



Final Paper

Culture of Fearfulness? Connecting Patterns of Vulnerability and Resilience in Young Urban Aboriginal Women's Narratives in Kijipuktuk (Halifax)

May 2016

UAKN Atlantic Regional Research Centre

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: www.uakn.org



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**URBAN ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE NETWORK (UAKN)
FINAL RESEARCH REPORT**

***Culture of Fearfulness? Connecting Patterns of
Vulnerability and Resilience in Young Urban Aboriginal
Women’s Narratives in Kijipuktuk (Halifax)***

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URBAN ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE NETWORK (UAKN)

FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

“Isolated Events?” Connecting Patterns of Resilience and Vulnerability in Young

Urban Aboriginal Women’s Narratives in Kqipuktuk (Halifax)

Project Team

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- Victim Support Navigator, Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre: Denise John
- Elder, Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre: Debbie Eisan
- Government department advisor: Dorothy Haché, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)

INTRODUCTION

I think too much of our identity is like a sad story and I think we are part of it but I don't think we're responsible for that. I think to change anything we need to change who's telling the story. I heard an African woman at the Summit say "the hunter will always be the hero until the lion has a story." So, I was like, "Yeah, we need to be our own historians and we need to share our own story and it has to be a good one... as the original holders of land and wisdom and knowledge on this continent. (Interview #5)

Background

In 2014, our research project entitled, *Culture of Fearfulness? Connecting Patterns of Vulnerability and Resilience in Young Urban Aboriginal Women's Narratives in Kijipuktuk (Halifax)*, was approved for funding by the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN-Atlantic), supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Canada (SSHRC) partnership grant. The project arose from the long-standing concern of the Urban Aboriginal community of Kijipuktuk regarding missing and murdered Aboriginal women, a concern intensified by the murder of Loretta Saunders, an Inuit student enrolled at Saint Mary's University.

From the beginning, the project's intent was to explore whether a culture of disconnection and denial exists in regard to cases of missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women (Jiwani and Young 2006), and how that culture affects young, urban residing women in creating what we term a "culture of fearfulness". While Loretta's murder has contributed to an increase in general awareness of the phenomenon in Canadian society, many of these women's stories have been well-known, and often accepted as a hopeless everyday reality among Aboriginal communities for decades.

Our project also arose out of a shared recognition that many gaps exist in the current research, and that we needed to see if there was narrative unity among what have been deemed "isolated events." Too often, when a case of a missing or murdered Aboriginal woman comes to light, her story is passed off as an isolated event that has nothing to do with her Aboriginal identity. Still, the shockingly disproportionate number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada (Pearce 2013; AIC 2009; NWAC 2007) suggests that these tragic events are connected through shared experiences of colonialism and one of colonialism's favourite offsprings, racism. As Interviewee #3 so poignantly and succinctly expressed it, *"Just another dead Indian. That's how I have felt my whole life."*

Our research adds an essential empirical focus on an Atlantic Canada urban context through a dedicated focus on the urban Aboriginal population in Kijipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia), in the territory called Mi'kma'ki. Kijipuktuk is the largest city east of Québec City. The "Urban Aboriginal People's Study: Halifax Report" (Sable et al. 2011) provides much of the significant demographic and background information.

Adding a powerful element to this project, much of the research was undertaken by two young, urban residing, Aboriginal women – Chenise Haché and Salina Kemp – whose voices and presence permeate the writing in this report. They both have courageously added their own voices under the section "Framing the Research: the Two Young Researchers", which follows the Methodology section. Salina also conducted a "self-interview," which is anonymously documented and included in the interview analysis.

While the interview-based nature of the project means that the voices of many young Aboriginal women are the basis of our report, their stories also reveal some of the structural and historical forces that serve systemically to disadvantage and threaten the wellbeing of urban Aboriginal women (Smith 2005; Anderson et al. 2008; Jacobs and Williams 2008). While each of their lives and deaths are unique, our research demonstrates that most of these women have experienced the social forces at play that disenfranchise,

displace, and disadvantage Aboriginal women and girls in Canadian society. These troublesome patterns of violence cause indescribable pain to the families and communities that share the histories of missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women.

Literature Review

There now exists an extensive body of literature on the broad topic of violence against indigenous girls and women, and more specifically, on the issue of missing and/or murdered Indigenous women. The majority of research in this area has been undertaken by Indigenous women's and human rights organizations; national, provincial, or tribal agencies and/or organizations; and government.

The first major research project in the past two decades to tackle the specific phenomenon of violence against Indigenous women and girls was the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1996. Both Volumes 3 and 4 of the 4,000-page Report of the RCAP made recommendations related to family violence and violence against women that built on the voices of many Indigenous women interviewed for these purposes.

The next major research project on the topic was the Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series Report on Aboriginal Domestic Violence (2003). The study took a multifaceted approach to the question of violence and concluded that domestic violence is an issue that must be understood with the proper social and historical context in mind. Many reports and studies since then have also focused on the specific issue of domestic violence, including those conducted by the Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association (2005), Inuit Women of Canada (2006), and the National Family Circle Against Family Violence (2006). Overall though, 2004 marked a shift towards research that considered a broader understanding of violence.

Amnesty International (AI) and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) collaborated on the first national or international study that focused solely on the phenomenon of missing and/or murdered Indigenous women. The report, "Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women" was a groundbreaking study conducted in the context of the NWAC's "Sisters in Spirit" campaign that raised awareness of the issue on an international level. The report itself presents nine case studies from three Canadian provinces over a three-decade period. The authors argue strongly that Canadian authorities did not ensure the safety and well-being of the women and/or girls in all nine cases, and that, in fact, the continued marginalization of Indigenous women and girls ensures that the perpetrators of violence are likely to walk free.

Following the high-profile findings of AI's and NWAC's research, Indigenous activists, researchers, leaders, and family members organized the "Highway of Tears Symposium" in Prince George, British Columbia. The symposium involved hundreds of people from the region in discussions about the disappearance and/or murder of over a dozen women and girls in the past twenty-five years along an infamous stretch of highway in northern British Columbia. In particular, the gathering focused on nine women and girls whose cases were still unsolved (1989-2006), eight of whom are Aboriginal. One of the most

cited findings of the final report (Lheidli T'enneh First Nation et al. 2006) was that all the women or girls were young, lived in poverty, and were travelling along Highway 16, which lacks the most basic transportation and social infrastructure.

Both the NWAC and AI followed up on their collaborative research with their own reports in 2009 and 2008 respectively. AI returned to their focus on the underlying causes of violence in the lives of Indigenous women and girls, turning especially to the ways that racism and poverty continue to increase the risk that Indigenous women and girls face. They cast a troubling light on the contribution of police forces to the issue. The NWAC's study broke some new ground by including the voices of the families of 23 missing and/or murdered Aboriginal women. Their ethnographic approach provided ample evidence of the intergenerational trauma that family members faced and the general lack of attention to their well-being. Together, these two studies recast the role that racism and poverty played in the social vulnerability that Indigenous women and girls continue to face, and presented damning evidence of the indifference of Canadian authorities.

The NWAC (2010) quickly followed up their 2009 publication with the final report of their 5-year "Sisters in Spirit" research project. Entitled "What their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters in Spirit Initiative," they launched a database of over 500 missing and murdered Indigenous women in the report, the first of its kind. The report also made three major research findings: a) the majority of cases occurred in the Western provinces; b) more than 50% of those involved were under 31 years of age; and c) Indigenous women were more likely to be murdered by a stranger than non-Indigenous women.

Since the path breaking work of the NWAC and their AI collaborators, several more major studies have been released that tackle the issue of missing and/or murdered Indigenous women. Among the main themes of these reports are that Indigenous women:

- a) face disproportionately more violence than non-Indigenous women (Statistics Canada 2011);
- b) have less access to formal education and employment opportunities than non-Indigenous women (Statistics Canada 2011; Yukon Advisory Council 2012);
- c) are much more likely to express dissatisfaction with the police and/or suffer violence at the hands of the police (Statistics Canada 2012; Human Rights Watch 2013); and
- d) have borne the brunt of generations of colonial policies and practices that exclude Indigenous peoples from social and economic well-being (British Columbia Ministry of Citizens' Services 2011; Assembly of First Nations 2012).

The most common recommendations contained in these reports are twofold: Human Rights Watch (2013), NAWC (2010) and the British Columbia Ministry of Aboriginal Relations (2011), and Amnesty International (2008) call for a national action plan to combat violence against Indigenous women, while the AFN (Assembly of First Nations, 2012) has called for a national inquiry. Most recommendations call for action to be led and developed by Indigenous women.

Project Set-up and Methodology

Our study serves to connect the human development and social cohesion themes and priorities as outlined by the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network guidelines. The research took place between October 2014 and April 2015. A total of sixteen individual interviews were conducted with young, urban-residing Aboriginal women aged nineteen to thirty-five years old, and one focus group was organized and held at the Native Student House at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Eight women participated in the focus group. Five of those eight also participated in an individual interview bringing the total number of participants to nineteen. Denise John, Victim Support Navigator at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, assisted in focus group facilitation. Additionally, project researchers Chenise Haché and Salina Kemp added their own experiences as Aboriginal women in our final report.

Our research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Saint Mary's University Research Ethics Board. All participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity, and all completed consent forms. Each was given a \$25.00 gift certificate of their choice to either the Atlantic Superstore or Tim Horton's. The Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre (MNFC) was our community partner under the directorship of Pam Glode-DesRochers. Denise John and Debbie Eisan, one of their resident Elders, offered both psychological and moral support.

Both Chenise and Salina connected with many of the research participants through social media postings. Chenise especially used her considerable personal and/or professional networks to recruit community members into the research. She also produced a poster for the focus group (see attached).

As part of our community outreach efforts, Salina and Trudy presented the project to the Parents' Group at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre and both Chenise and Salina participated in a session with Trudy on the role of research projects in Aboriginal peoples' education. The conference, entitled, "Atlantic Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Conference," was held at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) March 9 and 10, 2015. Approximately fifty people attended our session along with members of the Mi'kmaw Grand Council. The session will be posted on the MSVU conference site.

Methods

Given the nature of our research, a phenomenological approach seemed the most appropriate. Educator Max van Manen notes that phenomenological research is similar to ethnography in the means of gathering data – interviewing, participant-observation, document analysis, and so forth. However, phenomenology goes beyond documenting the subjective experiences of people or groups of participants, to the deeper question of "what is the nature of this phenomenon ... as an essentially human experience?" (Sable 2005, p.88; van Manen 1990, p.62).

To bring the difference between phenomenology and other qualitative research approaches (such as ethnography, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism,

biography, and etc.) better into focus, we should recognize the force of the essential phenomenological question. For example, no matter how any particular parent (or group of parents) relates to a child, we always want to know: How is this parenting? Is this what it is like to parent? Is this what it means to be a mother or father (van Manen 1990, p. 62-63)?

Van Manen regards phenomenological questions as core to research and to understanding the human experience of the phenomenon being studied (such as parenting in his own research). Phenomenology is not concerned with culture per se but with human experience. It is driven by a research question oriented toward understanding the “full significance of some aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole human experience” (Sable 2005, p.88; van Manen 1990, p. 63).

The focus is on a “human phenomenon” and the data gathering should focus on the “meaning of the experience,” which in this case, is the essence of being a young Aboriginal woman living in an urban setting. According to van Manen, a research method is only a way of investigating certain kinds of questions: “The questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting points, not the method itself ... The method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place” (van Manen 1990, p.1-2).

Fundamental to developing the questions is to first identify how we as researchers are orienting ourselves to the phenomenon we wish to study. van Manen describes this process as “identifying what it is that deeply interests you or me and of identifying this interest as a true phenomenon, e.g., as some experience that human beings live through ... So when one orients to a phenomenon one is approaching this experience with a certain interest” (Sable 2005, p.88; van Manen 1990, p.41).

