2.5 Promising Practice Five: Work with Aboriginal communities on human trafficking prevention

Studies on human trafficking in Canada conclude that the majority of people trafficked within Canada are Aboriginal women and children who are victims of sex trafficking. Many commentators concur that domestic trafficking in Canada has not received the attention it deserves. As discussed above, a subset of instances of prostitution may fit the current trafficking definition, given the growing rates of commercial exploitation of children in Canada. In particular, Aboriginal girls appear increasingly vulnerable due to earlier recruitment into the sex industry, recruitment by gangs, “gang-girls,” and family members, and very violent victimization in the sex industry. It is important to work with Aboriginal leadership to identify the complex factors that contribute to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal children, the incidence of trafficking in First Nations communities and the possible solutions to the trafficking problem, including culturally specific ones. This section explores each of these factors further.

2.5.1 Aboriginal women and girls are vulnerable to being trafficked

Grand Chief Ron Evans of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs is leading the First Nations response in Manitoba to human trafficking of First Nations women and children, with a focus on youth and women in urban centres. Youth awareness of human trafficking has been a central focus of the 2009 strategy as approximately 70-80% of the 400 children sexually exploited on the streets of Winnipeg each year are Aboriginal. The Grand Chief has convened a working group, which includes three other First Nations chiefs and partners with social service agencies, police forces and political leaders, to develop a holistic strategy for First Nations communities, focusing on prevention.

The Grand Chief believes that there is a lack of information and statistics on the magnitude of the trafficking problem in Canada. He acknowledges difficulties in knowing where to start, given the breakdown of healthy First Nations families including the impacts of the residential school history. Statistics from Transition Education and Resources for Females (TERF), a Winnipeg transition program demonstrate that in its programs for sexually exploited youth:

- Over 70% are Aboriginal;
- 50% had family in residential school;
- 91.5% are runaways who first left home at an average age of 11.30;
- 78% were previously in the care of Child and Family Services;
- The average grade level completed is 7.61.

Although the precise numbers of Aboriginals trafficked is unknown, their vulnerability as a group in Canada has been documented in numerous studies. In Winnipeg, for example, 70-80% of the children in one transition program from the sex industry are Aboriginal, while only 13.6% of Manitobans are Aboriginal. Other studies show a disproportionately high percentage of Aboriginals in the Canadian sex trade. Fifty-two percent of 100 female prostitutes in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside in 2002 were Aboriginal, compared to 1.7-7% of Vancouver’s population. Aboriginal populations are equally over-represented in other studies of trafficking in Canada. To cite but one example, recent Canadian reports suggests that Aboriginal girls are entering prostitution at younger ages. While the average age used to be 14, victims’ service providers think the average age is younger, with safety patrols in Winnipeg reporting children as young as eight being approached on the street for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Consequently, the Aboriginal Women’s Action Network (“AWAN”) opposes the legalization of prostitution for fear that it would push even younger Aboriginal girls into forced prostitution and further entrench those already in the industry. Empirical studies of dynamics in gangs also reveal that female Aboriginal gang members frequently recruit girls for prostitution to increase their own status in the gang and that the fastest growing segments of “gang girls” are under 16 years old. Recent studies of Native gangs from 2009 describe a rapid expansion of Native gangs in Canada. Experts on Aboriginal gangs have suggested that the best way to
250 TERTF, Mentor and Youth Program Evaluation Reports (Winnipeg: TERF, 2005).

251 Bruce Hallett, Aboriginal People in Manitoba (Winnipeg: Service Canada and Manitoba Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, 2005) at 13.

