

# INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND FAMILY VIOLENCE: *Changing the conversation*

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NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE  
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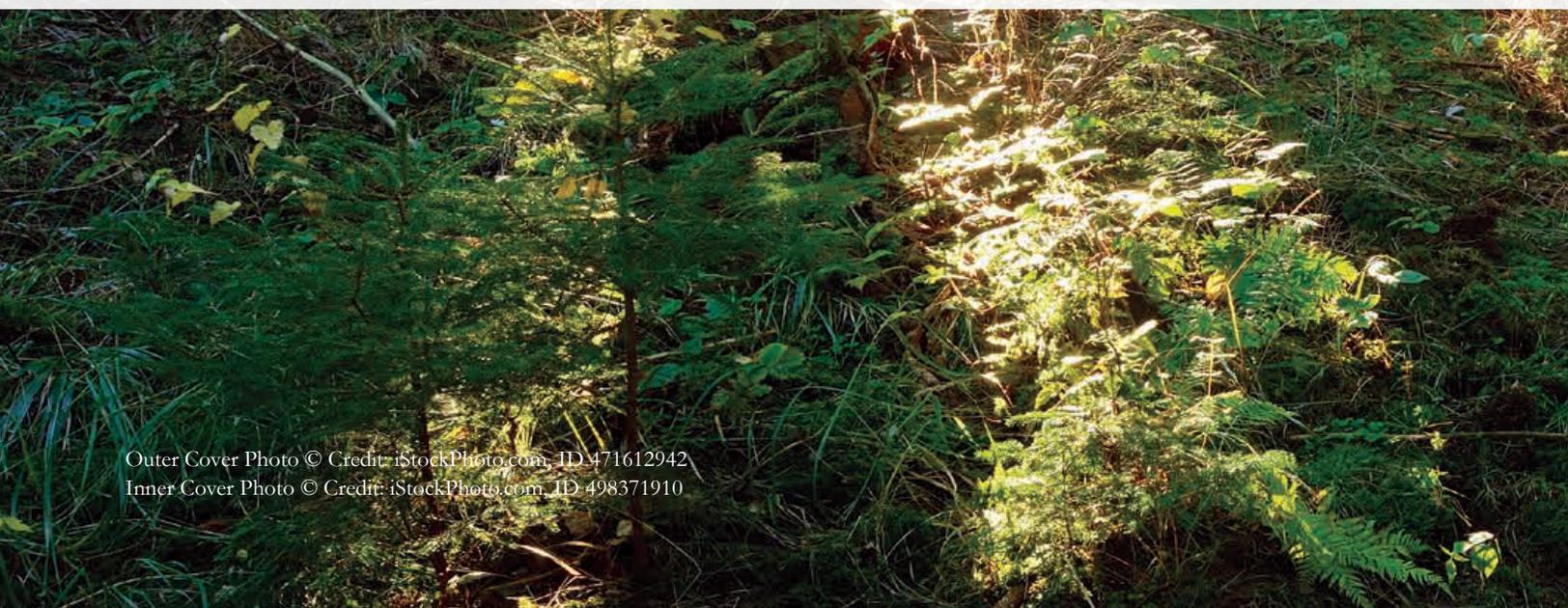
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# ABSTRACT

In settler colonial nations like Canada, violence is a reality that scholars, activists and communities continue to grapple with in a diversity of ways. Over the past several decades, efforts to understand and address violence have produced a significant body of literature, policy, and community dialogue on what has become known as ‘Indigenous family violence’ or Indigenous ‘intimate partner violence.’ During this same time period, advocates and scholars have developed a deepened understanding of a range of other kinds of violence related to colonization in Canada, including the historic violence of dispossession, residential school violence, state violence, missing and murdered women and girls, intergenerational abuse, and elder abuse. Across the literature, violence has been found to be a key determinant of health for Indigenous people and communities.

In this paper, the Canadian literature on Indigenous family violence over a fifteen year period (2000-2015) is critically analyzed using a decolonial lens. First, an introduction to Indigenous understandings of kinship is provided, followed by a discussion of the community and advocacy roots of Indigenous anti-violence efforts. The main body of the paper then provides a critical engagement with dominant frameworks and discourses of ‘family violence’ in the context of ongoing

colonization and Indigenous resurgence, identifying thematic trends in how Indigenous families and family violence are constructed and understood. Particular attention is given to the ways in which violence is framed in relation to colonization and Canadian state policies and practices, particularly in the areas of health and justice. Third, the paper brings community voices into conversation with the Indigenous family violence literature to illuminate connections, gaps and future directions. Finally, the authors refocus conversations on ‘family violence’ using a decolonial social determinants framework in order to redefine ‘family’ and ‘violence’ to reflect the diverse realities of Indigenous families, including those who are marginalized within their own communities, such as Two-Spirit and transgender people. A personal and collective commitment to decolonization is advocated as imperative for ending violence in settler colonial contexts.



# 1.0 INTRODUCTION



In our anti-violence and community-building work over the years, we have noticed that as the issue of violence against Indigenous people has become taken up in public discourse, violence within Indigenous<sup>1</sup> families has been increasingly targeted as being to blame. Rather than making visible intersections of ongoing state neglect, racism, sexism, homophobia and other expressions of colonialism in contributing to overwhelming realities of physical and sexual violence, public discourse naturalizes violence within Indigenous families and blames Indigenous people. These discourses rely on and reproduce gendered colonial stereotypes about Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women. We have seen family violence invoked even when Indigenous peoples' successes or achievements are being celebrated, which might be understood as a continuation of colonial discourses of Indigenous peoples as in need of 'saving from themselves.'<sup>2</sup> Additionally, as discourses of missing and murdered women have increasingly gained public visibility, so too has

the assumption that Indigenous families, including women and girls, themselves are to blame. This is evident in the interest the Canadian government demonstrates in researching the trafficking of Indigenous girls by their own family members (Boyer & Kampouris, 2014), as well as charging the cousin of Tina Fontaine with human trafficking in the wake of her death,<sup>3</sup> while the killer roams free.

Numerous Indigenous women have addressed the way sexist and racist colonial representations of Indigenous people as savages (i.e. Indigenous men as inherently violent and Indigenous women as subservient and sexually deviant) function to naturalize violence and actively create conditions of silence that make it difficult to speak out about violence within families. For example, in her submission to the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba in 1991, Métis scholar Emma LaRocque spoke about these demeaning colonial images and the difficulties Indigenous people face in addressing the issue of family violence: "I know we have shied

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Indigenous peoples' are used in this discussion paper to refer inclusively to First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal peoples' are used when reflected in the literature under discussion. When possible, culturally specific names are used.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Billy-Ray Belcourt's refusal of the media representation of him as a victim of family violence, when he had actually named systemic violence and racism: <https://nakinisowin.wordpress.com/2015/11/24/dear-media-i-am-more-than-just-violence/>

<sup>3</sup> For media coverage of Tina Fontaine's death and the arrest of her cousin, see <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/tina-fontaine-s-cousin-i-never-made-anybody-work-for-me-1.3115483>

away from dealing with the issue partly because we had to fend off racism and stereotypes” (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba [AJIM], 1999, n.p.).

As scholars and activists using a decolonial approach, we have to question what the dominant discourse produced in literature on family violence pushes out of view. Our interest in examining understandings of family violence, and current efforts to end violence amongst Indigenous family members, emerges within our broader concerns with decolonization, Indigenous self-determination and ending violence in all forms.

The purpose of this discussion paper on Indigenous communities and family violence is to do the following:

1. critically engage with dominant frameworks and discourses around ‘family violence’ in the context of ongoing colonialism and Indigenous resurgence;
2. bring community voices into conversation with existing literature on ‘Aboriginal family violence’ to illuminate connections, gaps, and future directions; and
3. refocus conversations about ‘family violence’ using a decolonial social determinants framework, in order to redefine ‘family’ and ‘violence’ to reflect the diverse realities of all Indigenous people, including those who are marginalized within their own communities (ie. LGBTQ2S<sup>4</sup> people and youth).

In this paper, we first outline our methodology for conducting this study and then discuss the context in which discourses of Indigenous family violence have emerged in Canada, including processes of colonization, resistance to widespread violence against Indigenous women and girls, and the prevalence of family violence. Following this introduction, we spend the bulk of the paper analyzing how ‘Indigenous family violence’ has been framed in Canadian literature over the past 15 years. Using discourse analysis, we examine general trends in how family violence is understood, and the way the literature views gender, causes of violence, the role of colonization, normalization of violence, definitions of family, the relationship between violence and health, geographic considerations, and the diverse range of solutions to family violence that are identified in the literature. We end the paper by highlighting approaches beyond the formal literature, discussing a range of community-led solutions to violence and providing six key principles to inform future Indigenous family violence initiatives rooted in Indigenous self-determination and decolonization.

## 1.1 Methodology

The majority of this paper examines how family violence is currently framed, through a literature search in Academic Search Premier using ‘Aboriginal/Indigenous/First Nations/Inuit/Metis + Family + Violence’ of Canadian material during the period 2000-2015. We chose this body of work because it allows us to analyze the production and circulation of normative

discourses used in dominant research and policy frameworks in Canada. While we did not set out to analyze community and other non-academic sources during the same time frame, other sections of the paper draw on an array of community materials, using our shared knowledge, community networks and previous research on violence and colonialism. We do not include sources that focus specifically on child abuse, elder abuse, nor violence against women in this analysis, as our aim is to understand the literatures explicitly focused on ‘family violence.’ We also exclude domestic or family violence literature that does not have an explicit focus on Indigenous peoples.

In this paper, we examine the conceptual frameworks and discourses in the literature with a focus on the meanings that are produced through language and their effects. A discourse can be described as a set of assumptions that are socially shared and often unconscious (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). A discourse may be “...groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. In other words, discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p. 142). We are interested in how the categories we use to conceptualize family violence in Indigenous communities are not merely descriptive but they help to bring our understandings of violence in to being in some ways and not others. By using this approach, we hope to illustrate how language can shape and limit our understanding of the violence and our responses to it.

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<sup>4</sup> LGBTQ2S is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and Two-Spirit people.

## 2.0 CONTEXT



Family and kinship structures have always been at the heart of the wellness of Indigenous communities and their ability to function as self-determining peoples. Extended family lineages form the core of Indigenous peoples' identities and are expressed across the generations in diverse, culturally specific ways. Family relationships are understood within networks of reciprocal responsibilities formed between Indigenous peoples and their non-human/animal kin, the land and waters that comprise their territories, and the spirit world which forms their cosmology. Indigenous systems of law and governance rely on the maintenance of these relational systems, as "law is about retaining, teaching and maintaining good relationships" (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 258). Each Indigenous nation has its own way of framing these relational modes of being, and the place of kinship and family within them. Yet it is generally agreed upon that Indigenous peoples' culturally-specific understandings of kinship relations are fundamentally different from those imposed through colonialism: "Euro-Western models of the nuclear family, in which

one father figure (along with one mother figure) is intended to meet all of a child's needs for guidance, discipline, affect, and support, have never characterized traditional Indigenous communities" (Ball, 2010, pp. 133-134).

Historically, within culturally grounded Indigenous kinship systems, a lack of hierarchy "[created] gender variance that fostered a fluidity around the responsibilities and obligations of family and community life based on an individual's gifts, aspirations, abilities and desires. Similarly, it created variations around sexual orientations and relationship orientations" (Simpson, 2015, n.p.). As such, kinship networks within many Indigenous cultures normalized gender fluidity as individual roles and relationships arose in relation to the diverse needs of local realities within non-nuclear family structures. Colonialism has interrupted these networks through the imposition of a heteropatriarchal family model resulting in wide-ranging and harmful impacts on the health and well-being of Indigenous families and communities (Hunt, 2016). Indigenous people who do

*While colonialism has recently been recognized as a social determinant of health in some literature, it is typically not acknowledged as the overarching determinant of health in Indigenous peoples' lives.*



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not fit into heteronormative<sup>5</sup> models of gender and sexuality, such as Two-Spirit<sup>6</sup> people, now frequently face homophobia and transphobia within their own families and communities. Beyond the individual impacts of these forms of violence on individuals, the loss of these vital cultural and family roles continues to negatively impact the ability of communities to revitalize their cultural knowledge and models of governance.

Indigenous scholars note that teachings passed down from elders show that prior to contact with Europeans, Indigenous communities were grounded in a holistic worldview that recognized that all life was interconnected (Smith, 1999). This included a holistic understanding of health and well-being, as well as an understanding of the connections between the individual, family, community, nation, and the natural and the spirit worlds. As such, there was

an emphasis on the importance of balance, harmony and reliance on distinct Indigenous governance models to support dispute resolution, protection and healing within families, clans, and nations (Baskin, 2006). Indigenous communities have identified the importance of developing understandings and responses to violence, which connect with current struggles for self-determination at personal and community scales (Baskin, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> 'Heteronormativity' is the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (men and women) and that heterosexuality is the norm. This belief system is culturally biased in favor of opposite-sex relationships. Discourses of heteronormativity have been embedded in social institutions, such as the family, the state and education, resulting in the marginalization of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit lives.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, 'Two-Spirit' is intended to include these diversely-identified groups of Indigenous gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning and Two-Spirit people. However, where existing literature focuses on one or more sub-groups of Two-Spirit people, specific terms or acronyms (LGBTQ2S) are used to reflect the focus of that research or scholarship.

## 2.1 Violence and social determinants of health

Over the past thirty years, violence has come to be recognized as a public health issue and as a social determinant of health (Dahlberg & Mercy, 2009). Social determinants of health are understood to be the social and economic conditions that influence the health of individuals and communities (Marmot, 2005). The way violence intersects with other social determinants of health may differ within and across diverse Indigenous communities. Family violence has serious and widespread consequences for health and well-being, including impacts on physical, mental, sexual, reproductive, spiritual and communal health. The health of communities impacts the health of families and vice versa. This highlights the importance of using context specific and culturally specific understandings of health and violence that take into account the connections between place, history, culture and other socio-economic and political factors in the lives of Indigenous people. While colonialism has recently been recognized as a social determinant of health in some literature, it is typically not acknowledged as the overarching determinant of health in Indigenous peoples' lives, but rather

as an add-on to other determinants. However, these views are shifting as colonialism comes to be recognized as expressive of various forms of dehumanization and systemic violence, changing the way that 'violence' and 'health' are defined under colonization.

Indigenous knowledge systems around the world embrace holistic and interconnected understandings of health and well-being, in stark contrast to Western Eurocentric and colonial constructs of health, which imagine body, mind and spirit as disconnected from one another and from other social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental factors. As such, many Indigenous people have emphasized the importance of moving beyond the social in understanding the determinants of Indigenous peoples' health, including Margo Greenwood, Sarah de Leeuw, Nicole Marie Lindsay, and Charlotte Reading in their recent book, *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health in Canada: Beyond the social* (2015). The authors argue that this approach begins with the assumption that:

1. colonialism is the most fundamental determinant of health for Indigenous people in white settler colonial states and is an "active and ongoing force influencing the well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada" (p. xii);
2. Indigenous knowledge and ways of life must be the primary frame of reference for understanding Indigenous health;
3. Indigenous voices/authors must be centred; and that
4. moving beyond what is typically understood as 'the social' may include an understanding of geographic (including land), economic, historical, spiritual, narrative and genealogical (language), structural determinants of health, as well as gender, culture, and age (pp. xii-xiii).



## 2.2 Roots of resistance

As we look at the legacy of work to address violence within Indigenous families, homes and intimate relationships, we begin by recognizing that as long as there has been violence, there has been resistance. Beyond the diverse programs, research, books or other formalized anti-violence efforts that show up in the family violence literature, it is important to recognize that much of the resistance to violence has taken place out of view precisely because it is taking place in Indigenous homes, families, and in intimate relationships. So rather than just focusing on histories of violence, we also seek to hold

up the everyday resistances of our relations who have been working to create change.

