



**Women's Narratives from the St. John's Native Friendship Centre:**  
*Using Digital Storytelling to Inform Community-based Healing  
and Violence Prevention Programs*

**KEY FINDINGS**

- Emerging themes from this project were creating space for Indigenous women in an urban setting, resilience, understanding women's health, the importance of traditional knowledge, and the effects of structural and intergenerational violence.
- There is a need to increase number of members who are trained in crisis intervention and violence prevention. For example, provide violence prevention/crisis intervention training for women.
- Bridge the gap between individuals moving to St. John's for the first time, specifically for individuals that may be experiencing culture shock (e.g. employment, educational, and housing assistance).
- Elder's at the SJNFC are needed to support and encourage members (Women members said that the SJNFC was normally the only place they feel safe to seek out help).
- There is a strong need to educate and promote Indigenous cultures in the wider St. John's community: create a larger group of individuals to assist in the promotion of their cultures to schools, businesses, and institutions; and
- The development of a resource manual that focuses on reconciliation and that addresses Canada's colonial history: promote strong relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in NL and Labrador is needed to bridge the gap.

**INTRODUCTION**

Building on the existing St. John's Native Friendship Centre's (SJNFC) violence prevention initiatives aimed to empower women through mentorship, education, and culturally rich experiences.

The project focused on developing an understanding of how violence prevention services affect Indigenous women at the SJNFC. There was particular interest in identifying how community-based healing practices provide support for Indigenous women. This project

was community-driven, combining participant observation, interviews, and participatory visual arts methods. They use a locally appropriate method, digital storytelling, which allowed women to engage in personal healing narratives. Digital storytelling is an emerging decolonizing method that is appropriate for Indigenous research. Throughout our project, women participants of the SJNFC, including Elders and young Indigenous women, created films that told their stories. Our project brought forward the experiences of strength, resilience, and empowerment of the five women involved. This project has allowed for the celebration of women by honoring and respecting their lived experiences. By the end of the digital storytelling workshop, an intricacy of detailed narratives had developed, providing rich embroideries of women's unique voices.

Being community driven, this project also met goals of the SJNFC by identifying needs, strategies, and challenges for violence prevention services, create a tool for violence healing strategies for the SJNFC and to make recommendations for community-based healing and violence prevention programming for the wider St. John's community.

### **PARTNERSHIPS**

This research is focused on a project that has been created as a partnership between the St. John's Native Friendship Centre (SJNFC) and Memorial University.

### **METHODOLOGY**

For this research project, using methods that aim to decolonize was not only appropriate, but also necessary in order to address the belief that colonialism continues to exist (Smith, 1999). Therefore, an important part of undertaking a project that is rooted in decolonizing methodologies is the recognition of using appropriate methods that give priority to the needs and approaches identified by the Indigenous community (Smith, 1999, Hendry, 2007, and Wilson, 2008).

Research methodology approaches will be taken through:

- Digital Storytelling;
- Conversational-style interviews; and
- Participant Observation

### **MAIN FINDINGS**

Emerging themes from this project include: creating space for Indigenous women in an urban setting, resilience, understanding the unique needs of women's health, traditional knowledge, and the effects of structural and intergenerational violence. Women provided important strategies and recommendations to help improve their healing journey. Strategies included: land-based healing, the importance of traditional foods and activities, peer healing, access to Indigenous counselors, and the important role that Friendship Centres play in shaping their lives.

**CONCLUSION**

This research explored how urban Indigenous women make sense of and define violence in the context of their everyday lives. This project demonstrated through arts-based methods and through conversational interviews that Indigenous women at the St. John’s Native Friendship Centre do not subscribe to the negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated through colonial practices. Instead, this project reflects the power and sacredness of women’s lives. By participating in interviews and the digital storytelling workshop, women promoted and encouraged healing by living a good life that is rooted in cultural continuity through the preservation of their identity. Women demonstrated that they are experts on their own lives and that they have a strong understanding of what is required to heal and move forward.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The summary of recommendations voiced by the women were organized into the following themes: Education and Training; Economic Development; Programs and Services; Traditional Materials and Medicines; Support and Staff; External Support Services; Terminology; and Evaluation. The recommendations are outlined in Chart 1.0 below.

