and that experience makes you implicitly more vulnerable and distrustful. Like our families are so distrustful. They are distrustful of the systems. Obviously! But they are also distrustful of each other. Like we are so distrustful of each other!

So we have no supports. There are some families that are on the healing path and have those supports and have that trust and have that cultural identity and all of that, but we literally have so many families in so many interpersonal relationships that are so distrustful and so unhealthy and so lost. But we construct them as intrinsically just bad parents. Not recognizing the poverty in this cultural dislocation and that all these pieces play and just create this vulnerable, vulnerable space for our girls, and really for all of our people. In my work I see it on a daily basis, that trauma manifests itself in just every single aspect of our people's lives but it gets constructed in entirely negative ways. I would argue that a good proportion of our people have posttraumatic stress disorder but we don't frame it like that...They can't get jobs, etc. You know the narrative? I mean to me, it's all those things and you can't separate yourself from looking at all of those things ... that literally punishes our girls for being vulnerable and placing them in that space. We are setting them up to become the next generation who take the brunt of society's

sexual and physical violence. We don't see it as a methodological or a strategic thing but we are setting them up to be that next generation.

Indigenous people and their families have been undermined for more than 500 years. This history of colonization and racism makes our young people vulnerable, whether they are in care or not. For Indigenous girls who have been apprehended and taken into care, many are torn from their families without an explanation. As one woman noted:

I think it depends on what was happening at home. If the parents were drinking or if they were being molested or abused and they come from that life, and then they are torn out of that life with no explanation and I talk with them and ask how come you are here and what brought you here? They'll be like, I don't know. I think it was because my mom was drinking one day and then all of a sudden a social worker showed up and here I am. So really they don't get an explanation about why they are in care or what the goals are for the family in order for them to go back home. Usually they don't know and that is why they are angry. That makes them vulnerable because they don't have an idea of what is going on with their life to begin with.

To be an Indigenous person in society is considered a significant vulnerability especially for Indigenous girls and women. Young girls' vulnerability is tied to how they are "treated as a baby, as children, as youth, and then later as young adults" as one person suggested. Vulnerability is also tied to the colour of one's skin. As another participant stated, "I think that if you have brown skin or black skin that you are considered a vulnerable person in society." However it was also noted that being an Indigenous person who "looks white" could also present its own unique experiences of vulnerability. As one woman observed:

...the colour of my skin didn't save me from the vulnerability of my mother who struggled with addictions when I was in my developmental stages, from a baby to age 7, and through those times she tried to protect us as much as she could, but her addictions just kind of got the best of her and it left us in really vulnerable places where we got hurt and where I got hurt.

She noted that her mother's addictions opened up avenues of risk that made her especially vulnerable to harm and exploitation. She further noted that when she was a child she wasn't raised to believe that her life had value. About this she shared the following:

Although I was loved, I wasn't treated that way. I was bumped around from different places to be watched by different family members or different community people, and left at home with babysitters when really bad things happened. I think it is that piece right there that I grew into this and started and without a dad too ... because my dad left when I was one. I think that it comes from the whole childhood and then what we adjust to and how we try to survive. We get into survival mode. I became used to trying to get the approval of so many people. To be part of something where I could just experience love. I think it is a continuous search for those things and I'm not saying it is all the same for everyone but I know for me there's always a search. At what point are you going to be good enough? When do I feel complete? Is it when I'm with a man or with an older man ... it's always like kind of looking ... I call that survivor mode. I feel that

a lot of our women are in survival mode, which stems from when they were a child and facing traumatic experiences or have complex trauma. We kind of just grow into adults surviving.

The Roots of Mistreatment and Exploitation

2. Why are so many young women mistreated and exploited?

Indigenous women have experienced violations against their human rights in every decade since the *Indian Act* was enacted. This has ranged from losing their status because they married a non-Indigenous man, to not being able to vote until the 1960s, to the medical sterilization of many Indigenous women, often without their consent, among many other atrocities. Many of the Indigenous women who were interviewed for this report noted that “there have been so many things done to purposefully violate our human rights” such that we have and continue to be victimized by Canadian systems and institutions that have actually contributed to creating the vulnerabilities experienced by Indigenous girls and women today. One woman shared that:

We have a health care system where we have poor health outcomes. There is a justice system that is there to criminalize and institutionalize Indigenous women...Until we start looking and examining the role that those systems [play] in contributing and even sometimes perpetuating the human rights violations of Indigenous women, it won't stop until then. It will continue to go and get worse though in the bigger picture when we look at why are there so many women being mistreated, it's almost like putting water in a pail full of holes. Until we start plugging the holes, you're just going to keep pouring water in it and we'll never get ahead of it if we don't start plugging those holes. And it will only get worse with those systems.

There is an untrue perception of Indigenous women and girls that has long been part of the history of colonization, displacement and marginalization where Indigenous women and girls have been seen as “sexually promiscuous and available to anyone who has a sexual urge.” As one advocate shared:

When newcomers came here they didn't necessarily understand what they were seeing. It was completely foreign and a different experience. So they saw obviously through their ethnocentric lens ... so we start to see a really methodical and a strategic attack on women and girls' identities and their place and space. We start to see them constructed as everything that we know today, as less than, they are promiscuous and why were they promiscuous? Because they had control over their sexuality and their bodies, which was the antithesis to white women. We start to see language of whores, drudges, as slaves to their husbands, and this is all stuff from my Masters when I was doing archival research, and then of course, squaw. Most people don't know that generations of indigenous women and girls were called squaws. Your mom, my mom, my grandmother – all called that.

She further expounded on this and it bears sharing the full breadth of her comment here as it helps to solidify the understanding of Indigenous girls and women's places in society. The anger reflected therein by the speaker is brutally honest and justified and is coupled with an evidence-informed understanding

of the ways in which language is a tool that is used to construct social norms. *Readers are warned that the following quote contains explicit language:*

So of course, if you look at the history of that word [Squaw], it actually means the French appropriation or bastardization of the Iroquois word for the female genitalia right? So it is the equivalent of today's "cunt." So when you construct women like that, so obviously, they are actually strategically placed to take the brunt of society's sexual and physical violence. That's why they are constructed like that because it justifies the violence, but really its colonial violence against the bodies of Indigenous women and girls, and that's not something new to Canada. That takes place all across the globe in colonization against Indigenous girls and women. And so we often blame indigenous women and girls, and we'll say ... and this one makes me mental ... Well, they love the lifestyle. Nobody fucken loves that lifestyle! Who grows up when you're four, five, six, seven years old and says hey, I want to go stand on the streets? But we construct Indigenous girls and women like that because of those early colonial narratives: Of course they like that life style. Of course they're going to put themselves at risk because intrinsically they are whores, intrinsically cunts, and they are intrinsically all of these negative things so of course they are going to be vulnerable and they are going to get exploited and mistreated.

If you're a predator, if you are an offender ... a lot of people think, all they are is stupid, and yeah, of course some are, right? But they are also very smart in a sense that they know where they can get away with things. So whose body ... if you just loath women, if you're a misogynistic asshole? ... who are you going to strategically target? You are going to target who you've been told all your life is a whore and is promiscuous and a prostitute and all of these things because you know you're going to get away with it. So all of those narratives coupled with all of the variables that we talked about before, poverty, housing ... And all of that, just creates a lethal cocktail for the most savage levels of violence to be perpetrated against indigenous girls, starting from so young. I mean you know this, I know this, but starting from like two, three, four years old – just with impunity. The other piece too and I know that the narrative is starting to shift and respect that it is our men that are doing this, our men and our boys are doing this – absolutely, that is an issue! Absolutely but it is born from that same space that we are talking about right now. So all of those conditions that created the space that we are in right now for little girls, are the same conditions, that I find, that created the sense of helplessness and hopelessness in our men and in our boys. So in the midst of that pain and now hurt, how does that manifest itself? In violence!

These stereotypical perceptions have taught men they can get away with mistreating and exploiting Indigenous girls and women. The mistreatment and exploitation of Indigenous girls and women has been normalized by society historically and this is still happening today. For instance, this is reflected in the terminology that labels Indigenous girls and women as prostitutes or they are described as willingly involved in the sex trade industry. As one participant shared:

When you continue to use the mainstream language and identifying someone as a prostitute or involved in prostitution or the sex trade, everybody knows what it is. So it is normalized because of that. It's normalized in the behaviour of the perpetrators as well because they are not seeing what they are doing is that they are victimizing a child or a young woman.

It was noted by some participants that some men from other countries continue to have these same perspectives about Indigenous girls and women.

The women and men that interviewed for this report also stated that the exploitation of Indigenous girls and women drives the commercial sexual exploitation industry. As one of the women put it, "it's sad to say, but we're like an industry and it is why so many women are also being mistreated and exploited and that is because there is a market for Indigenous girls and women." As another participant observed:

The national task force on sex trafficking on Indigenous women and girls in Canada identified several different markets within Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, and other areas in Western Canada, where, if you are a young girl from the north and you add an intellectual disability, whether she is FASD or some other form of intellectual disability – that's big money for a pimp to make. There's a market for targeting those girls. So until we actually address that piece of it that there are really bad people out there that are victimizing on purpose because there is a demand to abuse Indigenous women. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry concluded that the reason why Helen Betty Osborne was murdered was because the men who raped her had a stereotype in their mind that Indigenous women were promiscuous and had no human value but to be there for men for sexual gratification.

One participant noted that many perpetrators believe that they are helping vulnerable Indigenous girls. These perpetrators have been known to say:

Well you know what, she needed a place to sleep that night so I contributed to her having a roof over her head, or I was providing for her basic needs. They don't see what they are doing and that is the sad thing about it is that it is so normalized. That's not ok when you are sexualizing a woman in that manner.

Communicating on the Roles and Responsibilities of Indigenous Girls

3. What messages do we need to communicate to other people about the roles of young girls and women?

It is critical to understand that Indigenous girls and women are considered sacred in the Indigenous worldview. Women are the centres of family circles in Indigenous communities. More needs to be communicated to young girls themselves about the extent of their sacredness as women, as life givers. Indigenous girls need to learn and come to know about the traditional views on their sacred roles and responsibilities as girls. Although there is recognition that much needs to be done in educating girls and the public, at the same time the Indigenous community is grappling with undoing years of messaging

from colonial contact and residential schools, that our cultural ways are not evil. The beauty and strength and the love that is built into Indigenous values, practices, and traditions need to be communicated to everyone, but most importantly to Indigenous youth. Indigenous people have to play a significant role in the development of these teachings, however, it was acknowledged by one participant that:

...we don't have enough people to carry these teachings yet. We haven't hit the critical mass yet where we have a lot of people who are carrying those teachings. I think it's going to take a lot of commitment from all those carriers out there, those bundle carriers, to be able to bring and share that and do that in a way that doesn't burn them out either.

Learning about the roles and responsibilities has to start early. As one participant indicated:

I think that has to happen at a very early age, especially in the schools and not just in our schools. When I say our schools, where it is mainly Indigenous children but it needs to be mandatory curriculum, when you speak about our culture, when you teach about our culture. I get challenged with that sometimes because it bothers me that we have to go out there and educate people about how sacred we are as women, because that's just a natural value for me as an Indigenous woman and mother ... and those that are already perpetrating, won't really care. They are not even going to listen to that message or respect that message. So the only way that it is going to stop is to get to those early years of our young people in all cultures at a very young age in school.

As noted by the individuals interviewed for this report, the recent recommendations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provide an excellent and safe opportunity for this learning to begin because it "created a unique opportunity for people that didn't know anything, but were too uneasy to ask or learn." Young men in particular need to understand the sacredness of Indigenous girls as these girls will become life givers in the future. As one participant said, "I would like to see that these roles are taught to groups of young Indigenous men, teenage boys and all young boys."

The individuals interviewed for this report felt there was a need to start sharing messages that celebrate Indigenous girls and women for being Indigenous girls and women. Just as we celebrate the academic achievement of others, we should celebrate Indigenous girls and women who are following their traditional ways. While many of the individuals interviewed have noted these messages are slowly beginning to surface, they were unanimous in their opinions that there should be more exposure celebrating the strength, wisdom and beauty of the Indigenous girls and women of our province.