Using this approach, we questioned the effects that the disproportionate number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women throughout Canada has on the self-perception and sense of personal safety of Aboriginal women currently residing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Our core research questions were:

- Is there an inherent fearfulness that urban Aboriginal women in Halifax experience because they identify with murdered and/or missing women, both culturally and through shared life experiences and conditions?
- If so, within this culture of fearfulness, are there avenues of educational, professional, or cultural support and development for these women to experience a more fulfilling and secure life?

The following analysis brings together a wealth of lived experiences, which we have thematically bundled to highlight our main threads of analysis. These main themes include: Identity; Family and Community; Violence; Systemic Racism and Violence; and Social Networks/Supports. Each of these theme are further broken into subthemes that emerged through the interviews.

Framing the Research: Two Young Researchers

Chenise:

The death of my classmate Loretta Saunders has been the catalyst and driving force behind this research project, and has been the catalyst for a new chapter and purpose in my life overall. Loretta's murder, but more importantly, her life and commitment to Aboriginal women and girls, fundamentally changed the way I understand my own identity, strengths, and vulnerabilities, and ultimately, my role and responsibility as a young Mi'kmaw woman.

I still can't completely make sense of the feeling of confusion, grief, and helplessness that overwhelms you when someone in your life goes missing. Though a classmate might seem like a peripheral relationship, when she went missing I felt a gaping hole in my life and an intense realization that myself or any one of my Indigenous friends or family members could have gone missing in her place. It felt, and still feels, impossible that somebody could overcome all of the adversities and barriers that Aboriginal women face to make it to university just to have their life stolen from them. It's not unfathomable though, and in fact, I'm not even sure if it surprises me anymore. Loretta's story has opened my eyes to the ways that Indigenous women are systematically disadvantaged, erased, and eliminated in a larger narrative of colonial violence and racism in Canadian society. I fit into that narrative. All Aboriginal women fit into that narrative. Even knowing and accepting this reality as a truth, it still stings when strangers and friends try to engage me in a conversation that invalidates Loretta's identity and murder: "Well they didn't kill her because she was native, did they?", "I couldn't even tell she was Aboriginal", "She was writing about that topic right? "What are the chances?"

If nothing else comes from this research project, my hope is that it can start a conversation about the shared lived experiences of young Aboriginal women, both stories of resilience and struggle, and help people to navigate those toxic questions that come up so often when we try to speak about our experiences of racism and colonization.

I have been conflicted on how to respond to the concept of a culture of fearfulness in my own personal experience as an Aboriginal woman. As much as I strive to be proud and strong and put on a brave face, so much has changed in my life since moving into an urban environment and the murder of my classmate. I don't feel safe to listen to music while I run, or when I'm on the bus or in a new place. If I am alone on a trail, I walk with my keys clenched in my fist. I'm more cautious about approaching strangers and sometimes feel guarded and suspicious about the allies I let into my life. It is both comforting and disheartening that I can see how my behavior fits into a larger context of colonialism and violence against Aboriginal women.

Participating in this work and conducting these interviews with Aboriginal women in Halifax has been a significant part of my own healing journey and helped me to start to understand better a lot of the invalidating questions I hear about Loretta and my own personal health and safety. I feel connected to every one of the women that I interviewed during this project and I feel grateful and blessed that they shared their stories and their hearts with me for the sake of this research. Their stories and experiences made me understand more about my own life and relationships, and similarly to Loretta, I feel like any of these stories could have been mine. I have been impressed and inspired by the

honesty, integrity, and resilience of every single one of these women as they shared what they have been through and what they have accomplished. At the same time, it was incredibly emotional and heavy to be the person holding onto a lot of these stories, and hearing first-hand the connections among participants. There were many times that I felt helpless or responsible for the safety and well-being of the participants, many of whom I now consider friends. Whether it was good or bad, what these women shared with me was a gift, and I hope that is how it is read.

The narratives of these women stand as a direct testament to the power of Indigenous resistance and resiliency. We're still here, and we're here together.

Salina:

As an Aboriginal woman who has grown up in Halifax with family and a sense of community, it was hard to think of this city as being anything but home. After the death of Loretta Saunders it became very clear that this was not the safe home I had once thought it was. Hearing women speak about their feelings of safety and security in the days and weeks that followed Loretta's disappearance made it very clear that not everyone feels as though Halifax is a safe place. When I was invited to work on this project it was at first seen as an opportunity to gain knowledge of the research which can help to shape policy and make changes within the community.

Throughout this project most of my focus remained on the question of what supports and services were available for Aboriginal women in the HRM to experience a more fulfilling and secure life. Online searches were conducted in an effort to compile a list of services available. What these online searches revealed was a lack of visibility and communication regarding the services and supports available and that even what was found may not be up to date. Those services which are available were not easily found and much of the information regarding services was dependent upon community members providing direct information. This reliance on information from fellow community members may present a barrier for those Aboriginal women who have recently moved to the city and do not yet have a connection to the community.¹ Without the help of family or friends many of these Aboriginal women who move to the city are on their own to try to find supports which are not easily found. The lack of communication regarding the supports and services available raised the question of what the participants would identify in their personal stories about their experiences.

In order to preserve the identity of the participants great effort was put into the transcription of their interviews so that individuals may not be identified. Throughout the interviews women were asked questions about identity, personal development, supports, conflict and resilience. The women who were interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences but yet each of their stories speaks of their strength and resilience. Their stories reveal the connection which these women feel with their HRM

See, Jodoin, Lisa *Navigating Government Services: The "lived experience" of young urban Aboriginal families residing in Fredericton, NB*. <http://uakn.org/research-project/navigating-government-services-the-lived-experience-of-young-urban-aboriginal-families-residing-in-fredericton-nb/>

community and what was found was that in such a large city it is not always easy to have a feeling of community connection. The stories from these women not only exposes the need for community connection and a feeling that there is a lack of supports but also the ways in which they have found community and support.

What started as an opportunity to learn about the projects which help to shape policy, ended up being an eye opening experience in which I was given the opportunity to see this city through the eyes of someone who has just moved here away from everything that they know. These women have highlighted not only the struggle and adversity which they have faced but also the strength and resilience which they possess. This project has shown the importance of connection and communication and the difference that this can make for these women who have left everything that is familiar to find their way in a new community.

ANALYSIS

Statistical and Participant Information

The urban Aboriginal population in Kjiptuk consists of both status and non-status Aboriginal peoples from a number of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities throughout Canada. The largest group is the Mi'kmaq, the Indigenous people of Nova Scotia and Eastern Canada. At the time of the Urban Aboriginal Peoples' Study (UAPS, 2010) "Halifax had the smallest Aboriginal population of the *UAPS* cities." The other cities included Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Montreal, Saskatoon, Calgary and Regina, and Winnipeg (www.uaps.org). According to the report:

- In the 2006 Census, a total of 5,320 people in the Halifax census metropolitan area (CMA) identified themselves as Aboriginal, that is, as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Aboriginal peoples account for just over one percent of the total population of Halifax, which is also one of the smallest per capita concentrations among the UAPS cities.
- As of 2006, First Nations peoples were the majority Aboriginal identity group in Halifax (56%), with Métis accounting for one-third (33%) of the Aboriginal population. Three percent identify themselves as Inuit; 8% offered other or multiple responses.

As well, according to 2006 Census data collected in the UAPS survey, Halifax has a relatively young and growing urban Aboriginal population.

- From 2001 to 2006, the Aboriginal population in Halifax grew by 51 percent, which represents one of the fastest growth rates for the UAPS cities. The rate of growth is much greater among Métis (an increase of 120%) than among the First Nations population (28%). During the same time period, the total population of Halifax grew by just four percent.
- The Aboriginal population living in Halifax is slightly younger than the non-Aboriginal population (with a median age of 30 years, compared to 39 years for the

non-Aboriginal population). A similar pattern is observed Canada-wide, but is not as pronounced in Halifax as in the Prairie cities, particularly Regina and Saskatoon.

- Compared to non-Aboriginal residents, the Aboriginal population, in addition to being younger, has higher unemployment rates, and lower education and income levels. Aboriginal youth in the city are also more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be living in a single-parent household.

(UAPS: 2010_ <http://www.uaps.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/UAPS-Halifax-report.pdf>)

According to Statistics Canada, in 2006, Ontario had the largest number of Aboriginal females, totaling 124,900 and accounting for 21% of all Aboriginal females, while 17% resided in British Columbia, 16% lived in Alberta, 15% in Manitoba, 12% in Saskatchewan, 9% in Québec, and 5% in the Atlantic Provinces. The remaining 5% of the female Aboriginal population lived in one of the territories.

In 2006, almost half (46%) of Aboriginal females were children and youth; 28% of the female Aboriginal population were under 15 years of age, and 18% were aged 15 to 24. Among the Inuit female population, about one-third (34%) were under the age of 15, while the figure was 31% among First Nations females and 24% among the Métis female population. Furthermore, Aboriginal women were more likely to be lone parents than non-Aboriginal women. In 2006, 18% of Aboriginal women aged 15 and over were heading families on their own, compared with 8% of non-Aboriginal women.

According to the 2006 Census, there were approximately 7,000 Inuit, 35,000 Métis and 86,000 First Nations children under the age of 6 years across Canada. Roughly half (49%) of these children were girls. Compared to non-Aboriginal children, higher percentages of these young Aboriginal children were growing up in large families. Of those under the age of 6, 28% of Inuit girls, 25% of First Nations girls, and 11% of Métis girls were living in families with four or more children. This is compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal girls under the age of 6 in Canada.

About one in four Inuit (24%) and First Nations (26%) girls, and one in five (21%) Métis girls had mothers between the ages of 15 to 24; this is compared to 8% of non-Aboriginal girls. In 2006, 20% of First Nations women over the age of 15 were lone parents, while this was the case for 17% of Inuit women and 14% of Métis women.

(<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11442-eng.htm#a4>)

According to the 2011 National Household Survey and the 2014 AANDC Indian Registry System (INAC), the urban-residing population of Mi'kmaq in Kijipuktuk alone grew to 5,877 in 2014, an increase of almost 3,000 since 2006. In these statistics, the median age drops almost five years from 2006 to 25.4 years old versus 41.6 as the average age for the general population. (<http://novascotia.ca/abor/aboriginal-people/demographics/>).

From statistics provided by the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre for their service area, also derived from the National Household Survey, there are now 12,598 people of Aboriginal identity in Kijipuktuk, 6,118 of which are female. This figure is double the

2006 census. The largest number of women are in the twenty to thirty-five year old age category (see Appendix A), the age category our research represents. As also reflective of the demographics, the largest representative group identify as Mi'kmaq, and almost 50 % are mothers.

Sixteen different women participated in the project. We offer a brief biographical sketch of the participants, before beginning our analysis of the interviews.

Tribal affiliations/Nation/Cultural identity:

11 Mi'kmaq
3 Inuit
1 Mi'kmaw/Maliseet
1 Cree-Métis/Mi'kmaw
1 Sto:lo
1 Anishnaabe
1 Métis (undefined)

Age

19-24 -- 6
25-30 -- 7
31+ -- 5

Average age: 27

Motherhood

Mother: 9 women (47%)
Number of children: 13

Average age of children: 6 years old

Number of Years in HRM

0-1 year: 2
1-2 years: 3
2-5 years: 7
5-10 years: 1
10-15 years: 3
Entire life: 2

Average number of years in Halifax: 8.3 (5.3 years excluding lifetime residents)

Thematic Organization

After careful reading of the interviews, we organized the information into themes. From each theme, sub-themes arose. Inevitably, there was cross-over between themes, but we have done our best to highlight their relevance to the various arenas of life and work these women encounter.

