

# Ending Violence Against Women in Aboriginal Communities



## Workshop Backgrounder





## **Acknowledgements**

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**“Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation and it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.”**

**Former United Nations Secretary General - Kofi Annan**

## **I. Gender Equality**

### **Definition**

Principles of gender equality are centered on the belief that women and men are equal. Gender equality involves: promoting the full participation of women as equal partners in sustainable social development; encouraging the equal participation of women and men in all decision-making capacities; supporting women and girls so that they are fully able to exercise their rights to life, liberty, security of person, education, and healthcare; and reducing the gap between women’s and men’s access to and control of resources. Gender equality can only be achieved when women are recognized as agents of change in all economic, social and political processes.

### **Gender Equity**

Gender equity not only demands a substantive change in the policies and attitudes that govern gender roles and identities but also requires that an increased commitment be made to ensure that equal opportunity is accompanied by equal access.

### **Status of Gender Equality in Canada**

The dramatic improvement of principles of gender equality and gender equity in Canada over the past few decades, has contributed to an increase in both the formal and substantive equality enjoyed by Canadian women. Canada is not only a signatory to numerous international agreements and conventions, which cite gender equality as a necessary requisite for progress, but also declares fundamental equality for all within its own *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Nevertheless, thousands of Canadian women still cannot exercise their fundamental economic, political and social rights. In fact, the gender gap in Canada is much wider than commonly believed.

This inequality is perhaps most obvious in the economic spheres of Canadian society. Dr.Karen Hadley, author of “And We Still Ain’t Satisfied” Gender Inequality in Canada: A Status Report for 2001, approximates that Canadian women are earning 61 percent of what Canadian men are earning. Dr.Hadley reports that Canadian women are still denied access to many of the Canada’s high paying professional jobs. Furthermore, Canadian women are far more susceptible to poverty than men. In Canada, approximately 20 percent of Canadian women are living in poverty. Those numbers are higher for women of colour (37 percent of whom are living in poverty) and Aboriginal women (43 percent of whom are living in poverty).

Reference: Hadley, Karen Dr. “And We Still Ain’t Satisfied,” Gender Inequality in Canada: A Status Report for 2001. Released by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and the CSJ Foundation. 2001.



## Gender Inequality and Violence against Women

The issues of gender inequality and violence against women are fundamentally interconnected. Gender inequality remains one of the root causes of violence against women while violence

against women serves as both an acute manifestation of gender inequality and a means of perpetuating it.<sup>1</sup> Gender discrimination and inequality, which is rooted in the socially constructed gender roles and identities assigned to women and men, denies women access to critical resources<sup>2</sup>, including education, employment, capital and information and knowledge. Without access to these social resources, women's power to make decisions, earn a living and free themselves from situations of violence and domination is seriously compromised. Ending violence against women is central to the promotion of gender equality; at the same time, achieving gender equality is crucial to the elimination of violence against women.

## II. Violence against Women

### Definition

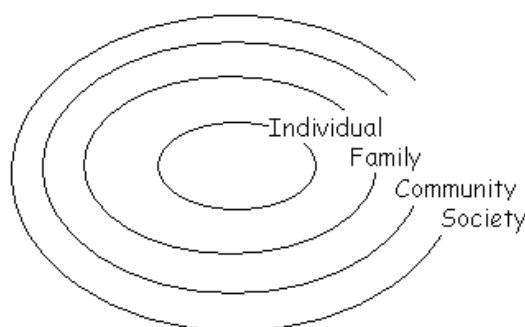
Violence against women is any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including threats of such acts and coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life.

Violence against women includes: physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, harassment or intimidation; sexual abuse or rape, including marital rape; battery; domestic violence; forced prostitution; trafficking in women and girls; burning or acid throwing; female genital mutilation; female feticide and infanticide; violence in armed conflict; systemic rape; sexual slavery; forced pregnancy; and forced marriage.