As outlined in the following section, discussions of family violence within Indigenous communities, scholarship and advocacy emerged alongside both grassroots and coordinated national efforts to name various forms of violence as violence – to name sexual, physical, emotional and other forms of abuse, along with the systemic and historical factors that are at the root of that violence. Many early initiatives to name family violence came from women survivors who were themselves living the daily impacts of abuse and who sought to break the cycles of intergenerational

violence within their own homes by being agents of change (Dion Stout, 1996; LaRocque, 1994; LaRocque, 1997; Maracle, 1996; McIvor & Nahanee, 1998; Monture-Angus, 1995). Naming the violence *as violence* was, for many, seen as the first step.

Recognizing the legacy of residential schools has been key to understanding patterns of violence both because of the physical, sexual and spiritual abuse that Indigenous children endured and because of the family disconnection that the schools created (AJIC, 1999). Importantly, at the time this family violence discourse first emerged, residential schools were still operational, as the last school in British Columbia closed in the



1980s and the last one in Canada closed in 1996 in Saskatchewan. Part of grappling with the legacy of residential schools was, and is, understanding that survivors brought colonial patterns of violence into their own homes, families and communities. Indeed, the intergenerational nature of abuse was, for many, a driving force behind efforts to end cycles of violence as family violence had become simply a fact of life for many Indigenous children (Dion Stout, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

At the community level, efforts to name and address violence within families have been connected to broader strategies to end the various forms of violence experienced by Indigenous girls and women. The anti-violence organizing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people is vitally important, yet it often receives less recognition within this field. Two-Spirit people have been deeply impacted by their erasure in the *Indian Act* (Hunt, 2015), as well as by homophobic, transphobic and sexist violence (Taylor, 2009; Zoccole, Ristock, Barlow, & Seto, 2005), including at the hands of their own family members – something we understand as being under the rubric of family violence.

### 2.3 Emergence of a “family violence” discourse

A discourse about family violence in Indigenous communities first emerged in Canada in the early-to-

mid 1980s, although Indigenous women’s groups identified the problem much earlier in the 1970s (Brascoupe, 1987; Indian & Inuit Nurses, 1987; Ontario Native Women’s Association, 1989). This discourse arose primarily through the anti-violence organizing and research by Indigenous women, as well as through the non-Indigenous women’s movement and through Indigenous-state relations. This early work is frequently cited in the more recent literature along with key writings produced in the early-to-mid 1990s (primarily by Indigenous women) (Dion Stout, 1996; Green, 1996; LaRocque, 1994; LaRocque, 1997; Maracle, 1996; McGillivray & Comaskey, 1999; McIvor & Nahanee, 1998; Monture-Angus, 1995), and through government commissions and inquiries, most notably the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba (AJIM) and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). Despite the fact that a discourse around Indigenous family violence has existed for thirty years in Canada, resulting in action plans, community initiatives, government, academic and community research and programming, “the words and concepts around violence in the family are still unspoken in many Aboriginal communities, and also in the literature” (Gibson, 2010, p. 1).

The late Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) is one of many Indigenous women who called for expansive definitions of violence that reflected the complexities of colonial power relations and the intersecting and interrelated forms of violence experienced by Indigenous peoples.

Speaking from her experiences as a Mohawk woman, she identified racism, colonialism and state violence as inseparable from other experiences of violence in the lives of Indigenous women. She explained that, “violence is not just a mere incident in the lives of Aboriginal women. Violence does not just span a given number of years. It is our lives. And it is in our histories” (p. 170). She emphasized that “organizing against a single form of violence – men’s – is not a ‘luxury’ that I have experienced. The general definition of violence against women is too narrow to capture all of the experiences of violence that Aboriginal women face” (p. 171). Here we can see the need to not only understand the continuum of violence experienced under colonialism, but to develop definitions of violence which account for more than just individual acts of gendered violence.

As family violence has been framed as an issue of concern for health, social service and justice sectors, the Canadian government has identified the need to study “the scope of this crime within Aboriginal communities” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 1). As we will discuss, we are concerned about the ways colonial discourse and power dynamics are often replicated in these examinations of the issue of family violence. For example, a 2006 report produced for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)<sup>7</sup> detailed the results of research about the views of Indigenous women and professionals who work with

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<sup>7</sup> In 2016, INAC’s name was changed to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada.

them on issues of family violence, specifically intimate partner violence against women. The statistical data and government research has exclusively used a framework of “male violence against Aboriginal women” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 1), which mirrors the language used in mainstream Canadian domestic violence literature. This gendered framework used by the Canadian government is reproduced in academic and community literature (often funded by various levels of government), perpetuating a view of Indigenous families as akin to the western nuclear heterosexual family model. This research tends to centre the expertise of non-Indigenous police, counsellors and other first responders over that of Indigenous people themselves, focusing on individual acts of violence between an Indigenous man and an Indigenous woman, overlooking the wider context of settler colonialism. For example, in the 2006 INAC report, when Indigenous women identified the ripple effects of residential schools on family structures, relating this historic family breakdown to contemporary family violence, the report authors said that Indigenous women and communities “may be less able to view the issue with clarity

or resolve, having yet to fully come to believe that male violence against women is inexcusable” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 13). Thus it is important to understand the relationship between government framings of family violence and the broader literature on this issue, as they have come to form a discourse and set of policies and programs through which, we would argue, Indigenous peoples’ decolonial analysis, cultural knowledge, and kinship practices are frequently obscured in favour of state-based solutions and expertise.

## 2.4 Statistics: A critical view to existing knowledge on family violence

Statistics on self-reported rates of violent victimization are gathered every five years in Canada, through the General Social Survey (GSS). Results from the 2014 GSS show that the rates of self-reported “spousal violence” for Aboriginal people were virtually unchanged from 2009 (10%) to 2014 (9%) (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2016). Analysis of the 2009 GSS indicates that Aboriginal women are almost three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report experiences of spousal violence

in the past five years (Perreault, 2011). While this statistical picture is useful in demonstrating the high rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women within their intimate relationships, the analysis of this data is shaped by categories made possible through the GSS delineations, providing only a partial picture. For example, Perreault (2011)<sup>8</sup> analyzes the relationship between drugs and alcohol and violent incidence, severity of the violent acts, and the number of times an individual was assaulted by their spouse over five years. Yet, questions are not asked about the intergenerational nature of the abuse, nor involvement of victims and their families in government systems such as residential schools and child welfare, including the Sixties Scoop.<sup>9</sup> Further, while the heterosexual family is not stated, it is assumed, making it impossible to know whether or to what extent LGBTQ2S Indigenous people and their families were included in the survey.<sup>10</sup> Similar to other government statistics on Indigenous peoples, the analysis of the GSS provided in Perreault (2011) compares Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rates of reported victimization, making the higher rates of violence visible across these categories without naming the historic and ongoing context

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<sup>8</sup> Because the 2014 data was only published in 2016, we cannot comment on how it has been mobilized in research on family violence. Thus, we focus here on the use of 2009 statistics.

<sup>9</sup> The “Sixties Scoop” refers to a period in Indigenous peoples’ history in which thousands of Indigenous children were apprehended from their birth families and adopted by or fostered out to non-Indigenous families. See Sinclair (2007) for more information about the Sixties Scoop.

<sup>10</sup> Ristock’s (2011) analysis of the GSS also highlights problems with the study and the way the results have been used to talk about prevalence of abuse in same-sex relationships. For example, while higher victimization rates were reported by LGB people, they did not ask respondents if the abuse took place in a same-sex relationship or a previous or current heterosexual relationship, so it is not possible to claim that violence in same-sex relationships is more widespread. They also neglected to differentiate between types of violence (physical, emotional, sexual) and did not address gendered differences (i.e. the LGB female and male respondents were combined into one category). Also, the survey did not ask about transgender individuals.



*Without any historic or social context, the association of Indigenous people with anger, drug and alcohol use, and poverty are naturalized rather than being seen as a product of historical and ongoing colonialism.*

of colonialism which contribute to violence in Indigenous communities and families. Rather than colonialism being seen as a root factor in the higher rates of reported violence, the analysis names drugs and alcohol use and the presence of neighbourhood crime (i.e., poverty) as factors, while anger is named as the most common emotional response from victims. Without any historic or social context, the association of Indigenous people with anger, drug and alcohol use, and poverty are naturalized rather than being seen as a product of historical and ongoing colonialism.

While this statistical analysis primarily focuses on rates of reporting to police, the GSS data does shed light on several significant aspects of how Indigenous people

deal with violence within extended family and community contexts. Aboriginal<sup>11</sup> victims of spousal violence were more likely to tell a family member, neighbour or friend about the abuse, with 94% of Aboriginal people and only 67% of non-Aboriginal people reporting that they told someone about spousal violence they were facing (Perreault, 2011). Yet these findings about the strength of Indigenous kinship networks in providing peer support are often overlooked in the literature on family violence. Aboriginal people who reported spousal violence were three times more likely than other Aboriginal people to have been the victim of a non-spousal violent crime, demonstrating the need to address spousal violence in relation to a continuum of other forms of interrelated violence rather

than as a separate issue. Yet, ‘family violence’ solutions often separate out violence between intimate partners from other types of interpersonal and systemic violence rather than treating them as interrelated within the context of colonialism. As critical scholars working within a decolonial framework, we are interested in interrogating how ‘family violence’ in Indigenous communities is understood within the available Canadian literature in order to identify what might be rendered invisible through the creation of certain categories in this anti-violence discourse.

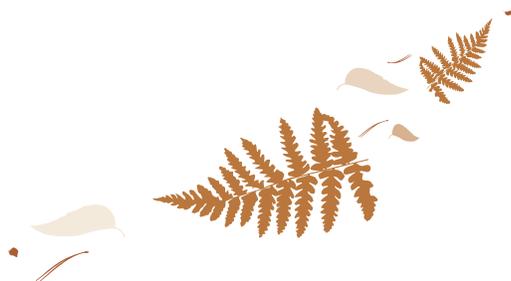


<sup>11</sup> The term ‘Aboriginal’ is used here to reflect the classification system used by government statisticians and researchers.



*...much of the literature reproduces heteropatriarchial  
crime-oriented and psychological discourses, defining family  
violence in ways that undermine Indigenous kinship  
systems which are central to self-determination.*

# 3.0 HOW ‘INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE’ IS CURRENTLY FRAMED IN THE LITERATURE



In this section we analyze the 2000-2015 Canadian literature on family violence in Indigenous communities – a total of 36 sources, the vast majority of which took a pan-Indigenous approach with few sources focusing on Inuit or Métis experiences. As we will argue in the analysis that follows, while some of the literature actively supports Indigenous self-determination and the resurgence of Indigenous culture and governance in its approach to ending violence, much of the literature reproduces heteropatriarchal crime-oriented and psychological discourses, defining family violence in ways that undermine Indigenous kinship systems which are central to self-determination. Further, as we will discuss, heteropatriarchal gender norms and nuclear family models are frequently assumed and reproduced in this literature, detracting from the possibility of revitalizing Indigenous kinship systems. The pan-Indigenous approach taken in much of the literature stands in contrast to the identified need to address the social determinants of health through localized, culturally-specific approaches that speak to the unique

needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. We identified the following themes, which we used to structure our examination of the literature: naming violence, defining family violence, rates of violence, analysis of gender and sexuality, causes of violence, colonization, normalization, silence and hiding violence, family, health, geographic considerations, and solutions.

## 3.1 Naming violence

While our literature review is focused on the past fifteen years, ‘family violence’ has been the term predominantly used to describe violence within Indigenous families over the past twenty-five years, while ‘intimate partner violence’ has more recently been taken up to specifically name violence between partners. In the literature we reviewed, we found the following terms were used:

- IPV or intimate partner violence (Alani, 2013; Brownridge, 2008, 2010; Daoud, Smylie, Urquia, Allan, & O’Campo, 2013; Moffitt, Fikowski, Mauricio, & Mackenzie, 2013; National

Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008; Taylor & Ristock, 2011)

- intimate-partner abuse (Belknap & McDonald, 2010)
- gender-violence (Belknap & McDonald, 2010)
- family violence (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Andersson et al., 2010; Baskin, 2006; Bopp, Bopp, & Lane, 2003; Campbell, 2007; Catalyst Research and Communications [CRC], 2012; INAC, 2006; Lester-Smith, 2013; Olsen Harper, 2005; Paletta, 2008; Shea, Nahwagahbow, & Andersson, 2010);
- violence in the family (Gibson, 2010)
- male violence against Aboriginal women (INAC, 2006)
- violence against women and children (Stewart, Huntley, & Blaney, 2001)
- domestic violence (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Andersson et al., 2010; Bopp et al., 2003; Chase, Mignone, & Diffey, 2010; Ellington, Brassard, & Montminy, 2015; Gibson, 2010; Kiyoshk, 2003; Mancini Billson, 2006; Olsen Harper, 2005).

Only one source explicitly avoids using the term 'domestic violence': "I chose not to use the term domestic violence because it excludes non-cohabitating partners and can refer to violence occurring in a domestic environment that is not between intimate partners (e.g., parent-child violence)" (Alani, 2013, p. 232).

In a move to recognize the wider impacts of violence within families and communities, some are using the broader term 'lateral violence' to describe a continuum of violence between Indigenous family and community members beyond just physical and sexual abuse: "[a]s communities move to define this cluster of behaviours and their effects on families, the term *lateral violence* is being used. Lateral violence refers to bullying, including gossiping, shaming and blaming others, and broken confidences" (Gibson, 2010, p. 1). It is also described as the "internalized structure of domination enacted upon another within the marginalized group" in forms of stigmatization and discrimination (Stewart et al., 2001, pp. 29-30).<sup>12</sup> Thus, colonialism and lateral violence are intimately linked as "lateral violence is also referred to as 'internalized colonialism'" (CRC, 2012, p. 31).

Many writings attempt to address the multiple forms of violence taking place within Indigenous communities. However, we argue that this literature contributes to

the pathologization of Indigenous communities through the naturalization of the violence as something that is a 'trait' or 'characteristic' of Indigenous people and communities rather than something that is being actively produced through ongoing systemic colonial state violence. The following quote illustrates this pervasive framing: "there now exist a wide range of community behaviours and characteristics that actually nurture, protect, encourage and permit violence and abuse to continue as a community trait" (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 11). Indeed, some authors see family violence contributing to a lack of agency, which they frame as 'choice disability' or being 'choice disabled' (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Andersson et al., 2010). This kind of language should be closely examined for its potentially pathologizing effect, especially in light of the utter lack of attention to the particular ways that people with disabilities are impacted by family violence in the literature.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the intent, these kinds of narratives promote colonial and racist constructions of Indigenous people (and whole communities) as inherently abnormal and defective.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 Defining family violence

Broadly speaking, definitions of family violence within the literature include a continuum of violence among a range of relations, based on Indigenous kinship networks, and includes:

*all forms of violence directed against someone on the basis of their residence or family ties. It includes the physical dimension implicit in domestic abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, intimate partner violence and other violent acts between family members."* (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010, p. 1)

Further, CRC (2012) explains the networks of relations that may be considered to be impacted by family violence: "male violence against women, violence between intimate partners, between siblings, between parents and children, and between parents and elders. Family violence includes violent behavior that occurs between family members in the immediate and extended family" (p. 30). Andersson and Nahwagahbow (2010) further state that "domestic violence includes nonsexual physical abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, economic abuse, and psychological abuse" (p. 1). Shea et al. (2010) emphasize that family violence includes the suffering of all members of the family, "including the perpetrators" (p. 35).

