

# Report

## *"After Healing is Healthy Living"*



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**Consultation on Sexual Violence and Aboriginal  
Community**

**March 21-22, 2011**

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## Table of Contents

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<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>B. Setting the Context for the Discussion</b>	<b>5</b>
Sylvia Maracle, Executive Director, OFIFC	5
Sherry Lewis	7
Tana Troniak	9
Research and Knowledge on Sexual Violence and Aboriginal Community	10
Initiatives that are Responding to Sexual Violence in the Aboriginal Community	
<b>C. Issues that will impact on the consultations on Sexual Violence</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>D. Moving Forward</b>	<b>15</b>
Sherry Lewis – Strategies for Discussing Sexual Violence in the Community	15
Sylvia Maracle – A teaching	16
<b>E. The Engagement Process for Aboriginal People</b>	<b>20</b>
Preparing to have the conversations	20
Planning for Individual Community Sessions	22
At each Community Session	23
After the Session	23
Other Work to Happen Simultaneously	24
<b>F. Next Steps</b>	<b>24</b>

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*“ There is a profound silence on the issue of sexual violence.”*

*Sherry Lewis*

Elder Pauline Shirt  
opened the consultation.

### **A. Introduction**

The Consultation on Sexual Violence and Aboriginal Community brought together representatives from the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, the Ontario Native Women’s Association, the Métis Nation of Ontario, the Independent First Nations and the Chiefs of Ontario. The full list of the participants can be found in Appendix A.

Four outcomes were identified for the meeting:

- Identification of key issues related to sexual violence and facing Aboriginal communities.
- Identification of current and potential innovative approaches to addressing sexual violence in Aboriginal communities.
- Strategies for discussing priority issues within Aboriginal communities and raising awareness of prevention, support services and healing strategies.
- A plan for each of the four Aboriginal organizations to engage their membership in these discussions using existing resources.

The report is a summary of the two days of discussions.

### **B. Setting the Context for the Discussion**

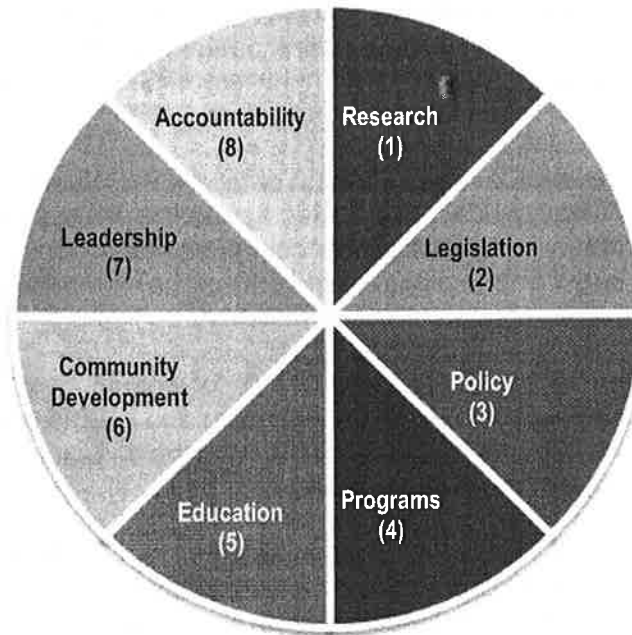
There were a number of powerful presentations provided throughout the consultation that framed and guided the discussions.

#### **Sylvia Maracle, Executive Director, OFIFC**

Sylvia opened the consultation by providing a context for the discussion. In the last year, the Ontario government has engaged in a consultation process around sexual violence. At the time, the government approached Aboriginal organizations to participate in these consultations. The Aboriginal organizations that had developed the Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women welcomed a consultation process that would be Aboriginal specific. While the Framework reflects all forms of violence, including sexual violence, the opportunity to look at how a specific manifestation of violence is reflected in Aboriginal communities was welcomed.

to stay in their homes. Each part of the issues wheel will have to be considered in order to move forward.