### Where Does Violence against Women Happen?

Violence against women persists globally as both a pervasive violation of human rights and a significant impediment to achieving gender equality. It is estimated that one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by a male in her lifetime. Despite successful actions by women's organizations over the past three decades, the scale and severity of violence against women is increasing.

### Who Does Violence against Women Affect?



<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. 'Addressing Violence against Women and Achieving the Millennium Development Goals.' *Department of Gender, Women and Health Family and Community Health*. (2005) <http://www.who.int/gender/documents/MDGs&VAWSept05.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. 'Gender Equality.' <http://www.unicef.org/gender/index.html>



Violence against women endangers the health and violates the rights of millions of women and girls around the world, regardless of race, socio-economic status, religion or ethnicity.

Some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to violence, including:

- women belonging to minority or indigenous groups
- refugees
- migrant labourers
- women living in poverty
- women living in rural or remote communities
- women placed in federal institutions or in detention centres
- displaced persons
- women who have been repatriated
- women living in situations of armed conflict and wars of aggression
- women living in areas, in which civil conflict and terrorism are present
- female children
- elderly women

### **What are the Effects of Violence against Women?**

- Violence against women is not only a violation of fundamental human rights but it is also an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace. Globally, violence against women has eroded women's rights to life, health, security, autonomy, bodily integrity and political participation.
- Violence against women carries serious consequences for both women's physical and psychological health; these consequences extend beyond any immediate physical damage. Women who have experienced violence are susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms and suicide. Women who have experienced sexual violence have often experienced early sexual initiation and are increasingly vulnerable to unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancies and the contraction of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Women who have experienced violence may also suffer from social isolation and rejection, lowered self-esteem and economic dependence.
- Children who experience violence or witness marital violence within the home have a higher propensity to become violent with others or suffer from violence themselves. Children experiencing domestic or family violence might also suffer from: emotional trauma, difficulties in school, lack of concentration, social isolation, lowered self-esteem and self-confidence and unstable living conditions.
- Violence against women has enormous social, economic and political repercussions for society at large. Violence against women undermines a society's social framework for development, justice, peace and equality. The economic costs associated with violence against women are high, included in these costs are: health care, policing, incarceration, intervention, transition houses, diminished productive capacities, social services, child services, court proceedings and intergenerational effects.



## Why Does Violence against Women Occur?

Violence against women can be attributed to a wide variety of socio-cultural factors, including:

- **Historically unequal power relations between women and men**
- **Differentiated socialization of girls and boys**
- **Women's unequal access to political, economic and legal sectors**
- **The use of violent means to resolve interpersonal conflict**
- **Unequal symbolizations and valuations of women's and men's bodies**

Although acts of violence against women are often perpetrated by individuals, it is important to consider that gender-based violence is a learned behaviour. Socialization plays a major role in such learning. Individual acts are supported overtly or tacitly through social institutions such as the family, the community or the state, either through normative rules or by impunity towards acts of violence.

Listed below are some of the factors that can contribute to an increased prevalence in violence against women at different levels of society:

**Individual Level:** Research indicates that individuals who experience violence or abuse as a child or witness marital violence in the home are more likely to perpetrate or suffer from partner violence. Frequent use of drugs or alcohol also lead to an increased prevalence of violence against women.

**Community Level:** Women's isolation and lack of social support, together with male peer groups which condone and legitimize men's violence, predict higher rates of violence against women.

**State Level:** Studies have found that inadequate legislations and policies to prevent and punish acts of violence, as well as, low levels of sensitivity and awareness among law enforcement agencies and social services, are linked to a higher incidence of violence.

**Family and Relationship Level:**

Cross-cultural studies have cited male control of wealth, male decision-making within the home and marital violence strong predictors and indicators of violence against women.

**Societal Level:** Studies conducted around the world have found that violence against women is most common where gender roles are rigidly defined and enforced and where the concept of masculinity is linked to toughness, male honour and dominance. Other social norms associated with abuse include the tolerance of physical punishment of women and children and the perception that men have 'ownership' and control over women.