Bopp and colleagues (2003) argue that family violence and abuse "manifests as a regimen of domination that is established and enforced by one person over one or more others, through violence, fear and a variety of abuse strategies... [and]... is usually not an isolated incidence or pattern" (p. ix). They emphasize that while it has similar components and dynamics of family violence in 'mainstream'

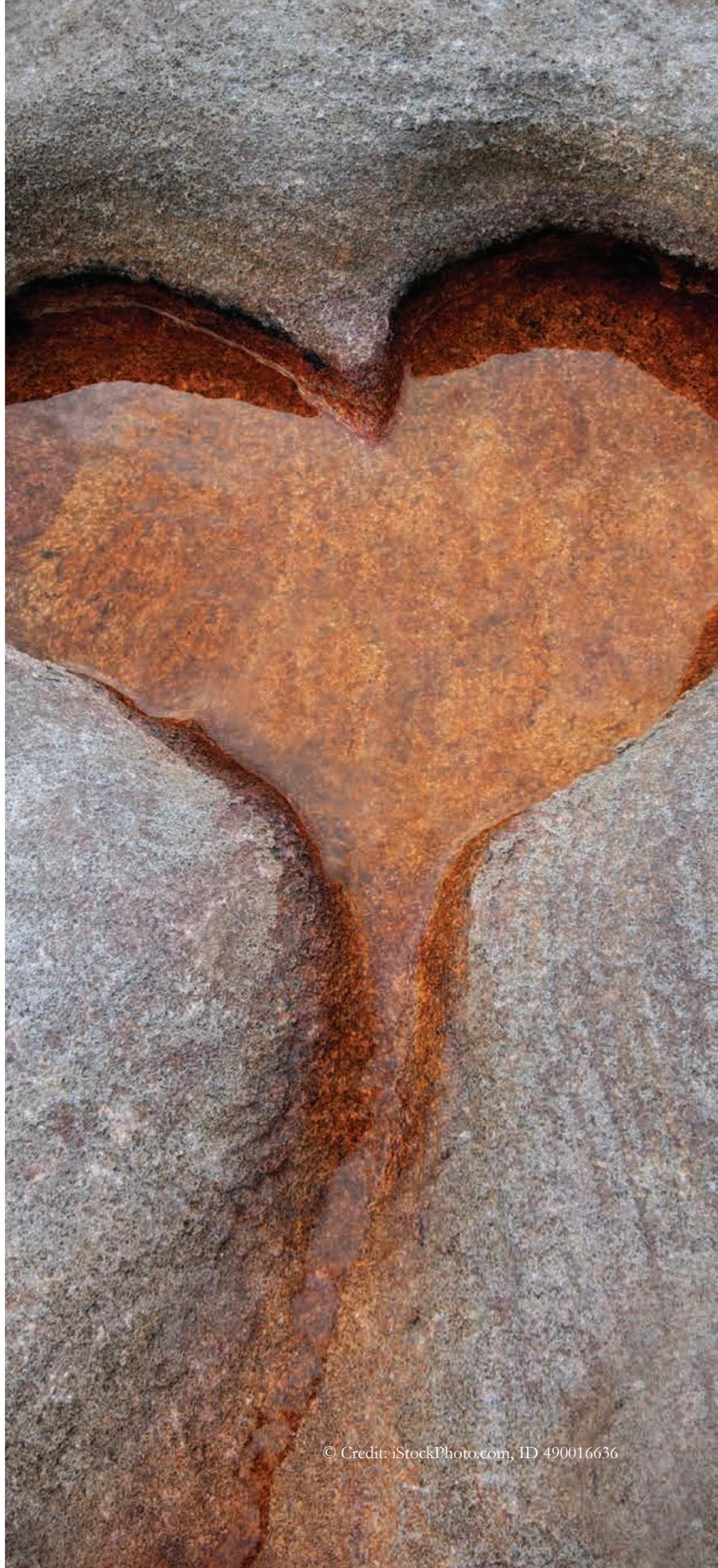
<sup>12</sup> This is echoed in creative and academic works outside the family violence literature, as Lee Maracle (1996) writes, "lateral violence among Native people is about our anti-colonial rage working itself out in an expression of hate for one another" (p. 7).

<sup>13</sup> Women with disabilities are mentioned in one report that acknowledges, "society does not recognize or make provision for their needs," which may create barriers for women to leave abusive relationships (Laplante, 2002, p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> For a critique on trauma narratives as pathologizing, see Million (2013) and Clark (2016).

(non-Indigenous) society, there are important differences in the experience of Indigenous people in that it is a “sociological characteristic of whole communities” that “is rooted in the complex web of Aboriginal community history and current dynamics” (p. 9). They draw on the findings of the RCAP, which argues that family violence in Indigenous communities cannot be understood outside of the deep connections to “the historical experience of the community” (p. 9).

In general, intimate partner violence is said to include physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic abuse as well as intimidation and controlling behaviour, including the use of “isolation, monitoring and the restriction of freedom to subjugate and control” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 29; see also Campbell, 2007; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). Although mentioned less, spiritual abuse is also included in some of the literature (Campbell, 2007). Intimate partner violence is described along a continuum, from one hit to chronic, severe battering (Alani, 2013), and it is also recognized that abuse is “not always physical” (Alani, 2013, p. 232) but can include sexual and/or emotional abuse, or a combination. Bopp and colleagues argue that “the lines between these categories are permeable and there is considerable overlap, simply because one type of abuse often involves elements of other types” (p. 29). Thus, intimate partner violence is defined as including “coercive, harmful and abusive behavior, such as physical, sexual, emotional and/or psychological abuse, by a current or former partner within an intimate relationship” (Moffitt et al., 2013, p. 2).



Most of the literature on intimate partner abuse describes an on-going pattern of abuse with some references to the ‘cycle of abuse’ theory developed by psychologist Lenore Walker in 1984, to describe a pattern of increased intensity over time, characterized by a tension building stage, an acute battering stage, and a honeymoon stage (Bopp et al., 2003; Laplante, 2002). Although this theory has been critiqued for the way it may overgeneralize diverse experiences and dynamics of abuse,<sup>15</sup> much of the literature relies on this framework for understanding the dynamics of intimate partner violence. This is distinct from another understanding of the ‘cycle of abuse’ or ‘cycle of violence’ (Baskin, 2006; INAC, 2006; Proulx & Perrault, 2000) that refers to intergenerational abuse or trauma that is passed down or transmitted from an older generation to a younger generation, often in reference to abuse experienced through residential schools.

The overarching definition of intimate partner violence in the literature is of male violence against women in a heterosexual relationship. Only four sources referred to abuse in same-sex relationships or experienced by LGBTQ or Two-Spirit people (Alani, 2013; CRC, 2012; Laplante, 2002; Taylor & Ristock, 2011). One report by the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada stated it is a myth that women only experience violence in relationships with men (Laplante, 2002). They argued that while the majority of women experience intimate partner violence

from men, many lesbians and bisexual women have reported experiencing violence from women in their relationships. Another study relied on a 2009 definition from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention stating that intimate partner violence is the “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy” (Alani, 2013, pp. 231-2).

While there is virtually no discussion of Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people’s experiences in the family violence literature, the general literature about LGBTQ intimate partner violence includes some reference to Two-Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQ people. Some descriptions of Indigenous LGBTQ2S experiences of intimate partner violence are included in Ristock (2002), Ristock and colleagues (2010; 2011) and Taylor and Ristock (2011). In these writings, a wide range of abuse forms are described including those similar to heterosexual intimate partner violence as well as some that are distinct to LGBTQ2S experiences, including homophobic and transphobic abuse; these are placed within the wider contexts of heteronormativity, colonialism and multiple forms of violence experienced by Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people across the lifespan. The majority of the research does not specifically address Indigenous transgender experiences of intimate partner violence.

### 3.3 Rates of violence

There is agreement that Indigenous people in Canada, especially women, experience disproportionately high rates of violence, including ‘family violence.’ The Aboriginal Healing Foundation has stated that family violence directly impacts “the vast majority of Aboriginal people and in some way, touches the lives of every man, woman and child” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 25). Yet the exact rates of this violence are a source of dispute, as some experts are doubtful of the statistical picture due to underreporting, no universally accepted definition of family violence, and limited empirical research (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Bopp et al., 2003). Further, some have said there is no evidence to support the assumption that pressures not to disclose are the same in all social groups; for example, pressures in First Nations reserve communities are very different than in urban non-Indigenous settings (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010). As well, prevalence rates of family violence, domestic violence or intimate partner violence are difficult to determine given the different measurement indicators used in studies and the homogenization of diverse Indigenous communities (Campbell, 2007). Brownridge (2008) compares two large-scale representative surveys of violence in Canada in an attempt to fill in these gaps in understandings of partner violence experienced by Indigenous women. The study states that while both surveys show that Indigenous women are four times more likely

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<sup>15</sup> See discussion in Dutton, Osthoff, and Dichter (2011).



*There is agreement that Indigenous people in Canada, especially women, experience disproportionately high rates of violence, including ‘family violence.’*

to experience violence than non-Indigenous women, risk factors in the studies cannot fully account for these elevated odds. Rather, the author suggests that the heightened rates of victimization are linked to colonization, which is not among the risk factors measured in the surveys.

Recently, rates of family and intimate partner violence against Indigenous men have also been discussed, as some have said that Indigenous men are at increased risk of emotional and physical abuse (Andersson et al., 2010). Very few studies provide any estimate of sexual abuse experienced by Indigenous males (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010), though Brownridge (2010) studies rates of intimate partner violence experienced by Aboriginal men using 1999 GSS data, while Ellington et al. (2015) examine perspectives of Indigenous men with experience of domestic violence in Quebec.

The gender analysis in the domestic violence literature will be further discussed below.

Despite the limited research about rates of family violence in Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people’s lives, existing literature and community knowledge suggest these people experience very high incidences of family violence. Taylor and Ristock (2011) note that:

*given the high rates of violence known to be experienced by Aboriginal people generally, it is concerning that there have been no published studies on partner violence in the Canadian Aboriginal LGBTQ population. Agencies providing services for Aboriginal LGBTQ people have recognized the problem and have attempted to provide appropriate resources and services. (p. 307)*

In an effort to address the gap, Taylor and Ristock (2011) review

studies in the U.S. and Canada about Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people’s lives, which have reported some findings on partner violence. Previous studies have consistently documented high incidences of violence, historical trauma, and state violence. These studies show that Indigenous LGBTQ2S individuals report very high prevalence rates of physical and sexual violence and historical trauma throughout their lifetime. As they describe, this context of violence is “linked to and supported by larger social structures that create and sustain inequalities and disadvantages” (p. 309) and as a result, efforts to respond to family violence or intimate partner violence must be aligned with anti-colonial Indigenous strategies to oppose state violence.

### 3.4 Analysis of gender and sexuality

Nearly all of the literature says family violence disproportionately impacts women or focuses exclusively on women. A smaller number of researchers have stated that both men and women can be victims (Andersson et al., 2010; Bopp et al., 2003; Brownridge, 2010), or discuss the abuse of boys within family violence (Shea et al., 2010), using an explicitly binary model of gender.

As stated earlier, Indigenous LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people were only mentioned in four sources (Alani, 2013; CRC, 2012; Laplante, 2002; Taylor & Ristock, 2011),

though it should be noted that CRC (2012) used a binary gender model, explicitly outlining roles for heterosexual Indigenous men and women while describing Two-Spirit people as “homosexuals” (p. 77). While some authors demonstrate efforts to avoid heterosexist language through using the term “partner” (CRC, 2012) or “spouse or intimate partner” (Puchala, Paul, Kennedy, & Mehl-Madrona, 2010) to describe people in intimate relationships, if Two-Spirit is mentioned at all, it is mostly only understood to be a term for sexual orientation rather than gender identities that fall beyond the gender binary (exceptions include Ristock et al., 2010, 2011; Taylor & Ristock, 2011).

The majority of sources mirror mainstream domestic violence discourse in portraying men as offenders and women as victims of abuse, with most of the literature focused on either women or men. One study argued that while anyone can be a victim or perpetrator (with the exception of young children), some Indigenous family violence intervention programs have focused their definition on men perpetrating violence against women and children because this is “the most prevalent form of abuse” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 8). Similarly, some research has emphasized the fundamental importance of ensuring that all solutions should prioritize the safety of women and children who have been abused (Baskin, 2006; Cameron, 2006; Stewart et al., 2001).



Fewer sources aim to address patterns of violence through an approach that is not gender-specific, though they are limited to a binary view of gender. For example, Warriors Against Violence Society in Vancouver runs groups in which men and women meet alongside one another, with women comprising about 10% of the perpetrators (Lester-Smith, 2013).

The disruption of culturally-specific gender roles in Indigenous communities and families is positioned as a key factor in contemporary family violence, as “susceptibility to family violence may be exacerbated by a history that disrupted the traditional balance between Aboriginal men and women” (Andersson et al., 2010, p. 53). Family violence is related to “the ‘legacy impact’ that residential schools have had on traditional gender roles and family structure across generations” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 10). In northern Canada, a shift occurred from an egalitarian society where “men and women shared equal power in the subsistence economy, to the post-colonial society. Aboriginal men struggled to impose patriarchy amidst a socio-economic downturn as women became the main wage earners” (Moffitt et al., 2013, p. 3).

Recent literature reflects a move to develop a critical gender analysis of domestic violence in Indigenous communities, focused on Indigenous men’s experiences, roles, and efforts to stop cycles of violence. This literature might be seen as connected to a broad move recently within Indigenous studies to focus on masculinity.<sup>16</sup> The impact of colonialism on men’s roles and power is discussed in the literature, as violence is “viewed as the expression of a domestic conflict in which partners play diverse roles, the aim being to reflect the multiple experiences of aboriginal men without restricting them to a fixed or predetermined role” (Ellington et al., 2015, p. 291). This has sparked an increased interest in examining men’s susceptibility to experiencing family violence. For example, one researcher uses statistical data from 1999 to examine Aboriginal men’s relative risk for intimate partner violence relative to non-Aboriginal men (Brownridge, 2010), which is seen as being caused by young age and unemployment.<sup>17</sup>

Yet this emergent discourse minimizes the role of heteropatriarchy in patterns of gendered violence. In a study with the Atikamekw/Innu Nation, Ellington and colleagues (2015) argue that existing literature fails to

capture the interactional dynamics within patterns of Indigenous family violence, arguing that portraying men as the main instigators of violence has led to their mass incarceration. This study uses terms such as “violence among aboriginal couples” (p. 288) to avoid representing women as the sole victims. They review six studies that focus on men’s roles in family violence and note that the studies reflect discourse of men alongside a range of other actors, which makes it difficult to focus explicitly on experiences of Indigenous men involved in domestic violence. This study (problematically) tries to unhinge the relationship normally assumed between men and violence, citing statistics that demonstrate “violence is primarily bilateral, that it is ‘seldom systematic and does not cause terror in victims on a daily basis’” (Ellington et al., 2015, p. 290). This analysis seems to undermine the severity of family violence within its critique of the gendered assumptions, which equate men with assailant and women with victim. This study claims that a majority of men they spoke with identified as victims of domestic violence while a minority described themselves as the main instigator.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, see McKegney (2014) and Innes and Anderson (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Research and community-based anti-violence programs have addressed some of the many complexities regarding women’s use of violence against male partners in heterosexual relationships and the importance of understanding the context, intent and effect of the violence (for example, some women have been accused of being abusive when they may be fighting back in self defense against an abusive partner). While a discussion of these debates and complexities is beyond the scope of this paper, further information may be found in the following: 1) *Women being arrested backgrounder* (Community Coordination of Women’s Safety [CCWS], 2010); and 2) Appendix 1 in Ministry of Children and Family Development [MCFD] (2010).