Chart 1.0

Category/Theme	Suggestion/Recommendation
Education and Training	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Peer Healing:</b> Increase number of members who are trained in crisis intervention and violence prevention. For example, provide violence prevention/crisis intervention training for women. A great deal of healing and counseling occurs not only by SJNFC staff members, but also between women members during programming (e.g. during drive homes in SJNFC vehicle, outings, tea and sharing, arts and crafts, and retreats).</li> <li>2. Allow women to provide recommendations to NL Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre, because they feel their needs are not recognized.</li> <li>3. Continue educating and promoting Indigenous cultures in the wider St. John’s community: create a larger group of individuals to assist in the promotion of their cultures to schools, businesses, and institutions.</li> <li>4. Develop a resource manual that would assist women in accessing materials or other programming across the St. John’s area</li> <li>5. Develop a resource manual that focuses on reconciliation and that addresses Canada’s colonial history: promote strong relationships between non-</li> </ol>

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	<p>Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in NL and Labrador.</p>
<p>Economic Development</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hire a professional to assist members in job searches and career services. Women discussed feelings of disappointment over the closure of the Employment Resource Centre, including the loss of computers.</li> <li>2. Bridge gap between individuals moving to St. John's for the first time, specifically for individuals that may be experiencing culture shock (e.g. employment, educational, and housing assistance).</li> </ol>
<p>Programs and Services</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Tea and Sharing:</b> Women discussed the feeling of wanting to attend on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but due to conflicting schedules, they could not attend. When possible, allow for more flexibility for multiple generations to spend time together (e.g. Elders and Youth program).</li> <li>2. <b>Yoga and Zumba:</b> Provide transparency to women as to why "non-Indigenous" programs are offered. This caused some confusion for women; greater transparency is needed to address how funding is allocated.</li> <li>3. <b>Land-based Healing:</b> Implement programs that allow families to get back on to the land to practice traditional activities and healing.</li> <li>4. <b>Elders' Programs:</b> Create trauma/strength-based programs that allow women and men who attended Residential/Day Schools to gather together.</li> <li>5. <b>Family-based programs:</b> When possible, include intergenerational programs and services (especially retreats).</li> <li>6. <b>Networking:</b> Create a pan networking/trading group that would allow members to access traditional teachings (e.g. workshops, online resources, teacher guests for crafts/singing/dancing).</li> <li>7. Use trauma-informed approaches to healing.</li> <li>8. Continue to carry out programs on a case-per-case basis; each person has unique and complex needs.</li> <li>9. <b>Art Program:</b> Continue to support local artists and expand art showcase.</li> <li>10. <b>Healing Circles:</b> Continue to hold sharing circles, increase frequency if possible.</li> </ol>
<p>Traditional Materials/Medicines</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Having access to traditional medicines would greatly benefit the members.</li> <li>2. Working with traditional materials during arts and crafts workshops and sessions are top priority for</li> </ol>

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	<p>members.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase number of drums and access to space to practice.</li> <li>Access to kitchen/space to be able to prepare and serve traditional foods (especially during feasts).</li> </ol>
Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent language revitalization programs.</li> </ol>
Support Staff	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employ a counselor who is Indigenous or who has a strong understanding and respect for Indigenous peoples, an individual who can address the needs of families (e.g. issues with social services, accessing health care, educational problems, and violence/trauma).</li> <li>Have available an Elder at the SJNFC to support and encourage members (Women members said that the SJNFC was normally the only place they feel safe to seek out help).</li> <li>Continue to practice self-care and team building between staff members (short term contracts and different job titles adds to an already stressful position).</li> <li>Continue investing in and mentoring young volunteers because they will become the staff of the future.</li> </ol>
External Support Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to partner with external organizations (Aboriginal Resource Office, Memorial University, and other Women’s Centers in St. John’s).</li> <li>Seek out innovative approaches with Memorial University, for healing (e.g. art and music therapy)</li> <li>Continue to facilitate strong relations with the department of ethnomusicology in order to preserve and promote Inuktitut and Moravian Church music.</li> <li>Continue to train and provide outreach to non-Indigenous agencies to increase level of comfort for women who access external services.</li> </ol>
Terminology	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address and discuss racial and discriminatory stereotypes that have created stigma for members.</li> </ol>
Evaluation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to evaluate the usefulness of programs by asking women to voice their opinions and suggestions because their needs are continuously evolving and changing.</li> <li>Continue to take weekly attendance of programs and services.</li> </ol>

**For more information on this project visit:**

<http://uakn.org/research-project/womens-narratives-from-the-st-johns-native-friendship-centre-using-digital-storytelling-to-inform-community-based-healing-and-violence-prevention/>

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