It is clear that actions to end violence must address a range of issues, from women's unequal access to resources and decision-making in the family to concepts of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, the male 'right' to dominance and control in all social institutions, including community-level groups, education systems and state structures, where these notions are fostered and perpetuated, must be challenged. So far, the responsibility for tackling violence against women has mostly rested on women's organizations; however, violence against women affects entire communities and thus, has to be addressed by both men and women.





## How is Intergenerational Violence Connected to the Aboriginal Experience?

### Violence against Aboriginal women and girls

Violence against women is a complex and multi-dimensional problem. It can take various forms and shapes, and has no geographical, social, economic or cultural boundaries. However, some groups of women are affected more than others due to a number of factors. Aboriginal women and girls in Canada are at higher risk of violence than other groups of women, and are more likely to experience higher incidence and severity of gender-based violence both from strangers and at home.

This can be explained by the history of colonialism that has left Aboriginal communities shattered spiritually, culturally, socially and economically. Loss of identity was accompanied by erosion of traditional gender roles and social relations in the communities. The status of Aboriginal women in their communities was undermined both through colonial practices and policies. For example, according to the Indian Act of 1876 only males could be considered Indian in their own right. The only way women could access the privileges and rights that came with the Indian status was to be directly descended from an Indian father or to marry an Indian man. It also effectively took away all political rights from Aboriginal women who could no longer participate in band-related elections of any kind. Such policies institutionalized gender-based discrimination against Aboriginal women, which informally continues to this day through racism and sexism.

The legacy of colonialism and forced assimilation created a number of problems that disproportionately affect the Aboriginal population, such as substance abuse, addictions, suicide, crime and poverty. Those problems both contribute and exacerbate violence against women and girls.

Despite numerous challenges, Aboriginal communities are making progress in addressing those problems by reclaiming their traditional teachings, ways of life, identity and self-determination. Advancing this change further requires understanding of the root causes that lead to violence, and the courage to break the vicious cycle.

### Residential school system and its impact

Between 1840 and 1983 around 150,000 Aboriginal children went through Indian residential school system. Those schools were created for the purpose of assimilation of Aboriginal children with the mainstream Canadian society. At the time the government believed that it was its responsibility, and hundreds of schools were established across the country. The schools were funded by the government, but run by churches.

Children were forcefully removed from their parents and placed in the care of the residential schools. They spent most of the year in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment characterized by rigid discipline and corporal punishment. They had very little to no contact with their parents and siblings, even if their brothers and sisters were in the same school. Children were forbidden to speak in their native languages, and to engage in any traditional practices. In addition, many children experienced physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the teachers in those schools.





The residential school experience traumatized whole generations of Aboriginal people robbing them of their culture, language, community ties, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being, parenting and other social skills. This trauma got passed down to future generations and become institutionalized within families and whole communities. It produced a number of devastating individual and social consequences that continue to affect Aboriginal communities today:

- substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, gas)
- violence
- crime
- domestic abuse
- family breakdown

The trauma of residential schools could have been addressed through traditional healing practices and rituals. However, residential schools survivors were denied the opportunity of connecting to their cultural and spiritual roots, as this is what the school system was designed to erase in the first place. The solutions offered through the Western institutions, such as psychiatry, often proved to be ineffective as they did not treat this complex problem in a holistic way, but rather focused entirely on individual experience. The healing movement began in 1960s and continues to this day focusing on promoting spiritual and physical well-being for Aboriginal people through a combination of traditional healing practices and Western medical models.

### ***Intergenerational Trauma***

What we learn and experience as children shapes our adult behavior. Aboriginal children who suffered abuse in residential schools carried it with them into their adult life, often passing it on to the next generation. This cycle repeats itself with each new generation.

If we do not deal with trauma, we inadvertently hand it down to the next generation. We often take out our pain and hurt on those we love the most - which is ourselves, and those closest to us - our family and friends. So, intergenerational trauma is trauma that is passed down behaviorally to the next generation: if we're angry and act angry all the time to others, our kids will think that's normal and do the same. If we ignore each other and deprive each other of love and affection in our relationships, our kids see and feel that deprivation or love and might think it's normal<sup>3</sup>.