THEME #1: Identity

Identity is a theme that runs throughout the narratives. Specific questions such as how people culturally identify themselves and where they considered home, highlighted one level of identity, but many layers emerged throughout the narratives. Some of these included:

- those who moved to Halifax, temporarily or permanently, from Mi'kmaw communities for university, employment, or simply to be away from their community, and identify as Mi'kmaw with specific Band identities;
- women who grew up off-reserve with no status or particular Band association yet have distinct Aboriginal ancestry and community connections with which they identify;
- women who identify as Aboriginal from other areas of the country, e.g., Alberta, Manitoba, Labrador, and have moved to the city for university, employment, or a relationship;
- Aboriginal identified women without any formal knowledge of their own ancestry, and who don't necessarily identify with any particular Aboriginal community;
- those who identify as an Urban Aboriginal person, who grew up and lived in the city most of their lives and consider the "city" as part of their Aboriginal identity;
- women who are actively involved in their political, working, and social life as self-identified Aboriginals;
- women who, despite being self-identified Aboriginal peoples, do not engage with any specific culture or community as an active part of their political, working, or social lives.

Other more subtle themes emerged that crosscut or underlay any specific tribal or cultural identity, as can be seen in the following quotations.

Sub-theme 1: Native Identity: When do I or don't I identify?

One of the pervasive themes for the Aboriginal women we interviewed was whether to identify as Aboriginal or not. For some women, self-identifying has become a source of strength and pride, drawn mostly from the strength of Aboriginal women unifying and showing their resilience or from a strong family identity or role model.

For a while, like when I met someone, I would never say I was like Aboriginal and stuff, but more recently I definitely became more proud of that. (Interview #8)

Throughout my life I have had mixed feelings. When I was younger and facing racism, I was ashamed of my background, but as I learned more from my family and community, I developed a sense of pride in my identity. I learned to take pride in the fact that my family decided to move off the reserve and live in Kijipuktuk. (Interview #14)

It was also never really fostered in my family. My mom never really talked about [our Aboriginal identity], my aunt never really talked about it, and my other aunt

was proud of it. So it was through her that I started to feel more a part of it.
(Interview #2)

For others, identifying as Aboriginal still presents a barrier as an “outsider” and leads to feelings of shame or fear of belittlement and violence. From the following interview excerpts, we ask, “What leads to the forms of fear and hesitation to identify as Aboriginal that participants expressed?” And, “How has this fearfulness been institutionalized so that it still exists?”

I've felt conflicted about [my Aboriginal identity]. When I was younger I used to be ashamed of it; I wouldn't tell people openly. Even now in university I haven't told really anyone that I'm Aboriginal. I never associated with the Aboriginal advisor at school. I think there was one class that had any sort of information or subject matter that had to do with Aboriginal experiences in Canada. I'm slowly becoming more and more drawn to it. (Interview #2)

I think the reason why I would kinda not tell people I was like Native was because they would just like sometimes swarm you with questions like you're some kind of like endangered species. And just ingenuous questions that you're like... When people ask questions and I like to teach them things, but when they're asking things that you know, “You shouldn't be asking me you should like....” like really intense questions.... Even like my employer when they ask... “So, what are you?” and I'm like so scared to say that I'm Native for some reason... One of my friends was saying it was... Thanksgiving and somebody mentioned... something like Natives don't like Thanksgiving, and he just went on this whole like, “Oh Natives are always crying about everything and like they get so much stuff we give them this and blah blah....”
(Interview #8)

When I moved here, I wasn't very open about my Native identity because in the [former place of residence] that was the worst thing you could be. I experienced so much violence and bullying and all that stuff because of that, so when I moved here I was like, “Frigg that”, I look white enough, I'm being a white girl.... The biggest barrier is not knowing when to self-identify. There are still times when I don't want to do it because it puts you in such a different place and makes you an outsider, even though they're (non-Indigenous people, ed.) the outsiders. (Interview #5)

As seen in the previous quotation, for those who “look white”, there is an underlying fearfulness about when to identify and for what purpose, and often feeling put on the spot to defend who they are. As Interviewee #14 once asked, “How Native do I have to be?”

Yeah, I've had, “Oh, you don't look Native.” And I'm just, like, feel ashamed of that almost. Yeah, like it's kind of strange. It's kind of an uncomfortable thing, even to talk about ... Well, they call us, in [First Nation community], French Indians, and like that we're not real Indians. (Interview #7)

I just say I am Metis. I don't like to identify as Caucasian generally unless I feel

like I am going to be discriminated against and then I'll classify. Like if there are like papers you have to fill out or whatever, it's like "Oh, What minority do you identify [with]?" The fact that they write that on a piece of paper makes me not want to identify. That is like extra discrimination that I really don't need. (Interview #6)

Discrimination and questions of how "Native" are you, can also occur within First Nations communities.

The elementary school and the junior high that I went to [were] very heavy in Native students. But growing up, because to a lot of people I don't look Native, I wasn't accepted by the Native community. But it wasn't just because of my racial background, it's also how I grew up, what I grew up knowing, and having family that looks more Native than I do. I didn't really grow up on the reserve and I don't speak the language, I don't have an accent. People are just like, you're a 'wanna be', you're white. And I got bullied for that a lot, and it was mostly the Native students who [did] it, which is really sad to say....I've had students come up to me at pow-wows and ask why I was there. Why are you here, you don't belong here. And then being in my classroom, you don't belong here. Walking down the street, you don't belong here. (Interview #11)

I feel as though I am often considered to be "not Native enough" by some simply because I did not grow up on reserve and can never pass on my Native status to my son. (Interview #14)

Interviewee # 13, was introduced to her Mi'kmaw family at age seventeen, a somewhat overwhelming experience.

Only in the later part of my life that I got to know them. Growing up, I didn't know exactly who I was. I knew I was Aboriginal, but I didn't know what nation. So I didn't put myself into any stereotype because... I knew I was tan, but I didn't know the story behind it, so I didn't really associate myself with Aboriginal...it was a little traumatizing. I was at that age, when all the emotions run high, in teenage years. It was overwhelming because I had a very small family and all of a sudden I had a hundred people in my immediate family... I have a complicated story, beginning with my father. He's British, born in England. So I grew up with my father. I didn't actually meet my Mi'kmaw family until I was seventeen. (Interview #13)

Sub-theme 2: Being a "Native Woman", Reflections on Gendered Fear and Violence

Aboriginal identity was an important theme throughout each of the interviews, but more specifically gendered themes emerged when participants began to share about their lived experiences and identities as Aboriginal women. For many, these experiences included layers of fear, mistrust, discrimination, and being "at risk" due to their Aboriginal identity. Gendered violence, or even simply the increased fear that one is statistically more likely to be at risk of experiencing violence, became a huge theme throughout the interviews, and speaks directly to our research concept of a "culture of fearfulness" within the lives and experiences of our participants. Housing, transportation, motherhood, community, and

lack of adequate services and supports all contributed to the experiences or inherent fear that participants felt as Native women.

We need to focus on Native women because Native women are being targeted because they are Native women. There's intersectionality. Native Women aren't treated like Native people and women, they're treated like "Native women." And whenever we talk about Native women it's like we're mourning them; we forget that there's still Native women here doing stuff.... Well I really liked what Kim Katrin said about how the fear of attack influences the everyday decisions that we make. I really feel that....And with Loretta that changed how I saw people, how I saw the university. I used to feel like a student, and now I don't. I feel like I'm not treated as a student first. (Interview #5)

From my life, and especially when we're talking about the invisible racism, how is it that it's that different? Can I go out on the street and someone notice me as being an Aboriginal woman and want to actively harm me? I can't begin to understand why that is. I've definitely read statistics that being a Native woman you're more likely to be raped; you're more likely to be subject to emotional or physical abuse from your partner. Obviously these statistics are about me or have something to do with me but I can't begin to understand how that happens. And so I guess for me that feels like it must be systemic racism. (Interview #2)

I wouldn't feel safe walking around at night, especially by The Commons. I don't feel safe with white men, and being single, I had some really terrible experience with white men. Those past experiences have really prevented me from wanting to continue to date white men. It feels and sounds bad but that's just my experience of what it's taught me. There's a sense of entitlement that allows them to treat you, and belittle you, and lower your self-esteem. I've been in abusive relationships before, and I really hate to generalize one race of the population, but I'm really scared to trust a person who isn't able to relate to my experience as an Aboriginal woman. With going to school and losing my friend, I'm very acutely aware that we're almost targeted and it's easier for them to justify mistreating you because you're a Native woman and I'm isolated and I don't have family here. I try my hardest not to put myself in situations where I'll be vulnerable but it's really hard. Most of the men here are white, so relationships and safety in that sense have been very challenging. I'm always hyper vigilant. (Interview #1)

As an Aboriginal woman you don't want to walk on the street alone. (Interview #3)

Well in general there was a lot of missing Aboriginal women, like I said, that makes me feel a target....I don't think that we're vulnerable; I just think, you know, that people have put this stigma on us.... it's just so scary. And knowing that my daughter, she looks very Aboriginal, I don't know if you've seen her, but she's very dark--dark eyes dark hair, and I have been teaching her what I know of our language, so little bits and pieces, so she will talk to me, um saying little words and stuff that she knows. And knowing that one day, possibly because of the statistics are

so high, that she could be one of those women, and that just frightens me so much to even think that you know my daughter could be the next missing or murdered.
(Interview #4)

When asked if she had ever been affected by stories of missing or murdered Aboriginal women, Interviewee #8 responded:

Yeah definitely, especially like the Loretta one really struck me. I don't know, I definitely feel affected but like I try and realize that you don't have to look Native; it's just like those situations that you end up in and like I always feel like I put myself in those situations. Not purposely because I am trying but I realize like, "Oh this is probably why a lot of women go missing." I don't know, I think that I can fight off these people or you know when physically I probably can't. It's just little things like that where I become more aware of what I'm doing and that I'm putting myself in danger. (Interview #8)

Subtheme # 3: The Token or Stereotypical Indian

Aboriginal students have expressed their frustration at being singled out in classes as First Nations. For some, it is being put on the spot to explain their history and culture, something they may or may not know much about. Interviewee #8 already mentioned (p.11) being treated like an endangered species. For others, it is the discomfort of being singled out, or sitting through questions the professors raise such as, "How many of you have worked with Native people?" In these excerpts, we see the tokenization and stereotyping of Aboriginal people, including how they are represented in the text books, again all pointing to a sense of isolation.

I felt tokenized by a lot of professors. (Interview #1)

*They (referring to her professors, ed.) almost fetishize it a bit, not in a romantic way, just like "Oh, you ever wise ever patient Indians, I need to learn from you, it's amazing that you're here." I had someone say that to me, "It's just so amazing that you're here as a Native woman" and I was like "F*** you. F*** you, that is so condescending." I wanted to say, "It's amazing that people think you're smart enough to be a professor."* (Interview #5)

And, the whole thing about Aboriginal people are supposed to have a certain look, dark eyes, dark hair. Some people say we have high cheek bones, um, short. This is apparently what the average Native looks like to other people...So, as you can tell I do look like that, like that category what they're explaining. (Interview #4)

My own personal experience with schools have been okay I guess. Grade school was always frustrating when I was forced to read history books that I believed to be full of crap, I always felt the need to point out to classmates that Native people don't live in teepees or say "how" and point out that they wouldn't know a Native person even if they were about to be smacked by one. (Interview #14)

Sub-theme 4: The “Drunken Indian/Dirty Native”

A painful and very public reaffirmation of the “drunken Indian” image was illustrated by an ad in the *First Nations Drum* newspaper in which Liberal MP Joyce Murray congratulates the Aboriginal graduates of 2015 followed by the lines, “Sobriety, education and hard work lead to success.” The ad was supposedly a mistake on the part of a salesperson at the newspaper, and never approved by Murray. Both Murray and the newspaper issued immediate apologies.²

However, our research shows the stark reality of this image for Aboriginal women both in the form of racism they experience in their daily lives, and in the social ills within their own communities that have arisen as a product of colonialism. As part of their healing process, a number of Aboriginal women are following what is called the “Red Road,” a path of Native spirituality. However, unlike many people not of Aboriginal descent, this public perception of the “drunken Indian” pits them in an either-or situation when it comes to drinking alcohol, as seen in interviews # 2, #4, #6, and #7.