Another idea that surfaced from these interviews is the need to begin asking Indigenous women about how they see themselves, what makes them strong and what makes them feel proud. We need to ask Indigenous girls and young women who they are, how they do things, who their families are, and what their plans are for the future. We need to celebrate their achievements. A conversation is needed in our city, province, and in our communities to understand Indigenous girls and women. It was also shared that we need to not just celebrate academic and work achievements but we should be celebrating any

kind of achievements, no matter how small, of those who are living marginalized lives. As one participant stated:

No one celebrates the girl who just got off crack. No one celebrates the girl who tried so many times not to get pregnant but ended up getting pregnant. We don't celebrate those things but these are the types of things that some of our girls and women are facing and they are shamed for it. Abortion – shamed! You're not with a man – shamed! You can't get your shit together or you're on welfare – shamed! We need to celebrate them for just being ... in all of our different forms and with all of our different perspectives.

Those interviewed for this report also wanted to make sure that Indigenous girls know that “there are these systems in place that tell families that you're not good the moment [systems] get involved in your life.” We have to stop sending these kinds of messages because it is “just the same intergenerational thing and we just spit out more people that don't believe in themselves or don't believe in their culture.”

The messaging behind the terminology currently used to describe vulnerable Indigenous girls and women also needs to change. For far too long Indigenous girls and women who have experienced violence and sexual exploitation, have been constructed as being somehow less worthy in the eyes of the public. The public and the media have to “stop calling our little girls prostitutes.” Much work is needed in educating the public in deconstructing the negative narratives of Indigenous girls and women's lives that have been promoted through the news and social media. As one participant noted, dialogue has begun, through the initiatives of Indigenous women, with the way that Indigenous girls and women are presented in the media when they have gone missing or have been found murdered. She noted:

So in doing this work for so long and for years, specifically in respect to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, so for years whenever someone would go missing and/or was murdered, the WPS or the RCMP, or whoever's jurisdiction it would fall under, they would release if the girl had been in conflict with the law and inevitably many times they were strung out or they were picked up for prostitution or whatever, they would release their mug shot. Of course what that did for the general public, whether it is conscious or subconscious, you would divorce yourself from that little girl or that woman. It was like well, she put herself at risk. For years now there were many of us that thought, look you can't do that. You first have to ask for a family photo because you are constructing negatively an image and a message that the media would use, oh prostitute found. No! She is a child! She's 15 years old. She's 16 years old and she's been chopped up. That's not a prostitute. I'm talking about Felicia Solomon Osborne who was constructed as a prostitute. She was bloody 16 and experienced savage levels of violence, chopped up and thrown into the river. But still in that context we say: prostitute.

So there were so many of us that felt for years and years and lobbied with the WPS and the RCMP, and then it shifted and then the messaging started to change because the perception started to change in the public's eye. I remember one story, it was the summer that Charisse

Houle was found, she was 17 years old. She was murdered and she was dumped on the outskirts of the city. She was murdered in July of 2009. Three weeks later, less than a month later, Hillary Angel Wilson was found, and she too was murdered...then all of a sudden, something shifted. CBC went on the street and they were asking people, 'what do you think about this? Is there something going on?' And all of a sudden the people on the street had a different narrative and they were saying yeah, there's something going on because these women or these Indigenous girls and they are at risk. So again that narrative has shifted. It still needs to shift. But we are at a different place compared to where we were 15, 16 years ago when I started working on this issue. I think we still have to be consistent with that message still and we have to, at every opportunity, deconstruct those subtle or not so subtle messaging for our little girls ... so that there is more compassion in constructing them as a little girls who are valued, sacred and in need of protection too.

Further to this was the recognition by the participants of the need to stop letting those who exploit young girls get away with their actions. A few participants identified that the messaging behind calling the perpetrators "Johns" who deliberately target and exploit vulnerable young Indigenous girls needs a significant overhaul. A number of participants noted the need to challenge the meaning behind the use of the term John because "it's so ridiculous because it is so forgiving." As one participant acknowledged in sharing her experience in working with police around the issue of the term:

These two officers said in our circle, 'well you know, these John's they're just really shy and they're awkward, and they're just lonely and they are socially awkward.' I responded, are you kidding me? You are excusing abusive behavior! So we are so forgiving and protective of Johns, 'oh he's just socially awkward,' when in fact that's not true. Upward of 70% of these men that exploit women and girls are married, they are fathers and they are professionals! So I always challenge people that if you are strategically looking for a little girl, you are a pedophile! Like call it what it is, which then again, shifts the narrative from blaming the girl that she chose that life at 13, 14 years old...people don't realize that physiologically their brains are not fully developed but we're assigning that they're making conscious, healthy decisions...Like are you kidding me?

Lastly, what was evident in the conversations with the individuals interviewed with this report is the deafening silence that arises regarding the public's perceived indifference to the numbers of Indigenous girls that go missing or are murdered. One interviewee reflected on this indifference when she shared the following:

Well, white bodies; white women's bodies are viewed as more valuable and more sacred and in needing more protection than Indigenous women and girls' bodies. That's right now. This is playing out right now. I think that that is actually really important to know this piece about the amount of media attention, which some women have gotten, which I think every woman should get. Absolutely everybody should get that, but be fair and equitable. Why is that? One of the police reports said that she's had no prior interaction with the police, that she's had no criminal record, okay whatever. I don't know why they had to say that, but they are saying it strategically to construct her as needing more attention. But you know we have Claudette Osborne, who has

been missing since 2009. She went missing after two weeks of giving birth. They did not do anything for weeks with her file. Two weeks after giving birth!

Options for Support, Development and Access to Indigenous Teachings

4. If Indigenous girls cannot live with their birth families and there are limited safe options for these girls to live with extended family or trusted community members, where else can they find support, development, and access to the teachings?

Indigenous organizations in the community also feel that they must do the work with their own Indigenous youth in order to create success for that young person. As one interviewee shared, "I think that connecting young people to organizations that offer our traditional ways, by Indigenous people, are really good places for our young people to go." It was said that this is a critically important factor because too many Indigenous youth today are not connected to their spirits and their cultural ways. It was shared that Indigenous youth "don't know who they are" and they are being told that, "ceremony is bad" by some of the people in the non-cultural placements they are experiencing. As one community advocate noted, some youth in care are not being "allowed to participate in smudges, not allowed to go to sweat lodge ceremonies, and/or not allowed to sit with the Elders" and generally, "they are not allowed to practice who they are" or to "connect with their identity" as an Indigenous young person when they are placed in non-Indigenous homes. Some youth feel they are not supported to share their experiences of violence and exploitation when living in care.

As one community advocate indicated, when she consulted with Indigenous youth regarding the questions posed for this report, one youth shared that in her previous placements "she was not allowed to share anything about who she was or what her experiences" had been as a sexually exploited young person. She had not been allowed to "share her spirit" and this resulted in the inability to relate with the prior placements.

As one community worker shared, "only an Indigenous organization can do relational work" with vulnerable Indigenous youth and moreover she feels that community-based Indigenous organizations have a different philosophy where often they tend "to go above and beyond" when it comes to working with vulnerable Indigenous youth populations. The approaches that they take in working with Indigenous youth were explained as follows:

When a kid goes AWOL, the rule is you call the police, you fill out the form, you call the worker and that's it, that's all you got to do. And that is all they do. But an Indigenous organization like ours, in our homes, if she's not home...Oh my God, it's a crisis – somebody, bring in another staff - somebody go look for her – where has she been....

This same organization indicated that they have gone as far as standing on the corner with a young person until they return to safety. As one woman shared:

I've literally stood on the corner and I said, I don't care, you can get mad at me all you want, but I love you and I'm not going to leave you here because it might be the last time I see you. I stood with her for an hour. She called me every name in the book until she's like, 'fine you're not going are you? You really do care, don't you?' She said that that day was the first time anybody had ever come to look for her and had, as she put it, 'the balls to stand out there with her.'

Other participants are of the opinion that too many Indigenous organizations are underfunded for the critical work that they do with the Indigenous community in comparison to the non-Indigenous organizations, which are perceived as being much better funded. As one community advocate lamented,

There are many Indigenous organizations that can take up the responsibility of working with vulnerable Indigenous girls if they were funded substantially.

"We have a huge inequality with being able to be successful at being innovative with what we know needs to happen and so that's a sad reality" while another noted, "We are still not putting enough supports, including financial, into Indigenous organizations and NGOs." There are many Indigenous organizations that can take up the responsibility of working with vulnerable Indigenous girls and youth if they were funded substantially to do that work. While many

might suggest there are funding gaps throughout the care system, one participant voiced the perception some hold that non-Indigenous organizations enjoy significant funding, while Indigenous organizations routinely struggle. Another participant indicated:

We have a lot of non-Indigenous organizations that service our girls and our women who get the bulk of funding and really, the bulk of that funding needs to be redirected to Indigenous organizations ... I think it is really important to recognize the amount of dollars that go into non-Indigenous organizations and the fact that Indigenous people are better suited and should be supported to be able to do that work.

By doing so, Indigenous girls would be connected to Indigenous role models and the community. If Indigenous organizations were funded more equitably they would be able to hire more Elders to work with and bring more teachings to Indigenous girls. It was said that Indigenous girls and women need "Indigenous spaces" where they feel safe to go and where they will feel comfortable and that this is an important role for Indigenous organizations. It was stated that government needs to take a courageous step forward in re-allocating and redirecting funds to better support Indigenous girls and women so they are able to access "independent, stand-alone support drop-in centres" so that if girls and/or women are at risk and stuck on the streets, they have access to "Indigenous spaces" where they can "crash for the night," get food, do laundry, or take a shower. These safe spaces must be available day and night, and must also be a beautiful space and a welcoming space with Elders and supports that are also always available. But this can only come to fruition with the redirecting of what Indigenous advocates believe are "millions and millions of dollars" that flow into non-Indigenous organizations, funding which hasn't successfully impacted the key drivers of the experiences of Indigenous girls and women.

At the time of writing, an exciting development is unfolding for youth in Winnipeg's west end neighbourhood. After growing public awareness and an information campaign by community-based workers and youth about the around-the-clock needs for youth in the city, the West End 24-hour safe space received funding from both the community and the government to move forward with its program development and open its doors. This is a progressive and positive move to further strengthen the community in an area of the city where many indigenous youth face issues of violence and exploitation.¹⁷

Some of the participants consulted for this report were unaware of targeted programs such as some of those offered at Ka Ni Kanichihk, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, or through such initiatives like Hands of Mother Earth (HOME), as examples that specifically focus on the needs of Indigenous girls where they can access a wide range of things, including the teachings, access to Elders, and where the opportunity to learn about their roles as girls and women is presented. One community advocate stated that there is no dedicated and appropriately funded ceremonial place here in Winnipeg and yet Winnipeg is situated on Treaties 1 and 3. Given that nearly 90% of children currently in care are Indigenous, it was also suggested that there should be a healing place in Winnipeg that is dedicated and available for Indigenous families, children, and youth. Thunderbird House was recognized as being such a place but it was noted that it has "its own funding challenges as it is no longer open all of the time" and furthermore it is not considered by all to be a "safe place" and so does not necessarily meet the needs that have been outlined.

Gender Relations and Interactions

5. What is missing in how we teach boys to interact with girls?

Those interviewed said Indigenous boys and men need to become healthier because they are one half of the balance that is necessary in life according to the Indigenous worldview. More role models for young boys and men are necessary. Young men, it was acknowledged, "need to have an equal opportunity, a sacred responsibility to be caregivers, to be protectors, to be providers, fathers, and grandfathers. They are just as important in a family."

The bonding between generations has been halted for too many Indigenous families. Both mothers and fathers must equally be involved in the bonding that happens between parents and children as the male Elder's teaching below intimates:

It's that cord that is connected and when you love your child so much, you can actually feel when they are struggling and when they are going through difficult times, but you need to make the connection with your child, and that is where the bonding is very important. If the mother has bonded with her child and also the father has bonded to the child, when that child is born it is so important that that child feels the male energy...It could be the grandfather, it could be the brother, as long as the child feels that there is a male energy, that child will know the difference.

¹⁷Learn more here: <https://www.facebook.com/WestEnd247/>

Nobody ever looks at that...Nobody even knows about that. They don't know the importance of the bonding that goes on. And what happens when a child is born. They just spend a few hours with the mother and then that child is taken and put up for adoption or in foster care, that bonding is then severed, because then there is no connection. There isn't enough time for that bonding to happen, and with that child in foster care being raised by someone totally different to them, they cannot connect with the mother because there was no bonding, and they bond with whomever is caring for that child. So that is something that needs to be looked at. It is important to create that bond between the mother and child as well as the father of that child so that bonding takes place. That's what happened a long time ago when our people took care of that child, so that needs to be looked at and see what can be done for the child to allow that to happen. So now you see that the agencies they don't know anything about that. They don't know these things because they haven't received the teachings on these things.

It was said that Indigenous boys and men have lost their way and also need access to the teachings as much as Indigenous girls and women.