Unaddressed trauma of residential schools resulted in numerous behavioural problems among survivors rooted in low self-esteem and powerlessness. Abusive and violent behavior became one of the major outcomes, often combined with alcohol and drug abuse. Multiple studies have found that children that were abused tend to become abusers themselves in their later life. Various forms of violence were normalized in residential schools, both from the teachers to the students and among students themselves. The survivors internalized violence both as a norm and through personal trauma, and passed them down to new generations. It produced dysfunctional families that continue to struggle with achieving peace and wholeness again.

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<sup>3</sup> Phillips, G. (1999) quoted in Menzies, P. "Understanding Aboriginal Intergenerational Trauma from a Social Work Perspective" *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* XXVII, 2(2007): 367-392, p.373.



### ***Gender-based Violence***

Although residential schools affected both men and women, Aboriginal women and girls bear the heaviest burdens of its impact due to unequal power relations within families and society as a whole. With the loss of traditional ways of life, identity and often the social status as the provider for the family, men take out their frustration and anger on those close to them - women and children. Sexist stereotypes and behaviors perpetrated by mainstream culture and media also contribute to gender-based violence, as women's bodies are objectified and they are not seen as valuable members of the community.

Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to traditional Aboriginal beliefs where women are held in high esteem as life givers and preservers. As the result of violence, Aboriginal women experience multiple negative effects, including poor physical and mental health, inability to hold a job, and substance abuse, which in turn affects their children, extended families and the whole communities.

### ***Breaking the Cycle***

Breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence requires addressing the trauma of residential schools, even if one has not experienced it directly, and re-learning what healthy relationships are. This is a difficult path on the journey to healing that takes time and patience, but which can lead one to achieving spiritual, emotional and physical balance and wholeness.

### ***Healing the Trauma***

It takes strength and courage to embark on a healing journey. Healing means coming to terms with what happened in the past, so one can move on with his or her life.

The basic principles of healing are:

- Being safe from physical, mental, spiritual and emotional threat;
- Taking responsibility for your life and your healing;
- Respect to yourself and others;
- Co-operation in the healing process with the members of your family and your community.

The process of healing involves several steps that help to overcome the impact of the traumatic events that happened in the past. The first step often means re-living some of very painful moments in one's memory, acknowledging them, and recognizing the impact they have had on the individual. The steps that follow involve overcoming the emotional turmoil that those memories bring. Residential school survivors go through stages of grief and loss, and it is important to find a safe and supportive environment to express them.

While this is an individual journey, one should not be alone on it. Strength comes from support and participation of one's friends, family, professional counselors, neighbors and wider community. Many individuals also find sources of strength in traditional teachings and healing practices, such as sweat lodges.



Communities and nations also need to heal from the collective trauma of the residential school system. The process of reconciliation and addressing the impacts of residential school experience has started in 1990s when Aboriginal leaders helped to begin a dialogue between the survivors, the federal government, and the Canadian public. This process includes an official apology from the Canadian government and churches that were involved with the residential schools, providing compensation to the survivors, and creating spaces for public hearings and memorials.

### ***Healthy Relationships***

One of the effects of the intergenerational abuse is that sometimes individuals no longer know what healthy relationships are. Feelings of love get often associated with violence, to the point where violence becomes one's way of expressing love. Figuring this out might be particularly hard for young people who are getting a lot of conflicting messages from different sources. This can affect relationships between parents and children, siblings, extended family and intimate partners.

Here are some of the basic principles underlying all healthy relationships:

- They make you feel good about yourself and who you are
- They are based on mutual respect and trust
- The power is shared equally
- They are violence-free

The key to establishing such relationships is open communication about one's views and expectations. Intimate relationships can be especially complicated. Low self-esteem, especially among women and girls, often makes them vulnerable to abusive relationships, as they do not feel that they deserve any better. They also might not feel that they have the power to say anything about the ways they are being treated. No one deserves to be abused, and no one should put up with violence in any form.