On the reserve, the way of life is just ingrained. There’s a lot of good things, like growing up, and doing certain things, but as for practicing your culture, I think it’s like you’re either on the Red Road or you’re drunk. Like it’s not like, because if you go and you drink and then you go to a sweat, “Oh look at them.” And I know when, like, the drum group wasn’t sober and it’s like, “Oh my God.” And it’s unfortunate that I guess in our culture, you have to choose between, “Ok, well if you do this, then you can’t do this.” It makes it difficult to be like, “Ok, well I do want to have a couple drinks but then my Red Road is going to be tainted.” But here, I’m not saying that I’m gonna drink and then go drumming or something, but like, I don’t know what I’m trying to say, but it’s almost like a black and white, either or, and I guess in the city where there’s like so much different things to do, it’s not so much like, maybe not judged, or I don’t know what I’m trying to say. It sounding kind of bad, but (laughing) ... then you see people, they’re like fully into their culture but they don’t like drink or anything and then you see like people like just the other way, and yeah, it’s hard to find balance. But for me, I respect this part but I’d like to be a young person. (Interview #7)

I grew up naively thinking that there was no racism in Canada until I got into Junior high and girls would pick on me and call me a “dirty native” and I thought, “That’s really weird, why would they do that?” A part of it also came from my family, just because my family has a lot of issues with alcohol and drug addictions. My cousin, who was addicted to meth for like seven years, associated her addiction with being Aboriginal, and so she was ashamed to be it and thought that everyone else should be ashamed. She also had a huge influence on my growing up in adolescence....The identity of being a drunk Native on the street, not paying taxes, not working. That’s largely how people viewed it and understood what being Native is. The mindset is largely that like, “We took your land 150 years ago, get over it. That isn’t in your life time, deal with it. it’s over.” Growing up I had a babysitter

²<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/joyce-murray-first-nation-newspaper-apologize-for-sobriety-grad-ad-1.3153724>

that would tell me, “Don’t worry, you’re not like those other Natives, you’re a good Native.” (Interview #2)

I, like for myself where I'm Native, it feels like I'm a target. They think, some people think, that we are vulnerable, weak, just, um, people that push overs because...I guess they think that we have, like, drug problems. The word that's going around about Native people, that we drink a lot, and stuff like that, but it's not true. The main stereotype that I've come across was gas sniffing, especially our Inuit people....(Interview #4)

[Being Aboriginal] was kind of introduced to me as the fact that, you know, “Be careful about consuming alcohol ... “because you’re Metis, and you’re Native and that is really dangerous ... You can’t drink like the other people that you know” is what I was told which I guess it is a good thing to know. (Interview #6)

Theme #2: Family and Community

Subtheme #1: Where do I find Community?

The Mi’kmaq Native Friendship Centre (MNFC) offers programs to approximately 4,000 urban residing Aboriginal peoples, including the Mi’kmaq Child Development Centre, drug and addiction counselling, and upgrading and training programs. It also acts as an important gathering space for networking and cultural activities, including feasts and access to Elders (www.mymnfc.com). For many the MNFC has been a life-saver and where they feel a sense of community.

One participant in the group interview grew up living on a small reserve and depending a lot on the people in her family. She felt connected to each person in some way. She left for the city to pursue career training. Having never been to the city before, the move was a big adjustment. At the time of her interview, her social network was the people at the MNFC and the Parent Support Group who help her keep her connection to her culture and her roots. Her “powwow family” also allows her to feel connected and not feel overwhelmed by her longing to go home. She misses her family but, because she comes from a remote community, it is hard to get home. However, now having lived here, she has goals for while she is in Halifax and she is making contacts making her experience relatively positive because she has gotten involved in the community.

Another participant in the group interview does not think she would have made it as far as she did without the support of the MNFC where the staff helped her to connect to her culture and to make a lot of friends. Now her daughter goes to the Mi’kmaq Child Development Centre. She feels like she has been a part of the community for so long that now her daughter is able to continue to be a part of that community as well.

Interviewee # 1 found support through the Confederacy of Mainland Mi’kmaq Native Counselling Centre housed on the [name of institution] campus.

....like the Native Counselling Unit connected me to a lot of people that I otherwise wouldn't have that I've made life long lasting friendships with. Um, the Friendship Centre's been supportive for sure, helping me with jobs, financially... Just seeing the need there and being able to reach out to them and ask for the support from them if I need it. (Interview #1)

Interviewee # 8 moved to Halifax four years ago. Though dating a “non-Native”, and in university, she finds a feeling of “home” when with other “Native friends”.

When I'm around my Native friends I just feel so like happy and like I don't know. Definitely more comfortable, it's funny too because I didn't know them, like I've known them for about the same amount of time, like my Native friends and my non-Native friends but, like, automatically I just feel like at home no matter where I am with my Native friends. (Interview #8)

A third participant in the group interview identified the issue of feeling homesick and not knowing many other Aboriginal people. As a solution, she decided to immerse herself in the local Aboriginal community. She felt that even though being from another Aboriginal culture, there was still an instantaneous feeling of home. However, being from Labrador, she feels that her best situation is when people from her culture gather together and listen to their own cultural music, eat the traditional foods, and to hear her own accent, which helped her own accent come back.

Coming here was really quite lonely. All my family is in Newfoundland... I go to the Mi'kmaq Children's Centre and the Friendship Centre and just kind of get to know everyone and that is where I met Denise and that's where I met a bunch of other parents so I felt that has really opened me up to just getting to know some people. Also, as well, I grew up with Loretta Saunders and so one of her issues were that she felt homesick, she felt she wasn't in the right culture, and she didn't know like lots of other Native people (inaudible) so I had to start immersing myself in people that are familiar....There is now a Nunatsiavut Society of Halifax, started basically in Loretta's—just with that idea in mind, that connecting Labradoreans so met with them a couple of times, and that feel like, even though it is really comfortable at the MNFC and the Children's Centre and here. But going into a situation with Labradoreans and like they bring their Labradorean cd's, caribou, and their own Inuit bread and stuff...just hearing my accent, and how my accent came back, it was just really nice.

Subtheme #2: A Dispersed or Discontinuous Community

Others have found it more difficult to find a sense of community, specifically an Aboriginal community, due to a number of factors. For example, Interviewee #9 grew up in Kijipuktuk and has family here but felt it is difficult to stay connected in such a large city where people are spread out. Being so dispersed made it difficult to stay in touch and have a sense of being part of a close knit, Aboriginal community.

If you look at the Aboriginal side of it, staying connected. There is only one location in Halifax or the HRM. It's not a close knit community like it should be; that's

probably my only challenge. There's enough buses and crap to get you around so you don't have to worry about that. (Interview #9)

Interviewee #2 is from away and does not have many friends who are Aboriginal but she also does not specifically look for Aboriginal friends. She has been to the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, but she found it challenging to find more of an Aboriginal community due to the dispersion of people throughout areas of Kijipuktuk.

I've found that, like, Native communities are obviously on the outskirts and placed in different areas so being able to be a part of it is just a challenge physically. (Interview #2)

This sentiment is echoed by Interviewee #6.

It's kind of a big city with a whole bunch of people doing their own thing and there is a really huge disconnect. There is not really a huge sense of community, I guess. (Interview #6)

Interviewee #10/16, who is from a community in rural Mi'kma'ki and came to Kijipuktuk to attend university, also expressed the difficulty of connecting with community, though used the MNFC child care services and Tawaak Housing.

I think the most challenging part is not having anybody really in Halifax. I guess back home they're really supportive of me doing this for myself and for [daughter's name]...I guess, well, I have Tawaak housing and the Mi'kmaw daycare there. I guess like I never really been to the Friendship Centre. Like maybe for a party but I haven't used it as...a resource. I know it's there. I don't really know what to say...other than it's tough, I guess like, it helps to have stuff like that in the city, the daycare, and all that other stuff. (Interview #10/16)

Interviewee #4 has made acquaintances but she does not really know them very well and she has a hard time trusting people so it becomes very difficult for her to trust introducing people to her child or inviting people into her home.

...not knowing people is a big thing too because if I don't know them, sure it's an acquaintance but if I don't know who they are, I'm definitely not going to go spend my time with them, a lot of my time, because you know...So, um, it's just I have a lot of trust issues, so having to actually find someone who I can actually trust is a big thing for me. So, it's rare that I would actually go and say, "Let's hang out. Come over to my place," especially introducing them to my children, it's a big thing. (Interview #4)

A group interview participant felt that one of her greatest barriers was the difficulty of making networks of friends and supporters. She did not have a problem making friends while in university, but once they graduated she experienced loneliness because her family was all back home. She felt she had to make her own family here, but switching schools in January made it difficult to meet people. Being a third year, mature student made it even more challenging to connect with people.

Subtheme #3: Not from this community

Though all the women we interviewed identified as Aboriginal, some experienced cultural barriers due to being from different and more distant Aboriginal communities outside of Mi'kma'ki. Interviewee #1, an Inuit, identified her biggest challenge as not having family support here and connection to her own community members, while Interviewee #5 felt there were cultural barriers that separated her from the urban Aboriginal community, while still feeling welcome.

The most challenging is really not having family here and connection to my own peers, like community members. There's a very small Inuit population here so I feel often very homesick and urban centre and growing up in a rural area, having access to living on the land, eating wild meat, and living just a more slow, quiet paced, life style and come here and it's a lot faster. The urban centre can really take a toll on your spirit and you feel a lot of pressure. It's easier to colonize and assimilate to pressures of city living. So access to just like natural spaces, even though I recently got a vehicle, it's easier for me now to be able to leave the city if I want to. But yeah, the biggest challenge is not having enough supports around family, especially this time of year. (Interview #1)

Many people think that because we are all Aboriginal we should really understand one another and feel really connected, but for me there's still a lot of cultural barriers. Just being that, where I'm from a different territory, I'm not from here. I do feel a little tension. I do still feel very welcome here. (Interview #5)

Subtheme #4: Becoming isolated from your home community

On the flip side of the homesickness, some women from remote communities were experiencing increased separation from their home communities having been away so long. Interviewee #8 has been in Kijipuktuk for four years having moved here from a small, Quebec community.

For a while it wasn't that bad, I didn't miss home that much, but for some reason I find that more this year, more than anything. I just feel like I have been away for too long and sometimes I just like dwell on like the people that I miss and I'm just like, "Sigh it's so hard." ...I think it's just been too long. Like, I have lived here for four years and I go home...maybe once every three months or something, and just like all the little babies growing up. And, that is what's made me feel like, "Oh my God, it's been too long!" And just like things changing in the community, and I realized I'm not really a part of that any more. Well I still am, but it's hard when you're away. (Interview #8)

Interviewee #1 talked about those who, like herself, have moved to Halifax from more remote or isolated communities and find that it is harder to go home because it is too expensive or too isolated. When her father died, there was no funding for her to get home for his funeral. When asked, "Is there anything you feel like is missing? Like what would make your experience here better?" Interviewee 10/16 answered:

I don't really know. Well I did have my sister here. Just the “no family issue”. I have some friends and they're good to have in the city too, like school friends. (Interview #10/16)

Subtheme #5: Should I go back to my Community?

One of the major legacies of colonialism was the creation of reserves throughout the 1800s, and the formation of the Department of Indian Affairs under the federal government in the wake of Confederation. With the subsequent writing of the Indian Act in 1876, policies and regulations, including who and who is not considered a “status Indian”, began determining the life choices of Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada.³ One of present day consequences is the growing divide and tension between people living off reserves and those still living on reserves. This is exacerbated by the increase in urban residing population of Aboriginal peoples who identify as Urban Aboriginals, whether they have Band membership or not. As articulated in the following excerpts, family relations, blood quantum, financial resources, and also just getting out of the crab bucket, makes the choice between living on or off reserves difficult for some of the women we interviewed. There is also a “stigma” of not living on reserve.