**Issues Framework from the Strategic Framework to  
End Violence Against Aboriginal Women**



**Sherry Lewis**

Sherry opened her remarks by describing how she has lived in many different communities, both urban environments and in her home community of Six Nations. When she last returned to Six Nations, her boys noted how wonderful it felt to be in the community and not have to deal with racism. Their comments provided her with the opportunity to reflect on her experience of community. She recognized that safety was still an issue for women in the community. The question she was left with was “why is it so safe to be a man and not a woman on a reserve?”

The violence is obvious if we look:

- On reserve there are names for women who watch lacrosse and are assumed that they will have sex – “lacrostitutes.”
- Gang rapes are part of the experience of teenaged and young men and young women’ experience especially when alcohol is involved.
- We have communities that are hot spots – where there are high incidences of sexual violence targeted at Aboriginal women.
- A couple of weeks ago, a young woman in Six Nations was murdered. She was found naked and beaten to death in a party room. No one has anything to say about it despite there being people who participated and those who were in the room watching.

- When women look at the sexual violence in their lives, 95% will not go to an Aboriginal helper but will look for different ways to heal. There are 150 ways to do your healing journey and we cannot judge one as better than another.
- Human trafficking is part of sexual violence. Aboriginal women are trafficked not only for sex but also for organ harvesting. Aboriginal women are vulnerable to violence as sex trade workers, as targets for organized crime and vulnerable to all forms of crime.
- Policing is part of the issue. Police need specialized training to work with Aboriginal people, to work in Aboriginal community and to understand the complexity of the issues facing Aboriginal women.
- Many Aboriginal women have low standards and low expectations in our relationships. We accept disrespectful behaviour from our partners because “at least they do not beat us.” We need to listen to each woman and her story. We need to understand that her story is hers to create. How can we help women and families talk about the abuse?
- How do we deal with the community when the abuse is based in the religious and spiritual life of the community? We know of faith healers and spiritual leaders that are sexual abusers.
- How do we support the leaders in our community who have endured sexual violence and now we are asking them to lead the conversations on this issue?

Sherry left us with a message of openness. When we start to open up the discussion on this issue there will be many nuances and many stories.

### **Tana Troniak**

For the last four years, Tana has been the Executive Director of the First Step Women’s Shelter in Sioux Lookout. The shelter serves 26 First Nation communities, most of them fly-in communities. Tana shared the many things that she has learned since becoming Executive Director:

- The women who are coming out of the Northern communities are coming out of third world conditions and they often are living in homes with up to 10 other people.
- 99% of the women that the Shelter sees have experienced incest, date rape or some form of sexual violence. What is increasingly obvious is that the girls are getting younger who are experiencing sexual violence.
- The rules, policies, processes and clinical work at the Shelters do not work for Aboriginal women and have to change. The zero tolerance policies means that many women are kicked out of the only safe place they have. Also, women are supposed to leave at a specific time even if there is no other place for them to stay.
- A harm reduction approach is more appropriate. Part of the work of the shelter is to help women to develop coping mechanisms for their addictions and mental health issues before they start dealing with them. In many cases, the women can only deal with one issue at a time.
- The helping approach that the Shelter uses is “supportive listening” instead of counseling. As soon as we use counseling we impose a framework on the women.
- Our job is to build on the strength of the women, to build resiliency and rely on humour to give good energy to the women.

8. Look at how existing programs can be adjusted to promote healthy relationships and provide women with a safe place to disclose sexual violence. Some programs that were suggested included: Healthy Babies, shelter work, housing work, Court Workers Program.

In addition to the work being done around the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women*, the OFIFC Initiative, *Healthy Indigenous Males (HIM)* provides an opportunity to focus on men as abusers and as abused, as participants in their healing process and as leaders supporting other men to heal.

### **C. Issues that will impact on the consultations on Sexual Violence**

#### **1. Issue is not widely acknowledged**

Women, communities and leaders do not yet know the magnitude of the issue of sexual violence. In most communities, sexual violence is portrayed as either a one-off incident or the most horrific situations are being presented. The embedded nature of sexual violence in Aboriginal communities makes it difficult to raise the issue.