Our men initiated each other into manhood but they are doing it in a negative way through the gangs. It is because they don't have healthy role models, they don't have healthy men; they don't have those ceremonies to bring them into that age of manhood, into that fast, the teachings...So I asked these questions to the Elders. I sit with them and I talk with them because I see a lot of distrust in our community around the violence, the inactive fathers. I'm sure they love their children but it's like they need to work more so on themselves because they too have been devalued. They too have been devalued because of their roles and responsibilities have been taken away. They too were brutalized in some way shape or form and indoctrinated by mainstream beliefs. They also need to bring back the ceremonies for the young men.

Another interviewee shared a similar perspective:

I don't think that little boys get those teachings anymore. I think at some point they may have but they just definitely don't do it now....So in the context of little girls, we talked about earlier about those roles and responsibilities about little girls, we definitely have to be doing that for little boys about what their roles are as indigenous boys, as indigenous men and what their roles are traditionally as protectors... The same thing that situates young girls to be vulnerable and at risk and to be exploited and all of those things, those are the same conditions that create absolute rage and a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in our boys and in our men. Because of the long-standing colonial, intergenerational facts and how that manifests itself is through violence.

We can't be surprised, unfortunately, when these things happen because we are creating spaces that are ripe for the violence that are executed against them by our little boys and little girls. Because they are hurt and they are lost and we are constructing them as these monsters and they are not.

Most of the women consulted for this report believe that men have to be included in the healing in order to bring back balance.

I've noticed how we keep boys out of the women's teachings - boys and men. So last year at the women's gathering, there was like six or seven men who helped the set up... Yesterday, for the first time, there was equal amount of men and women, usually there's more women than men in sweat lodges and in ceremonies. Like if you go to a Sundance there will be like thirty women and 3 men because women are the ones who are bringing it [culture and traditions] back and then the men follow us. So we are bringing it back. So it's all that controversy with women on the big drum, and women dragging buffalo skulls. I got a teaching from an Elder that we are supposed to do that to bring the men back, for them to do what they are supposed to do. So we need to teach boys that they are there to walk beside a girl and protect her.

It was also noted that what makes Indigenous girls and women so vulnerable is when Indigenous boys and men today do not know and understand their roles and responsibilities. Young men need to be introduced to the rites of passage that are specific to young men but they also need to understand the roles and responsibilities that have been gifted to girls and women. It was said that access to the traditional teachings must start early with boys. The male Elder who participated in the interviews for this report shared his understanding of how important it is for Indigenous boys and men to have some understanding of women's teachings:

Men have to be included in the healing in order to bring back balance.

There is not enough of it being done. There has to be more work in that area, because when I listened to those women's teachings, I listened to those women sharing, I learned a lot. But the other part, in which I have an advantage, is from about 6 years old, when my grandmother taught me how to respect women, when I was 5, 6 years old and she taught me that and I really learned my respect for women. She made reference to the women, and that young women will become life givers. Well, when you're 6, 7 years old, you don't know what a life giver is. It wasn't till my older sister had my nephew and I heard my grandmother calling her a life giver, and then I understood what that meant. So those things need to be shared.

Some participants felt that if Indigenous boys cannot access traditional teachings about their roles and responsibilities at home, then it should be available in an educational setting like at school. This is important because indigenous men need to be involved in the lives of their children and it is never too late for them to reclaim this role. As one participant shared:

There is something lacking for these young men too and again, it goes back to we blame the mothers for everything. I'm laying the blame with some of these fathers. Anyone can impregnate anyone. But it really does take a man to step up and say no, I'm going to be a father and I'm going to be an involved father...I've seen fathers who has spent 20 years in jail and made a huge changes in their life so they could be there for their grandchildren, and they turned out

to be the best grandfathers ever. They were so involved and they are raising their grandchildren. It is never too late...and that's where the bear clan and other clans, they should be a lot more active, they should be teaching our men how to be men so they can teach their young boys how to be boys.

Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Girls through Systems Collaborations

6. How can the public systems (e.g. child welfare, justice, health, education, etc.) be improved so that there are better outcomes for Indigenous girls?

The need for more collaboration among the many systems that interact and service Indigenous children, youth and families within this province was identified as a long outstanding issue that has yet to be met. As one person said:

Change the legislation and make them talk. Seriously, that is what it is going to take. I'm at the point where we've been having this conversation for the last 15 years in a very serious way but how do we stop the siloing? How do we stop people from putting themselves into these one-offs? And you know what? Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. We have all these dialogues and we have all these good intentions and everybody just walks away from the table and just does whatever they do.

Another participant interviewed who has worked across various systems in the province reiterated this same position noting that meaningful collaboration is still missing across various system sectors:

The silos have always been identified, as these departments work in silos, and in most cases they are just down the hall from each other. I mean you have the Department of Education in this office, and then you go down the hall there is social services. There is no excuse. Even in the legislature. You have the minister of family services and down the hall is the minister of education- why aren't they talking? This is not brain surgery. This is not rocket science. It is so fundamental ... collaboration. Set up something. Let's talk. Let's meaningfully do it. Meaningful collaboration is missing, it is missing.

Meaningful collaboration is reciprocal and aims to address power imbalances.

The need to change legislation was identified as a way in which change can be made to improve outcomes for Indigenous girls who are engaged across various systems. There should be no systems barriers in place for children and youth as this advocate explained:

It has to come from the top. The leadership themselves has to give the directive that you will work together, it is going to be in your legislation, you are going to have to talk to one another, you have to try and provide this wrap around service... I think when it comes to children there should be no barriers and there should be no constraints.

One Elder interviewed explained that there is willingness among Indigenous people and organizations to collaborate with various government systems, however, it was noted that it appears these same government systems are not interested in reciprocal collaboration. It was noted that this was unfortunate because Indigenous people “have a lot to share” and that this “unwillingness to collaborate” is seen as a big loss to many systems because Indigenous people and organizations see that, “they are struggling and they are creating more problems by not [being] willing to work with us.” As this Elder explained:

Those are things that the system and the different programs need to keep open and hear what we have to offer. So that's the sad part of it, they know everything and they are still encountering the same problems and the same issues, and they can't seem to resolve them. Yet we have some answers to those issues and how we can help out. And I think if those programs are open to us, I think we could move it along a lot more quickly. And then maybe someday, like I never give up on that part, but maybe someday when they teach about the residential school issues in the classrooms across the country, when they teach about Treaties across the country in the classrooms, then they might begin to understand...But until then, they are in control, they are the bosses, they know everything, and we are too dumb and stupid ... that is the way that we will be looked at. And that's why I feel that way when I sit down with government people...is they look at me as if I don't know anything. I am not the only one who thinks and feels that way because there are others and they had been treated as such. The only thing that that they use us (Elders) for is for the opening and the closing prayers, and that's it, and then you just go sit in the corner, that type of thing.

Another person interviewed also stated that government systems, when working with Indigenous populations, especially those that interact with children and youth:

...can no longer make policies that come from the head, they have to also have to make decisions that come from the heart, and in order to reach reconciliation, they need to take that journey from the head to the heart. People in government need to begin to understand that.

Sometimes collaboration between systems puts Indigenous agencies and organizations in precarious situations where the trust that they have worked to build among vulnerable Indigenous populations can easily be destroyed by systems where procedure and policy can jeopardize the tenuous nature of building trust with marginalized youth. An example of where this happened is exemplified in the following story shared about a “highly-entrenched and exploited girl” who was required to “turn herself in” to the Manitoba Youth Centre (MYC). In the days leading up to her arrival at MYC, a plan was developed to offer the youth as much support as possible as she dealt with the justice system:

And so everybody agrees, [all of the systems and professionals involved in her support plan], so we know the plan that on this day on Thursday she's going to turn herself in at two o'clock [in the afternoon]. And the reason why it is two o'clock [and not earlier in the day] is because it is her birthday. So we are going to take her out for breakfast and then we are going to buy her some clothes and then we are going to bring her to jail because she needs to deal with all that stuff right? And so [the other system professionals] they decided that ‘no, we don't have time at

two o'clock anymore because we are going to be busy doing other things. We are going to pick her up at nine o'clock [in the morning]!' And gave us five minutes notice. Not even enough time to tell her that the plan is off – the whole plan is off! They came and arrested her right at the house. So it is those types of ways in which the system just totally screwed up this kid. Like all of the work that we did up with her up until this point...well now she doesn't trust us because we told her this was the plan and then all of a sudden the police show up at nine o'clock and we didn't even have a chance to tell her.

It was noted that in situations such as that shared above, systems need to allow the people and the organizations who have the strongest relationships be the ones who are making and enforcing the plans because a girl's safety is the most important element whether she is in care, in custody, or out on the streets. It was noted that the girl no longer sees this particular community organization as a support anymore because she feels "let down."

People working in public systems need to stop saying that Indigenous girls "exploit themselves."

The ways in which Indigenous girls are viewed by various systems was also highlighted as problematic to many of the people we interviewed. In particular, it was stated by some community advocates that people working in many public systems need to stop saying that Indigenous girls "exploit themselves," or that "they are prostituting themselves." Some have even heard that

"Indigenous girls enjoy that kind of lifestyle." As one person strongly said:

They're not viewed properly. I don't know how many times I have heard this ... but lots of workers in the system will say, 'she's exploiting herself' ... and it's like, what? How could you even think that? Just the fact that you are seeing her in that lens, she's screwed, like she is totally screwed...she's not going to get the proper help that she needs because they are not seeing her as a young person in need of protection, that there are these outside factors that are targeting her and that is where we need to draw the line in the sand and protect her.

It was also stressed that foster parents and those working in the systems need to be better educated about young people who are being exploited because it is not always a matter of choice. Labelling does not make girls safer, in fact it makes them all that more vulnerable when people don't understand the vulnerability and place blame on girls who are being exploited as was shared in the following story reflecting on this effect:

So this father called me and he's like, yeah, she's a prostitute, she's prostituting herself. It was really hard for me to be understanding in that moment, to be empathetic about the needs of what they are going through as a family because I kept thinking, '*yeah, she's vulnerable and she's being victimized and if this is what she is coming home to every day then that is what is also putting her at risk.*'

As another person noted:

It all affects service, so if you have a system that is seeing her as perpetuating her own victimization, that's not even a starting point, she doesn't stand a chance. She's always going to be seen as a kid that is choosing her lifestyle and is responsible for her own actions and then she becomes, oh that bad kid, we'll get over it eventually over time, and then it minimizes the abuse and the victimization she is going through. And that's a real problem. And that's why some organizations just warehouse girls because they are tough. Like sexually exploited girls who have been victimized, especially for a long period of time, it's not roses...it requires many attempts to pick through those protective layers that they have...It's really, really hard and it takes a long time to break through those barriers so that she is honouring herself and recognizing that she has total power and that she has choices to make because everyone else has been telling her what to do.

It was also shared that the public systems need to be different, especially those that work and service Indigenous children and youth. These systems need to be predicated on Indigenous value systems:
If they are working with our children, they are different. A definite different culture and people. Our lineage is in the land. Our DNA is in the land. We all belong to one another. I think we need to use the resources that are within our communities and in our families. I use my sister as an example. Well I'll say, my children are acting up, so I'll send them to my sister, talk to them or I'll talk to my other sister and say, well maybe you could talk to my son, but don't tell him I told you this. We need to utilize that again, our family structures, even if it's not our family structures, outside our family structures, and uncles, grandmothers, and whatnot. We need to utilize one another again and give value to one another again.

The current systems need to ensure that Indigenous traditions are accessible to all Indigenous children and youth who come into contact with various public systems - this is currently missing from many systems. Access to Indigenous ways should mean ensuring a wide range of these traditions are offered as a choice to anyone who engages with systems, especially in child welfare, justice, health, mental health, and education. As was noted by one person, "not all people smudge or want to participate in smudging because that is not the point. The point is to have access and a choice." While it is important to implement a gendered analysis and/or gender lens on programs and services, it is equally important to ensure that an Indigenous lens is applied to the programs and services offered through the systems that interact with Indigenous girls and populations. In particular, it was noted that services offered through systems need to be not only culturally appropriate but "culturally safe" as many Indigenous people are on different levels of understanding about who they are as Indigenous people.