252 Farley supra note 129 at 249.


255 See e.g. Christina Spencer, “Native gangs on the rise, says study” Ottawa Sun (11 March 2009).

prevent trafficking of Aboriginal women and girls is to prevent child sexual abuse and implement broad education programs to confront misogyny, sexism and the early sexualization of girls and to provide quality programs for abusers that are comprehensively implemented. In addition to gang recruitment, family-based sex trafficking is common in some Aboriginal communities, with one study reporting that 25% of Aboriginal women in prostitution were from families involved in prostitution. Recruitment by friends is also reported to be common. Women and girls, who make up 75-80% of Aboriginal youth in the Canadian sex trade report very violent victimization, including physical assaults and other forms of physical and sexual violence, severe physical injuries (including stabbings, broken bones and spinal injuries), and kidnappings. In March 2010, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (“NWAC”) released an updated list of 580 Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in the past three decades, some thought to be victims of sex trafficking. As a result of the studies cited above, numerous groups, both domestic and international, have called upon Canada to bring those responsible for crimes against Aboriginal women to justice and to develop a meaningful, comprehensive and coordinated plan to ensure safety for Aboriginal women.


257 82% of women have suffered physical assaults by johns in prostitution; Melissa Farley and J. Lynne, “Prostitution of Aboriginal women: Sex inequality and the colonization of Canada’s Aboriginal women” (2005) 6:1 Fourth World J. 21.


259 72% of street level prostitutes have been kidnapped; Cler-Cunningham and C. Christenson, “Studying Violence to Stop It: Canadian research on violence against women in Vancouver’s street level sex” (2001) 4 Research for Sex Work 25.

of Mavis Erickson (13 April 2010), who said that while rumours abound that some of the Aboriginal women who disappeared from the “Highway of Tears” in British Columbia have been trafficked, a formal inquiry is needed to adequately investigate the link and draw conclusions. For example, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has urged Canada to establish a comprehensive national plan of action to address the social and economic factors that lead to increased risk for Aboriginal and other minority women; Amnesty International, supra note 249 at 26; Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, “Flesh trade targets natives: Young Aboriginal women used as a sex commodity in cities across Canada” News (August 27th, 2009), online: Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women http://www.missingjustice.ca/2009/08/flesh-trade-targets-natives-young-aboriginal-women-used-as-a-sexcommodity-in-cities-across-canada/.

2.5.2 The root causes are complex

Recent studies summarize the complex root causes of sex trafficking of Aboriginal girls in Canada, which include:

- Legacy of colonization and residential schools
- Lack of awareness, acknowledgment and understanding of sexual exploitation
- Violence
- Poverty
- Isolation and need for a sense of belonging
- Racism
- Substance abuse
- Increased gang activity
- Gaps in service provision
- Discriminatory policies and legislations

Similarly, the Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center conducted a thorough study of the sex trafficking of American Indian women and girls in Minnesota in 2009. In reviewing their empirical findings with 33 Native community leaders and Elders, the group used a “social ecology lens” to summarize the influences that contribute to Native American women and girls vulnerability to sex trafficking. The group identified four layers of influences that, when combined together, resulted in Native American women and girls’ extreme vulnerability to sex trafficking. The four layers, from external to internal, include: the influence of the majority society; neighborhood and community environments; the influence of family and friends; and the individual. The first three of these layers contains numerous factors contributing to Native girls’ vulnerability, as follows:

1) Influence of the Majority Society:
   - Government actions: genocide, reservation system, urban relocation
   - Media glamorization of sexual exploitation/sex as a marketing tool
   - Emphasis on money as proof of success
   - Targeting of Native women for sexual exploitation
Unequal gendered consequences for roles in prostitution  
Federal definitions of “deserving victims”  
Government priorities based on group size and influence  
Under-funded “safety net” systems  
Racism  
Socioeconomic inequality  
Government actions: boarding schools, Indian Adoption Project, sterilization

262 Sethi supra note 240. See also Sikka supra note 240.  
263 Social ecology looks at “people in their environment and the influence of that environment on human development and behavior.” Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center, Shattered Hearts, supra note 242 at 35, 106.