Say I make this decision to go back [to my reserve] and actively try to enrich the culture and be a part of it and have it be a part of my life. I still feel like there's going to be huge barriers. Just because I've always had this feeling that Native communities are very exclusive, and you can only be a part of them if you have grown or been in them. I feel like this in some ways a side effect of blood quantum. It's based on exclusion. In order for me to try to do that I have to prove that I am somehow related to them, I am somehow their cousin. You can see why this would be a difficult decision. I have to sacrifice this one thing and then push myself in this area of fighting to deserve to be there. It's a challenge and something that I struggle with. (Interview #2)

[On moving back to the reserve] I don't know. Like I thought of it after I had my daughter, but then people get broken into and stuff there, the drugs are bad and, so yes, just unsure at the moment. Like because life seems so much like easier in a way, financially, there, but... Yeah, like lack of opportunity. But with my daughter, like, we have family there, but my family can be a bad influence on me too. And here it's like super expensive to live, and you can never get ahead, unless you're, you know, really rich or... but money's not everything.... Cause living on the reserve, too, like I mean there's always like you know, it's almost like you're judged all the time, like you don't want to go for a jog, because “Who does she think she is, jogging with the water?” Like you know what I mean? Like so, be yourself, and like, I don't know, just feel more comfortable to be proud. I think like that on the reserve. (Interview #7)

I think there's pros and cons, I guess. A lot of times when I think about my children, like I feel like I had a good upbringing, like I grew up on the reserve and I feel like I

³ <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1314977281262/1314977321448>

don't have like anything really negative to say. Like, I felt like it was good, but then sometimes I worry about raising my kids on the reserve. I feel, like, where there's a lot of poverty and so a lot of the kids, I guess, that they might be going to school with are not getting the attention at home, and what kind of influences that would be on my kids? I feel like in the city you don't have so much of that connection with, like, your family and friends and all the people you knew all your life, but at the same time there's like maybe a little bit more opportunity and then less chance of your kids being influence or hurt by other people. (Interview #10/16)

Theme 3: Violence

Subtheme #1: Intergenerational Trauma/Self Destruction

Intergenerational trauma was a pervasive theme throughout the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, one that many residential school survivors brought to light in describing the effects of being separated from their families and culture, as well as abused at the hands of those in power.⁴ We see it reflected in our interviews. One interviewee specifically referenced a Vagina Monologue entitled, “Crooked Braid,” a monologue about an Aboriginal woman who was in an abusive relationship and had been severely beaten by her husband. Her young son witnessed the abuse and grew up to wreak similar abuse on his own wife. The interviewee said this woman's story “helped bring awareness to ending violence against women, but also in my own personal way, I got to release some of that hurt and anger.”

I'd say the biggest barrier for me is isolation, either mentally, physically, whatever it may be. It's tough being alone and carrying, for me, what a legacy of intergenerational trauma so that really created like this challenge for me to reach out to people, to be connected to people.... Rather than blaming my Mom, I just learned to understand, you know, that our family survived a lot of trauma and colonization and I really am just, I'm just like in disbelief at how she is still alive, because I witnessed a lot of, a lot of difficult things that she had had to endure growing up so it's amazing, but...she copes in very destructive ways. (Interview #1)

Interviewee #3's mother died of alcoholism at age 44. She worries about her little girl having to go through the same pain of losing her mom and going through similar experiences of violence she endures in her own relationship.

[On her relationship] A lot of Aboriginal women are abused and become missing because of the situation that I'm in right now. I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know what's going to set him off. I live in fear every day. I don't know how that man's going to react...What's it going to take for him to be satisfied, me dead? That's how I honestly feel right now. I'm fighting so hard with all these things to

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https://www.eneletters.gov.bc.ca/Aboriginal_Healthy_Living/Summer_Solstice_2012/TRC/article

make our life better and it's not enough... I was going to break it off but I love him, and I don't even know if it's real love or if it's what I'm used to, because my dad beat my mom. I don't even know what I want anymore... He's my protection and then he hurts me at the same time. (Interview #3)

I guess the specific situation where I truly felt that I was not safe was when my mother left her husband and he began threatening my life and the life of my son that I was pregnant with at the time. (Interview #14)

And my mom has been impacted by domestic violence, but I guess it's kind of indirect to me, even though it was my father. (Interview #11)

Subtheme #2: Suicide

The suicide rate among Aboriginal youth is disproportionately high compared to non-Aboriginal people in Canada. Health Canada's First Nation and Inuit Division estimates First Nations youth suicide rates to be five to seven times greater than non-Aboriginal Youth, and Inuit youth suicide to be up to eleven per cent greater, depending on the community.⁵

Interviewee #3, a Mi'kmaw woman, lost a cousin to suicide when she was a child as well as a number of men in her life. She described how the suicide rate for women seemed to increase around the late 1990s and early 2000's, whereas it had been predominantly men in the early-mid 1990s. One year she lost twenty-one people to suicide. She herself has attempted suicide eleven times.

It wasn't just Waycobah, it was Eskasoni, Membertou, Shubie because they're all connected everybody is related. "Everyone was so closely knitted that when one person was missing from a group, we all feel it...Lost a lot of friends to suicide and cancer. People follow that pattern, I tried to follow it a couple times, with suicide. I always wonder "Why are these people so successful with their suicide and I'm not? I have to wake up in the hospital, I'm alive...How come God let them stop suffering and I have to keep suffering?" ...I don't have no suicide thinking anymore but on the reserve I do because there's nothing there. There's no life. It's like zombies. You can see that in the city too, people trying to get their next high, but for some reason it's more personal on the reserve because you know those people, you know their everyday struggles, you know what happened to them, you know their stories, so it affects you as well. Losing a lot of people to cancer, losing a lot of people to suicide, murder you know? ... When I was going through all of those emotions, I wanted to become missing. I wanted to become a statistic, I was praying somebody would kill me or murder me because I didn't want to live the way I lived anymore. I was full of shame and guilt and all of that. (Interview #3)

⁵ <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/mental/index-eng.php>

When she made her last suicide attempt she called 911 and asked for help. When she got to the hospital she knew it was their duty to report. She had taken seventeen hits of speed. Hospital staff told her that she had a choice to come with the paramedics or to sleep it off.

I looked at my sister and I said "I could either stay here and sleep it off and you'll find me dead tomorrow, or I could go to the hospital. But, you know what's going to happen at the hospital right?" her kids will be taken away. But they both agreed she should go to the hospital. (Interview #3)

Interviewee #1 grew up in foster care. Four Christmases ago her father took his own life. The mentor at Healing Our Nation helped her to understand her father's passing in a more culturally sensitive way.

It's getting easier with time. Suicide is very stigmatized, and he really helped to reduce those feelings of stigma and just accept it for what it is. He had also lost a family member. A lot of the pain and grief comes from isolation and not understanding fully and he helped to reduce that sense of isolation.

Subtheme #3: A violent environment

A number of examples have already highlighted the violent or abusive environments many of these women experienced growing up, whether within their communities or elsewhere. These two excerpts from Interviews #4 and #14, point specifically to their perception and experience of living in an urban environment.

Interviewee # 14 grew up in Kijipuktuk within a lower income area.

I grew up in Spryfield, there were many situations where I did not feel safe. Staring down the end of a sawed off shotgun while a store you are in is being robbed or leaving a party just before the place gets raided by police were something that was normal when I was growing up. (Interview #14)

Interviewee #4 lives on campus at a Halifax university but comes from a small community in northern Canada. Her fearfulness of living in Kijipuktuk is further exacerbated by feeling she would be targeted as an Aboriginal women.

I find there's like a lot of violent crimes. There's been a few high risk sex offenders, a couple pedophiles which is unheard of back where I'm from. That's a big shock to me. Besides that, it's mainly the violent ones, and um, break and enters.

Honestly, it makes me not want to go outside. Um, I, like for myself, where I'm Native it feels like I'm a target. (Interview #4)

Theme # 4: Systemic Racism/Colonialism

As seen in the quotations cited thus far, there is an inherent fearfulness to participate fully in many activities as Aboriginal women, whether professional, educational, cultural, or recreational. The fearfulness stems from the systemic racism they experience daily and the embedded fear for their personal safety as Aboriginal women in an often unfamiliar urban setting. Therefore, along with the practical issues of finding supportive conditions in an urban setting, some as simple as knowing where to cash a check, their underlying fearfulness of being targeted as Aboriginal women adds a deeper, often invisible barrier in their lives as seen in the previous quote from Interview #4.

Subtheme #1: Law Enforcement/the Justice System

There are many instances that could be cited regarding the treatment of Aboriginal women, and Aboriginal people in general, by the justice system. The call for a special report on missing and murdered and Aboriginal women went unheard by the Harper government, citing that the issue had been extensively studied and that it is a social vs. criminal issue. However, according to Roger Lewis, a former RCMP Officer from the Shubenacadie First Nation, the RCMP has been working since the 1960s to increase community patrolling by First Nations and generally becoming more culturally sensitive throughout the force. He also noted the difference between RCMP, who are under Federal jurisdiction for policing First Nations Communities, and the Provincial and Municipal police forces that are less familiar with community policing and generally less culturally sensitive (personal communication with Trudy Sable, November 13, 2015). The difference in policing practices is an area that is worth further research and discussion. For this report, we are pointing to the personal experience of these Aboriginal women when dealing with law enforcement.

When asked if her Aboriginal identity impacted her relationship with law enforcement, Interviewee #9 responded:

Personally, no, but I have seen it within people in my family that it has had a negative impact—the stereotypical, “Oh yeah, O.k. we’ll deal with them in this manner instead of if the person had identified as being a typical Caucasian person they might have been treated differently. (Interview # 9)

I first started to learn about the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women in school while writing a paper about “Sisters in Spirit.” [Regarding the justice system] The government is not paying attention and that leaves us more vulnerable. If there isn’t any punishment for those committing the crime, that that continues to allow for us to be targeted? That’s really the scary part—where is the justice system? Aboriginal women are very devalued in society. I’ve noticed that to be a widespread problem across Canada. It is surprising that we are not surprised anymore when you hear about another Native girl missing or murdered. (Interview #1)

There’s a lot of people that have been murdered and their murderers were not convicted or they were and only serve a year and a half. You know what I mean? Just another dead Indian. That’s how I’ve felt my whole life. (Interview #3)

Interviewee # 8 was originally in foster care, as were her brothers and sisters. She was the only one of her siblings who ended up living with her mother due to her stubbornness, according to her.

Well, like I mentioned before about what I witnessed as a kid, it's almost like... yeah I'm trying to think of how I want to say this. I feel like nobody really likes the cops....I feel like you have the opportunity to use like other methods or like something like that and you're not, you're just like following like what's...being told to you. I have, I guess, some kind of respect for police but it's just like, the police officers...I don't know how to say that, they're just like any other like RCMP officer kinda thing....I don't know, even like conflict resolutions, it's not like you gotta do what these cops do. You don't gotta taser someone, and like throw them down in hand cuffs but yet they still do it....I think like my experience in the social services system, like even as a kid I knew that was wrong, you can't just separate a family like that and be like okay once a month you can see each other....What was really tough for me was that these were Native people who were doing these social workers, or these police officers that I like despise, weren't white they were Native. Like these were the people from my community, I don't know I found that was really like not right. (Interview #8)

My experience with law enforcement has been mostly bad. When I was pregnant with my son my mother decided to finally leave an abusive relationship and when her ex-husband came trying to bust in my door I was left waiting for over an hour for police to show up even through 911 dispatch could hear him threatening to kill me and my baby. He finally left when he heard the sirens but they did not pursue him and refused to lay charges because I had no proof. Multiple times when my mother attempted to lay charges against him for stalking her and threatening her, they refused. My sister became so scared that he would try to take her that she didn't even want to go to school but the cops would not do anything about it....I don't think that it has been so much my identity as it has been my experiences of an abusive background in a low income area. Although I still tell those closest to me that if I ever go missing, they are to hide the fact that I am Native and to tell the police that I am a white woman so that they will actually search for me. (Interview #14)

In response to a question about her professional opportunities and educational goals, Interviewee #4 reflected:

I've been putting a lot of thought into that lately because um, it seems like when I was a young child, all I wanted to do was be an RCMP officer and that is still the goal as of right now. But it seems that the justice system is failing us, especially Harper—he's not a part of the justice system but he is the government. But it's just sickening, everything that's going on. (Interview #4)

Juxtaposed with the systemic problem she perceived of a failing justice system under the Harper government, Interviewee #4 also provided a poignant example of a positive RCMP experience—a powerful First Nations role model who inspired her dream to join the

RCMP one day. The importance of mentors and role models can be seen laced throughout the interviews. This example is particularly noteworthy since the role model is a First Nations RCMP officer working within a First Nations community, within the justice system she sees as flawed.