While it is important to understand the causes and dynamics of intergenerational abuse, each individual should take responsibilities for his or her actions, while also recognizing his or her role in the collective process on the level of the whole community. It is within our power to re-define ourselves and our relationships through self-reflection, healing and growth.

## **III. 'We Can'**

### **What is the 'We Can' Campaign?**

The 'We Can End All Violence against Women' campaign is a multi-year, international initiative, which seeks to challenge and change the societal attitudes, beliefs and practices that support and maintain violence against women.

In 2004, the campaign was launched in six South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since then the campaign has spread to other parts of Asia, as well as across Africa, Europe, North and Latin Americas.



The British Columbia 'We Can' campaign was officially launched in June 2007. It is run by a coalition of diverse organizations that include women's groups, unions, international development agencies, legal education organizations, multicultural service providers, youth groups, businesses, media and others.

As African, East Asian, European and Latin American countries are joining the campaign it is becoming a truly global movement.

## **Campaign Objectives**

'We Can' seeks to promote and encourage:

- an environment in which violence against women is never acceptable
- a collective and visible stand against violence against women
- a popular movement to end all violence against women
- and a cooperative network between local, provincial and regional alliances working to end violence against women

## **Campaign Strategy**

The British Columbia 'We Can' campaign believes that violence against women is rooted in structural inequalities and widespread misconceptions of gender roles and identities. 'We Can' aims to fight violence against women by changing individuals' attitudes towards women. 'We Can' works with men and women to re-evaluate and re-define concepts of gender and identity and endeavors to breakdown structural gender inequalities.

'We Can' believes that every individual has the power to change her or his own life as well as the lives of those around them; however, 'We Can' recognizes that people need to feel the need for change and understand the benefits of change before real change can occur.

A key element of the 'We Can' campaign model is educating and mobilizing individuals to take a public stand and public action against violence against women. This is achieved by inviting ordinary women, men and children to become 'Change Makers'.

## **Who is a Change Maker?**

A Change Maker is an individual who pledges not to commit or tolerate any violence against women, who works to re-evaluate his/her own attitudes and who agrees to encourage at least five other people to do the same.

In communicating and discussing violence against women with others, each Change Maker secures support for her or his own change. As circles of influence begin to overlap and the number of Change Makers within a given group or geographical location attains a critical mass, an environment is created in which women experiencing violence or individuals wishing to speak out against violence will receive both support and encouragement.



### Change Makers Believe:

- Violence against women is never acceptable
- Change in current gender perceptions and attitudes is essential and possible
- Violence against women is a public issue, not a private matter
- Each individual has the potential to change her or his own life
- Change must begin now

### What Do Change Makers Do?

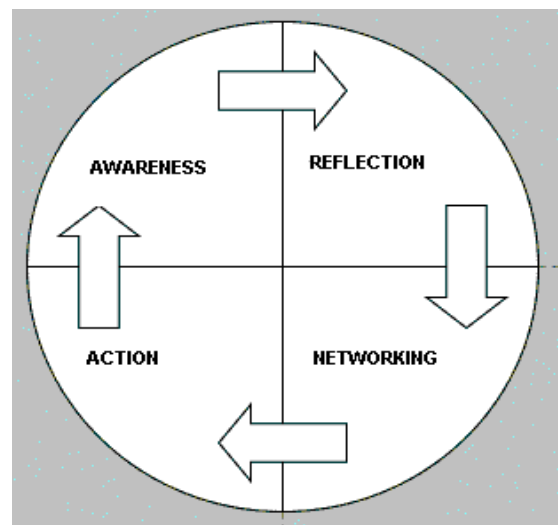
- Initiate and encourage discussion about gender inequality and violence against women
- Act as role models of alternative behaviours
- Encourage others to recognize the various forms of gender violence and discrimination
- Enlist the help of influential community members to create a positive environment and to reduce risks for women

### How Can They Do This?

- Talk to friends, neighbours and colleagues to raise awareness about violence against women and encourage them to re-examine their own attitudes and practices
- Increase their own awareness about violence against women
- Disseminate campaign information
- Challenge existing gender biased attitudes, stereotypes and practices
- Take a public stand against violence against women
- Support women who are experiencing violence

### Model of Change

The model of change this campaign seeks to support is one of **awareness, reflection, networking and action** which leads to **change**.