2) Neighborhood/Community Environment  
Social isolation  
Visible, active sex trade  
The “don’t talk” rule  
Limited jobs, few options for education and career planning  
Community normalization of violence  
Gang activity  
Crime-based underground economy

3) Family and Friends  
Poverty  
Physical/sexual abuse  
Parents affected by generational trauma  
Parents affected by FASD/mental illness  
Prostitution and survival sex  
Substance abuse

4) Individual  
Cumulative effects  

2.5.3 Anti-trafficking ideas for Aboriginal communities

Because of the complexity of the trafficking situation for Aboriginal communities, any one antitrafficking practice will be insufficient to solve the problem on its own. That said, certain programs focused on the issues raised above lend themselves to being adapted by Aboriginal communities to begin to address this serious problem. In this section five programs/ideas are highlighted that either target vulnerabilities that are correlated with trafficking in Aboriginal communities, such as school drop out rates and the lack of economic opportunities, or provide culturally relevant victim services to Aboriginal victims of trafficking.

2.5.3.1 Keep Kids in School
Reduction of school drop out rates may be assisted by funding schools in Aboriginal communities that provide career pathways programs and work-based learning such as cooperative education, internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, mentoring, and school-based enterprises. These types of programs, which have been shown to reduce dropout rates, can also provide practical economic skills to children that may reduce their vulnerability to being trafficked.

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Ibid.

Jane Runner, *Demographic Information*, supra note 68.


Culturally sensitive education may also reduce dropout rates in Aboriginal communities. For example, in Quebec the Cree Way Project, which incorporates the traditions and knowledge of the local community, parents, and Elders, has resulted in improved academic performance amongst schoolchildren and decreased dropout rates. The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development as well as the Native Hawaiian Education Council have recommended that Aboriginal knowledge be incorporated, through community involvement, in education within Aboriginal communities. A report to the Prince George school district on Aboriginal public schooling found that:

... strong community-school connections establishes within children the assurance that their culture and cultural knowledge is important to the education and subsequently provides for a strong sense of identity within the children. This in turn will lead to higher self-esteem, lower dropout rates, and higher levels of academic achievement.

In either Aboriginal schools or schools adapted to include culturally sensitive education practices, an anti-trafficking educational program could be implemented to educate youth on the reality of human trafficking and to provide specific tools for Aboriginal children to protect themselves from exploitation. Aside from educational programs that address trafficking directly, schooling within Aboriginal areas can also more completely integrate the specific cultural contexts of the community through programs developed by communities themselves. Involving the specific belief systems of the community as well as community Elders into school programs can connect schooling more closely to the experiences of community members and make education a more relevant and empowering experience.

2.5.3.2 Community Watch Groups

Available information indicates that Aboriginal women are frequently trafficked from rural communities to urban centres, with families and friends of these women losing the ability to obtain information on their locations and status. Community watch groups in rural communities may address this situation by providing communication links between communities and urban trafficking destinations. These groups may be able to use their detailed knowledge of their communities to more easily identify traffickers who infiltrate communities
and to become aware of circumstances within communities that may render women vulnerable to being trafficked – e.g. unemployment, domestic disputes or drug addiction.

268 Mitchel, *ibid.* at 11.
270 See e.g. Sethi, *supra* note 240 at 59.

Community watch groups could be given the contact information of support workers and authorities in order for them to respond rapidly if there is an imminent danger of trafficking within their community. Further, in circumstances when women have left communities and groups suspect that trafficking has occurred, they can use their contacts to provide specific information about these women to support centres in trafficking destinations.

Community watch group programs have been implemented in many regions where trafficking is occurring. One example is in Bangladesh, where a country-wide program, supported by USAID was formed to train local community leaders, local officials, and local police in methods to identify, report and prevent trafficking from occurring.271 Although there may be stark differences with realities in Canada, the development of community watch groups warrants further research and debate.

2.5.3.3 Cultural Mediators

Another promising practice may be the use of Aboriginal outreach workers trained in human trafficking who can work as cultural mediators and who, through field and street work, could reach out to Aboriginal victims in order to raise awareness about human trafficking, and inform them of their rights and options for escape. By acting as cultural mediators, the outreach workers may be able to relate to and address the specific cultural considerations. It is important that the outreach workers are from the same cultural background – in this case, of Aboriginal origin – as the women they are assisting.