The whole RCMP thing was a dream for me ever since I was really young. Um, my father and another woman, they got into a domestic violence dispute, and all throughout living with my father, I felt like the mediator, I felt like the parent, I felt like the person to go in and just split everything up. Um. Just, you know, the responsibility at such a young age was an eye opener. Like, I felt like my childhood was taken from me because of that; I didn't live a regular childhood life. When you see kids playing outside at eight or nine, I didn't do that. I felt, that I had to stay home because I needed to protect the woman that was in the house because my father was very jealous, revengeful, just any little thing would tick him off...there wasn't even no alcohol involved. But, um, when they got into the dispute I can remember there was this RCMP officer; he was Native; he was very big, tall. At the time I was small, so you know... He had these dark brown eyes and dark hair and he had the calmest voice I'd ever heard, and he just came and picked me up and he said it would be okay. Um, and he took me away from all of the bad stuff that was going on, the environment, and he just took everything away. So to have such a big impact on a child's life, that's what I want to do. I want to make somebody's life, so much better. That small little thing that he did made such a big impact on the way I looked at everything, the way I perceived authority figures, just everything from then on was a dream of mine to become an RCMP officer in hopes of one day making some child or some person feel safe, secure.

Subtheme #2: Educational Systems

There are a number of initiatives that universities within Kijipuktuk have undertaken within the last few years to increase support and opportunities for Aboriginal students. These include creating new Native Studies programs, designating spaces and counselling support for Aboriginal students, increasing symbols and art works celebrating Aboriginal culture and artists, employing full time Aboriginal advisors, etc. The Association of Atlantic Universities Working Committee on Aboriginal Education is currently promoting the adoption by universities of the recommendations made in the Truth and Reconciliation Report. The committee, comprised of representatives from all Atlantic Canadian universities, is also developing a strategic action plan for the implementation of these recommendations. As expressed in the interview excerpts below, education is a vision for many Aboriginal women, but the challenges they have faced have been long lasting and painful for many.

Interviewee # 5 was the first one in her family and neighbourhood to go to university. In fact, she thought of education as something only for white people from upper class families, a perception she developed from watching movies. She stated how proud she was and looked forward to going to university, making friends, and being supported in her educational program. However, it soon became evident that the support systems for

assisting her on this new journey were not in place, e.g., Aboriginal advisors and mentors, an Aboriginal student space, and lack of communication about events involving Aboriginal people.

Specifically, as a student at _____ University, she felt anger, disappointment, and isolation when a President's Task Force on the experience of Aboriginal students took months to release. The report was commissioned in the wake of Loretta Saunders murder and contained numerous recommendations for ways [University name] could increase support and services for Aboriginal students. She spoke of having her illusion "shattered" when she "saw a real resistance from the school" to create support systems.

*My whole outlook on this relationship with the school changed because I realized that the vague force that was resisting against all the progress wasn't vague at all. The school doesn't want us here at all. Even when one of our sisters dies, they don't give a f***. They just don't. (Interview # 5)*

In fact, her Aboriginal Support worker had warned her of the colonialism she would face at university, a warning she only intellectually understood until encountering it personally at university.

I didn't realize how degrading and exhausting that interpersonal colonial exchange can be. I didn't see it that way, I just thought, well people treat Native people like shit and that's just the way it is. I never really connected those two things even though I knew what colonialism was. I was quite intelligent, I knew a lot about it, but I didn't know how that would play out interpersonally. (Interview #5)

Interviewee #5 also felt that there was not enough done by her university after a racist altercation with another student, while Interviewee #4 describes an atmosphere of "hate" when she walks around school.

I just would have had someone I could have gone and reported that to and if in some way they took some sort of action that made it clear to me that that is not okay, that's all I really needed. Maybe if they talked to him, maybe if they brought him in so we could talk to each other, maybe if they brought him into a talking circle, I don't know what it would look like but or even if they just reprimanded him and wrote him a "strike one", or if they made him do like cultural training. Basically, any action that was formal. I go to the university and I say "look, this is what happened to me" and they said "this is not okay", and they did something about it. If I could just have it in writing, like in a formal acknowledgement from the university, like "this is not acceptable", that's all I need. By not having anywhere to go with it I feel so invalidated. (Interview #5).

I don't know what is about us that makes people hate us. I don't know. We're not bad people. If anything we're kind, that's all I can say. Because we know so much about what's going on, we've seen a lot, we've just witnessed so much stuff that we can empathize with a lot of people and I just don't know why people hate us. It hurts

actually, and it makes me think that in school, when I'm walking around it feels like people are looking at me, looking at me in that manner. Hate. (Interview #4)

Interviewee # 8 noted the need for a space for Aboriginal students to “hang out” at and get to know each other at her university while Interviewee #1 spoke of the lack of courses dealing with Aboriginal history and world view.

I really just like the company of being around other people that are Native. Like it doesn't even matter what is going on. I really wish that at [University name] there was more like... like even at my high school back home there was just like a room where like all the Natives go hang out. That would be cool if [University name] had that. Cause, it's like you say, you just graduated like we have been going to the same school this whole time and like I know like a couple Natives that go to [University name] but I bet there is a lot more. (Interview #8)

Social work program was really helpful, but at the same time they are resistant to making spaces safer for Aboriginal people. It's really quite shocking and disappointing that [University name] does not have a department of Native studies. They don't have a lot of Native courses available. They don't have any mandatory learning on Aboriginal history, there's no real acknowledgement or admission that we're on Mi'kmaw territory. I want to do an MED but I don't want to, I'm not going to get into a program that I'm not interested in or I don't feel connected to. So, my Masters has to somehow relate to what I'm currently doing, just promoting Aboriginal education. So, I did find one though where my colleague sent me some information on [University name] MED in Aboriginal world view and indigenous education, so it has to be specific to that and the reason why I want to do that is because I've spoken to a professor, she's from my home territory, she's a professor at [University name], she said “You have to make sure whatever program you get into, that it's open and willing enough for you to be able to study what you want to study” because a lot of programs can be very specific around streaming, like I know what stream I want to get into. So I have to find the program that fits me rather than me fitting into a program. (Interview #1)

When asked if she had ever experienced forms of racism in Halifax, Interviewee #9 responded:

Yeah, nothing too terrible but name calling, you know, the whole wagon burner and all that growing up in elementary school, junior high, until we got into the Aboriginal classes. That kind of, um, taught a little bit more about it and then the rest of the class kind of picked up on it that. “Oh, okay. That's what it is. Yup I'm not an outcast; I am Aboriginal; I was here before you.” And, it kind of settled down but I dealt with it quite a bit. (Interview #9)

The following excerpt is particularly poignant and illustrative of the many challenges Aboriginal students face trying to succeed in their educational path, including trying to support family and community members while in university.

And then, this girl from my community, I wish I could've helped her more. I didn't know her that well, but through some of my family, she found out where I lived. She was constantly showing up at my house, drunk as a skunk, at 12 o'clock every day, and I'm like, I have school tomorrow, I'm at work tomorrow. I think she lasted six months. She went to [name of learning centre]. Her teachers were racist, they told her she couldn't do it. They said she was dumb, she didn't have what it took, and for 6 months I was, like, "Just stay there, just keep going, just ignore them, just do it!" She lasted 6-8 months. All she did was drink because she couldn't handle, like, the racism, the pressure, and the lack of support....Now she's back at her community and all her dreams of going to school are gone. She's just resigned to the fact that she's gonna live in the community her whole life. And I'm not saying that you have to move to the city to be successful. You can do a lot of things in your community, but when you want to do something, and in 6 months you just give up because you feel like you can't, then there's a problem. (Interview #13)

Though Interviewee #14 had a relatively positive experience in university, the opposite was true of her brother and sister during their high school grades. Interviewee #14 was in custody of her own brother and sister during these years.

My experience with post-secondary has been a bit better, the registrar's office not only knew how to process my paperwork but was also on a first name basis with the person who provided my funding. Professors not only supported me in guiding my studies to look at how the different issues impacted First Nations but would also encourage me to question what was being taught and to seek out the education that fit me best....However my experience with the high school that my brother, and then later my sister, attempted to take Mi'kmaw studies at was absolutely infuriating. My brother refused to continue attending because he always felt like the teacher would put him on the spot expecting him to be able to speak about all things Native. When my sister attended this class she became so offended by the teacher's racist attitude that she reported it to the school board. (Interview #14).

Many Aboriginal students with Band membership receive tuition through their Band offices. This funding has its own regulations regarding the students' choice of educational program and institutions, as well as changes in program and failure to complete courses. There is also a cap on the funding they can give, as seen in Interview #9.

For the most part, yeah, I have my tuition paid for by the [Name of Band] and, if it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be back in school....they give me a minimal living allowance, it doesn't make ends meet but it's a start....with my school funding barely, I get \$800 a month and my rent is \$800 a month, that doesn't make up for the rest of my bills and my groceries, transportation etc. (Interview #9)

Interviewee #4 describes having her student loan reduced once the funding institution learned she was First Nations. Up until then, she did not feel financially insecure.

I didn't [feel financially insecure, ed.] until the other day when I finally got my student loan. And, it was very hard because it seemed like only after I told them that I was Native that they took all the money and said, "You know what? You don't need it." ...My initial was nine grand, so I go in and I asked them, "Well is it okay if I have my funding from my status?" And they're like, "Oh yeah, you know, it's no problem; you have a high need because of your two kids so your numbers won't change." So I was like, "Oh perfect."

So I went to them, and the next day as soon as I put it up, the document that was stating that I was being funded, the next day it went down to three grand, so that would be enough to take care of tuition and that's it. So, I ended up getting \$600 and they kept giving me the run around, and it's like, "I'm only getting \$600 dollars a month. I have two kids. How do you expect me to have day care?" And, I missed a lot of school because of that because I didn't have enough money to give them, so it was just really hard and, like, I confronted them about that. I was, like, ever since I told you that I was Native, you guys haven't been giving me anything; you've been giving me the run around, talking to me very ignorant. And, I said, "Is this the way that you treat everybody? because I highly doubt you'd treat a regular person originally from Halifax that way. I don't mean to be racist, but a white person, I don't think you would treat them like that. I have a few friends that are getting students loans and they've never had any issues. Why am I getting issues? Is it because I'm Native? Ever since I've told you that I was, you've been giving me troubles. They said, "No it's not because of that," and I said, "Well it kind of seems like it. Any other person would get the full amount with two kids." And, I said, "If this is the case then, um, I won't be going to school; I'll have to drop out."

So, I went to the appeal board and they denied it and I told them that I was going to go to my status and tell them what was going on and see if they could help me out with it, not in terms of finances, just in terms of public awareness, to see if I could get some people behind me to say this isn't fair, the way they're treating her isn't fair. But, I had to go to the higher appeal board and I got it fixed because I had all the documentation needed to state that this isn't enough to take care of my kids and to live comfortably while going to school. And, I said a student, in general, shouldn't have to worry about finances, where they're going to live, how they're going to pay for daycare, if they're going to eat the next day. You know, they shouldn't have to worry about that even for somebody with kids. Obviously I've sacrificed a lot and when it came down to it. I wouldn't eat so that my children could have food. So, hard times but I made it through and I did get the money. (Interview #4)

The following participant had a particularly negative experience within her own Band regarding her student loans. She was two credits away from a Bachelor of Science degree, but when she failed two courses, the Band would no longer pay for her education, leaving her with a \$10,000 tuition payment. Though able to pay off half of the loan through a job offered by one of her professors, she still owed \$5,000. She spent years trying to negotiate with her Band to work something out but was unsuccessful and consequently began having suicidal thoughts. She believes this resistance was political and fueled by jealousy of her intelligence and success from other community officers. Specifically, she felt the

welfare officer didn't like seeing her get ahead, so she tried to fire her, but fortunately was rehired by the Chief.