Those interviewed were also of the opinion that more Indigenous people need to be employed in the systems that interact with Indigenous girls in order to create change that is meaningful for Indigenous children, youth and families who must engage with these systems. As one interviewee noted, "it is really super hard for Indigenous people to work in them, because systems are so controlling." Systems need to change their approaches in order to be able to nurture and support Indigenous people who are employed in these systems. As one interviewee shared, "you don't want to feel like you are a token

Indian who is just being shushed. You need to be valued in those positions that you are doing and what you are doing there.” In addition it was said that the workforce within these systems need to be reflective of the Indigenous populations who access them. Essential to employing Indigenous people within systems is the need to develop and nurture relationships not only within systems but when working with Indigenous populations. It was said that many of the systems have “no sense of relationship.” Many of those interviewed for this report question how services can be delivered in the community, particularly with young people, when as one person put it, “you don’t even get the concept of relationships within your own system?” The importance of developing relationships was identified as being essential across all systems that interact with Indigenous families, youth and children.

Traditional Parenting and Traditional Family Structures

7. Are there elements of traditional parenting or traditional family structures that would help improve the situation of young women who are vulnerable?

The responses we heard were similar to what had been expressed regarding what communities need in order to keep Indigenous girls in care safe. Most of the responses reflected on the need to bring back elements of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and the teachings. As one young interviewee said:

Ceremonies are just like learning our roles. One of the things about indigenous culture is learning our roles and kind of what we did in our role as part of the family and our role in the community, and being able to learn those things again and to be able to do it together. It's such a kind and gentle way of connecting. So I think that those kinds of ways of connecting could be used more.

Being taught by Elders is important in developing a young person’s sense of belonging. In the process of teaching, the learner feels valued and connected and this contributes to a young person’s sense of strength and confidence. Learning from parents about Indigenous ways of being is important for making connections between generations and for connecting to the land:

When my mom teaches me, when we are out together and when she's teaching me something, I feel valued. I feel connected, but I don't just feel connected to her, but I feel connected to the land and when I feel connected to the land, I feel surrounded by it. That means I'm connected in all ways and when I'm connected to something that is always so strong and it's something I understand, I'm confident. When I'm confident I can do anything. I think that our young men, and our young women, and our families, our Elders, need that opportunity to experience that. I'm not saying that's going to work for everyone, but I bet you, if we make it more accessible for people and if it was something that was broadly looked at or used, you wouldn't just have Indigenous people doing it, you would have non-indigenous people doing it. You would have non-Indigenous people doing it because it's a beautiful way to connect.

Participants indicate the need for more “positive grandmothers, Elder roles, and role models for young women as well as for young men.” Extended families are also a part of traditional family structures and

need to be more utilized than they currently are when Indigenous girls interact with systems outside of their family structures. This was strongly emphasized in the diverse responses that follow:

I think extended family is so important. In the indigenous ways our second and third cousins, they are our cousins and in the clanship with Anishinaabe people, if you are in the bear clan, you would be my sister. We would be relatives. So our family units are much closer than the European structures of family. I don't know what the Cree system is or their traditional family structures, but I know the Anishinaabe, there are certain roles and responsibilities within the clan systems. If you are adopted and you didn't know your clan, you would still be given roles and responsibilities. So you would have that sense of belonging, and you would have that sense of care. To instill that in the young people is important. We have gang members who may not necessarily have been exposed to ceremony but they know enough to take off their hats when in ceremony. There's a reverence there that they know somehow through cell memory or just knew when they were very little – it's a protocol, something that they have retained.

I know a lot of the young people out there they had been so hurt that the only thing that they respect, are things that are very direct and very immediate, like in street justice. There's a culture out there that is still familial and tribal so to speak. They still have that loyalty. I think it is still important to show them that this is a part of their root culture, so they can make some comparison. And to show them that a traditional sense of relationship has been broken down and eroded, and that they may adopt things that are meeting immediate needs, or to surrogate what is missing. We know that street culture eventually takes away integrity and creates more vulnerability. It takes time to sort this out and heal from that.

I worked with sexually exploited women for a long time and it takes time to establish that trust, that relationship with them. I'll tell you one thing, the hardest piece in that circle for most people -the mental, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual – was that the spiritual aspect took the longest to heal and come to terms with, or even to recognize for the women. It was always the spiritual part because many have received messages that our culture was bad. These negative messages came from residential school – and that our ways were pagan, or black magic or bad medicine. Sometimes it was clergy that abused them or someone that was Christian that abused them. And we know in some communities that are highly Christian and that this is where they got abused. I'm talking about adult women here sharing. I can't imagine it's that much different for the girls in terms of addressing healing and spirituality. So I think it is really important to explore that in traditional parenting because everything is spiritual. There's always that connection.

Another noted that connecting to the land and the ceremonies has to be an ongoing process and it should be non-threatening and be introduced in a way that engages and builds on the curiosity of young people:

I think it should always be encouraged as a choice-based experience. The approach that I often used is to encourage them to come and check it out the activity for 10 minutes and just be. I let them know that if they want to draw that's totally fine; they don't have to sit in a circle. I would even allow them to sleep, as long as they were present and they were safe. It was really important, safety was number one and that they would recognize it themselves, they could come to a safe place and not be ostracized because they weren't participating in a warm seat. Often we become so program focused.

Indigenous families have been so wounded from the experience of colonization and the legacy of residential school that many of those interviewed reiterated what has been said for a long time - the need to make healing a priority for families in every community. Healing is important to the revitalization of Indigenous cultures, traditional parenting and traditional structures, and ensuring availability and access to these programs was identified as a critical piece of the puzzle. As one person said, "you can give all the money in the world but if healing programs are not available, it's not going to help."

In discussing the role of traditional parenting and traditional structures that might be beneficial for healing, it was also pointed out that many of the parents of vulnerable children also need access to these same traditional teachings along with their children. Some mothers, said one advocate who has worked extensively with the mothers of missing and murdered women and girls, "are not developmentally at the same level as their children." Some parents are at a stage of "arrested development" because of colonial legacies and "do not necessarily have the capacity to be a parent." It was recognized as important that the parents of children who are in care be involved in learning traditional parenting skills as part of the healing process. The Elder also shared these same concerns and indicated that he felt more needs to be done by child welfare systems to understand the situation of the child within the family:

They have to jump through these hoops that the CFS agencies are putting on them. There has to be a time to say, okay, that's enough. But you see, jumping through those hoops comes from the agency and their mentality of looking down on the parents of that child, and that's what they do because a lot of them are social working right and these parents don't. They are just regular folks. They are just surviving together, and then something happens and the child is taken why not work with the family, work with them together, learn about them – how come that happened to you, what took place, what happened in your life? Because sometimes people get triggered things from their past when they were a child and now that they are adults they are reacting to that trigger that happened.

So those are things that are not being looked at because they don't look at that history of the families of what they've gone through. They could've been in residential school or they could of

been raised by parents who went to residential school because those parents didn't learn about parenting when they were in residential school, so they don't know how to parent.

My mother went to residential school. She never once said, I love you, she never once held us, she never told any of us that she loved us until she was in her 80s. So being a child and being raised in that environment I developed issues around love and affection. So I had to learn all that and I realized that this is where it came from because I didn't receive it when I was young. When I was a child it wasn't there. Except for my grandmother – that was who taught us to love and that ... to love one another, to take good care of one another because she knew her daughter didn't know how. My mother didn't know how because she was taken off to residential school. So those are the issues. What are the issues of the parents that they are taking the child from? What are their issues? Maybe there is alcoholism? Maybe there's violence? Maybe there's abuse? Whatever it is dig into it, look at it!

Because so much has been lost as a result of residential schools, Indigenous families need to be taught about traditional ways of helping. Families can learn to do simple things together as a family and incorporate sharing circles, smudge, and tell stories, for instance. As one person stated:

Incorporate those sharing circles with your family every week if you can. Smudge in the morning with your children. Teach them how to care for themselves. Explain to them what some of those teachings are. Explain to our young women why the sage is so important to them and why the sweet grass is important to the men. Teach them stories. Teach them to be proud of who they are and you should be doing it right from the time they are little.

We have to somehow help our men find their way back to their roles as men, as fathers, and as protectors.

Teaching begins at birth and it was stated, “we need strong women because it is women who are our teachers and our Elders. We need strong women to teach women to nurture those little girls, those little gifts.” It was also said that, “we need our men to nurture and learn how to respect those little girls and those little gifts.” It was also acknowledged that in the Indigenous community that “we don’t have strong dads anymore. We have very few dads that stay in their children’s lives for their whole lives. It’s just not that kind of society anymore.” Another noted, “we have to somehow help our men find their way back to their roles as men, as fathers, and as protectors.” The male Elder noted that if families could engage in ceremony more often, that “our communities would be so healthy and there would be no need for child and family service agencies as well or anything like that. There would be no crimes, no abuse of any form. But unfortunately, there are other things at play that won’t allow that to happen.”

Many of the teachings were said to instill lessons and teach about discipline that can carry a person forward in life. An example of how these lessons can be learned is found in the berry ceremony for women as was shared as an example by more than one of the participants interviewed for this report:

My daughter did the berry fast. She couldn't eat berries for a year but she had to serve berries at the full moon ceremony and she is bear clan so she loves berries. It almost killed her but you know what that taught her? Abstinence, like waiting for something, like not jumping into a relationship sexually. So it really taught her a lot of good things.

Connecting to the land is also considered a critical component of traditional family structures that might be helpful for improving the situation for vulnerable Indigenous girls. The community needs to be able to heal together. When Indigenous families are helped to connect to the land through land-based healing methods, positive effects are noted on entire families and communities and this encourages transformative change. Through the connection with land, traditional roles appear to come back and families start to interact with each other in a way that is fundamentally different. Cultural camps were identified by many of the people interviewed for this report as being vitally important to the healing which is necessary for Indigenous girls and their families. As one interviewee noted, "they are interdependent again because when you are out on the land you have to depend on somebody else to survive." Others have noted that much of the knowledge about being on the land is associated with the idea of "blood memory" in that the land teaches Indigenous people to connect with their ancestors by learning to be on the land. As the Elder noted, "it is a reconnection to Earth, to the land. It's a reconnection and that is where we all come from is the Earth. It's a natural environment and then the relationships get strengthened from that and communication gets strengthened" as well.

Providing Safe and Nurturing Homes for Indigenous Girls

8. What do communities need to be able to provide more safe and nurturing homes for young girls?

Participants note that Indigenous organizations need access to funding that is equitable in order to be able to provide more culturally safe and nurturing homes for Indigenous girls. Also fundamental in providing safe and nurturing homes is the need for ensuring better education among those who take on fostering Indigenous girls. Ideally, Indigenous girls need safe and nurturing homes where they can be supported by Indigenous people who are familiar with Indigenous traditions. When those arrangements cannot be secured because of a shortage of placements, then non-Indigenous people who provide care for indigenous youth must be trained and supported to provide culturally safe environments where youth can be encouraged to access their culture.

I would rather have a child sleeping on a couch surrounded by his aunties and his uncles and his loved ones with no bedroom to sleep in but still part of that family rather than disconnecting him.

The licensing requirements and standards set by the provincial child welfare system was highlighted as being particularly problematic for ensuring safe homes for Indigenous girls as these standards don't take into consideration the reality present among Indigenous populations as this one consultant noted:

I think that it is totally ridiculous because it is totally unrealistic. Those licensing requirements were designed by somebody sitting in an office, a non-Indigenous person and I will say, obviously, not living in a

reserve ... because I would rather have a child sleeping on a couch surrounded by his aunties and his uncles and his loved ones with no bedroom to sleep in but still part of that family rather than disconnecting him, and losing his language, losing who he is and losing his spirit. Why would I bring him into the city? Put him on the couch at aunties' because at least he is not going to feel the shame and stigma of being a kid in care because there are kids in care that carry that.

I think that our legislation is so wonky when it comes to telling you how to raise a child. Because if this is my child, if I am in trouble with my child and I give my child over to my sister to raise for me for a while and I'm not involved with child welfare, nobody comes in and says, oh, you need this much x-square footage, and you need to have this, and why is that child sleeping on the couch or on the floor or wherever, right? Nobody sticks their nose there, only child welfare is as intrusive as it is and the only way to not be as intrusive is to back away from some of these ... I'm not saying have an unsafe place. We want it to be safe but I want it to be safe for the whole family, not just for that child. I would like to be able to have some flexibility and a budget to be able to fix up a home, well, so ok ... we've had foster homes that have had to close down because they just didn't have enough room to keep a sibling set. All it would have taken is adding an extension onto the house and we have no way to fund with that and we have no way to help with that. That is ridiculous. It shouldn't happen that way. But the legislation does need to change and there does need to be what is called "community norms" so that when you are in this community, you are going by that community's norms. When you are in Winnipeg, you can go by Winnipeg's norms. You know, you have a different housing stock here than you do in the community but it should go by the community's norms and not by just the legislated piece of paper that somebody came up with the idea that you need x-number of square feet per child. Who had that idea?