This is not a linear process; the progression of awareness and the understanding and readiness for action take time, repeated exposure to ideas, demonstration and peer challenging and support.



Change Makers are the key players in raising awareness, breaking the silence and inspiring and demanding change.

### **Key Things to Remember**

- Violence against women is institutionalized at all levels of society – individuals, family, community and state/institutional. To foster women's equal worth and opportunity, it is necessary to address the issue of gender discrimination and violence against women at each level.
- Violence against women is not a private matter but a public issue. Until individuals recognize this and challenge practices of violence against women, violence and discrimination will continue.
- The social, cultural, political, economic and legal factors act to increase women's vulnerability to discrimination and violence must be addressed.
- Ending violence against women requires a change in the deeply entrenched and pervasive societal attitudes and practices that endorse violence against women. Attempting to change these attitudes and practices is a difficult task, one which often invites confrontation.
- The model of change 'We Can' seeks to support is one of awareness, reflection, networking and action. This is not a linear process; the progression of awareness and the understanding and readiness for action will take time, repeated exposure to ideas, demonstration and peer challenging and support.
- State interventions and legal solutions designed to protect women through effective implementation of legislation, have consistently been hindered by the lack of support from dominant public and community interests. Bringing change at the individual level is a necessary prerequisite for bringing change in society. *In this sense, change must begin with the individual and extend to the family, the community and the society.*
- People need to feel the need for change, see its benefits and initiate the process by raising awareness, breaking the silence and rejecting ideas and beliefs that support violence against women.
- Individuals, local groups, regional alliances and national institutions must work together to achieve the values of equality, mutuality, collectivity and justice.
- Public mobilization and education will lead to the transformation of unequal power relations and will facilitate the empowerment of women.



## Resources

### Learn More

- The British Columbia 'We Can' Website: <http://www.WeCanBC.ca>
- Native Women's Association of Canada: <http://www.nwac.ca>
- Status of Women Canada: <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca>
- Women's Organizations in British Columbia:  
<http://www.distel.ca/womlist/countries/canada/britishcolumbia.html>
- Where Are the Children? Interactive website about residential school experience and its impact: <http://www.WhereAreTheChildren.ca>
- Surviving the Past: Options for dealing with residential school abuse:  
<http://www.SurvivingThePast.ca>
- The Healing Journey: <http://www.TheHealingJourney.ca>
- Aboriginal Parenting After Separation: <http://apasbc.ca>

### Where to Get Help

- VictimLINK: 1 800-563-0808 (Toll free 24/7 helpline for victims of family and sexual violence)
- Youth Against Violence Line: 1 800 680-4264 (Toll free 24/7 helpline for youth)
- <http://www.domesticviolencebc.ca>
- List of BC Transition Houses:  
[http://www.bchousing.org/programs/transition\\_housing/Contacts](http://www.bchousing.org/programs/transition_housing/Contacts)
- *Indian Residential School Survivors Society*: Toll-free phone: 1 800 721-0066 or 24 hour National Survivors Support Line: 1 866 925-4419 <http://www.irsss.ca>
- *Warriors Against Violence Society*: Phone: (604) 255-3240 <http://wavbc.com>
- *BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres*: Phone: (250) 388-5522  
<http://www.bcaafc.com>
- Legal Resources Database: <http://www.clicklaw.bc.ca>
- Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of BC:  
Toll-free phone: 1 877 811-1190 <http://www.nccabc.ca>





**Together We Can  
End All Violence against Women**

**[www.WeCanBC.ca](http://www.WeCanBC.ca)**