Cultural mediators have been utilized successfully in Italy by the Tampep NGO to reach Nigerian victims of trafficking.272 Tampep has found that outreach workers of the same cultural background as the victims are able to more successfully form relationships of trust with victims, as well as to more easily address issues involving language barriers, and knowledge of victims’ systems of belief.273 Cultural mediators work in collaboration with social workers to provide direct support to the victim as they navigate the complex system of services and interact with a variety of service administrators and providers. The mediators help facilitate access to services, provide information on benefits and provide cultural sensitivity.
2.5.3.4 Survivor-Led Shelters and Transition Programs

“Honouring the Spirit of our Little Sisters,” a community-based safe house for adolescent females in the Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, opened in 2003 as part of the Manitoba strategy to end child sexual exploitation. Little Sisters is for female and transgendered youth ages 13-17 who are currently subjected to and at risk for sexual exploitation. The program offers an open-door, 24 hour a day, seven day a week home, where programming focuses on the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development of each resident. The founder, Jackie Anderson, explains “it’s as close to a family as you can find...trust and love are at the core...because every adult in these young people’s lives has abused them in some way.” The programs are designed to help youth build a strong foundation of self-worth through a process of self-discovery and self-esteem building. Youth admitted to the program have input into the planning, monitoring and evaluation goals set out at the time of admission. Most referrals are from Winnipeg Child and Family Services or the Mobile Crisis Unit, although community and self-referrals also possible. Further evaluation of the effectiveness of such aboriginal survivor-led shelters would assist in seeing whether these should be considered as promising practices.

2.5.3.5 Strengthening Native Culture: Nokomis Endaad (“Grandmothers House”)

After years of development, researchers and victims’ service providers for Native Americans in Minnesota have created a new model of service, named “Nokomis Endaad,” or Grandmother’s House. The service provides culturally intrinsic healing for American Indian women challenged by addiction, mental health, sexual trauma and cultural disorders. The complexity of Native youth vulnerability to trafficking, described above, the goal of the model is to heal native youth of trauma by re-centering Aboriginal values and cultural practices and rebuilding youth pride in their culture. The program is an “intensive outpatient co-occurring disorder treatment program,” which was developed based on Native women’s sharing circles, decades of experience at the Minnesota Indian Women’s Resource Center dealing with historic trauma in native communities, and an extensive literature review, in particular on studies showing that most Native youth have coexisting drug and mental health disorders.

Nokomis Endaad is focused on building cultural pride and is designed to bring women back to their traditional strength-based roles in Native communities. Various culturally specific therapies are incorporated into the model, which also is designed to meet Western best practice standards. For example, the service model contains:

an Elder in residence
extensive ceremonial practice
equine facilitated learning/therapy, which has been shown to have very positive results

275 Interview of Jackie Anderson, ibid.
276 Interview of Suzanne Koeplinger (27 March, 2010).
277 In Canada, studies have shown that 79% of women in prostitution (of any ethnicity) report three of four types of violence: 73% were child victims of domestic violence and 84% were victims of childhood sexual abuse. See Farley, supra note 129. Statistics among trafficked Aboriginal women of childhood violence and sexual abuse often exceed these numbers. See Runner, supra note 68. Drug abuse rates vary by drug, with alcohol (86.5%), marijuana (86.5) cocaine/crack (72.1%) and opiates (59.1%) topping the list of substances abused by youth transitioning from commercial child sex exploitation. Ibid.

for youth with mental or emotional disorders
art therapy
traditional food ways
a parenting curriculum focused on fetal alcohol syndrome
a chemical dependency program
a mental health program, with a staff mental health therapist to respond to histories of violence and abuse
a Native assessment tool that looks at trauma history and family responses

The service is currently too new to have reports evaluating its outcome, but a one-year review is planned in order to share results on this innovative program.