### 3.5 Causes of violence

The literature names both individual and systemic factors as the root of family violence among Indigenous people and communities. Yet individual attributes and behaviors are focused on in the majority of the literature, with substance use being named most prominently (Alani, 2013; Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Andersson et al., 2010; Ellington et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2013; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008; Paletta, 2008; Puchala et al., 2010; Shea et al., 2010). This mirrors Canadian government studies of family violence, which state: “[a]lthough many factors are perceived as root causes of violence (loss of identity and way of life, continued impact of residential schools, a ‘learned cycle,’ etc.), nearly all participants pointed to drug and alcohol consumption (by both parties) as an aggravating factor” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 3). In some cases, substance abuse is not seen as a causal factor of family violence,

but rather one of many factors resulting from colonialism that are linked to family violence (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Dreddy, 2002; Laplante, 2002; Mancini Billson, 2006).

The intergenerational nature of violence in Indigenous families is also recognized as a factor, as most perpetrators have themselves been victims of some form of violence (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Andersson et al., 2010; Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Shea et al., 2010). A 2008 study based on Crown Prosecutor files from family violence offences in the Territories over a 5-year period indicates that three-quarters of those accused of a family violence offence (85% of whom were male) have themselves experienced violence or abuse (Paletta, 2008). Although the study connects family violence to intergenerational trauma and what they characterize as a “risk pile-up” (p. 28), they note that similar rates of having experienced violence are found for non-Indigenous people accused

of perpetrating violence within their family, potentially obscuring the specificity of colonial trauma and overlooking the severity and persistence of abuse.

In some cases, poverty is also named as a key contributor to violence (Alani, 2013; Ellington et al., 2015; Puchala, 2010; Shea et al., 2010), although once again most of the literature does not address the way poverty and economic inequality is institutionalized by the colonial state (exceptions include Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Campbell, 2007; Mancini Billson, 2006). While family violence is identified as having a negative impact on financial security and potential loss of matrimonial home (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008), one might argue that the relationship can also be seen in reverse, as a lack of secure housing and financial security in turn contributing to people feeling stuck in violent domestic situations.

Brownridge uses existing GSS research data to identify “social background variables” (2008) or “risk markers” (2003). These include: being a youth, having low educational attainment, having a previous marriage/common law union, rural residence, alcohol abuse, having a large family (family size and “high fertility rates”), and patriarchal dominance related to colonialism. It might be argued that this categorization, stemming from government-created categories, tends to blame violence on attributes of Indigenous women, naturalizing risk and deflecting from societal and systemic harms. Brownridge (2003) also argues that the Indigenous population in Canada is growing (with reference to “high fertility

rates”), and as a result the problem of violence against Indigenous women will also grow. By drawing these statements together, the author inadvertently implies that the violence is inevitable. Although the author recognizes the need to address colonization as a major factor contributing to high rates of family violence, the methodology focused on ‘risk markers’ contributes to the reproduction of problematic colonial stereotypes about Indigenous women and communities in general.

A study by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (Bopp et al., 2003) states that Indigenous family violence “is a multi-factoral social syndrome and

not simply an undesirable behavior” and that the violence is “allowed to continue and flourish” (p. ix) because of “unhealthy community conditions and dynamics” (p. 10). Although the use of the term “syndrome” implies a psychological explanatory framework versus a socio-political one, the authors emphasize that the cause is multi-factoral, social and rooted “in Aboriginal historical experience” (p. ix), and the problem cannot be attributed simply to individual behaviours.

Systemic oppression, discrimination and inequity are also named as contributors to Indigenous family violence (Alani, 2013; Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007), including “stress

from cultural isolation, redefinition of gender roles, financial constraints, lack of stable housing, and threats and discrimination experienced by minorities” (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010, p. 1). Further, it is recognized that Canada does little to address violence against women in general and fails to address racism and bias in addressing violent crimes against Indigenous women (Andersson et al., 2010).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, “marginalization and discrimination put communities at risk of violence and the same factors deny victims protection of the welfare and justice system” (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010, p. 5).

*...“marginalization and discrimination put communities at risk of violence and the same factors deny victims protection of the welfare and justice system”*

*(Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010, p. 5).*



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<sup>18</sup> At the time of writing, the government is entering the second phase of a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women. Although some see this as a step in the right direction, others are critical of the government’s lack of focus on policing and justice issues and a number of other aspects of the terms of reference for the inquiry. The outcomes of this inquiry, and the impact it has on levels of violence, have yet to be seen.



## RACIST POLICIES   ONGOING LEGACY   SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE   MARGINALIZATION

### 3.6 Colonization

Some of the family violence literature refers to the historical context of Indigenous people in Canada, but does not always name colonialism specifically (Brown & Languedoc, 2004; INAC, 2006; Kiyoshk, 2003; Olsen Harper, 2005). Among those that name colonization as a factor (Alani 2013; Baskin, 2006; Brownridge 2003, 2008, 2010; Campbell, 2007; CRC, 2012; Daoud et al., 2013; Dreddy, 2002; Ellington et al., 2015; Mancini Billson, 2006; Stewart et al., 2001), colonization is primarily perceived as historic rather than ongoing (Alani, 2013; Brownridge, 2003, 2008, 2010; Dreddy, 2002; Ellington et al., 2015; Laplante, 2002; Puchala et al., 2010; Shea et al., 2010). Violence

is seen as an outcome of historic marginalization: “family violence is a social issue that evolved as a consequence of social injustices and cultural oppression experienced with colonization” (Moffitt et al., 2013, p. 3). Baskin (2006) emphasizes that Indigenous peoples themselves assert that family violence is “a direct result of the colonization process” (p. 15). Brownridge (2003, 2008, 2010) seeks to use GSS survey data to prove that many of the risk factors faced by Indigenous women and men are linked to colonization, by finding that known risk factors cannot fully account for elevated risks. Thus colonization may be the common factor—“the unique experience of colonization of Aboriginals in Canada plays a large role in their disproportionate

likelihood of violence against women” (Brownridge, 2003, p. 81). As we discuss below, others see colonization as more than just playing a large role, but being the central condition out of which interconnected forms of violence arise.

A number of studies we reviewed from 2000-2015 (including but not limited to Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Dreddy, 2002; and Laplante, 2002) draw on findings from the RCAP, which traced the roots of family violence to racist state interventions that sought to deliberately fracture Indigenous families. Situating family violence within a range of historic and social factors, the Commission notes that:



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## CULTURAL OPPRESSION   HISTORICAL CONTEXT   INTERCONNECTIONS   RACISM

*First, Aboriginal family violence is distinct in that it has invaded whole communities and cannot be considered a problem of a particular couple or an individual household. Second, the failure in family functioning can be traced in many cases to interventions of the state deliberately introduced to disrupt or displace the Aboriginal family. Third, violence within Aboriginal communities is fostered and sustained by a racist social environment that promulgates demeaning stereotypes of Aboriginal women and men and seeks to diminish their value as human beings and their right to be treated with dignity. (RCAP, 1996a, p. 52).*

Although much of the literature refers to colonization as a problem of the past, a number of researchers acknowledge that colonization is

ongoing and manifested in current racist policies, laws and practices towards Indigenous peoples in Canada (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Dreddy, 2002; Richardson & Wade, 2010; Stewart et al., 2001; Taylor & Ristock, 2011). For example, in a guide for Indigenous child welfare workers addressing family violence in Ontario, practitioners are told, “as a child welfare professional, no matter how skilled or well intentioned, you remain part of the colonization legacy of separating Aboriginal children from their families. This makes your work exceptionally challenging” (CRC, 2012, p. 24).

In a few studies, the term genocide or cultural genocide is used to describe the systemic colonial

violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada (Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Kiyoshk, 2003; Stewart et al., 2001). For example, Baskin (2006) states:

*[family violence] is the result of, and a reaction to, a system of domination, disrespect, and bureaucratic control. It stems from the consequences and devastation of forced white colonial policies of assimilation and cultural genocide over the past several centuries. Aboriginal peoples have internalized this oppression and thus its impact is felt in the family. The treatment of women and children within the family is a reflection of the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in a broader context. (pp. 24-25)*

In relation to colonization, institutionalized racism has also been named as a cause of family violence in Indigenous communities in Canada (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007), as well as a systemic barrier impacting those who are trying to access support when dealing with family violence (Baskin, 2006; Stewart et al., 2001).<sup>19</sup> In describing the context of family violence in a northern Indigenous community impacted by forced relocation and loss of land, Campbell (2007) argues that a:

*subtext of racism underlies much of Canadian government policy, both historical and contemporary, towards Aboriginal people. The exploitation of land, mainly in remote areas and occupied by Aboriginal people, for the purposes of resource development with all but cursory consideration of the long-term impact on residents, illustrates how racism permeates accepted social policy. (p. 74)*

Some authors argue that Indigenous peoples' overall socio-economic position (as a result of colonialism) must be addressed in order to prevent and end family violence (Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Campbell, 2007; Daoud et al., 2013; Dreddy, 2002; Stewart et al., 2001; Taylor & Ristock, 2011). Daoud and colleagues (2013) take a multifaceted approach to understanding the relationship between colonialism and violence against Indigenous women, identifying historic, systemic, cultural and interpersonal factors, ultimately focusing on the impact

of socio-economic position on rates of violence using data from the Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey. This study is one of few that propose an anti-violence measure rooted in fundamental social inequity among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, seeing limited self-determination as being at the root of high rates of violence. They write:

*Our results show that the disproportionately high rates of violence against Aboriginal compared to non-Aboriginal women are largely explained by SEP [socio-economic position]. Policies to reduce abuse need to work primarily towards improving SEP among the Aboriginal peoples. Future research on the excess of abuse among the Aboriginals needs to focus on the historical colonial narrative of Aboriginal peoples, social capital and access to social services. Elements of the Aboriginal spiritual values of anti-violence need to be revitalized. (p. 282)*

### Loss and exploitation of land

Loss and disconnection from land, forced relocation onto reserves or urban centres, and exploitation of resources was an identified theme in some of the literature (Campbell, 2007; Dreddy, 2002; Mancini Billson, 2006; Richardson & Wade, 2010; Taylor & Ristock, 2011), sometimes explicitly connected to the denial of self-determination (Puchala et al., 2010). In these studies, family violence is understood as an effect of the devastating land-based impacts of colonialism. Of those studies that

address the relationship between family violence and loss of land, most connect the loss of land directly to colonial practices of removing Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories. However, the discourse focuses primarily on *loss* rather than explicitly naming the past and present land theft that is legitimized through colonial state laws and practices.

Campbell's (2007) study is significant for documenting the way forced relocation of Indigenous communities greatly impacts familial and kinship ties. Indigenous interviewees state that prior to forced relocation from the island, there were fewer social problems in the community and they were dealt with through communal and familial processes of resolution, including the support of elders. Another study examines the effects of forced resettlement, this time on Inuit communities, and similarly finds that the loss of the land and traditional ways of living, and egalitarian relationship models, all contribute to diminished 'social vitality' and a dramatic increase in male violence against Indigenous women (Mancini Billson, 2006).

### Residential schools

As previously discussed, in the early to mid-1990s, the RCAP named residential schools as a significant cause of family violence in Indigenous communities (as cited in Bopp et al., 2003), and the intergenerational impacts of residential schools on the prevalence

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<sup>19</sup> As Emma LaRocque (1989) has stated, racism has been institutionalized in "government policies of assimilation, paternalism, and the historical and continuing confiscation of Native lands and resources" (p. 71).

of family violence continues to be recognized in much of the literature (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Campbell, 2007; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008; Chase et al., 2010; INAC, 2006; Kiyoshk, 2003; Moffitt et al., 2013; Olsen Harper, 2005; Stewart et al., 2001; Taylor & Ristock, 2011). Yet we note that in one government study (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, based on information from INAC, 2006), Indigenous women themselves are more emphatic about the role of residential schools on family structure and parenting skills than first responders, who do not see residential schools as having a very large impact.

The report on family violence from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (Bopp et al., 2003) emphasizes that some researchers have recognized the residential school system as a form of political state violence. For example, Abadian (1999, as cited in Bopp et al. 2003) is said to have argued that the:

*social and political violence inflicted upon Aboriginal children, families and communities by the state and the churches through the residential school system not only created the patterns of violence communities are now experiencing but also introduced the family and community to behaviours that are impeding collective recovery. (p. 9)*

Abadian's research names political state violence against Indigenous people as the cause of family violence in that it "almost always tears apart families and whole communities" (as cited in Bopp et al., 2003 p. 9). Various terms are used in the literature to describe these widespread impacts, including "collective trauma" (Bopp et al., 2003) and "intergenerational trauma" (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010). Intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools has been identified as a reason that conventional strategies have failed to reduce family violence (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010).

*In relation to colonization, institutionalized racism has also been named as a cause of family violence in Indigenous communities in Canada*

*(Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007).*

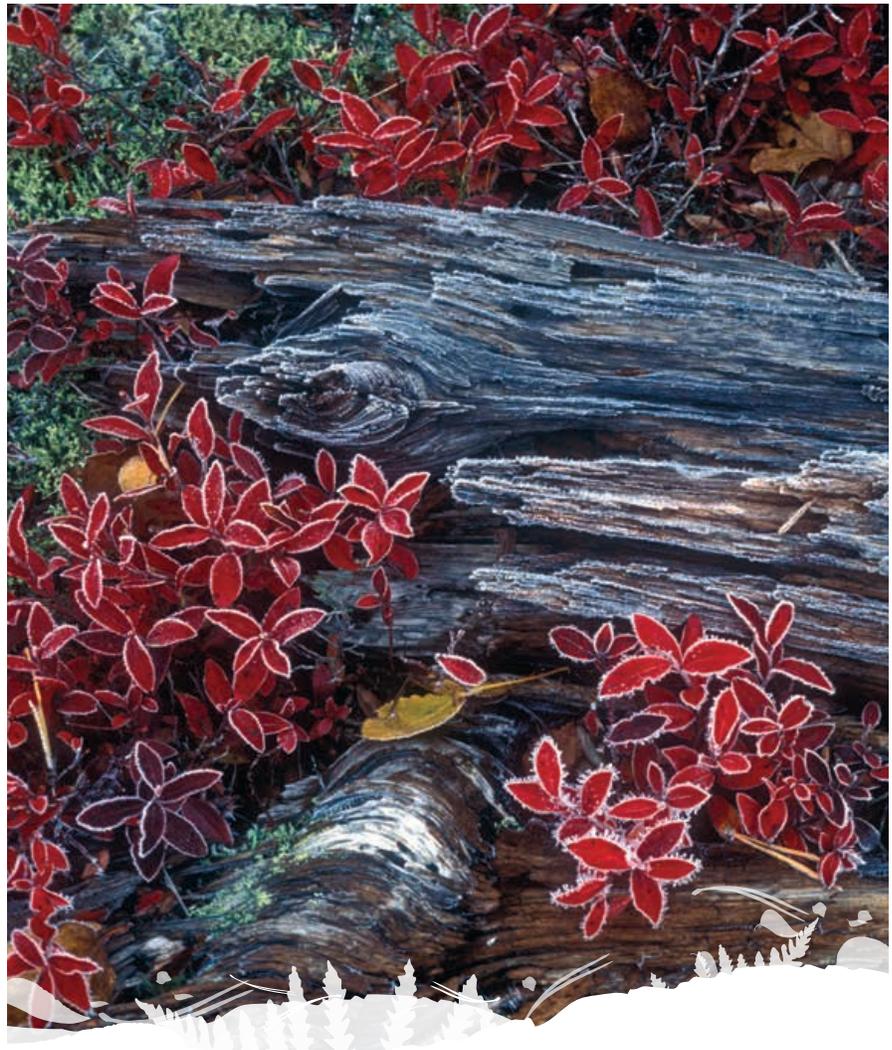


## Patriarchy

Many studies discuss how patriarchy introduced through colonialism is a key factor in producing family violence (Baskin, 2006; Cameron, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Ellington et al., 2015; Kiyoshk, 2003; Mancini Billson, 2006; Moffitt et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2001). In her early writing about family violence in Indigenous communities, Emma LaRocque (1991) argued that as part of the process of colonization, “Aboriginal men have internalized white male devaluation of women” (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 70).