The consultations will need to be cognizant of the impact of the conversations and anticipate that people will be overwhelmed. There is shame and stigma in talking openly about the issues of sexual violence. The conversations cannot instill shame, fear or hopelessness as that can lead to suicides.

#### **2. Difficult for leaders to speak on the issue**

Since sexual violence has been an unspoken part of many women's lives, it has likely been unspoken for many leaders. Leaders may feel that they cannot disclose sexual violence because they will be perceived as being weak. The leaders will need to be supported and new messages need to be presented. Strength needs to be defined not as silence but as speaking out and healing. A woman who has survived sexual violence is STRONG. To stay silent is just another form of control.

#### **3. A family and community approach is required to address the issue**

The approach described in the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women* recognizes that the issue of sexual violence, particularly the issue of incest, requires a family and community approach. Each individual family member needs to have time to address their healing needs and the family, as a whole, needs supports and interventions.

As people start to speak about their individual experience as a victim and name a perpetrator, other community members get involved by either coming forward as being victimized, in defending the perpetrator, in threatening or ignoring the victim. To create safety, the community, as a whole, needs to be supported to have the conversations.

- A strength and resiliency based approach is needed.
- Many healing processes need to be in place for people to choose from, including healing circles.
- Develop ways to support women to address sexual violence earlier in their life and not carry it as a burden and shame for so long.
- Restorative justice is a tool that needs to be shared and used more.

## **7. Support healthy relationships and healthy ways of living**

For many people, particularly young people, they are not clear on what is a healthy relationship. Sexual violence becomes part of family life, dating life and being accepted.

There is a need to describe and show healthy ways of living. The medicine wheel and other teachings that reinforce healthy ways of living are good tools to use.

Part of the healing process includes learning about the different roles that each person has to play, particularly the role of men and fathers to protect the people they love.

### **Elder Pauline Shirt**

While we need to find ways to support people to heal from what has happened to them, there is an equal need to ensure that the next generation of children is not exposed to sexual violence. As a community we need to support parents. There are teachings out there that guide us in our responsibilities as parents and caregivers. When we give the children and youth a foundational base, we provide them with tools to live an anti-violent life and to have resiliency when bad things happen to them.

## **8. There is a clear relationship between sexual violence and concurrent issues.**

There are many factors that have a direct impact on the individual, the family and the community's ability to respond to sexual violence. Sexual violence is often connected to the other issues: an addiction; specific mental health conditions (PTSD and Anxiety Disorders); teen pregnancy; homelessness and FASD. A person who has multiple issues is often ignored when they name sexual violence as being part of their lives.

Social determinants have a direct impact on the incidence of sexual violence. There is a direct relationship between being under-housed and being exposed to situations that make a person vulnerable to sexual violence. It is known that pimps are using Homeless shelters to house women they are trafficking.

## **9. Social systems can play a role in addressing sexual violence**

Key systems including: child welfare, education, criminal and housing can work in ways that will reduce the incidents of sexual violence.

- The lack of mainstream media coverage on stories about sexual violence, particularly when it relates to Aboriginal women, makes it invisible.
- Social media is creating new forms of sexual violence: sexting, internet photographs, and facebook exposure.
- The Internet lures women into situations that make sexual violence probable.
- Women hating women is reinforced and a form of misogyny. There is an increase in the number of gangs and bullying. Young women are becoming as aggressive as men. We are creating circumstances where women, girls and children are violated and their violence is a coping mechanism.
- Institutionalized patriarchy is entrenched in many key institutions. For example, the church has reinforced ideas that women and children are not to talk about sexual violence; and lateral violence and vicarious trauma is happening in many workplaces and educational settings.

### **13. Each partner has a role in this work**

Governments as part of their history (residential schools, legislation) have played a role in perpetuating sexual violence in the Aboriginal community. Jurisdictional issues facing cross-border communities needs to be addressed so that when sexual violence needs to be addressed, jurisdictional issues are not a barrier.