Communities and families also need to understand how lateral violence within the communities plays a significant role in destabilizing Indigenous girls. Some of those interviewed for this report indicated not all of our people understand where this level of violence comes as is reflected in the response by one interviewee to the question of 'what is needed by communities to be able to provide safe and nurturing homes for young girls:

In providing those safe and nurturing homes, we all need to know that history because we don't ... because we blame each other. We are so vicious to one another in some respects. No, not vicious ... we are so unforgiving and we are so judgmental to one another and we are judgmental to one another for things that are actually beyond our control. So if we are going to look at safeguarding little girls and creating those safe and nurturing homes, literally we all have to kind of understand that. If we could situate each other and not be so unforgiving and so judgmental because we are destroying each other as well ... but at the core, for instance with that family, they blame each other, rightly or wrongly, but not fully understanding everything that's pushed on them. I think if they were able to understand that better and in a more intimate and thorough manner, I think that they would be more forgiving to one another and be able to create a better space for all of them?

Lastly, nearly every individual consulted for this project spoke about the healing that is essential for Indigenous peoples and communities to deal with the legacy of colonial contact, continuing colonialism, and the impacts of lateral violence. As one person expressed:

They need to heal first, the communities themselves, because they are part of that whole legacy and that's that legacy I was talking about, which is the colonization first of all but there is also the residential schools, there is also the effect of the Sixties Scoop that's in there but there also families that were just destroyed. So they need healing first. You need good addiction programs in the community. You need good healing programs. You need to help the community to become healthier and stronger.

And healing doesn't happen immediately. It requires sustained attention and for many communities dealing with the legacy of colonialism, it requires stable funding for support programs. As one person stated:

There needs to be dedicated funding for sustained periods of time and I think that's the shortfall ... You need long-term sustained funding in order to go through this whole period of time and the healing. And it has to be a full cycle. So if you look at a whole cycle it is 16 years, 4 years for each level of healing.

Ceremonies were said to be life changing and able to produce results that are not seen through traditional non-Indigenous methods of practice as explained in the following quote:

Some of those ceremonies are life-changing. I don't believe, and not to get me wrong, I don't believe a psychologist can do what a sweat can do or what is Sundance can do. I've seen healing in those places, which will take 10 years, maybe five years of seeing a therapist. I've seen it happen in a Sundance in one year, plus you have the ongoing work of the traditional people that lead to these ceremonies. I'm living proof because I lived in a home of violence. I've had abuses in my life. I've endured things that nobody should endure. Everything was brought back to balance through ceremonies. It was almost like I had to take the negative out and put the positive in. I had to decolonize and believe in what I am as an indigenous person, as Anishinaabe Kwe.

Keeping Indigenous Girls Safe While They Are In Care

9. What are some of the things that can be done to keep Indigenous girls safe when they come into care of child welfare?

There are a lot of Indigenous women in the community who care, love and have the experience of working and living with Indigenous children. As one grandmother who was interviewed said, "Give them some time with us and they need to be in an environment with as many grandmothers as possible, with as many people giving them the messages that they are valued." Another idea shared as a way to keep Indigenous girls safe was the notion of having grandmothers on site or having them going to foster homes to check in on girls in care. Youth who are in care need "grandma love" because grandmothers

can provide unconditional love, respect, and kindness and they value the gifts that children and youth carry. Another noted that they would like to see a grandmother program in group, and residential homes where grandmothers come in and sit with the young ones, not to babysit, but to have some meaningful time to do something together. As one participant surmised, “grandmothers could sit together with the moms and daughters. Let’s bring back that way of life again. I think every place should have a beautiful grandmother mentor in place that is healthy” and it would help to “bring some of their traditional teachings back again.”

Give them some time with us and they need to be in an environment with as many grandmothers as possible, with as many people giving them the messages that they are valued.

In particular, it was noted that when Indigenous girls come into care, the child welfare system severs all fundamental familial relationships that are key to a young girl’s wellbeing. It was stated that when children are removed from their families, it is vitally important that each child knows “that he or she still belongs to a family.” Despite being in care, Indigenous girls in care need to be connected to their families and they need regular contact and visitation with

their parents, their siblings, their grandparents and extended family members because they are going to eventually gravitate back to these familial connections. As one interviewee emphasized, “why doesn’t the system just accommodate that because some [youth in care] are going to do that anyway and run away” and then the system is “going to report them as a runaway, and then they are going to get into trouble and then they are going to be put in the Manitoba Youth Centre. It is so insane.” All children want to be with their families so it is vital to “enhance these relationships and provide more visitation opportunities” as one interviewee surmised. The relational aspect is a key factor in Indigenous culture, which often gets missed because once a child is apprehended by child welfare they are “kind of divorced, against their will, from all those things and people that make them who they are.” As it was noted, “those who are not a part of the situation don’t understand the grief, the loss of that human connection to people who matter to you.” Another advocate strongly stated that the most important way to keep Indigenous girls coming into care safe is to make sure they are not “assimilated.” In a message to temporary caregivers who foster Indigenous girls, one interviewee said:

Don't assimilate these children - they are not your children. You are there to be able to provide them with a safe space, hopefully it is temporary, but don't assimilate them. I think that foster parents should, as much as possible, bring them [children in care] to their own cultural events. I know that there are foster parents to do that, but there are those foster parents who wouldn't participate in those things and they should, they should be mandatory, I think. If you're going to have children for a long period of time, don't assimilate them into your culture...If you want to teach them a language take them to classes, and let them learn their own language.

Interviewees expressed that the more control that is placed on young people the more it destabilizes them. The child welfare system is frequently criticized for not including young people in the decisions that impact them when they come into care. As one interviewee stressed:

I think what happens when kids come into care is that there is a sense of urgency. Sometimes that really is what the situation is. But I don't think it is for the young people. There is an urgency to get things done. To get them into a home in a safe place immediately without the consideration of how the child feels. I think right from the get-go I think you're probably getting a lot of emotional kids, especially when you're pulling them away from their homes, maybe we need to look at that and what that looks like.

It was said that the "free will" of a young person is often stifled upon entry into the child welfare system. This free will must be respected to ensure that young people grow to believe in themselves and build confidence. As one person noted:

We always forget that and I think by the time you hit 10 or 11, you have your own sense of thinking. You have your own values. You're beginning to develop your own mind and you have preferences for the things that you like. We forget about the agency, the free will of our young people that come into care. I think people are forgetting that because in our culture there was always this unspoken value of non-interference that you don't interfere in people's lives. I think they forget about that because our young people are already developing their own ideas.

Another aspect mentioned was the need to honour who a young person is. It was said that the child welfare system often "doesn't do enough to honour young people." It was adamantly stated that Indigenous organizations have to be on the forefront delivering services to Indigenous populations as a way of improving the treatment of Indigenous youth by non-Indigenous systems. As the staff at one organization stated, "Indigenous-based organizations tend to go the extra mile and do more for less." In explaining this, the person stated:

When we hire people we say we can teach skills, you don't have to know all about the stuff about child welfare, nothing. What we look for and what you can't buy is having somebody who cares and so our interview questions are more value based interview questions. Skills to us are secondary but if you can step up and be that person, that's the hardest people to find in child welfare....So I think if we start focusing more on the value base of honouring people of where they are at, being non-judgmental, being strength-based that you can teach people skills after that, but this is the core of what we are looking at for people to want to be able to do more.

Children and youth coming into care also need to know what is going on because for many of them, they are in varying states of shock and may not know what is going on when they have a social worker sitting across from them saying:

...this is what is going to happen: you're going to come into care, we're going to go to court, you're going to be a VPA or you're going to be under apprehension...like they use their language and their words, and when that child, in that moment – they have no understanding of what it means is being told to them and what is being shared to them. So then they go onto the next stage when they are placed and they don't understand what that means to be in care and what that means to live with a family or to live in a group home.

Some of those interviewed also suggested the need to do environmental scans and ask all the possible questions of Indigenous girls that come into care to ensure that they are safe, not just in the placement, but when they are outside of the home:

I think doing an environmental scan is important, to ask all the possible questions... I'll give you an example... One young woman who was doing really well throughout her program attempted to sabotage her completion. We wondered why she was sabotaging her program completion, then we found out through some of the terminology she was using in her counselling sessions identified that she owed a heavy drug debt. With this information we challenged her to share what she was hiding and found out that she was scared to go back into the community. So the helpers were able to establish a safety plan to put her in a shelter if she wanted, and if she chose she could go to a shelter out of province. We were able to respond to her needs of safety, because of our knowledge of the street language at the time.

Chances are these kids won't tell, for the most part, what is bothering them. Chances are if they may have heavy drug use if they are experiencing drugs, they may be stacking up a debt. They won't tell because maybe they have been threatened, maybe they were told a younger sister or sibling is going to get hurt, or her family is going to get hurt. So to assess for these types of things is really important, to know what is out there. They are living in a system and you can do all kinds of protection but if you are in denial about what is going on out there, with their sisters and their brothers out on the street, whom they love and have a relationship with, something might be missed. It's also part of the grief cycle if they've exited the street life, in that they miss the relationships that have been established. In their times of darkness, it's usually their street family that they know best or trust. If they are sitting on something, it could be an emotional landmine, but they could be doing well and then all of a sudden it comes out. It's because it's unresolved, so it important to make note of that. Yes, and you can do that not just by interview alone, you could do that in narrative exercises, journaling exercises, art or whatever have you or just sitting around cleaning sage or going out. You can ask them what parts of the city create some anxiety for you and you need to know why and it is important to include them in respect to help you create a safety plan for them.

One of the things that could be done to keep Indigenous girls safe when they come into the care of child welfare is ensuring that group homes and foster parents are educated to know when a girl is not safe. One of the ways to ensure this is to staff these homes with individuals who are experiential because it was noted that they tend to "know right off the bat" if a young girl is vulnerable. It was said that it is equally important that organizations use that value-based way of managing those with experiential knowledge that are within your organization because they are extremely valuable. It was shared that when experiential people on staff see this vulnerability, they are able to identify this vulnerability quicker by saying:

I'm worried about her so we're going to have to put in extra supports because of that ... because they know ... they're experienced. So I think the more we have experienced people at the front end and it's a combination of people with experience and people who are experiential – a

healthy balance – That's really important when you have educated people that can identify when a girl's not safe.

Keeping Indigenous youth safe in care also requires a different way of managing group and foster homes. In defense of having experiential staff, the staff at one agency interviewed for this report stated that, some organizations don't understand the value of having somebody with lived experience and know the fact that when somebody has lived with trauma, "they deal with that for the rest of their lives." As they shared, those with experiential knowledge may not deal with it the way they dealt with it when they are 15 where they are now at 40, but it is still a piece of who they are and sometimes there are struggles that come along with that. As one consultant expressed, "you know, not all agencies get that. Not all organizations get that. And the minute that somebody is coming with that lived experience might mess up or might be just having a hard time right now or not being able to say hey I need a break ... you know, right away they are judged."

Programs to Address the Vulnerability of Indigenous Girls

10. Are there any programs that need to be developed to address the vulnerability of Indigenous girls in care?

It was noted by many of those interviewed for this report that Indigenous girls need a place to be safe. However it was recognized that there are few supports, including financial ones, being invested into Indigenous organizations that can provide these safe places where Indigenous women and Indigenous people can be safe. This lack of funding and recognition of experiential knowledge was described as "difficult and frustrating."

Others interviewed indicate that the child welfare system needs to engage more with families and the community-based agencies that are already doing specialized programming with Indigenous girls. As one individual noted:

I think that the answers are already out there and we're always just looking for the next best thing but it's already there. It's just a matter of how to we work together, when can we put our differences aside, and what is that look like? When are we going to acknowledge that indigenous people and indigenous families can take care of their own children?

Another Indigenous advocate opined that other shelters housing sexually exploited youth could benefit from learning how Indigenous organizations "do things." As a community, we all need to step up more meaningfully for Indigenous girls and the non-Indigenous population need to learn from indigenous ways of being. We all have a role but the most practical and effective role for non-Indigenous populations and organizations is perhaps to not take the lead but instead to listen and take in the lessons of Indigenous leaders in

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community who can help us all find our roles within the lives of children and youth and families as we rebuild from a shared and painful history.