In a study of domestic violence with Inuit communities in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, Mancini Billson (2006) states that Inuit identified ‘shifting gender regimes’ and lack of balance between men and women as being the cause of domestic violence and a direct outcome of multiple effects of colonialism, including the forced relocation of Inuit in the 1960s from the land to hamlets. The colonial impacts on relationships between Indigenous men and women are also noted in other studies (Ellington et al., 2015; Mancini Billson, 2006). For example, one study finds that “the devastating effects of colonization on men deprived of their status as leaders, role models, protectors and providers,” have often led to “identity confusion, social exclusion and geographic isolation,” which “are also characteristic of the life of aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence” (Ellington et al., 2015, p. 289).

Other literature acknowledges the harmful impact of colonialism on traditional Indigenous gender roles (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Taylor & Ristock, 2011), yet much of



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this literature simply acknowledges a ‘disruption’ or ‘loss’ of traditional roles and knowledge and does not make visible the more deliberate colonial state and church practices that attempted to eradicate diverse Indigenous gender expressions, ceremonies and knowledges through the imposition of heteropatriarchal values, policies, laws and overt sexual and physical violence. Taylor and Ristock (2011) is the only source within the literature we reviewed that makes these connections between colonialism and heteropatriarchy explicit.

## 3.7 Normalization, silence and hiding violence

Much of the literature identifies the reality of pervasive silence about acknowledging or naming the violence within families. A number of researchers state that family violence has become normalized in Indigenous communities such that it is “not questioned but simply accepted” (Bopp et al, 2003; Campbell 2007; Mancini Billson, 2006; Olsen Harper, 2005; Stewart et al., 2001). In one report produced by

the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, family violence was described as “the norm” such that it is “part of the way of life of many communities” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 10).

In a study conducted by the federal government, Indigenous women and first responders spoke about the way violence can become normalized and ‘almost sanctioned’ within families and communities (INAC, 2006). Some identified this as part of a ‘culture of secrecy’ (INAC, 2006). In another study, interviewees noted that there are strong beliefs that women should stay with their husband at all costs and never leave even if there is violence. Some argued this is a cultural belief, reinforced by the elders, while others saw it as rooted in colonial patriarchal beliefs about men’s inherent superiority to women (Campbell, 2007).

Identifying the ‘normalization of family violence’ is important for understanding the impact of widespread colonial state violence, economic and spiritual violence in the lives of Indigenous people. Yet a discourse about ‘normalization of family violence’ in Indigenous communities is often used to justify racist constructions of Indigenous men as inherently violent or Indigenous women as passive or likely to be victimized. Therefore, a critique of the pathologization and stereotyping that frequently accompanies this kind of framing of Indigenous peoples is necessary when discussing silence and normalization. For example, as Stewart et al. (2001) argue, the root cause of normalization of violence is institutionalized racism imposed through colonialism. In one study

in an isolated northern Indigenous community, Indigenous service providers said they believe that community members are silent about family violence due to shame and fear (Campbell, 2007); however, the researcher importantly notes that the reasons for fear and shame are linked to state intervention (fear of losing one’s children to the child welfare system, fear of a racist and punitive criminal justice system), as well as fear of retaliation and further violence.

Within the literature, a discourse about the home is often used which assumes that privacy in the home creates conditions of risk for family violence or a barrier for accessing help. In this discourse, “[h]ome is not a safe haven but a site of family violence” (Andersson et al., 2010, p. 66). This discourse ignores the many ways that the state denies privacy in Indigenous homes through increased surveillance and intervention. It also relies on a Western Eurocentric understanding of home and family and does not consider experiences and understandings of home beyond the nuclear heterosexual family home, such as home being related to land, territory, widespread kinship systems, and chosen family in the case of Two-Spirit and LGBTQ people.

While the literature names shame, fear, silence and hiding violence, it does not widely address the context of racialized state interventions and pervasive racist-sexist stereotypes about Indigenous people that produce this silence and shame. Family violence in Indigenous communities may not be hidden or veiled in secrecy for the same reasons as it may be for white and

racialized non-Indigenous people. Silence about violence may be related to the fact that Indigenous women do not in fact have the privilege of privacy. ‘Hiding’ family violence may be a response to the very public violence of racism and ongoing colonialism, and its profound effects on individuals, families and communities.

### 3.8 Family

Family violence in Indigenous communities is often defined as an “intergenerational problem” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 9) or a “cycle of intergenerational trauma” (p. 48). As noted earlier, the term ‘intergenerational’ has different meanings referring both to the intergenerational effects of violence in residential schools or of colonialism more broadly, while in other cases it refers to the way “family violence directly and indirectly affects family members of all ages” (Lester-Smith, 2013, p. 310). Most of the literature addresses the widespread impact of family violence on all ages within the family; however, there is limited discussion about the way violence affects diverse kinship systems within Indigenous nations.

The importance of integrating holistic and intergenerational understandings of the effects of violence on families has been emphasized in the literature (Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Lester-Smith, 2013). In most of the research, there is recognition of the serious impact on children and the way violent behaviours may be passed down through generations where violence eventually “becomes a learned behavior” (INAC,

2006, p. 26). The impact of loss on children has been discussed, including the loss of traditional ways of being within Indigenous families and the multiple forms of loss that children experience within families due to forced removal from their families (i.e., child welfare), death associated with violence or substance abuse, and poor health (Baskin, 2006).<sup>20</sup> Male violence against Indigenous women has a “negative impact on children (nurturing a sense of fear and insecurity and the intergenerational perpetuation of the cycle of violence)” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 3; see also Baskin, 2006 and Bopp et al., 2003). Some research describes the serious impacts on children who have witnessed or experienced family violence, including: depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, becoming violent, substance abuse, self-destructive behaviours, having difficulties in school and social relationships, and increased risk of being homeless due to the violence at home (Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Laplante, 2002; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [NCCAH], 2009).

As noted earlier, heteronormativity and a binary gender system was imposed on Indigenous families through colonialism. A heteronormative discourse about families pervades the literature about family violence, where heterosexual relationships are constructed and privileged as natural and normative.

For example, heteronormativity is apparent in the language used to describe families and partnerships throughout the literature reviewed (i.e., husbands/wives, men/women) even in articles that acknowledge the existence of non-heterosexual relationships.

Another theme related to family is the role of the colonial state in the breakdown of Indigenous families, not only through residential schools but also through the child welfare system.<sup>21</sup> Children’s experiences of witnessing family violence is often a major factor that is considered by child welfare when taking children into care (NCCAH, 2009), and many Indigenous mothers experiencing violence in intimate relationships “feel further disempowerment and fear from the very systems that are supposed to protect children” (Baskin, 2006, p. 26; see also Stewart et al., 2001). CRC (2012) provides an important intervention into the state’s role in the breakdown of Indigenous families, seeking to develop an understanding among child welfare practitioners of the relationship between intergenerational trauma, child welfare practices, and family violence.

### 3.9 Violence and health

A significant theme across the literature is the relationship between family violence and individual, family, and community health and well-being (Andersson et al., 2010;

Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003; Brownridge 2008; Daoud et al., 2013; Ellington et al., 2015; INAC, 2006; Lester-Smith, 2013; Mancini Billson, 2006; Moffitt et al., 2013; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008; Shea et al., 2010). Indeed, one study found that family violence was seen as the number one health concern among Indigenous women in Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Brownridge, 2008). Numerous health effects of family violence have been documented including, but not limited to, physical injuries such as broken bones, burns, bruises and injuries resulting in death; as well as sexual and reproductive health impacts such as unplanned pregnancies, low birth weight babies, lost pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases; urinary tract and bladder infections; and mental health effects including depression, anxiety, diminished self-esteem and sense of security, self-harm, substance abuse, eating and sleep disorders, and suicide attempts (Alani, 2013; Moffitt et al., 2012; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008; NCCAH, 2009).

In particular, the impact of family violence on mental health has been recognized (Alani, 2013; Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010; INAC, 2006; Moffitt et al., 2013; Shea et al., 2010). Mental health discourses frequently individualize the health impacts of domestic violence, with increased rates of mental health disorders being seen as an outcome of abuse. This framework tends to

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<sup>20</sup> As noted by the anonymous reviewers of this paper, high incarceration rates for Indigenous people in Canada have a significant and negative impact on Indigenous families. However, the impact of incarceration on family breakdown and loss was not discussed in the literature we analyzed and thus is not discussed in this paper.

<sup>21</sup> The Sixties Scoop was not mentioned in the literature, but we wish to note its significance here as a continuation of residential school and child removal policies.

pathologize behaviours deemed 'risky' or undesirable, such that drug and alcohol use, exchanging sex for money, 'having unwanted sex' (Andersson & Nahwagahbow 2010), or 'HIV-risk behavior' (Brownridge, 2008) become framed as mental health problems. Further, violence and anger are themselves viewed as being among the mental health challenges facing Indigenous men (Ball, 2010). These approaches, in which the behaviours of individuals who have experienced domestic violence are viewed as a sign of mental illness or the violent behaviour of abusers is viewed as mental illness, are often used even in literature in which colonization is understood as a health determinant.

Additionally, a discourse about healthy relationships runs through much of the literature. A shift to a

discourse on 'healthy relationships' was seen broadly within the feminist anti-violence movement in North America in the late 1990s and early 2000s, where an increasing number of violence prevention programs began to develop healthy relationships curricula for (predominantly heterosexual) high school students. Our review suggests that this discourse emerges at a similar time in the literature about family violence in Indigenous communities.

There are complex effects of this discourse. In some cases it reproduces an individualistic and paternalistic psychology framework, for example advocating for "educational programs to teach Aboriginal women about healthy relationships" (INAC, 2006, p. 8) or "compulsory personal growth

programs" in shelters and second stage houses such as co-dependency groups to help women form "normal healthy relationships" (Olsen Harper, 2005, pp. 31-32). Regardless of the intent of these approaches, they can lead to blaming and pathologizing women who have experienced violence, especially when the context of ongoing colonial violence that has created unhealthy relationships in Indigenous families is missing.

Taken together, these kinds of mental health or psychology framings of family violence may invalidate the importance of interdependency and relationality, and may downplay the role of ongoing colonization in patterns of violence within Indigenous families and communities. While mental health frameworks can be useful in advocating for specialized, culturally



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relevant health and anti-violence programming for Indigenous people, pathologizing language tends to individualize causes, impacts of, and solutions to violence.

In contrast, some authors (Alani, 2013; Baskin, 2006; Bopp et al., 2003) call for researchers and health practitioners to take up a holistic approach to Indigenous mental health in which intimate partner violence and family violence must be examined in “consideration of the holistic, layered, and complex life situation of Aboriginal women” (Alani, 2013, p. 236). These authors stress the importance of rebuilding healthy relationships within families and communities to promote self-esteem and self-worth as Indigenous people, while explicitly challenging Western individual and family

psychology models and emphasizing the need to move away from an individualist towards a holistic Indigenous approach (Baskin, 2006, p. 29). As Baskin (2006) states, “healing for families does not mean family therapy;” it instead focuses on “learning non-violent ways of relating to other family members based on Aboriginal values. It includes the use of traditional teachings, ceremonies, and a way of life to guide Aboriginal family members to health and well being” (p. 18).

Indeed, not addressing the interconnectedness of intimate partner violence and mental health may be harmful and contribute to ongoing colonization (Alani, 2013). In a review of interventions and approaches to reduce family

violence, Shea and colleagues (2010) found that holistic concepts of health, spirituality, traditional ceremonies, and healing practices were key to violence prevention and intervention. Within a holistic health framework, Lester-Smith (2013) redefines health as related to cultural practices, with “ancestral health-knowledges and ways of being” (p. 319) key to healing from family violence. Daoud et al. (2013) take their analysis of colonialism further in explicitly stating that the collective violence imposed through colonial systems, such as child apprehension, is directly associated with domestic violence, as restrictions on self-determination and control over land and resources continue to be a determinant of levels of family violence. Further, they state that lack of access to primary health

care, caused by systemic inequities, interferes with the ability to end abuse. In this holistic decolonial approach, “examining individual, social collective, and historic as well as contemporary experiences of Aboriginal women and their use of health care and social services is important not only to understand their experiences of abuse, but to the development of culturally relevant and effective services” (Daoud et al., 2013, p. 282). Rather than using a lens focused on individual behaviour or individual health, Daoud et al. (2013) pinpoint socio-economic position as the cause of high rates of family violence, suggesting that efforts to reduce violence must focus on understanding colonial narratives, and on improving social capital and access to social services within culturally appropriate frameworks. Similarly, Bopp and colleagues (2003) make the connection between family violence, the breakdown and undermining of Aboriginal cultural values, and the poor health and well-being of individuals, families and communities. They argue that rebuilding Aboriginal nations is necessary for improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal people. Additionally, the impact of family violence on the overall health and well-being of Indigenous communities has been discussed with the identified need for community healing (Baskin, 2006; Stewart et al., 2001), which is, in turn, necessary for nation-building.

Within the literature, health care workers are understood to play a key role, among other first responders, in addressing the health impacts of family violence, thus making cultural competency among health practitioners central to fully preventing and responding

to violence. In some rural and reserve communities, nurses and other health practitioners may be the only service providers available – a situation which is problematic in and of itself. Puchala et al. (2010) suggest that forced assimilation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples have led to the loss of control over their communities and lives, thus forcing dependency on government for sustenance and health care. In this context, the authors suggest that health programs and practitioners should integrate elders within community-based spiritual approaches to health in order to reduce domestic violence within a framework of cultural revitalization and self-determination.

### 3.10 Geographic considerations

Issues of place are discussed in the literature, with general agreement that family violence is impacted in diverse ways by the historic and contemporary geographic factors facing Indigenous communities. Some authors argue that increased isolation experienced by residents of rural, northern and geographically isolated communities may lead to increased vulnerability and compound patterns of family violence (Campbell, 2007; Dreddy, 2002; Mancini Billson, 2006). However, others note that geographic isolation or smallness of communities in and of itself may not cause vulnerability to violence but, rather, it depends on how geographic and social contexts *produce* vulnerability. For example, in one study, “several interviewees believed that before [forced] relocation, prior to moving from the island, the problem was not a

hidden one, as it could not be, due to the close proximity of neighbors” (Campbell, 2007, p. 67). Some state that the impact of geographic factors is not unilateral, as “the degree to which a community is geographically or socially isolated can either reinforce the isolation and control measures abusers attempt to impose on their victims, or can serve to thwart them” (Bopp et al., 2003, p. 61). Further, research by Stewart and colleagues (2001) found that while “there was some variation between rural and urban Aboriginal communities, there were more commonalities than differences” in terms of levels of violence, silencing and confidentiality issues (pp. 36-37). However, the study affirmed that rural communities tend to have diminished access to resources for addressing and preventing family violence.

Although the literature included discussion of family violence in diverse geographic contexts, there was little recognition of the grassroots anti-violence initiatives taking place in rural and isolated communities, particularly in northern areas. We observed that although Inuit organizations such as Pauktuutit are doing incredible work on family violence within Inuit cultural frameworks in isolated northern contexts, this work is not recognized in much of the literature, which generally utilizes pan-Indigenous approaches. Thus, the power and specificity of grassroots mobilization in small, rural and northern geographic contexts is not being recognized to the extent that it should.