*Instead of [continuing] to fight for what was right for me, I just became a drug and alcohol addict. I gave up. Three of four years of fighting this and I'm not getting anywhere, I only need two courses. The hell with it, they want me to be an alcoholic, I'll be a f**** alcoholic then, let's see how they like me now... I made my suicide attempts, they [the band] was sending flowers to my hospital room and apologizing, giving me free jobs, that I didn't have to go to work and they'd give me my paycheque, give me enough hours for unemployment then that stopped. That's why I went to Alberta, to try to make money to try to pay off that tuition. That was two years ago and that's why I'm back in Halifax to finally pay off that tuition. (Interview #3)*

Aboriginal women without Band membership often have to seek student loans. For instance, Interviewee #6 self-identified as Metis. She came to Kijipuktuk from a rural area to attend SMU. Unable to pay off her student loans, she dropped out and went to work to support herself.

Tuition has been very challenging. Affordable education is really awful or basically non-existent, unless you have a [???? inaudible] which I do not.....I don't feel like it is this evil thing out to get me or anything, but like it could be a little bit easier to exist without some sort of barriers and problems. (Interview #6)

Interviewee #2, on the other hand, had a positive experience at [University name] citing her professors, the Career Centre, and the Women's Employment Outreach as all supportive.

Um, university, as far as education, I loved it. I still love it, and I miss it. Now that I've graduated I have formed really close relationships with my professors and um, I wouldn't change...any of it....I feel like I do have support for sure, especially through the Career Centre here at [University name]. Um, so that's cool, and like I've also gone to Women's Employment Outreach as well. And they're pretty cool, and they are supportive and they have like a goal written out for you and they want to work with you until you achieve that goal... (Interview # 2).

Interviewee #1 also felt being in university was a major support to her coming to Halifax, and helped her understand her relationship to her mother by learning about the process of colonization and trauma.

Like, education has been, and I have been interviewed by [name of University] before about how like my career has evolved since _____Program, to actually getting a degree, and I talked about how school really helped me, 1) about my culture because that was really stripped from me growing up and, 2) how to learn about myself and self-discovery and the process and the steps to how to decolonize if I wanted to. Even though that process is very difficult, at least I have kind of a

pathway on how to go about doing that. Education's really like a key to helping you rethink and clearly think about things in a different way and really just try to empower yourself. So education's been, um, very helpful. And then the people in that environment, like I really look up to a couple of mentors that were along my educational journey. So I did practicum at Healing our Nations, I really connected with somebody there and then the [Program] director was really helpful. Just any Aboriginal mentors, like role models, in the school system... or where ever. There's a real need for us to feel connected and belong to a sense of community here so that's been really helpful. (Interview #1)

Theme # 5: Social Networks/Supports

In 2014, L. Jane McMillan, PhD, St. Francis Xavier University, and Pamela Glode-Desrochers Executive Director of Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre Halifax, Nova Scotia produced a comprehensive UAKN report entitled, *Urban Aboriginal Wellbeing, Wellness and Justice: A Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre Needs Assessment Study for Creating a Collaborative Indigenous Mental Resiliency, Addictions and Justice Strategy*. The report details a number of needs and recommendations for support services. It can be accessed by visiting the UAKN website, uakn.org.

For this research, we will draw from the interviews and group discussion, along with the research Salina undertook to assess the effectiveness of a site called "211 Nova Scotia," a site to assist users to "easily and quickly" find community and social services they need. We will look at both the barriers and positive experiences these women face in accessing the services and networks they need.

Subtheme #1: Communication of Information

The Halifax telephone and online service, 211 Nova Scotia, is one way women can connect to community and social services. However, in her investigation into the site, Salina found the service was quite limited in what information was available for urban residing Aboriginal peoples. For example, Tawaak Housing Association and the Mi'kmaw Legal Support Network do not appear to have been included on the site. The site has supports listed under "Aboriginal" for education and employment services through the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. Ironically, there is very little offered for adults who do not have children, do not have a criminal record, do not have addictions, or do not have AIDS. This lack of information can give the impression that there is no help available for people not in these categories. As Salina notes:

It is very frustrating to know that key supports, which we have right here in the HRM such as housing, victim support workers, and mental health support workers, have not been included on websites such as 211 Nova Scotia. With the number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada it is, in fact, shocking to see that there is so little visibility of the supports available.

Interviewee #9 generally found support pretty easily accessible but identified information about different programs and supports as a barrier, as well as the frequency with which

these programs change because of changes in funding availability. She also noted the limited access to the MNFC in the evenings and weekends.

...there's certain circumstances, say the Friendship Centre. They are only open Monday to Friday and they close every day at five o'clock, so if it is later in the evening or if something comes up over the weekend that you need help with for, say Monday, you can't get in contact with anybody. It's closed. (Interview #9)

Interviewee #3 was dealing with very difficult circumstances when she arrived in Kijipuktuk,

Housing is a challenge here. When I first arrived to the city I was homeless. I just came with my suitcase and hope. Within six days they got me into the Native housing [Tawaak], and I had lost my [youngest] child to foster care. The other two are with their Dad, in [name of community] on the reserve. It's been a struggle trying to clean up my life and my addiction issues and the violence that I have experienced at home . . . When I finally came to the city I had some hope that I'll get better services and better opportunities to help me, especially in the mental health department because, when I had my baby last year on Christmas eve, I had postpartum and that triggered a lot of the suicide attempts. [Interview #3].

For Interviewee #1, the experience was relatively positive, finding support services that were not available to her before coming to Kijipuktuk.

Probably like, the other side of being in an urban centre is you have access to so much more services and programs. So that's the plus side of it, is that I was able to access support services and programs like the Food Bank if I needed to. Like DAL has one when I was in need before. And just knowing more of what's available out there. So the DAL, like the Native Counselling Unit, connected me to a lot of people that I otherwise wouldn't have, that I've made life long lasting friendships with. Um, the Friendship Centre's been supportive for sure, helping me with jobs, financially. I know a couple years back we [inaudible].... Just seeing the need there and being able to reach out to them and ask for the support from them if I need it. (Interview #1)

Interviewee #13 described how five people from her family attempted to relocate to the city but gave up. Though, as a city dweller, she took many services and networks for granted, but family members voiced the following causes for giving up.

"I don't know where to go for a void cheque." "I don't know where my bank is." "I don't know where to catch a bus. I don't even know how to look that up. I don't know where to get bus tickets if I did want to catch a bus." (Interview #13)

Subtheme #2: Transportation

As illustrated in the previous quotation, learning the bus system is an obstacle for many newcomers as is general reliance on public transportation

Now I am here because it is easier to work and have money than it is over there [referring to University] especially when I don't drive. (Interview #6)

As a student who is a single parent there are many barriers, I do not have a license and so I have to rely on a bus which only runs every hour. (Interview #14).

Additionally, for some women, it is also a source of fear to use public transportation, particularly at night.

The biggest barrier for me is transportation. I don't have resources, and I don't have a lot of money, so I struggle to actually go to things. I don't have a car; I can't drive. I have to use public transit, which is very dangerous too. If an event is late and I don't have a drive back, I can't go because I'm not going to be bussing that late. So that's the biggest barrier for me, I can't get to places so I can't access my network as readily as I like to. (Interview # 5).

Subtheme # 3: Cultural Activities

The interviews have revealed how cultural activities are important to build both a strong sense of identity and community for a number of these women. For some, it is re-learning or learning traditional cultural practices for the first time, including their language. For others, it is finding and participating in cultural activities to support them, or for them to offer back what they know about their culture to others. For women from distant communities, it can be a way to be reminded of family and traditional values.

Barriers to participating in cultural activities are the ability to fit cultural activities into their schedule, transportation to and from activities and events, the lack of activities outside of working and school hours, the availability of different cultural activities, as well as access to Elders and traditional knowledge within the city. As noted in our breakdown on page ten, nine of the women we interviewed are mothers, with a total of thirteen children between them averaging six years of age.

Interviewee #9 has participated in sweats in Hammond's Plains and in Dartmouth when the opportunity arose and she had the free time to do them, but she does not have as much time anymore. She would love to get involved in drumming again but it conflicts with her school schedule and her home schedule, plus travel becomes an issue when drumming in less accessible places.

I have participated in sweats in Hammond's Plains and in Dartmouth when the opportunity arose and I had the free time to do them. Not so much any more. I would like to be able to go back to them. Drumming I would love to get involved in that again, but the same thing, it conflicts with my school schedule and my home schedule. And, when they do have drumming in other places, it's a travel problem sometimes when I don't have a vehicle or I have kids or I have to go and do other things with my family and I just don't get there cause it's not at the right times. (Interview #9)

Interviewee #14 finds it more difficult to find time to participate in cultural activities now that she has returned to school. She no longer feels she has the free time to be able to visit with Elders for advice because many live outside of the city. The school also does not yet have the space to be able to smudge unless she stands out on the sidewalk where people

will stare or ask questions and make her feel very uncomfortable. A number of universities throughout Canada have made spaces for Aboriginal students to have smudges, sweats, and other ceremonies within their own specially designed centres, but other universities have not.

... as a student I don't always have the time to access these networks because I am too busy taking care of my son and my home and keeping up on studying. And it isn't always the easiest to pay for a babysitter on a student budget. There are many opportunities which I have been able to pursue, but there are still many opportunities, which I do not have the support to pursue. Having a son, and an ex-husband who only takes him on every second weekend, means that I will never be able to do a term abroad even though there have been a number of opportunities. And there are many classes which are in the evenings that I am unable to attend because it is not possible for me to find a sitter for every evening for an entire term and I don't think I could go an entire term only seeing my son in the mornings before school. As for opportunities within the community, time has been a large barrier because I take on a full course load which means lots of time spent studying and writing. However, my family lives very close and see each other all the time. ...When time allows, I drum with the [name of drum group] and I follow the powwow trail when I can. In the summer I collect the sacred medicines that grow in the area. One particular cultural practice that I wish I had more access to would be a sweat. (Interview #14).

Interviewee #4 believes that despite access to non-cultural supports and services in the city, there is a need for more cultural activities representing the variety of cultures that are in Kijipuktuk. Although this is Mi'kmaw territory there are many other cultures that live in the city, and they are looking for ways to connect culturally. The participant stated her own need for the ability to learn language and to start drumming and dancing as examples.

Interviewee #3 identified an important function of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre would be the ability for their members to obtain traditional foods similar to how the food bank functions. She stated that service is not available. However, in mid-November, 2015, the MNFC sponsored a traditional moose hunt in Cape Breton. The MNFC both hosted a community feast from the moose meat brought back, and gave away 1,200 pounds of moose meat to community members. They hope to do the same in the coming years.

Interviewee #10/16 discussed trying to bring some of her language and culture from her home community, and the challenges she faced transferring that to the urban setting.

I think like, when I go home I go sweat with my sister. There's nothing like that here, like even the language here. Like I tried to bring stuff back from my Dads there when my niece was in immersion. I just, like, whatever we had at the house, I'd just like bring it here so I could teach [daughter] that but I can't. It's hard trying to teach your daughter a language when it's not spoken to her like how it would be at home. It's hard to bring that here too. Try to bring everything from the community to here, I don't know. Cause it's like, it's so easily lost. Like we can go home and she can be,

like, my Dad or whatever, we can like just do all that stuff with her. But then when we come here, it's like challenging for me to do it for her to be...she can't speak. Like, even books; like you can't even read a book to her because like if I wanted to read a book to [daughter] in Mi'kmaw or whatever, I'd have to go and like find, like, what a bear is and go and put the word in the book there. And you'd have to do that, I think, for a lot of stuff if you want her to be fluent. That's a lot of work for my daughter to speak her language, I guess. I try, but I find it so easily lost like that. (Interview #10/16)

Interviewee #8 expressed how her language was important to connecting her to her culture. Though she is from Mi'kma'ki, her community is not strong in language retention. In Kjipuktuk, she felt she had greater access to learning the Mi'kmaw language due to people that she met in Halifax who are from other Mi'kmaw communities.