One of the participants suggested that instead of assessing a residential facility based on standards that don't address the needs of vulnerable Indigenous girls, the evaluation should be based on "how many times Indigenous kids go running from these placements." It was insinuated that too many times Indigenous girls have been returned to these homes only to "go in one door and out the other door and then they are back on the street." In some of those cases, it is important to acknowledge that it isn't necessarily the placement that is mismatched, but in some cases it is the lack of appropriate case planning and wrap around care that leads to youth running away. Youth sometimes run from the very things that can best support them. And in some of those cases, they are running from excellent placements because those placements feel so different from what they know – a girl who runs from a loving home back to what she knows on the street isn't necessarily making a decision that reflects her best interests.

Programming to address the vulnerability of Indigenous girls is rooted in the education system. As one interviewee suggested, "I would like to see it start at kindergarten and go all the way through the school year. She further elaborated that it should also:

Become part of the curriculum and that's built right in. I think especially for schools like David Livingston, like Niji Mahkwa has it built in, and Children of the Earth and Little Red Spirit has some of that, but at the school level you really need to help our young women especially if they are in single parent homes. We really need to protect them and put a shell of protection around them and that is the best way to protect them is to help them be proud of who they are and to feel safe for being who they are.

In order to ensure that Indigenous girls thrive in our city, one participant stated "we need to be able to meet them where they are at, where they are already hanging out, whether it is online or at a drop-in centre, through peers, or schools." Schools in particular are seen as being environments where there are "greater opportunities at younger ages to get girls building up on not only their protective factors but also their leadership skills."

The *Red Road to Healing* was offered as a programming idea that had some merit among interviewees in terms of its ability to address the vulnerability of Indigenous girls experiencing violence. "People coming out of incarceration, people that had needed anger management, people on probation, and people needing to do programming to get back their children, have taken this program" and they are thriving, and it works. The *Red Road to Healing* was described in the following way:

It's mainstream and traditional concepts put together, teachings, exercises, and most of all it is done in a circle. Healing happens in the circle. It's women being together, sharing common stories and putting away some of the myths and other belief systems and utilizing our traditional

The Red Road to Healing and Traditional Teachings

is a program for women who have experienced family violence and are ready to move forward in their healing journey. The Red Road to Healing program is guided by traditional teachings in the support it offers to women in our community which include:

- One-to-one support and counseling
- 10 week Teaching & Sharing Circle offered throughout the year
- Aboriginal ceremonies, teachings and support from Elders
- Monthly events and activities to bring women and their families together

This program is offered through the West Central Women's Resource Centre in Winnipeg. For more information call (204) 774-8975 or find them online: <http://wcvrc.ca/programs/red-road-to-healing>

ways of knowing, being and our teachings. It's a beautiful program.

Another idea is that there needs to be more prevention programming in addition to programming for wellness and family reunification. Another interviewee suggested that there could be an academy or an institute that focuses specifically on young and vulnerable Indigenous girls to help build leadership among Indigenous girls and women because it is important to address the historical fall out that has manifested in the Indigenous population: What we are living right now in the millennium is the direct aftermath and

repercussions of those colonial base policies that began in the last century, almost 2 centuries ago really, with residential schools, and parcels of land...We are seeing now what has happened. The government officials at those times made statements well, we will Christianize the Indians, they will do better in life, we won't have status Indian but they will do better and be better off. Well, they were wrong because we aren't. The native population has not been better off because of those policies. In fact it has almost destroyed the indigenous family unit, and community, and culture. That is what it has done because the Indigenous people have fought against and rebelled against those policies and what it was doing to them, but in those fights, many of our people turned to alcohol and drugs to forget, to not think about it, and just to survive day by day.

It has taken a toll. It has not been a positive influence in the lives of native people – those policies. And we are seeing it now and I believe it is the predominantly the Indigenous female in society in Canada that has been the victim now. She has paid for it, very much so. That's my theory. So that is where we start with the vulnerable Indigenous female and build the females back up. Because we know traditionally the backbone of the Indigenous community was women, not the men, but the women. That is slowly coming back with different movements like Idle No More and through other Indigenous female leaders. Even with our male leadership, like the Assembly of First Nations, you name it, whatever native political organization truly it's the women who stand behind the roundhouse and keep it intact. I think the leadership roles of Indigenous girls are fantastic to slowly implement and teach young girls how to be leaders, its empowerment.

An Indigenous centre for children and youth was cited as being necessary in the north end of Winnipeg where it could include “Indigenous space” where young Indigenous people could connect, interact and relate to each other in a safe, respectful, harmonious and balanced way that is rooted in the cultural teachings. It was suggested that such a place could include “a gym, a place to eat, to do laundry, and the opportunity to interact with Elders.” As part of this idea was the suggestion that there be a “full-sized van that could pick up girls and take them to camp at Sundances, or participate in the rites of passage activities or to take them to a place where girls could work on pow wow regalia or do beadwork and sewing.” And while it was recognized that there are a number of Indigenous based organizations already within the city like Ka Ni Kanichihk, and Ma Mawi, for example, that provide excellent opportunities for Indigenous girls, it was stressed that more programs and organizations needed to be developed to address the various programming needs of vulnerable Indigenous girls.

What Indigenous Girls Need to Thrive

11. What do you believe young Indigenous girls need to thrive in life?

Indigenous girls need to be taught how to love themselves. For too long Indigenous people have been taught to hate themselves. This started during the time of the fur trade and then was cemented through residential school. The answer to teaching girls to love themselves so that they grow into strong Indigenous women must come from Indigenous people, Elders, and through Indigenous cultural teachings. There are women in our community who believe they can make this happen provided the appropriate resources are in place. As one interviewee said:

Indigenous girls need to believe in their goodness, they need to believe in themselves, and they need to know that they are good human beings because they come into this life so disconnected and separated, even when they are in families because the mother is struggling, because something else is happening and it's so difficult to give the message. It's difficult when you are trying to give it to adults now, which I have been doing most of my life. And then when they continue to hate who they are as adult women, it's very difficult to teach the young to love themselves. But give me some young girls for a while. You give me them for a week and I'll teach them. I'm good at that. That's what my life is about. I've been doing that since the 1970s. So we need programs and to do retreats to be with Indigenous girls, to make them feel loved.

Indigenous women want a chance to work with their own young people. A number of the women interviewed for this report implored, “Give us a chance to work with our own children if you really want to see and make change for Indigenous girls who are vulnerable. We can do that using our cultural ways and teachings as the fundamental building blocks.” Indigenous girls in the community and those who come into care need a chance to learn from other Indigenous women. As one woman who was interviewed noted from her experience of putting on decolonization workshops for Indigenous people, that many “come in ... just broken, hating themselves for whatever reason, and at the end of that seven days, it was like a beautiful flower waking up.”

Another participant stated:

Young people don't necessarily need to take part and get involved in our traditional culture every step of the way, but they should have access to it whenever they want. Our young people need to know that they have a choice. That they have control over their spirits. That they have control over their minds, but most importantly, that they have control over their body ... I think alleviating any kind of shame associated to those things is really important to the wellbeing of Indigenous girls.

Indigenous girls and young women need strong Indigenous mentors and community people to be around them as much as is possible. Indigenous girls need to learn the teachings from female Elders about womanhood and about their roles as future life givers. These teachings, it was noted, should happen when they are young children or when they are teenagers. Those interviewed stated that women in the Indigenous community need to "step up in mentoring these young women in bringing them along and nurturing them in the absence of them having a family or loved ones in order to fulfill that capacity in their lives." But it was also noted that Indigenous people do not need permission to work with youth. As one participant said, "if you have a really good idea to do something with the youth, you don't have to ask for permission - just do it."

If you have a really good idea to do something with youth, you don't have to ask for permission - just do it.

Indigenous girls are not just vulnerable; they can be incredibly resilient and this fact often gets overlooked. When an Indigenous girl is in a safe place, she may be exercising resiliency and feel confident about just being herself. Indigenous girls need to have a sense of belonging in

order to thrive. This sense of belonging comes from family, community and from various cultural practices and teachings; they need to be a part of a community system. If they can't be with their families and in their communities, then, "we need to be able to provide them with a home away from home with Indigenous peoples and communities and/or with non-Indigenous people who care and understand the history of Indigenous people and the Indigenous way."

The ability to build relationships is an important part of sustaining relationships. One thing that was noted by a number of the people interviewed is that when you are working with Indigenous youth, it doesn't matter how they behave, you "have to go into these relationships with love." Participants shared that some Indigenous girls in care have been threatened with having access to cultural teachings cut off as a form of punishment when they are not conforming to the rules of being in care. Young people need to not only be a part of a community, but they need to *feel* that they belong and adults have a clear role in actively demonstrating the strength of the community fabric. Access to culture should never be used as a form of behavior modification. When young people experience positive reinforcement, they can build strong identities that will carry them into adulthood.

Indigenous girls need to know who they are in order to thrive in mainstream society. The message was clear and reiterated by all of the men and women interviewed for this report: that Indigenous girls need

to learn their culture in order to grow and thrive. They need to know how to get their spiritual names, participate in ceremonies like the Sundance, and learn how to sing the songs. They need to learn about the rites of passages that will take them from being a girl to a woman. They need to participate in ceremonies like “the full moon ceremony, get involved in the rites of passage for both young men and women, so that they know their respective roles and responsibilities and their purpose on this earth.” As one interviewee noted, “so many girls don’t even know about being on their time, how sacred that is, and that’s a ceremony. They need to relax and honour themselves at that time.” In particular, girls need to be on the land and connect with it, as land is part of ceremony.

One participant with prior experiences conducting cultural camps with young people explained the power of culture and the connection to land. Based on her experience, she noted, “those camps were successful with youth who were in care.” As she further shared:

We took them back to the land to remember who they were. We did sweats. We did name giving. We did drum making. Even knowing your spirit name. It’s very important knowing who you are, to be able to identify yourself and to know that you belong to something that is ancient and real. I think our kids need that. They need to be reminded. They need to be taken back to the land. They need to sit with the Elders. They need their names. They need their culture. They need to hear their songs.

The youth, she noted, also feel these connections as many of them have said to her, “I wish I could stay out here. I wish you were my grandmother. I wish we could live out here.” She noted of those who are connected to the culture, to the land, and to their Elders that, “today you see that some of these youth are strong, some of them have graduated and they are moving on. It’s amazing what the culture did for them, how it changed them, how they felt belonging. I think we need more of those camps out there.” Quite a few of the other participants interviewed reiterated that when Indigenous people are taken out on the land, they act differently and the land teaches them to act in such a way that is necessary to treat each other with respect. As one person noted, “it’s like all their cultural values all of a sudden just come back” and that much of this is tied to “blood memory” that surfaces when connecting with the land.

Participants collectively agreed that in order to start working with Indigenous girls and young women there must be more cultural programming and activities in the community that are led by community members and Elders. The traditional community needs to be supported by Indigenous people so that they can bring these women into the culture. It was said that Indigenous girls will thrive, but only when the traditional community becomes stronger. For Indigenous girls who are in care, the families that are looking after them, and it doesn’t matter what nationality they are, they too can play a part to ensure that Indigenous girls have access to the cultural knowledge or at least ensure that they are introducing Indigenous girls to cultural events and activities within the community.

There are differences between young Indigenous girls who are in care and who have been engaged with the culture versus those who are in care but not involved with the culture. As one participant observed from her experience working with youth in care who are engaged with the culture, “once a young

woman picks up her bundle, it is very unlikely that she is going to be or allow herself to be treated in a disrespectful way again." It was noted that the young women who carry their bundles, "seemed to have an inner strength or a strength that starts to tell them that they are valued. That the Creator recognizes them, that they are a part of something larger, that they are part of ceremony, that they are a part of what's good about them, that honours them and values their spirit." These cultural teachings can be life changing. It was reiterated by another participant as being extremely important for Indigenous girls to have access to cultural teachings and Elder mentors. She stated:

We don't have access to those cultural teachings through ceremonial teachings, and not that everybody is into ceremony and stuff like that, but just even those basic core, like what does it mean to be an Indigenous girl or woman. I truly learned that when I quit drinking and doing drugs when I was 20. I met a medicine woman or an Elder and she started giving me these teachings and that's literally the moment that my life went down this path. Like you're valued. You're not the piece of shit that you have been led to believe and had grown up believing. You're valued. You're sacred. You're all of these things. It was life changing.