### 3.11 Solutions identified in the literature

The literature provides a range of approaches to addressing Indigenous family violence, but there is general agreement (aside from several government studies) that government initiatives alone will not and cannot provide long-term change. While some research emphasizes state-based solutions, including policing and justice initiatives, the majority focuses on approaches that address violence with at least some use of Indigenous cultural and social practices. Thus, the solutions in the literature might be understood along a continuum, which at one end, locates change within government initiatives, at the other end, locates change within Indigenous cultural teachings and knowledge, and in the middle, includes approaches that advocate a combination of the two. Below, the discussion of solutions has been broken into three sections: state-based solutions, expansive solutions that seek to foster change beyond formal state mechanisms, and community intervention and response models.

While some innovative program models are discussed in the literature, including training manuals and program models, little research is available which evaluates the outcomes of proposed programs or models. A 2010 examination of available international literature on the prevention of Indigenous family violence found that few studies focus exclusively on Indigenous communities and those that are available do not provide strong empirical evidence on the success of various approaches (Shea et al.,

*... regardless of whether or not Indigenous people lived on or off reserve...informal networks of family and friends are seen as a major support in responding to family violence.*

2010). Although there are debates within academic and community circles about privileging certain kinds of science, knowledge and evidence and the way these claims may devalue diverse forms of Indigenous knowledge, some of the literature identifies the gap in scientific research on anti-violence solutions as a problem that needs to be addressed. For example, Richardson and Wade (2010) call for greater evidence-based controlled studies of psychiatric or mental health care for survivors of family violence, with quantitative analyses of the impact of interventions. Further, Andersson and colleagues (2010) call for gathering hard scientific evidence about how resilience can be used to reduce domestic violence, arguing that RCTs (randomized controlled trials) have more impact on national resource allocation than a Prevention Research Agenda (PRA) or a cross-sectional study. Advocating for a more culturally grounded methodology, Andersson and Nahwagahbow (2010) outline a PRA to ending family violence, using culturally specific research, evidence synthesis, local theory development, ethical aspects, and methods emphasizing intervention. We recognize that the scope of our review may have limited our access to evaluation of best practices, which may be available within local-level research on specific program models not currently found in academic search engines.

Directives are also provided on the ethical and cultural considerations for designing future research on solutions to family violence. Research on restorative justice (RJ) and intimate partner violence in

Indigenous communities needs to take seriously the concerns raised about a lack of gender and diversity analysis in planning and implementation, which often results in women survivors of violence being revictimized through RJ processes (Campbell, 2007, p. 57). As well, researchers should aim to move away from “romanticized and abstract notions of what can be achieved” and focus on actual lived experiences of victims and offenders (Campbell, 2007, p. 60).

In general, the literature indicates that formal government-funded resources to address well-being and safety on reserve are much scarcer than off-reserve programs. One federal government study emphasizes the difference in resources available to address family violence on and off reserve (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). Urban resources include crisis centres and shelters, hotlines, friendship centres, and counseling services. On-reserve resources include health care professionals, health centre referrals to off-reserve and urban resources, and police. However, regardless of whether or not Indigenous people lived on or off reserve, the study finds that informal networks of family and friends are seen as a major support in responding to family violence.

### State-based solutions

There is general recognition that government policies, programs and services are currently ill-equipped to fully address Indigenous family violence. Thus, some research focuses on ways to improve government services for Indigenous clients, such as through cultural sensitivity training for first

responders, better police responses, more money for counseling and transportation to counseling, better privacy training, treatment for offenders, and long-term engagement in the justice system (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). These solutions call for a deepened relationship between Indigenous people, both offenders and victims, and Canadian government systems. Within this same government study, Indigenous research participants identify the need for increased women’s leadership and involvement in community decision-making as being key to preventing abuse (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). This finding is mentioned in passing, while state-based solutions to assist Indigenous people are discussed over the majority of the 42-page report. Thus we found that the emphasis on locating change within government approaches led some researchers to overlook the significant roles of Indigenous people themselves.

Recognizing the ongoing role that state actors play in Indigenous families, homes and communities as an expression of ongoing colonization, some sources provide resources for social workers, counselors and others to investigate the ways they can change their practices in order to decrease harm. For example, CRC (2012) provides child welfare practitioners in Ontario with the education and resources to strengthen their own practice, create meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, and become an advocate for systemic change within the framework of reconciliation. Rooted in the principles of truth-

telling, acknowledging, restoring and relating, this resource actively seeks to reorient state actors toward Indigenous and decolonial principles for promoting family well-being.

This critical approach to state intervention is echoed in the analysis of some researchers who warn against the potential harms from pathologizing and individualistic approaches to trauma therapy within state-supported mental health systems. Richardson and Wade (2010) assert that putting Indigenous children who experience family violence through psychiatric care can further stigmatize them and subject them to additional racism, which they argue is a violation of their fundamental human rights. Overall, state-based approaches to prevention, intervention and healing from family violence are found to be lacking, in need of improvement, decolonization and/or an all-out rejection.

### **Police and criminal justice mechanisms**

Indigenous peoples' uneasy and often distrustful relationship with police and the Canadian justice system is evident throughout the literature. Despite this recognition, some authors maintain an emphasis on the role of criminal justice approaches while ignoring extra-legal solutions to family violence. For example, this is evident in lengthy discussion of statistics about disclosure of violence to police while neglecting statistics about disclosing incidents of violence to family, friends and neighbors within the same study (Andersson & Nahwagahbow, 2010). Criminal justice system responses to Indigenous family violence are seen as minimal and ineffective, leading

some to call for greater punitive measures (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). This reflects a bias towards viewing violence as a crime rather than as a broader social phenomenon and overlooking the harmful effects of over-criminalization of Indigenous peoples in some of the literature, which in turn limits solutions to those based in formal justice mechanisms.

Some recognize and critique problems with the criminal justice system but also advocate for a blended model of collaboration with the justice system that draws on Indigenous community knowledge and experiences (Bopp et al., 2003; Campbell, 2007). Others are wary of criminal justice solutions to family violence, calling instead for "approaches other than the socio-judicial treatment of domestic violence" (Ellington et al., 2015, p. 288). Baskin (2006) argues that the "criminalization of family violence and Western methods of intervention and treatment have not helped to ease the situation" (p. 15) and, in fact, often contribute to revictimization. Campbell (2007) builds on the work of Emma LaRocque (1997) in arguing that most of the 'white-stream' punitive criminal justice system responses have been ineffective and make the problem worse by isolating offenders from their family and community without providing the kind of interventions needed to change violent behaviours. Conversely, problems also arise when offenders are released back into the community "without formal sanctioning" (Campbell, 2007, p. 60), as this implies that family violence is being condoned or ignored. Within

this context, law enforcement and social workers are typically seen by Indigenous people as "agents of social control rather than of social change" (Baskin, 2006, p. 15). Indeed, some scholars note that legal representatives themselves feel the criminal justice system is incapable of responding to intergenerational trauma, including in cases of domestic and family violence (Paletta, 2008).

In recognition of the limited ability of criminal justice approaches to change patterns of family violence, RJ approaches have been developed to provide alternatives to incarceration for offenders. Instead, RJ uses cultural and community resources to foster change in patterns of behavior such as through the use of sentencing circles which involve community and family members. Opinions on the use of RJ in addressing family violence are mixed. In research with Canadian judges, Belknap and McDonald (2010) report that their participants see the potential for naming intimate partner abuse in a community setting to increase awareness and foster greater responsibility on the part of defendants. Yet the authors raise a number of concerns, specifically the potential for RJ to result in further colonization and racism, as a model through which mostly white judges can widen the net to ensnare Indigenous people into criminal legal systems (Belknap & McDonald, 2010). In research on the use of RJ in cases of violence against women and children in British Columbia, Stewart and colleagues (2001) find that while some Indigenous women support the use of RJ, others vehemently oppose its use in cases of violence against



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women and sex crimes. In this study, concerns were raised about gendered power imbalances between men and women and how these often play out in the implementation of RJ. The authors note that many women stated:

*they felt they had less power in their communities than men and that the system was designed to privilege and benefit males. The power imbalances within these communities are usually complex and bureaucratic. Band councils were often cited as reflecting the ways of the colonizer, with men holding power in the communities. (p. 39)*

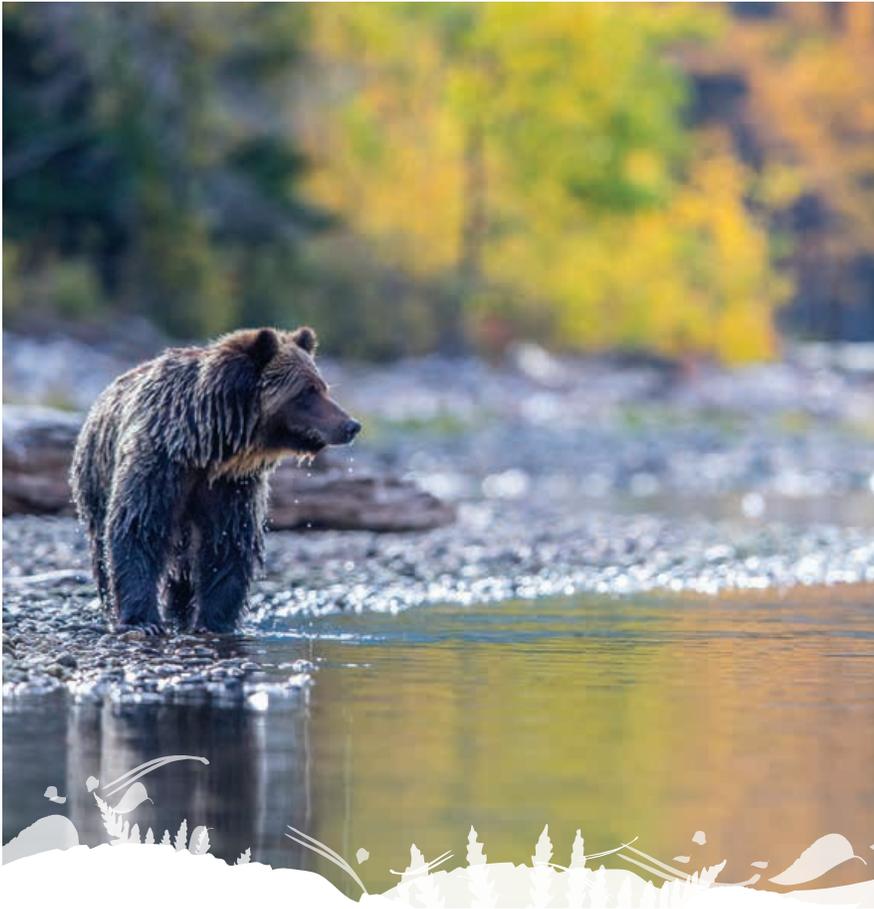
Additional concerns about RJ's use in situations of family violence include safety concerns for women whose offenders are serving their sentences in the community rather than in a facility.

Further, critics have said that because RJ is viewed as a 'traditional' and 'cultural' model for dealing with conflict, it has the potential to perpetuate harmful views of 'tradition' and 'culture' in which Indigenous cultures become viewed as static or frozen in time rather than as pluralistic, ever-evolving and adaptive (Cameron, 2006; Stewart et al., 2001). Yet concepts of 'tradition' are mobilized differently by different stakeholders, as "[RJ] is used by Aboriginal women's groups to denote a respected place held by Aboriginal women within their nations prior to colonization, which they believe should inform contemporary Aboriginal justice models" (Cameron, 2006, p. 53). Stewart et al. (2001) argue that it is difficult to define traditional practices after centuries of colonization, asking "So who is defining 'culture'?" (p. 57).

This concern was echoed by an Indigenous respondent in the study who was concerned that it is primarily non-Indigenous judges and other legal representatives who are creating these alternative justice programs. Thus, Cameron (2006) argues that future research on the use of RJ must "examine factors such as offender's manipulation of the process, emphasis on reconciliation, the resources available to violent men and to victims, and the presence or absence of feminist voices in planning, executing and evaluating these initiatives" (pp. 59-60).

### Expansive approaches to changing norms around violence

To varying degrees, the literature describes broad-based approaches to changing norms around violence in Indigenous families and communities, considering both the impact of colonization and the role



*...the restoration of Indigenous peoples' place-based connections to land, water and animals within culturally specific practices are integral to changing Indigenous peoples' relationships to violence.*

of cultural and political resurgence. In a BC-focused study, Richardson and Wade (2010) use an Indigenous rights framework to assert the need to address social and economic conditions that increase peoples' vulnerability to violence, including poverty and housing, protection from discrimination, and the right to integrity and security. In doing so, they advocate for the expansion of the provincial Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) mandate to enable the Ministry to address poverty and housing in order to avoid child apprehension. On the other hand, due to the colonizing role of state systems as a whole, Baskin (2006) stresses that interventions and solutions:

*must take an approach that is community controlled and culture based. Such an approach must be holistic in nature and, therefore, needs to include interventions that centre on community awareness, healing processes for the entire family, and an alternative to the present criminal justice system. (p. 15)*

Overall, these approaches to ending family violence indicate that colonialism is a key factor in interrupting traditional kinship relationships and, thus, broad social changes are needed in order to revitalize healthy Indigenous families and communities. Approaches described below include the importance of a relational approach, community

leadership, land-based and cultural practices, individual and collective healing, fostering resilience and individual agency, revitalizing Indigenous gender roles, and strengthening extended community support networks.

### **Relational approach**

The literature indicates that family violence must approach change through a "relational lens," in which violence is understood "as a violation of the relationship the person has with others, including family and community, rather than an individual act or behavior" (citing Ross, 2002 in Campbell, 2007, p. 76). Emphasis is thus on offering healthy relationship education (National

Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008), conflict regulation, and family healing models which locate change within interpersonal relationships rather than solely individual behavior (Ellington et al., 2015). This recognition of the impact of violence on kinship and community networks is consistent with Indigenous legal traditions. Thus, informal networks of family and friends are identified as a key resource for people who have experienced violence or in the prevention of violence (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). However, it is worth noting that within government research, these relationships are often not recognized as a strength of Indigenous anti-violence solutions (i.e., National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). Instead, as described above, state-based crime-oriented solutions often separate men from women (offenders from victims) through gender-based programs. These approaches differ from models below that build on the strength of extended family networks, revitalizing their role in Indigenous cultural practices and self-determination.

### **Community leadership**

The leadership of Indigenous people is vital to changing norms and patterns around violence within Indigenous families and communities. Long-term changes in the rates of family violence are seen by some to require local autonomy or control as:

*Solutions must be 'owned' by the community. Having lost so much, Aboriginal people are struggling to regain power and independence. Taking ownership starts with designing solutions*

*that are community-based and community-driven, which can be adapted by the community to reflect its own culture and meet its own needs as community members define them. (Dreaddy, 2002, p. 19)*

In particular, changes in gendered violence are said to require male leadership to “commit to long-term undertakings to isolate and weed out factors that condone violence against women and children” (Olsen Harper, 2005, p. 13). However, leadership does not need to come solely from recognized leaders, such as elected or hereditary chiefs, but can come from community members who become leaders in local anti-violence work. Indeed, while some felt optimistic about increased opposition to family violence from Indigenous leaders, others worry that “abuse may simply go further underground within the still prevalent culture of secrecy surrounding this issue in Aboriginal communities” (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008, p. 3). Thus, the literature reflects a diversity of views on where leadership on ending violence should come from.