All of the Urban Aboriginal Organizations and the Chiefs' organizations have a role to play.

## **D. Moving Forward**

Before determining the strategy to move forward, a number of presentations were provided on what has been done around other issues.

### **Sherry Lewis – Strategies for Discussing Sexual Violence in the Community**

There are many lessons to learn from the experiences that the Native Women's Association of Canada had when they went into the communities to talk about the missing and murdered Aboriginal women under the Sisters in Spirit initiative. When we went into the community, the communities were prepared for NWAC to come and yet there were some issues that they were not ready to discuss, including sexual violence. Some things to consider:

- Ensure that in each group, there are peers so that every woman can have someone who shares her perspective. If there will be older women then have older women as the facilitators.
- The language that is used needs to be respectful. Have a set of key messages and reinforce them throughout the consultation process.
- Use a variety of interventions and approaches to engage with the women.
- Do the groundwork so you can speak about the experiences of sexual violence that have happened in the community. It is important to understand the pain and strength of the community that the consultation will be held in. What has been done to ensure survival in that community?



Sylvia reminded us that on the issue of sexual violence we are at “promotion” on the wheel – we are beginning to talk about what we can do.

Promotion: When we begin to talk about what we can do.

Prevention: We are asking the question of how to avoid the crisis or the situation. By asking this question we can develop programs that are proactive in avoiding the negative situation.

Crisis Intervention: Government often focuses on crisis intervention because it needs to respond to the immediate issues.

Curative: When we look at a situation and see that it continues to repeat itself, then we need to look at the systemic and individual change that is needed.

Rehabilitative: When we address issues, there is a recognition that change has to happen on many levels. Kizhay is a good example. The program is being offered in the prison for Aboriginal prisoners. But for it to have greater impact, the program is also being shared with the prison guards and the system so that they can respond appropriately to the changes in the Aboriginal people in jail.

Promotion of Stability: There cannot be a constant state of change on any issue. Leadership at times needs to recognize the progress and allow time for the change to be absorbed and lived. In some cases, the changes we seek in our communities are profound and require that each individual community member have the opportunity to learn, to change and then experience that change in their lives. (e.g. men who choose not to use violence in their personal relationships)

Training: Aboriginal organizations are often offering not only a different way of looking at an issue but different ways to address the issue. Training is often required for workers and for leaders.

Supportive Resources: This can simply be funding for any of the type of programs above. But it is also intended to be the shift in power where there is a sharing of resources and power through significant changes in legislation and policy.

### **Working Assumptions**

When talking about sexual violence in Aboriginal communities, the discussion will recognize that there are many forms and dynamics with respect to sexual violence. In particular the discussion will be based on the following working assumptions:

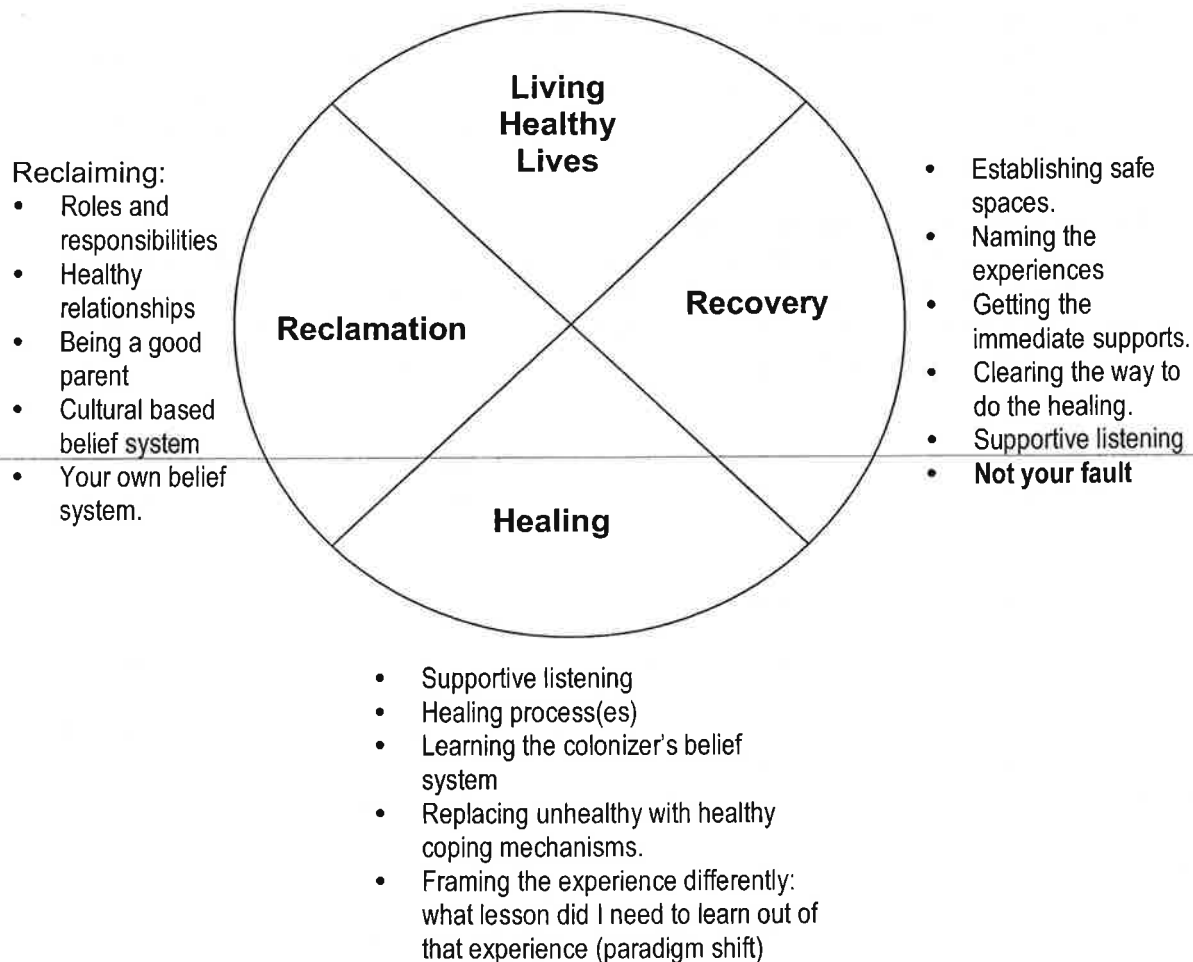
- A. Sexual violence is rampant and pervasive in Aboriginal community. There are “hot spots” where sexual violence is concentrated. In some communities, the incidence of sexual violence is 9 out of 10, much higher than the reported incidence of 1 in 10 in the mainstream.
- B. Sexual violence against Aboriginal women happens in both Aboriginal communities and in non-Aboriginal communities. Many of the Aboriginal men who are perpetrators of sexual violence have also been victims of childhood sexual abuse.
- C. Aboriginal women and children are targets for sexual violence and other forms of violence and exploitation.
- D. The majority of Aboriginal women who have experienced family violence have also experienced sexual violence.
- E. The perpetrators of sexual violence are primarily men, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The incidence of women being perpetrators of sexual violence is rare.

## Addressing Sexual Violence in Aboriginal Communities

The discussions throughout the two days led to the creation of a wheel that conceptualizes the work that is required. It is important to reinforce that the starting point is to **end** sexual violence and not just to **talk** about the issue of sexual violence.

The wheel starts in the east with recovery. Safety and telling the story of the experience of sexual violence is the beginning of the process. In the south is healing where people can have the opportunity to understand their experience. In the west, each person can reclaim the strengths and roles that can move him or her beyond the experience of sexual violence. In the north, people can live a healthy life.

- Know what is a healthy life and healthy relationships
- Being supported to live a healthy life.



There are a number of key words and messages that need to be part of the consultation process, such as: love, resiliency, wholeness, and forgiveness with accountability.