I have a couple really good friends from [name of community] and in [name of community] they are more fluent at Mi'kmaw than definitely in [Interviewee's home community] and so I like that I have that here, you know...even more so than I would at home, someone to teach me Mi'kmaw. And I feel like there is a lot here that, if I wanted to, I could get involved with. I really just like the company of being around other people that are Native. Like it doesn't even matter what is going on. (Interview #8)

Interviewee #8 also spoke of her spirituality as important to her, and trying to find that within Kjipuktuk.

I think for a little bit of my life I was like pretty involved in the church but I really feel like I had more to do with like, I'm like probably more spiritual like back home. I find that everyone is pretty spiritual and like, you know, everyone smudges and it's like it's pretty common. And, just like I don't know... just kinda like looking for something similar to that and that's what like kinda drew me to, like, go to church and you know those friends who are like.... [I] feel like at least like if your Native you always believe in something. But, like, let's say that my boyfriend—and he's white and just believed in nothing—like I can't believe in nothing. I feel empowered by ancestors if I pray like if I'm really having a hard time.... (Interview #8)

Interviewee #11 identified the ability to smudge as something which helps when having a bad day or feeling stressed. Although she does not know how to smudge, she still feels comforted by the smell any time that she enters the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre.

Theme #5: Resiliency and Integrity

We are concluding our report with the theme “Resiliency and Integrity” to honour and recognize the strength and determination of many of these women who have found pathways through the many barriers they have encountered. Many have successfully drawn on both their internal resources and external resources, when available to them.

And my mom has been impacted by domestic violence, but I guess it's kind of indirect to me, even though it was my father. But I grew up around so many strong Native women and I had my grandmother with seven kids and kind of worries of our own 'cause my grandfather was in the Navy. And then my mom raising three kids by herself on a very limited income. And just seeing my aunts and my cousins, seeing how they grew up, hearing stories about my grandmother. My grandmother was almost taken into the residential schools. They knew the Indian agents were coming and they told her, do you want to go to the Indian School? She said, "No." "Then go hide." And she hid up in the rafters and watched them come to the door, and say, "No, there's no kids here." I got to hear about her stories and her living in Halifax and meeting my grandfather, and so that was really cool. (Interview #11)

Well I dropped out of high school when I was pregnant for my son. Complications prevented me from attending classes, but a few months after my son was born I went to the Kijipuktuk Aboriginal College to complete my G.E.D. and then went on to the NSCC's adult learning program to try to upgrade to high school equivalency. When I took custody of my brother and sister I felt the need to drop out so that I could go back to work. I spent a few months working at a cleaning company until I found a position at a Dollar store where I worked until health complications made standing for long hours almost impossible. I was lucky to somehow get a summer internship working at SMU's Business Development Centre on the First Nations business team. What started as a two month intern position turned into a three year full time job where I gained valuable experience and a passion for the different policy issues that are faced by First Nations communities. Once I realized that I would never be more than the assistant that does not get formally recognized, and never able to truly influence changes, I decided to return to school. Somehow within two weeks I went from being an employee to being fully enrolled in University. (Interview #14)

Interviewee #2 made friends at university but chose to not succumb to the social pressure to participate in a lot of partying. Instead, she became more involved in her hobby and the people who she met through her participation in it. In making this choice, she found people who wanted to help her to be better, healthier, and stronger.

I know that your culture is important, and I feel that it is important to [me], but I feel that it is also ancillary to [me]. So when I think about my life I think about my goals, I think about things that I want to do, and that's how I identify myself. So if I were to [identify myself as Aboriginal] I would like to do that in the way that my goals are tied to making life for Aboriginal people better. (Interview #2)

Similarly, Interviewee #11 and Interviewee #1 found strength and life interests through acting and joining circus training.

Yeah, I got into acting when I was 14, and I did an acting class I think it was 8 weeks, and during that we were taught the logistics of acting. And then at the end of it, we had taken Romeo & Juliet, and kind of translated it into modern language, and added a few fun things in there. The director had booked the [theatre name], and we performed for our family. That was really cool. And then fast-forward a few

years later—I was 18 or 19—it was the first year that the [name of theatre group] were in _____, and my mom's work, the _____ Family Healing Centre, had been the recipient of the ticket money. And so, it was the same director from that play that I had done when I was 14...She's directing it and my work is the recipient of the money from the tickets....At first I thought it was another acting opportunity, and then I fell in love with it. And so my mom is like, well let's learn about it. So we sat down in front of the computer and spent probably 3 hours in front of the computer on YouTube, just looking up people's videos that they had uploaded. And so, last weekend was my fourth year doing the _____. (Interview #11)

Despite the conflicted feelings we have heard in some of the interviews about living in one's home community, the following interviews reflect the aspiration to give back in recognition of the trauma so many in their communities have suffered and survived.

Yeah, I mean, in this job I really come to just gain experience what the needs and services are for Aboriginal youth. Like, for me, what's helped me succeed is education, so I want to really, um, promote that for other youth who are struggling. I want to do my Masters of Education, but I'm definitely noticing a lack in programs out there that are specific. My life path just continually leads me to contribution in some way to my community so I want to keep doing that. I have to believe in what I'm doing to keep doing what I am doing... I wish I could do more for my community. For me, it comes down to connecting us within our communities and trying to find support within that network that we've built ... As I continued to do my degree, I really focused on our traditional approaches of helping and healing and that to me is the answer. Cultural recovering, relearning our ways to empower ourselves. I think that's why we want to remind ourselves of our strength, our capacity to survive. (Interview #1)

My ultimate goal is to open a recovery house on the reserve. So I want to deal with my addictions and issues and then I want to open a recovery house on the reserve. Where people go to sweats in the back and learn how to be productive by cutting wood, splitting wood, going in the woods, nature walks... I already have ideas of how I'm going to do it, I just need supports and grants....When I was an addict I was shunned. Even though they were doing worse off than me they were like "no you get away, you gotta get out of here, you're a trouble maker" stuff like that. Because I became homeless and I came here, and everybody is shutting their doors on me, I realized I need to give back somehow when I get better and give all those Native people that got the door slammed in their face some hope and some help because I want to help my people. (Interview #3)

Interviewee #5 felt that if you're Aboriginal, you've got a shared experience and a shared suffering, a collective suffering. So it's important to be around those people, not only to talk about it and get it off your chest but also it gives you the strength to resist it. It's a way of decolonizing yourself, a way of resisting that system of how we organize our society. That's why it's important to her. By participating in our gatherings and just hanging out with native people, it just reminds her that we're still here and we don't have to be like

everybody else, because she doesn't want to be like everybody else, she wants to be native. (Interview #1)

I'm a national aboriginal youth 4Rs advisor, so basically I work with the [name of institution] and the 4Rs movement and I'm kind of like an intersection between those two things because the 4Rs is kind of a collaboration between 14 different organizations and I work with the [name of institution]. Basically I advise on a national level about reconciliation and what the role of the [name of institution] will be in servicing Aboriginal women and girls...I also created a toolkit for the which is distributed nationally for ___Space Circle, which is a youth program for Aboriginal girls in urban settings, I guess it could be for anybody. I was nominated for the UN Women's Advisory Council as a Canadian representative, which is kind of cool. I'm one of the youngest nominees that was kind of neat. I'm part of Leaders of Today, which is a youth organization that works with the provincial government on different issues, right now we're kind of focusing on health... my focus is culturally appropriate care, and how to improve access to health care for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people, but also how to make that care more appropriate and how to make it more accessible to us. I also like to focus on mental health for First Nations people and how we have very different needs of treatment. I'm involved a lot at the Friendship Centre, I was involved in the [title] Project, that's kind of cool. Sounds pretty fancy. Got a couple scholarships this year, I don't really know what they're called. (Interview #5)

Interviewee # 14 adds a beautiful articulation of the larger, community aspect of resiliency.

The most important part about these networks is the support that we provide to each other, there is always someone that you know you can call when you need help of any kind. If there is something that you would really like to learn about, there is often someone within the community who can teach you or introduce you to someone who can. (Interview #14)

SUMMARY

Though a relatively small representation of the large, urban-residing Aboriginal population living in Kjiptuk,⁶ an amazing array of issues, variations of experience, and layers of complexity have been articulated, while many are still unexplored and unsaid. Thus, this report is meant to help with the unravelling the many crossroads and intersections these women literally and metaphorically experience within their lives. However, we have also attempted to connect patterns of resilience and vulnerability in young urban Aboriginal women's narratives in Kjiptuk (Halifax), as our title has implied.

⁶ 5,877 Aboriginal people are estimated to live in Kjiptuk (<http://novascotia.ca/abor/aboriginal-people/demographics/>)

One of the common grounds we see between the women we interviewed are the dichotomies they have to bridge in their everyday existence—urban-rural; raised in a community/not from a community; from Mi'kma'ki/from away; status/not status; look Aboriginal/look white. Plus, a major difference is that many are considered as the fiduciary responsibility under the Indian Act, something no other Canadian citizen has as a distinction when declaring their identity. These dichotomies create an extra layer of uncertainty about how to interact, how to simply be a person, without being questioned about who they are as the original inhabitants of this landscape.

Second, it is evident from these interviews that the women we interviewed have grown up within a culture of fearfulness. This culture has a short existence given the 13,000 years of their ancestral lineage, but it has taken a toll. The culture of fearfulness we are presenting has well-developed public narratives and statistics to remind Aboriginal women daily of their vulnerability as Aboriginal women. This public narrative creates a negative, self-reinforcing loop, a constant reminder of who they are by social determination.

It is also evident that there are systemic changes that need to be made in many sectors of Canadian society, including education and law enforcement. What we see is a patchwork of services and positive actions that could be re-configured to be a more coherent and easily accessible system. Some of the women were fortunate enough to benefit from counselling services, positive role models, career centres, the MNFC, etc., while others were more isolated from their families and communities, and fearful about venturing out, particularly with the consciousness that they are Aboriginal women. Those with children feel even more vulnerable due to lack of support, both institutional and if living away from their home communities.

However, it is equally important to find and strengthen the strands of support and resiliency these young Aboriginal women have found, and learn from their experience and strength. They have much to teach if we can listen to their life stories and experiences. It is evident that strong role models, accessible and sensitive support systems (Healing our Nations, the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, CMM's Native Education Counselling Unit, the Women's Career Centre, to mention a few from our interviews), have all impacted a number of these women in significant ways, some literally lifesaving. Perhaps more important is their cultural identities and supports, as seen in the discussion about cultural activities (pp.36-39) that include access to Elders and healing ceremonies, feeling empowered to learn how their culture did shape history and make significant contributions, and that their traditions can help heal the suffering. These are resources that can be strengthened in universities, social services, and generally honoured in Canadian society. This is the narrative that needs to be told.

Recommendation for moving forward.

Due to the richness of themes and experiences that have emerged from these interview, we recommend that this initial research be expanded upon and involve a number of scholars and experts (particularly Aboriginal) from different disciplines looking through different lenses at these and other interviews. Our literature review already shows the significant ground work that has been established, and can be built upon, regarding the experiences of

Aboriginal women in Canadian society. However, with an inter-disciplinary effort, more can be done in terms of looking at the multitude of factors that influence these women's lives such as motherhood, cultural communities, foster care experiences, family support, funding and institutional support, along with many other factors that influence these women and their opportunities to live meaningful lives. Doing so will provide a more in-depth, comprehensive, and cross-cutting understanding built on first-hand experience of Aboriginal women and the strengths that they have found to both survive and succeed within a culture of fearfulness.

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