### **Land-based and cultural practices**

The revitalization of cultural practices and the restoration of “cultural continuity,” such as through land-based teachings, are seen by some to be central to changing norms around family violence. Since colonization plays a large role in the disproportionate likelihood of violence against Indigenous women, “global initiatives designed to restore missing elements of Aboriginal culture” are necessary for “the primary prevention of violence against Aboriginal women in

Canada” (Brownridge, 2003, p. 81). Indeed, some authors see a strong connection between family violence and the disconnection from land through forced relocation, urbanization, or loss of land-based practices due to residential schools or other assimilative regimes. In Campbell’s (2007) study in a northern Indigenous community that has experienced forced relocation, interviewees stated that an awakening about family violence is taking place with increased willingness to speak out and develop new approaches that are grounded in traditional knowledge of the “elders, returning to the ‘bush,’ and specific workshop and justice initiatives” aimed at improved living conditions, inter-generational communication, and inter-connection (p. 72). Many interviewees suggested that spending time on the land and relying on traditional means for living as this community has done for centuries (i.e., hunting, trapping, fishing, shelter and meal preparation) should be an “integral part of any future response to family violence” (Campbell, 2007, p. 72). Similarly, in discussing solutions to domestic violence in Inuit communities, Mancini Billson (2006) notes that many Inuit elders have “stated very simply, if contemporary Inuit were to follow traditional Inuit practices, the need for courts, prisons, and shelters system would not exist in the first place” (p. 81). Thus, the restoration of Indigenous peoples’ place-based connections to land, water and animals within culturally specific practices are integral to changing Indigenous peoples’ relationships to violence.

### Individual and collective healing

Both individual and collective healing are discussed as central to broad-based solutions to family violence (Alani, 2013; Bopp et al., 2003, Kiyoshk, 2003; Lester-Smith, 2013). Healing is often understood within culturally specific terms. Campbell (2007) builds on Lee Maracle’s identification of the importance of a different approach from the dominant responses where “the concepts of healing – rather than merely responding to incidents of violence – and the focus on wellness demand a strategy that is different from the current responses to family violence” (p. 76). For example, cultural continuity is viewed as a common protective factor among interventions they analyzed, which “took into account Aboriginal beliefs, holistic concepts of health, spirituality, traditional

ceremonies, and healing practices” (Shea et al., 2010, p. 8). For Indigenous women, holistic healing is said to include “celebrating their womanhood, traditions, and culture” (Alani, 2013, p. 237). In these ways, healing is connected to broader cultural revitalization, including both the use of culturally specific healing practices and the collective process of healing in the context of ongoing colonialism.

### Fostering resilience and individual agency

Some literature emphasizes the important role of building individual resilience and agency in order to cope with historic and ongoing violence. This approach counters a dominant research trend focused on what is wrong, and instead frames solutions centred on existing strengths. Although these are

individual qualities, they are fostered within the context of broad family and community relationships. Resilience is understood to be “the means by which people choose to use individual and community strengths to protect themselves and to build their future,” including spirituality, family strength, elders, ceremony, oral traditions, identity and support networks (Andersson et al., 2010, p. 64). In turn, reducing incidence of family violence is seen to mean “an *increase in the proportion of ‘decision enabled’*” (Andersson et al., 2010, p. 66, italics in original) or people who have choice over their sexual and reproductive risks. Thus, reduction in incidents of violence helps to build individual agency, while decreased trauma allows for greater individual sense of choice.



*...revitalizing Indigenous women's cultural roles and respect for their leadership are seen as central to changing norms around family violence.*



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### **Revitalizing Indigenous gender roles**

In general, the gender analysis in the literature focuses on greater respect for Indigenous women and revitalization of women's leadership roles, with somewhat less focus on the role of men in changing cycles of abuse. The solutions described in the literature operate entirely within a heteronormative framework, as Two-Spirit people and LGBTQ relationships are mostly absent from discussions of gender and sexuality.

The RCAP (1996b) is commonly cited in the literature, as Indigenous women speaking at the hearings stated that the best hope for ending family violence is the "restoration of traditional Aboriginal values of respect for women and children and reintegration of women into family, community and nation decision making" (n.p.). The need for women's full and active

participation in anti-violence solutions is pointed out strongly in the RCAP recommendations which call for ensuring "full and equal participation of women ... in decision making bodies responsible for ensuring people's physical and emotional security, including justice committees and boards of directors of healing centres" (Dreaddy, 2002, p. 19). Further, research on the provision of services to women living on reserve indicate that an experienced Indigenous woman would be better equipped and more trustworthy to provide anti-violence services than non-Indigenous service providers (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). Thus, revitalizing Indigenous women's cultural roles and respect for their leadership are seen as central to changing norms around family violence.

To a lesser extent, the literature explores men's role in changing norms around violence, with a particular focus on revitalizing the cultural roles of men as fathers and caregivers. Ball (2010) says that Euro-western perspectives of fathering overlook cultural strengths and sources of resilience which are key to Indigenous men reclaiming their roles as fathers within broader circles of care. The research offers a multi-generational perspective on becoming a father after the disrupted transmission of fathering caused by various colonial government interventions. In the study, some fathers describe enacting a "hegemonic masculinity borrowed from mainstream media depictions and observations of non-Indigenous men," including violent and angry behavior (Ball, 2010, p. 131). Intergenerational abuse is also discussed, as several



*...people who met with elders as part of their treatment experienced dramatic reductions in incidents of domestic violence attributed in part to the elders' gentle approach, compassion, spiritual practice...*

fathers “reported that engaging with their children evoked painful memories or glimpses of childhoods that had been punctuated by abuse or family violence, death of a parent, or abruptly changing circumstances, such as residential school or apprehension by child protection services” (Ball, 2010, p. 132). Rather than solely being passed on among men, learning to become fathers does not occur in isolation; rather, their own mothers and female partners play important roles in the transmission of fathering capacities, including their capacity to form intimate relationships with their children and to become engaged caregivers. The reference to

‘circles of care’ evokes a conception of family that is “consistent with culturally and historically collectivist communities in which deeply intertwined relationships among family members provide a network of care for children, as opposed to the nuclear family unit of care characteristic of western European family life” (Ball, 2010, p. 134).

*The Warriors Against Violence* program also provides a group model in which men can unlearn western gender norms and restore Indigenous principles of responsibility to others. Instead of relying on kinship networks, the program brings together groups

of men (and, to a lesser extent, women) in which “the safe space [becomes] their extended family of trust, vulnerability, hurts, happiness and guidance in their lives” (Lester-Smith, 2013, p. 319). Other groups that are discussed in the literature use similar approaches that integrate spiritual and cultural practices in collective and holistic healing models, for example the use of the medicine wheel in the *Change of Seasons* program in British Columbia (Kiyoshk, 2003). Thus, it is evident that changes in the behaviours of Indigenous men cannot happen in isolation or through individual treatment, but are instead enacted through collective measures.

## Community intervention and response models

While the section above describes discussion of broad shifts in community and family norms around violence, the literature also provides specific intervention and response models for attending to Indigenous family violence when it occurs. These approaches differ from those described in the section above on state-based responses in that they emphasize the use of culturally-specific models that reconnect family members rather than fostering greater disconnection. These approaches often blend Indigenous cultural traditions with non-Indigenous approaches to respond to the needs of victims, those who have been abusive, and extended family and communities.

Some models focus on healing individual male perpetrators in order to change their violent behaviours while avoiding further family disconnection, such as the Partner Assault Response (PAR) which uses cultural teachings to change individual patterns of abuse (CRC, 2012). However, the majority of approaches do not focus on perpetrators alone, but instead advocate programs for women and their children, or for extended families including the integration of elders and other respected cultural leaders. Unlike justice system responses, these intervention and response models emphasize solutions that involve entire networks of those impacted by violence.

### **Beyond talk therapy: Use of visual methods in counseling**

Arts-based and visual methods, such as the Life Story Board (LSB) tool, have been advocated as a therapeutic

and assessment tool that allows for the involvement of entire families in helping them develop greater understanding of cycles of violence (Chase et al., 2010). Developed for use with children in countries with armed conflict, LSB has been found to be useful in diverse Indigenous contexts in which family violence has occurred, including women's shelters, with expectant mothers from northern reserves, and with residential school survivors. This visual process is said to "draw out resilience and coping strategies and supports, helping someone to visualize a way through and out of a vicious cycle" (Chase et al., 2010, p. 151). When adapted for use with traditional Indigenous teachings of local communities, LSB has further potential to be used in collective community assessments and interventions into existing realities of family violence.

### **Role of elders in mending kinship relations**

The importance of integrating the wisdom of elders in community programs was emphasized in the literature (Baskin, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Mancini Billson, 2006). In a program initiated by a Lakota/Cherokee psychiatrist, Puchala and colleagues (2010) discuss efforts to improve clinical care through the integration of elders in treatment for Indigenous people who have experienced domestic violence. Research was conducted on the clinical counseling experiences of 113 Indigenous people from Saskatoon, as well as surrounding Cree, Dakota and northern Dene communities who were given the option to include an elder in their treatment. The study found that people who met with elders as part

of their treatment experienced dramatic reductions in incidents of domestic violence attributed in part to the elders' gentle approach, compassion, spiritual practice, and the inclusion of the perpetrators in discussions about violence (to the extent that this approach was agreed upon). Extended kinship networks were involved, as "elders were able to involve the family on both sides of the couple in ways that medical professionals cannot," challenging the stories they have received about violence by replacing them with stories about respectful relationships (p. 93). Storytelling was central to this process, as "the elders appeared to be engaged in a social process of reconstructing self-narratives into redemptive scripts for the future as a process of 'making good'" (Puchala et al., 2010, p. 93). This approach facilitates the shifting of a participant's identity from one of victimization to one that refuses violence through traditional cultural practice. This model demonstrates the role of elders within extended family – in effect, part of their kinship network, even if not related by blood. Thus, the authors advocate for the strength of interventions that restore traditional practices and involve elders in the treatment of all family members who have been impacted by cycles of violence.

### **Extended family involvement in therapy**

Richardson and Wade (2010) provide a family therapy model for a restorative process undertaken with a perspective that does not minimize the violence nor perpetuate a colonial code of relations where community members receive help from so-called experts. Rather, *Islands of Safety* was created to "address and redress what has

been taken, to create safety and restore dignity to families” (p. 137), designed in conjunction with Métis Community Services in British Columbia. Using a more-than-social determinants approach, they assert that “healing is facilitated by social justice and families are often blamed for its absence rather than held up in an intricate social network based on love and the provision of particular situational needs” (p. 138). People are treated as spirited and agentive beings who sometimes choose to use violence but who could also choose respect. In this approach, “[w]here possible, and with a maximum level of choice, Indigenous families are invited to discuss their hopes and dreams for their family through a Metis/Cree model of family life, by identifying how their family has responded to current and historical violence and oppression” (p. 138). Countering the dehumanization of colonization is key to this approach: “the restoration of dignity occurs when the injured party is supported in pursuing just redress. Dignity is expressed in the insatiable desire for self-governance in the context of freedom and equality” (p. 138). *Islands of Safety* uses the language of human rights and social justice rather than of psychology, providing participants with ways to identify

how people respond to and resist violence rather than how they are affected or impacted by it.

### **Community-based shelters**

Organizing safe and supportive shelters for Indigenous women and children experiencing violence has been one strategy to respond to family violence. At the very basic level, shelters provide a physically safe environment, food and clothing, emotional support, information about abuse and related impacts, systems advocacy, and connection with others to reduce or minimize isolation (Olsen Harper, 2005).<sup>22</sup>

The National Aboriginal Clearinghouse on Family Violence (NACAFV) emerged out of grassroots organizing by Indigenous people working to address family violence who saw the need for coordination at the national level to address the problems with underfunding and under-resourcing of Indigenous services responding to family violence. They also recognize the importance of increasing capacities of Indigenous communities in areas of family violence prevention, intervention and long term healing.<sup>23</sup> As a national network, they initiate, design and coordinate culturally appropriate

programs, advocate for the needs of Indigenous shelters, and identify best practices. Their members include INAC funded shelters (on and off reserve), Aboriginal specific shelters and second-stage housing, and Aboriginal family violence and outreach programs.

The NACAFV regularly consults with Indigenous shelter staff to identify best practices, needs and gaps in shelters. A study of best practices by the NACAFV involving consultations with twelve Aboriginal shelters in diverse geographical locations on and off reserve, identified profound, chronic and ongoing underfunding, lack of staff training, staff burnout and high turnover, and lack of awareness or normalization of family violence within Indigenous communities as the most pressing issues (Olsen Harper, 2005). Knowledge sharing remains an important tool for reducing isolation, preventing burnout and strengthening initiatives within communities, and includes the development and distribution of best practice and training manuals, as well as opportunities for training and dialogue amongst Indigenous shelter staff in forums, conferences, webinars and blogs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The federal government provides funding through the Family Violence Prevention Program (FVPP) of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), for forty-one shelters, as well as community family violence prevention projects on and off reserve, which include public awareness campaigns, workshops, support groups, and community needs assessments (INAC, 2016). The FVPP also provides funding to the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence to act as a national network to support shelters and their staff through training, prevention activities, research and collaboration with key partners.

<sup>23</sup> For more information, see their website: <http://www.nacafv.ca>.

<sup>24</sup> Although it did not show up in the literature search, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada has contributed significantly to developing culturally significant shelter programs within Inuit communities. As part of their longstanding commitment to address and prevent family violence and abuse, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada created a *National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities*, and *Sharing Knowledge, Sharing Wisdom: Guide to the National Strategy* and through this, they developed the *Making Our Shelters Strong* project. The shelter project includes workshop training materials and a website including a blog and secure space for workers for peer support, networking and information sharing (Pauktuutit, 2007; 2011).

While Indigenous shelter programs provide many essential supports within communities and are in urgent need of increased resources, some have also raised questions about whether a shelter model is best-suited as a primary approach to address family violence in Indigenous communities. For example, Olsen Harper (2005) note:

*women's shelters are the only focal point for addressing the issue of family violence in the various communities examined; there appears to be little movement to garner other support to address the issue. The question certainly arises as to whether women's shelters should be considered to be the primary vehicles to combat family violence in Aboriginal communities. Shelters may wish to position themselves as only one of several key agencies spearheading efforts in this area within a community. The question certainly arises as to whether women's shelters should be considered to be the primary vehicles to combat family violence in Aboriginal communities.*  
(p. 8)





*The movement towards Aboriginal self-determination  
rooted in community-based responsibility, action,  
ownership, and empowerment needs to be respected  
and supported*

*(Baskin, 2006, p. 28).*

# 4.0 DECOLONIZING FAMILY VIOLENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE



*The movement towards Aboriginal self-determination rooted in community-based responsibility, action, ownership, and empowerment needs to be respected and supported. Aboriginal communities must have the jurisdiction, legal responsibility, and financial resources to determine their own local priorities, standards, and organizational capacities to address all aspects of family violence interventions. This includes community-based healing for all of its members. (Baskin, 2006, p. 28)*

Beyond the formal family violence literature, communities and individuals are undertaking initiatives to decrease violence in Indigenous communities within larger self-determination and resurgence movements. In this section, we discuss some of the ways communities are working to address family violence, and to redefine dominant framings of ‘family’ and ‘violence,’ within decolonial and culturally-specific frameworks. We discuss several individual initiatives and then provide a series of principles which we believe are shared across

approaches to addressing family violence within decolonial analyses. This section is not intended to provide an exhaustive study of community approaches; rather, it gestures towards the expansive work being done beyond formal academic and government research in order to show the great potential of this work in pushing past some of the limitations we identified earlier – in particular, addressing state violence and heteropatriarchy.