Some of the key messages are:

- The story is yours. Tell it in your way.
- The healing journey has many starting points and many tools. Choose what and who works for you.
- It is not your fault.

#### **v) Address roadblocks and concerns**

A key question for organizers before any consultation is how to deal with roadblocks to having these discussions. The experience of sexual violence is one of isolation. There are many components to isolation including geographical and cultural isolation.

Breaking through the isolation is part of the process in dealing with sexual violence.

The influence of the church and the reluctance of the church to have these discussions has had a huge impact in some communities.

There is a process to recovery from sexual violence. Once it has been named, there are often other issues (e.g. addiction, mental health issues) that are part of the person's way of coping or hiding from the trauma of sexual violence. All of these issues need to be considered and addressed.

Other concerns that will need to be addressed: avoiding re-traumatization; being triggered as facilitators; being targets for the pain; being challenged when using the teachings and Elders as part of the process; the normalization and denial of sexual violence; and lateral violence.

#### **vi) Train the facilitators and Elders that will go into the community**

Everyone responsible for these conversations will need to recognize the context around sexual violence and most particularly how sexual violence has become normalized in

Aboriginal communities. The training would include:

- An understanding of the historical context;
- The dynamics of power and control;
- The scope of the term sexual violence;
- Community preparedness;
- Using the same language;
- How to handle disclosure;
- How to handle difficult questions.

A suggestion is to do a train-the-trainer process that would build capacity in communities before and after the consultations particularly if the intent is to have more than one session in any community.

#### **vii) Find the leaders and heroes**

Gather more people around us to do this work. Bring the heroes and leaders to the community as they bring hope to the conversation.

**v) Establishing community supports for the post-consultation**

To ensure that safety and care exists for each person after they participate in the consultation, the planning would include networking with the appropriate agencies and ensuring that a list is handed out to each participant or a buddy or helper is identified for people who want one and that the Elder(s) who are working with the group is able to continue to work with group members after the session.

**3. At each community session**

The community session will be built on good planning that ensures safety and the facilitators, helpers and Elders will be prepared to respond to the issues as they arise in a caring and supportive way. Each session will create confidentiality and confidence that it is a safe place.

**i) Have multiple ways to communicate**

Use multiple vehicles to communicate the issues including using creative approaches (plays, drama, dance, art).

**ii) Address the multiple issues that will be in the room**

Any number of dynamics may arise in the room and it is important that the facilitators and helpers can comfortably address issues that arise around: Aboriginal status, gender, age, declaration of suicide intent, abusive perpetrators at the meeting; family complexities, leaders who are perpetrators, power dynamics and cultural competency.

**iii) Have helpers and ways to promote help at all times in the sessions**

There will need to be plan to take care of the facilitators and helpers, participants and the community

**iv) Have healthy people as role models at the meeting**

People need to see evidence of what a healthy life can look like and what recovery can look like. People need to see women who are not in crisis but have been there who can be models of healing living. If they cannot attend, have a video that inspires people.

**v) Provide material**

Offer everyone who comes information about how to be supported after the meeting. Provide a helper, the crisis line and organizations that they can reach out. The list would include help for the individual, couple and family.

**4. After the session**

**i) Debrief**

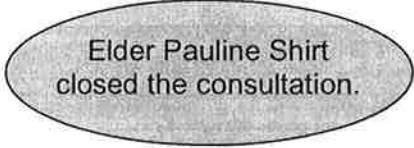
As part of the learning and the care for the facilitators, Elders and helpers provide the opportunity for a debrief so people can talk about their experience of each community session and suggestions on how to move forward in that community.

**ii) There is a responsibility for the next step**

Ideally someone in the community (organization, leader, Council, group) will take up the responsibility to continue the conversations.

**iii) Provide on-going support to the community**

- In all of the work around the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women*, make sexual violence an explicit topic.
- Share the report and this knowledge with our organizations and partners. In particular, talk to the leadership about the issues.
- Recognize that this is a new area for discussion and videotape some of the conversations of the heroes and leaders that are speaking about the issues.



Elder Pauline Shirt  
closed the consultation.