Indigenous girls will thrive in our society when they begin to see themselves reflected in the world around them, when they see themselves becoming leaders within this province. Indigenous youth need to see more Indigenous people in leadership roles, more Indigenous teachers, youth care workers, social workers, and there must be more Indigenous people running for government, among others. As one community advocate stated, "we should be seeing Indigenous people everywhere in the service industry and in corporate Canada." In order for this to happen, more equity needs to be incorporated into the education systems: training opportunities and participating in the workforce. As was noted, "many Indigenous youth still don't believe that leadership is something that can come out of themselves." Another community advocate echoed, "we still don't have enough that our Indigenous youth, in my opinion, can actually see themselves in positions such as a mayor or as a leader." There is too much rhetoric in the saying that: *youth are the future*. In fact, youth are also the present and must be supported to see their value today, and should be encouraged to expand and explore who they are and what their gifts are. To realize and experience their value, Indigenous youth need to experience equity within the community. As one participant emphasized:

It seems like it's a fluffy little word...but really if you were to apply equity in the lives of Indigenous girls and women...we would see our women and our girls thriving. Well what does it mean? Well it means that you have access to affordable food. What frustrates me is how long have we been talking about this: poverty, education, health, reproductive health, and housing. How long have we been talking about this? So I feel that when we say it, we're not really. So if we were to apply equity we would have safe housing, adequate housing, mould free housing, and if we had schools that they could go to, if they saw themselves reflected in those schools, and for our kids that are in the schools in the city they don't see themselves reflected in the educational school system...And then they say we don't have enough capital to build those schools but we have money to invest in pipelines? We have all kinds of money if we want to invest in the military but not for schools. If we were able to commit in an honest way to these things, you would see changes in one generation. Kids have food in the mornings, simply just

food, to concentrate in the mornings, if we had safe housing, we would see changes in one generation. I really, really do believe that!

Mentors need to take a strengths-based perspective in working with and helping Indigenous girls. Indigenous girls will thrive when they know what their strengths and what their gifts are. It was noted that, "they often don't know what a gift or what a strength is. They don't know what their gifts are. It is up to the trusting adults that are honoured to be accepted into their lives to help them identify what those gifts are through youth engagement opportunities."

One participant shared her experience of attending ceremony with her daughter and how it prepared them for tumultuous years when her daughter pushed back and rebelled. She noted:

I can remember the first full moon ceremony that I took my daughter to, and she was 12 and it was time for her to start the change over into womanhood. And she did her first full moon ceremony with me and others...it was a really special time for me with my only daughter to be able to do that and go through those ceremonies with her. I really think that it helped strengthen the bond for us for what would be to come those more challenging years where she was trying to individuate herself and separate from me and all the angst that goes with it. I think that that is what kept us together with the fact that we had some common shared experiences too that were more traditional and more spiritual. I think it helped us survive but I was fortunate enough to have that. Not all of our parents have that like how do you go out there and get enough women who are living in poverty already, who don't have enough food for their children, how you get them to start thinking about helping those children to survive when their basic survival that day is focused on 'how do I get them to eat?'

It was also said that, "Indigenous girls need to be taught responsibility from a very young age." Indigenous girls need to be taught about what is "normal." Normal relates to being respected as a person and knowing what your boundaries are. Many Indigenous women struggle to understand normalcy and healthy boundaries because some of them have partners who sometimes assault and exploit them.

As one woman interviewed said:

I've worked with a lot of girls over the years. I started up at Children of the Earth teaching women how to sing and how to find their voice through song. I brought the teachings back to some of them and some of them have found their traditional roles and responsibilities and they're in ceremonies, and leaders in ceremonies...You see such a beauty in these young people and they don't see it themselves. I guess I just love passionately and believe that we are beautiful and strong people.

Suggestions for Keeping All Indigenous Girls Safe

12. What ideas or suggestions do you have that would make all Indigenous girls safer?

One of the suggestions made by a participant is the belief that more attention needs to be on those that perpetuate and exploit Indigenous girls. As one community advocate believes:

I think the capacity building piece in the strategy needs to happen because sexually exploited Indigenous girls are being preyed upon, we know it for a fact, they are being targeted, they will always be until something changes. We will always have, sadly, a pool of victims, continuously, which are actually getting younger and younger...so the sexual exploitation of girls, even when I started 15 years ago, the average age was 16 years and now it is 13 and it is getting younger and younger. So we need to start controlling this runaway train sooner than later...We have to go after the people [who] are buying women and girls and then that whole service system has to be able to have some core values around cultural competency.

It was also strongly suggested by the participants that more support for this area needs to come from the general public and the mainstream political leadership, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As one person offered:

I really think political will and commitment from all the way up to the top and all the way down and to make it a very clear message that we value our young women and even if one of them goes missing, you matter. That one little girl is going to matter. That one woman is going to matter. And we are going to do everything that we can to find out what happened...Our girls are not disposable... These are our children – your child is my child – I need to know that other people are going to look at my child and say, you are my child too and I am responsible for you.

We have to stop being responsible for just our child and see them all as our children.

We have to stop being responsible for just our child *and see them all as our children.* We have to give back to that village mentality because we are so focused far away from it, I think...There's little pockets of it here and there but not nearly enough.

One interviewee reiterated the need for bringing Indigenous women's perspectives back into place where women look after each other the "way it used to be." It was said that any such an approach has to "come from an Indigenous perspective" and that changes in the system need to be based on relationships:

There is so much work to be done out there and there's a relationship that we have to rebuild. By not listening and not doing anything about what we are discussing or requesting...there's no relationship building if you're not following through, so it's a waste of my time. So I'm not here to waste my time because I'm done pussyfooting around. I'm not doing it in mean-spirited way.

I'm not doing it in an arrogant way. I'm doing it an honest ways. My time is precious. I could be out there doing instead of sitting here. So let's not waste my time...Let's not waste other people's time that is being put into this study. We need to do something yesterday. We need to put something in place that is Indigenous if we are working with Indigenous people and it can't come from their mindset, their belief systems, their standards, it can't. It hasn't worked. Why do you think there are so many kids missing? Why do you think there are so many kids in child welfare services? It's not working. We've been saying that for years. Give us the resources. Give us the time and place to work with our young girls, our young boys. We know. We've come to know what works for us and what doesn't work for us.

Other suggestions include the need to develop a plan that includes peer mentorship opportunities, including legacy building and succession planning for Indigenous girls while they heal. More presentations that focus on safety need to be implemented in the community and through schools:

Once again in the school systems to go in and do presentations to the kids and they do that with the Winnipeg police in the outlying areas of Winnipeg, the RCMP do safety sessions. For example community organizations, Ikwe, Wabung, Ka Ni Kanichihk going to the schools and talk to the kids... do workshops about making girls safer, the buddy system, say no, don't talk to strangers, focus on drugs, alcohol, and prescription pills...you name it. That's what needs to be done and to continue to enhance it more.

The most important suggestion that can make girls safe is to listen to the voices of youth. Youth have a voice, they have important ideas and opinions, and they know their own situations better than anyone else. One of the most vital roles of caring community members is to seek out and encourage the voice of youth to be heard. Everyone must play a part in asking Indigenous girls what they need to ensure their safety and wellbeing in today's world. As reflected throughout this report, all of the answers lie in the cultural wisdom and as one interviewee said "it is up to us, as Indigenous people, to start recognizing and valuing our own learning institutions, ceremonies and ways of being" as this recognition is a crucial part of the reconciliation process necessary for healing, social inclusion and the revitalization of Indigenous cultures.

Messages to Indigenous Girls

13. If you could pass a message to young girls, what would you want to tell them?

Indigenous girls need to know that someone cares for them because many of them believe that no one does. It can be very difficult to undo that mindset. So if we are going to show that we care for Indigenous girls, we need to start talking to them when they are young...The male Elder suggested that girls should "go find a grandmother that will share the teachings about womanhood, about being a life giver."

The messages from the people interviewed for this report consistently focused on the fact that Indigenous girls are loved despite the fact that many girls might not know who or from where this love comes. The following quotes are the messages that participants who were interviewed for this report want Indigenous girls to hear:



You are loved, so loved. Awe, even though I don't know them that I think about them often, and I send them lots of positive energy, and that there are people out there who genuinely care for their well-being. And that there's tough times ahead, but you're going to get through them, and there's so much to be proud of, and there's so much love for them and even if they don't see it or feel it sometimes, but it is very much real. Don't ever give up. Don't ever stop being yourself. I want to say, don't ever stop fighting to be yourself because being a young Indigenous woman, it is tough, it is tough! It's not easy. It's a bumpy road ahead, but it's worth it - it's worth it every step of the way!

Don't give up. I think that they need to hear that they are valued. That we love them and that we do care deeply for them and just come in and we'll keep you as safe as we can....But I don't want them to give up on themselves either. You know what, it is a really rocky road that they are having to live right now. I just don't want them to give up because we can help them.

You are smart, you are kind, and you are important! That came directly from the youth.

You are so sacred, you are so loved. You are not who society thinks you are. You are so valued. You don't even know that people out there love you and what they do. You are so beautiful! I wish they could see that in themselves and to know that and feel how special they are and sacred...You see such a beauty in these young people and they don't see it themselves. I guess I just love passionately and believe that we are all beautiful and strong people. We've survived genocide, colonization, and residential school. We are not what colonization has done to us.

I would empower young girls, and tell them that they deserve respect, that they can say no. I would say...you are worthy, you are worthwhile, you are loved, and you are special.

We want you to know that we love you and care for you and that we want good things for you but you have to know that you are cared for and maybe you don't even know the people that care for you but you are loved. You are loved by us for sure. But you just need to know that.

That they are loved! I think it is important to tell them that they are loved. And I know the system doesn't support that but that is not our system, because in our system, it is highly relational. To tell them that they'll be okay and that they can heal, that there is a place for them, that they are beautiful.



Participants adamantly expressed that young girls need to hear that they are beautiful because they don't hear it enough. Indigenous girls need to feel positive and they need to feel healthy physical touch. As one community advocate shared:

Well, I work with a lot of young girls and one thing that I always do with families and with our people in general, and our boys, our young men...for some reason I've always been demonstrative, so demonstrative even with all the abuse that I've went through I've always been so affectionate. We're not affectionate with each other. I know that that seems like whatever but I'm always touching people. I'm hugging people because we don't get it enough or I say simple things to the little girls, 'oh you're so beautiful and you're so smart.' I always tell our girls that because they don't get it enough. They don't get that messaging. I always make a point of going to tell our people how beautiful their babies are because they never get it. I always hug our girls. I always touch our people. I know it sounds so simple and so ridiculous, whichever way you want to interpret it, but our people don't get touched in a positive way, and that's messaging. Touching is messaging. I always hug everyone that I come into contact with. Some people don't want to be touched and that's fine. You can tell when you are invading their space and it becomes unsafe for them.

So for me it's providing that literally consistent messaging about how sweet they are, how smart they are, and how beautiful they are. And I don't mean beautiful in the sense of what we construct as 'beautiful', but rather their spirit is beautiful, they are beautiful. So me that's really important in messaging for our girls, but also for our boys. Our boys don't get it either and we don't offer enough love.

PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS

There is wide-spread agreement that the current child welfare system in Manitoba is struggling to meet the needs of children, youth, and families. Many interventions continue to prioritize short term crisis-oriented fixes at the expense of strong, coordinated planning for improved future outcomes. The scope of challenges many indigenous families face is broad and deeply rooted manifestations of the racist and discriminatory policies and practices of historical governments. Generations of lived experience where indigenous children were forcibly torn from their families and communities, and then subjected to calculated efforts to kill all traces of culture in those children are a horrible and shared legacy that all Canadians are today being called to acknowledge, understand, and heal. At local, provincial, and national levels a growing call is being sounded that public services need to be responsive to and reflective of the populations they serve. In the case of Manitoba's child welfare system, nearly 90% of the 10,295 children in care are indigenous and Manitoba has an opportunity to become a leader in how meaningful restructuring and root-cause investments can reshape and redress the abuses of the past.

As advocates for children and youth, the OCA sees young people every day who are living the legacies of residential schools, the 60s Scoop, and other examples of systemic racism. This report has looked specifically at the experiences of indigenous girls in the community as a way to examine one of the groups of youth most impacted *today* by the experiences of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. As a society, we have heard the voices and experiences of survivors through the incredible efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada; we also have access to a growing body of social research that has been able to paint a clear correlation between what happened to indigenous families in the past and the incredible disadvantages many are experiencing today. Support needs for many families are complex and in broad terms, the provincial child welfare system has been ineffective to a large degree at improving outcomes for indigenous children and youth. Apprehensions, removals from community, government-controlled programs, one-size-fits-all policies, funding formulas that reflect government priorities instead of community realities, the increasing pressure on agencies and individual workers to deliver results without the requisite resourcing has left far too many children and youth unsupported to meet their potential. This is partly due to ineffective policies and practices, and partly due to the child welfare system being expected to patch service gaps when other public systems fall short. But, readers should be encouraged that in Manitoba we have many opportunities to make meaningful changes that can bring about significant improvements to end the trauma and create tangible reconciliation.