There is a diverse array of initiatives to address family violence that do not show up in the literature, many of which are known only by individuals living in close proximity to the people undertaking them. We seek to hold up the significant contributions these initiatives make to shifting norms around violence within frameworks that foster the leadership of Indigenous people and communities. In our work on this issue over the years, we have observed a number of approaches taken by Indigenous communities and individuals, which include:

1. working within or in relation to state systems in order to effect change and lessen systemic harm, and
2. working entirely outside of state systems in order to center Indigenous approaches and/or to center a critique of those systems as violent.

These two approaches reflect the range of strategies being used to navigate the colonial power relations discussed in the literature review.

One recent initiative aimed at bridging Indigenous communities and state systems is *The Indigenous Communities Safety Project (ICSP)*, an initiative of the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia (EVA BC) led by Indigenous women. The program is intended to share knowledge with Indigenous leadership (including governance leadership, service providers and the natural leadership) in Indigenous communities related to criminal justice, family justice and child protection laws, policies and practices that directly affect systemic



responses to domestic and sexual violence, child abuse and neglect. The purpose of ICSP is to empower Indigenous service providers to increase safety among Indigenous communities – especially women and children – by becoming aware of their legal rights, understanding lethal risk factors, and accessing services and the justice system if they become victimized. They also work to foster local relationships between Indigenous leadership and anti-violence service providers. The project takes an expansive view of violence as impacting Indigenous women, family, community and Nation. The Coordinator worked with Legal Services Society (LSS) and EVA BC to integrate their public legal publications and violence against women related materials into

three-day community workshops. The community workshops include four modules: History and Impacts of Colonization, Breaking the Silence, The Right to be Safe, and Healing.

Focused on reducing harm through drawing on local knowledge and resources, ICSP has supported communities to identify practical ways to improve safety and access to justice for women and children, including the development of domestic abuse safety plans and preparing Indigenous communities with the tools they need to identify ‘lethal domestic violence’, such as identifying risk factors, responding to disclosures, and negotiating help. Additionally, they have improved the ability of service providers to better

assist Indigenous communities, especially women and children, to keep themselves safe, to be aware of their legal rights, and to access justice if they experience violence. Emphasis of ICSP is on better educating Indigenous people on Canadian law and policy in order to know what mechanisms are available to improve their safety, including relevant aspects of the Criminal Code, the RCMP Primary Aggressor Policy, the provincial Violence against Women Policy, the High Risk Domestic Violence Protocol, and the Child Protection Domestic Violence Guidelines. This is one example of an initiative which seeks to work in relationship with state systems in order to improve their effectiveness in addressing violence within Indigenous communities, while also

centering a decolonial approach that considers the local realities of diverse communities.

Further, resources within this project attempt to counter heteronormative assumptions about Indigenous families by naming same-sex relationships, as well as transphobia and homophobia in discussions of abuse in their training materials. This is a promising first step in naming LGBTQ2S lives, something which could be deepened by integrating Two-Spirit traditions and Indigenous knowledge about gender and sexuality. Although patriarchy is often recognized as central to settler colonial power relations, the family violence literature and many community initiatives are largely absent of mechanisms through which to dismantle or

confront heteropatriarchy. This trend is connected to dominant analyses of gendered violence in Indigenous communities in which “binary gendered analyses miss the opportunity to make connections between the erasure of two-spirit traditions and the impact of colonial patriarchy on the position of women in Indigenous communities” (Hunt, 2015, p. 104). Indigenous approaches to confronting family violence can counter heteronormativity by centering Indigenous notions of kinship which make it possible to consider the lives of *all* Indigenous people outside of binary constructions of gender. We see this as essential for avoiding the replication of homophobia and transphobia, which we understand as an expression of family violence when Two-Spirit people experience

these forms of violence within their family homes.

One area of Indigenous anti-violence work that is working from decolonial approaches that understand both state violence and heteronormativity as inherent to colonialism is Indigenous youth sexual health. Both formal organizations and small, informal groups of youth across Canada and the United States are using peer education in which Indigenous youth are creating models for healthy relationships, rooted in the reclamation of their own sexual health. This work entails unlearning colonial practices in order to allow young people to understand consent, choice, and desire in ways that are aligned with decolonial principles and cultural teachings. Much of this

*Indigenous approaches to confronting family violence can counter heteronormativity by centering Indigenous notions of kinship which make it possible to consider the lives of all Indigenous people outside of binary constructions of gender.*



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work emerges out of the grassroots educational and advocacy work of HIV/AIDS organizations, in which Indigenous leadership has flourished.

Relatedly, youth-led organizations like the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) work with young people across the United States and Canada to destigmatize youth sexuality and to create spaces in which the relationships and lives of all youth are accounted for in conversations of “sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice.”<sup>25</sup> This includes working with groups of youth who are marginalized within their own communities and who have been impacted by the intersecting harms of state systems, including street-involved youth, queer youth, youth who use drugs and alcohol, and young moms. NYSHN fosters spaces

in which youth can be met on their own terms and in which they can come to define ‘family’ within their personal realities – such as through street families, adoptive families, and chosen families – rather than trying to adhere to normative ‘family’ models. Conversations about healthy relationships and violence prevention are situated within an approach that values the use of cultural knowledge in determining what is right for young peoples’ own bodies. This work emphasizes harm reduction and resistance, while working “to create more options for justice, not just the criminal (in)justice system, by meeting people where they’re at through community-based organizing to support Indigenous peoples directly impacted by colonial and state violence” (NYSHN, n.d.).<sup>26</sup> NYSHN thus supports youth in naming the harms caused by state-

based systems such as child welfare, justice and mental health, which often label and pathologize youth and contribute to the violence they face, as interconnected with interpersonal and relationship violence. In naming these systems as sources of harm, NYSHN calls for young people to address relationship violence and state violence simultaneously rather than viewing them as distinct. In general, sexual health groups using these models conduct work with youth of all genders together rather than separating youth along binary gender lines, as is often seen in mainstream sexual health education.

This youth-led work is linked with a diversity of decolonial efforts being undertaken by Indigenous people and communities to foster the resurgence of cultural practices and values as deeply interrelated with efforts to end family violence, and to redefine ‘family’ and ‘violence’ in the process. Within this work, it is important to re-think and de-center Western psychological approaches to addressing family violence, including critiquing individualized psychological models of resilience, given that factors that promote resilience for Indigenous people reside primarily outside of the individual (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011). Indigenous and decolonial understandings of resilience include “culturally distinctive concepts of the person, the importance of collective history, the richness of Aboriginal languages and traditions, and the importance of

<sup>25</sup> See the NYSHN website: <http://nativeyouthsexualhealth.com>.

<sup>26</sup> NYSHN’s website lists a set of principles underlining their work at: <http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/whatwebelievein.html>.

individual and collective agency and activism” (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 88). Efforts to decolonize and redefine trauma within the context of colonialism allow for family violence to be repositioned as an extension of systemic harms rather than pathologizing approaches to trauma focused only on individuals which frequently naturalize ‘risk’ as inherent to Native life (Clark, 2016; Million, 2013). Rather than re-centering trauma narratives, Indigenous storytelling and the revitalization of oral tradition allows for colonial logics to be decentered as culturally specific stories that foster the revitalization of kinship systems which counter colonial tropes, including heteronormative nuclear models.<sup>27</sup> Land-based teachings and education are central to the revitalization of stories about family which are not based in nuclear models, but instead emerge within Indigenous worldviews of extended relationships with land and waters (Pauktuutit 2007, 2011). These and other components of Indigenous resurgence and decolonization are integrally linked with efforts to address family violence while revitalizing models of family which allow for Indigenous systems of governance to thrive. Recognizing the key role that kinship plays in the maintenance of Indigenous community knowledge and legal systems, these broad and interconnected efforts counter the logics of dominant family violence discourse which continues to portray Indigenous families as a problem rather than a solution to colonial violence.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, see the NCCAH webinar on family violence featuring author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIyi4tpjJD0&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIyi4tpjJD0&feature=player_embedded) or <http://www.nccahccnsa.ca/450/Webinars.nccah>



## 4.1 Principles to inform future Indigenous family violence initiatives

In closing, we outline six key principles that have the potential to bring about meaningful change in the way family violence is understood and addressed in Indigenous communities which are interrelated with broad efforts to improve the health of Indigenous peoples and communities. We have identified these principles as foundational to the transformative work being done both in formal anti-violence literature and at the grassroots level which has Indigenous self-determination and decolonization at the centre.

### 1. Recognition of ongoing colonialism and dispossession

Settler colonialism is the current condition of life in Canada. Colonialism and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples is not something that happened in the past, but is indeed an active reality shaping the lives of Indigenous peoples and everyone living on the lands now called Canada. The ongoing involvement of state actors in Indigenous homes and families is an expression of colonial power, as is the belief that this involvement is expected, unavoidable, or necessary. Colonialism is furthered through the devaluation of Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, languages, and lives and the normalization of western hierarchies of race, gender, class and other axes of power. Colonization, racism, heterosexism and sexism are embedded in systems of health care, justice, education and child welfare, contributing to the levels of violence experienced by Indigenous peoples.

### 2. Locate risk within colonial systems

The identification of risk factors commonly creates labels which stigmatize Indigenous people as inherently risky, especially those who are 'young and uneducated' (Brownridge, 2003; National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2008). Rather than identifying the causes of poverty, for example, studies on family violence often identify poverty itself as inherent to Indigeneity. This works to obscure the ways in which forced relocation and land theft, and the resultant poverty and state dependency, are actively produced through colonialism. Decolonial approaches call for the examination of racism within educational, health care, justice and other systems, such as the lack of culturally appropriate curricula, racism among service providers, and links to residential school histories, as being related to low educational attainment, employment and health outcomes, and the impacts of these factors on cycles of violence. In decolonial analyses, state systems are identified as the source of 'risk' rather than being inherent to Indigenous peoples.

### 3. Foster self-determination of individuals, families and communities

Recognizing that the normalization and imposition of violence against Indigenous people, both individually and collectively, is a central tool of colonialism, ending violence is integral to self-determination. Further, the principle of self-determination guides us to question how anti-violence work can contribute to lessening state power, including the involvement of state agencies in Indigenous peoples' homes and families. Self-determination and health are interrelated, as self-determination is essential for Indigenous peoples' well-being (Ladner, 2009) and ability to live free of all forms of violence, while Indigenous peoples' health is essential to actualizing self-determination, which involves personal and community power and control over decision-making (National Aboriginal Health Organization [NAHO], 2001). Self-determination is necessarily defined and expressed differently across diverse Indigenous cultural contexts, requiring localized, culturally-specific examinations of what ending violence means for each Indigenous community, family and person. Self-determination also means respecting and upholding each Indigenous person's sexual orientation, gender presentation, gender identity, and family makeup – including adoptive families, queer families, single parent families, intergenerational households and more.

#### 4. Indigenous gender-based analysis:

Indigenous peoples each have their own culturally-specific understandings of gender and gender roles. Much of this knowledge was fractured due to the imposition of the heteropatriarchal gender binary in the Indian Act, residential schools, the English language and other assimilative tools. Yet, Indigenous peoples' lives today are a testament to the vibrant, diverse understandings of gender rooted in cultural practices and systems of governance. Indigenous gender-based analyses are critical to decolonization, as they require that we recognize the importance of gender roles and identities which fall far beyond the western binary. This decolonization of gendered relations is imperative for ending the normalization of violence against Indigenous women and girls, as well as other forms of homophobic and transphobic violence faced by Two-Spirit people, and indeed all forms of violence that Indigenous people experience.

#### 5. Localized solutions

There is no singular solution to ending family violence. Solutions are as diverse as indigeneity itself, as solutions must come from within Indigenous place-based, cultural practices and teachings. Localized solutions allow for quickly adaptive responses to violence, as locally emergent issues can be dealt with more easily than those imposed from afar. Local approaches allow for the deepening of individual agency, as community members look to one another rather than to outside actors to create change. For example, the work of Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada (2007, 2011) provides incredible resources which utilize Inuit cultural values within the Inuit language, identifying how these values can inform violence prevention in alignment with ancestral, localized knowledge systems. Together with other localized determinants of Indigenous peoples' health, efforts to address structural and interpersonal violence have the potential to transform community well-being today and into the future.

#### 6. Kinship systems as integral to Indigenous law

In fostering a reimagining of family responsibilities within the terms of Indigenous law, it is possible to link the revitalization of Indigenous legal traditions to ending violence within Indigenous communities, as we cannot have healthy legal systems and truly be self-determining peoples if violence is still occurring within family networks. Thus, ending violence is not only a health issue, but an issue of sovereignty, at the level of individual Indigenous people expressing sovereignty over their own bodies and at the community or nation level. Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) advocates for recovering Indigenous law which “has at its center the family and our kinship relations” (p. 258). Within Indigenous legal systems, individuals take up roles that are culturally specific. For example, ‘peacemaking’ is a role that is “both family-based and spiritual” (p. 256), expressing a set of values that is distinct from those underlying Canadian law. Thus, the increased ability of Indigenous people to take up their familial responsibilities free of various forms of violence is necessary for the revitalization of legal systems which serve in the maintenance of healthy, self-determining communities.



*...we recommend a framework that goes beyond the social determinants of health, to recognize that all of the determinants of health in Indigenous people's lives (eg. geographical, environmental, historical, economic, political, cultural) are situated in relation to colonization as the overarching determinant.*

## 5.0 CONCLUSION



In this discussion paper, we have provided an analysis of discourses of Indigenous family violence as they have developed in the Canadian literature, 2000-2015. As we have shown, Indigenous family violence discourse first emerged through leadership of Indigenous women and communities concerned with ending violence – work which has continued to this day. Yet as Indigenous family violence discourse developed through research and literature over the years, we noticed a tendency to center state-based solutions even while recognizing, to greater or lesser degrees (and often not at all), the role of colonization in high rates of violence. We suggest this is because colonization is primarily framed as occurring in the past, rather than being understood as an ongoing condition of life in Canada today. Further, family violence literature is at risk of reproducing pathologizing and criminalizing discourses which locate the source of ‘risk’ and ‘harm’ within individuals and within the nuclear heterosexual family unit, particularly by understanding poverty as a sign of individual failure or substance abuse as an individual health problem, rather than understanding poverty and substance use as fostered

through legacies of trauma and systemic inequality.

Looking to important work occurring within Indigenous communities, through activism, research and local-level cultural resurgence, we encourage a shift toward discourses of Indigenous family violence centered on principles of self-determination. In particular, it is imperative that the concept of the family moves away from heteropatriarchal models in order to account for Two-Spirit people, same-sex and queer relationships, as well as culturally specific concepts of kinship which are much broader than the nuclear family. Additionally, a social determinants of health framework which locates the ongoing nature of colonization as the primary determinant is key. Indeed, following Greenwood et al. (2015), we recommend a framework that goes beyond the *social* determinants of health, to recognize that all of the determinants of health in Indigenous people’s lives (eg. geographical, environmental, historical, economic, political, cultural) are situated in relation to colonization as the overarching determinant.

We encourage the integration of six principles in frameworks for understanding family violence within Indigenous communities:

1. recognize ongoing colonialism and dispossession;
2. locate risk within colonial systems;
3. foster self-determination of individuals, families and communities;
4. work from an Indigenous gender-based analysis;
5. create localized solutions, and;
6. understand kinship systems as integral to Indigenous law.

Together, we hope that our critical analysis of discourses of violence within Indigenous families will contribute to deepened understanding of both the important work that has been accomplished on family violence to date, and the significant work that lies ahead in our collective efforts to end interconnected forms of systemic and interpersonal violence. We suggest that an individual and collective commitment to decolonization is necessary in order to achieve the goal of ending all forms of violence within the context of enduring settler colonialism.

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