Community voices from indigenous leaders who participated in this project were clear. Collectively, they described the perception that lives among many families and communities: that the government has not positioned itself as an ally to indigenous youth and their families. The participants in this research – who are each respected leaders in their communities and professions – told us that the government still exerts rigid control over the care and protection of children to the unfortunate exclusion of the families and communities who want to be a bigger part of the solution. They also told us that the structure and policies of Manitoba's child welfare system too often ignore the critical importance of culture as a pathway to healing trauma and protecting children. What is lacking, they shared, is a system built on

principles of fairness, hope, and inclusion. Regardless of background, all humans desire to be a part of something larger, to be valued and needed members of a larger whole. Perhaps most critically, the participants in this study emphasized that there is a vast wealth of knowledge and wisdom in the indigenous communities that can help reverse the trend of the unacceptably high apprehension and in-care rates in this province. They shared many ideas of policies, programs, and values that could improve lives of some of the most vulnerable individuals in our province. Many of the ideas shared with us during the course of this research echoed many of the Calls to Action released in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. As such, the recommendations that follow focus on three main themes that as advocates for children and youth we also believe can reverse the trend of overwhelmed systems of government care. Those themes are: improving broken areas of the current structure, ensuring children can remain as close to home as possible when help is needed, and vastly improving the system's ability to ensure all children and youth have access to their culture.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: The Children's Advocate recommends that the Department of Families conduct a thorough cultural audit of the foster care licensing standards and regulations to support the objective of increasing the numbers of safe foster homes available in rural and remote communities. The cultural audit shall examine the concept of *community norms* for safe care of children and ensure that urban standards (i.e., square footage requirements, single room occupancy) do not continue to be unfairly applied to rural locations. The revised foster care licensing standards and regulations for Manitoba must ensure safety of children remains a priority of care.

Rational: The child welfare system has long struggled to develop foster resources in rural and remote locations, especially within First Nations communities. Many stakeholders knowledgeable of the child welfare system have long contended that provincial foster licensing standards unfairly discriminate against families who live outside of urban settings who would otherwise be eager to provide safe and loving homes for children in care. Too often, children and youth in care are moved from their home communities to where adequate foster resources are located. Separating children and youth from their home communities also means disrupting schooling, social supports, and ongoing connections to family, all of which are issues that compound long term risk to children. Conducting a cultural audit of foster care licensing standards and regulations will contribute to addressing system deficits that unfairly disadvantage indigenous families.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: The Children's Advocate recommends that the Department of Families develop training tools and resources for all caregivers who foster indigenous children and youth to ensure all out-of-home placements receive training and education on ensuring children and youth are supported in exploring and developing their cultural identities.

Rational: While nearly 90% of children and youth in care are indigenous, foster families in Manitoba reflect a broader diversity of its citizens. Children and youth in care, as well as many of their families and others within the system acknowledge the importance of cultural identity and that cross-cultural placements can make it more challenging to ensure a strong cultural identity for young people in care.

Children in care have a right to be raised respectfully, according to their own customs and traditions and there is an important role for government to ensure caring foster families have access to resources and tools that will support their desire to provide the best possible care for children and youth.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: The Children's Advocate recommends that the Government of Manitoba provide funding to community-based organizations to hire indigenous cultural workers to support indigenous children and youth impacted by the child welfare system. This investment in the care and development of indigenous children who are disproportionately impacted by colonial legacies is in recognition of significant volumes of evidence showing that knowledge and experience of culture has positive impacts on long term outcomes for young people.

Rational: In recognizing that nearly 90% of the children in care are indigenous, increasing the number of cultural workers available to child welfare and locating those workers in community-based organizations would likely improve quality of service delivery and outcomes for young people. Locating cultural workers adjacent, yet outside of the child welfare reflects the wisdom that the most effective application of this approach is within community based organizations where relationship-based work is a fundamental principle. This approach would further support the province's move to prioritizing prevention based programming and could reduce the numbers of children coming into the care of child welfare.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: The Children's Advocate recommends the Government of Manitoba establish a Grandmother's Council, or *Ganawenamig*, that acknowledges the traditional role of women in caring for family systems and which can engage the wisdom of indigenous Elders in providing cultural safety and traditional parenting advice and guidance to government on the development and delivery of public services that impact children, youth, and families. The Council should be developed through meaningful consultation with indigenous individuals who are recognized within the indigenous community as leaders. These consultations should identify and invite appropriate indigenous women to serve their communities through advising government in all areas of the public service that impact Manitoba's children.

Rational: Developing a Grandmother's Council will help ensure that the systems that serve a disproportionate number of indigenous citizens reflect the wisdom of its Elders.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This report has reflected on the literature as it relates to the history of colonization and the devastating impacts it has had on Indigenous populations in Canada. An examination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history in particular points to how the *Indian Act* has been complicit in both the dispossession of land and the sacred and traditional roles among Indigenous people and women specifically. Along with this dispossession has been a culmination of federal and provincial policies that continues to subject and inflict trauma, separation, loss and grief. Much of this trauma and grief resulted from the intergenerational experiences of the residential schools and Sixties Scoop eras, and continued through the policies of child welfare, resulting in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the system and among those who have been sexually exploited and missing and murdered. Over the years, many of the policies designed to protect Indigenous children and youth, specifically girls, have actually had the opposite effect in that many Indigenous girls coming in the child welfare system remain vulnerable to the violence inherent in the very system intended to protect them. Internationally, Canada has been judged as being unable to uphold laws to protect Indigenous women and girls from violence. Apathy and indifference towards Indigenous women and girls has been perpetuated for too many years given the lack of real concern by past federal governments to undertake a national inquiry into understanding why there are so many missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls throughout the country.

The backbone of the report rests on the narrative testimony obtained from a select number of community members who expressed deep concern for Indigenous women and girls. The perspectives are based on community knowledge that is deeply rooted in the oral testimony and narrative of Indigenous individuals, which represents a culturally nuanced way of knowing and is itself, a form of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Thirteen questions were asked of 11 individuals from the Indigenous community within and outside of Winnipeg. The responses to these questions reflect the *Debwewin* or the “truth” of the participants regarding their concerns on the vulnerability of Indigenous girls involved in the child welfare system. The following generalized perspectives can be concluded from the collective responses shared by the community members who responded to the thirteen questions posed in this community-based initiative:

- The vulnerability of Indigenous girls who become involved with child welfare is reflective of the same vulnerabilities inherent in the historical relationships that have existed since contact with settler societies, which has been further perpetrated by the *Indian Act*.
- These vulnerabilities are rooted in the intergenerational trauma, separation, loss and grieving experienced because of colonization, residential schools, and experiences with the child welfare system, among other systems. These intergenerational experiences laid the foundation for the mistreatment, exploitation, and human rights violation of Indigenous women and girls.
- The centrality and sacredness of Indigenous girls and women has been lost because of the degradation of Indigenous autonomy and femininity through colonial contact. Indigenous girls and women need to reconnect to the beauty, strength, and love that comes from cultural

teachings that are important for helping them connect to knowing who they are as Indigenous girls and members of Indigenous nations.

- Reconnection to self for Indigenous girls lies in the respective cultural teachings among the various Indigenous nations within Canada. Access to and reconnection to Indigenous knowledge, culture and ceremony is critically important to the spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing and identity of Indigenous girls. Knowledge of one's culture and teachings provide Indigenous girls with a strong foundation that lends to the sense of belonging and community connectedness, which is vitally important to their sense of safety.
- The bonding and knowledge between males and females has resulted in unhealthy relations in and among Indigenous populations. It was said that the teachings need to be shared between girls and boys and they must start early. Girls and boys must be equally involved and have access to cultural teachings that inform their respective roles and responsibilities to one another to ensure balance is restored among males and females for the sake of future generations. What is required is restoration and reclamation of cultural practices and ceremonies, including rites of passages practices.
- There is a need for more collaboration between the many systems that interact and service Indigenous children. Moreover, collaboration between systems must also include developing stronger relationships between Indigenous populations and their respective service organizations. The incorporation of Indigenous traditions in the collaboration and relationship building processes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems and organizations is a vitally important element for ensuring that Indigenous girls remain safe. Collaboration and relationship building must include the employment of more Indigenous people in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems.
- Indigenous parenting and families' structures will only become stronger and improve when elements of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, teachings and ceremony are restored, taught, and relied upon. Because so much has been lost as a result of residential schools, Indigenous families need to be taught about traditional ways of helping. This requires a connection to land, language, and Elder roles. Healing is important to the revitalization of Indigenous cultures, parenting and traditional family and community structures. Nearly every individual consulted identified healing as essential for Indigenous peoples and communities in order to deal with the legacy of colonial contact, continuing colonialism, and the resulting impacts of lateral violence.
- Indigenous organizations need access to funding that is equitable in order to be able to provide more culturally safe and nurturing homes for Indigenous girls. This can be done in collaboration with mandated agencies. Also fundamental in providing safe and nurturing homes is the need for ensuring better education among those who take on fostering Indigenous girls. Indigenous girls need safe and nurturing homes where Indigenous people who are familiar with Indigenous traditions can support them.
- The best way to keep Indigenous girls safe is to maintain access to fundamental familial relationships that are key to their wellbeing. Whenever possible and safe to do so, Indigenous girls need to be connected to their parents, their siblings, their grandparents, extended family and community. These bonds need to be stabilized and nurtured and encouraged. Indigenous

girls need to have a sense of belonging in order to thrive. This sense of belonging comes from family, community and from cultural practices and teachings. The ability to build relationships is an important part of sustaining relationships.

- There are few supports, including financial supports, being invested into Indigenous organizations that can provide safe places where Indigenous girls can go to be safe outside of their familial connections. Various programs and more safe Indigenous spaces need to be created to address the vulnerability of Indigenous girls.
- In order to thrive in society, Indigenous girls need to be taught how to love rather than hate themselves as they have long been taught. Strong Indigenous helpers, mentors and Elders within the community are needed for incorporating cultural knowledge to begin building confidence in Indigenous girls.
- Indigenous girls can be resilient and this resiliency needs to be encouraged and developed, and cannot be overlooked. It is important to encourage girls to see their own strength and spirit, which in turn will help that spirit to grow stronger. Indigenous girls need to know who they are in order to thrive in mainstream society. It was agreed by all of the participants that Indigenous girls would get a sense of who they are by participating in cultural activities and ceremonies.
- The messages from the individuals interviewed for this report consistently focused on the fact that Indigenous girls are loved by the Indigenous community despite the fact that many may not know who or from where this love comes. They don't want Indigenous girls to give up on themselves.
- Community members presented a number of solutions about what would make Indigenous girls safer. These recommendations are rooted in knowledge about the history of how Indigenous girls have been exploited. The formal recommendations contained in this report reflect an Indigenous lens that sees relationship building as vitally key in changing the safety landscape for Indigenous girls. Furthermore, the recommendations suggest that listening to the voices of Indigenous girls is equally important for ensuring safety for vulnerable Indigenous girls.

And so, it all comes down to the strength of relationships. The health of our communities is integrally tied to the strength and tenacity of those bonds. The voices of the community that resonate within these pages have offered many ideas for how we can go through the healing that is needed to arrive at a vision of a safe and healthy society that hears, includes, values, and protects all children and youth. The issues may seem complex and heavily intertwined, and yet, the solutions cover the spectrum from the simple to the more detailed, and there are valuable roles for all Manitobans. By investing in organizations and approaches that promote healthy relationship building and which actively facilitate outreach activities within communities where vulnerable indigenous girls live, there is a reasonable belief that outcomes will be improved. On a systemic level, there is also critical need to audit and aggressively address areas of the public systems that remain tethered to outdated approaches which have clearly not improved the lives of youth. These issues can be solved when each of us commits to actively create compassionate and reciprocal relationships, which should be of comfort and serve as motivation to anyone who sees the trauma and no longer wishes to see it continue.

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APPENDIX

This report would not have been possible without the voices of the community leaders who agreed to share their wisdom and knowledge with us. We offer our deepest gratitude and thanks for the gift of their voices and we hope they each feel honoured by how we have shared their words.

While some have requested anonymity, we publicly acknowledge the others for their participation in this project. *Miigwetch.*

Trudy Lavallee
Elder Belinda Vandebroek
Nahanni Fontaine
Chickadee Richard
Jade Harper
Elder Wally Swain
Jackie Anderson
Diane Redsky
Michelle Hourie

