



Ottawa Inuit
Children's
Centre

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SANNGINIVUT
STRONG VOICES FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Improving Systems and Services
for Inuit Women and Children
Affected by Violence:

Interviews with
Inuit Women

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I think we got it all. You guys are always handling things well. I'm glad it's coming up and coming out! I only have praise! Trust is so important. That's why it's easy to talk. I trust you.

Interviewee, Sannginivut Inuit Women and Children Affected by Violence

Introduction

Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre (OICC) has embarked on a project to work with stakeholders in improving systems and services for Inuit women and children affected by violence in Ottawa. The goal of *Sannginivut: Strong Voices for Stronger Communities* is to reduce barriers and better support Inuit women and children by providing educational resources and training to build the capacity of agencies.

In year 1, we completed three research reports for the project: 1) interviews with Inuit women affected by violence, 2) interviews with services providers, and 3) a promising practices literature review. This report on interviews with Inuit women has been reviewed and approved by the project Advisory Group.

Method and Results

Method

Including the voices and perspectives of Inuit women affected by violence was seen as crucial to the project. Speaking with women who have experienced violence themselves and/or have supported others leads to a deeper understanding of the types of situations and challenges they have faced. It also gives those most directly affected by violence and abuse an opportunity to describe the gaps they see and the ways in which agencies and organizations can improve services.

Women who are clients or staff members at OICC and were known to have survived violence and abuse themselves or personally supported others were approached to participate. In particular, participants in the weekly women's circle were asked if they would be willing to attend a separate focused discussion with OICC staff.

Originally, the project team had hoped to do two focus groups with Inuit women. A group interview situation allows for a dialogue that includes different perspectives and enables women to explore their experiences in relation to others. Groups also are a way for women to connect with other women who have had similar experiences, provide support to each other, and together contribute to breaking the silence on the issue.

However, after several weeks of promoting the group and trying to recruit participants, it became clear that the women were not comfortable discussing violence and abuse issues in a group setting. For some, the violence was too traumatic and/or too recent. There may have been concerns about confidentiality among group members. As a result, the project team decided to do individual interviews.

We created an interview plan that addressed the ethics of discussing violence and abuse with survivors, including:

- describing the focus group in written materials as a place to discuss women's services needs in general, but verbally telling them it would include some questions on violence and abuse (to protect women who may still be living in a violent situation, but also to allow them to make an informed decision to participate and prepare them for a discussion on those issues);
- creating a consent form that:
 - clearly describes the purpose of the research and how the information collected will be used,

- stressing confidentiality unless there is concern that a child or underage youth is at-risk;
- ensuring that participants will remain anonymous (not identified by name or by details that might reveal their identity); and
- explaining that women can decide how much information to share, and that they can stop participating at any time;
- ensuring there was an Inuk counsellor available during and after the group to provide individual support;
- providing information on referrals to other agencies; and
- ending the session with a reminder that discussions such as these can be distressing, suggesting methods of self-care, and encouraging women to reach out if they are in distress.

Two Inuit women conducted the interviews and provided follow-up support. Please see Appendix A for the interview guide and Appendix B for the consent form.

Results

We were able to complete 10 individual interviews that ranged in length from one to two hours. All of the women had personally experienced violence and/or abuse, either in childhood or adulthood. Six of the 10 women also had supported others who had been victims. The respondents shared both painful stories and their healing journeys, as well as describing their interactions with Ottawa agencies.

While the women were not randomly selected, they did represent some diversity in life experiences. They ranged in age from 21 to 65. They had been born in small and larger communities in Nunavut, and had left the North either as children or adults. Five women have lived in Ottawa for 20 or more years, three have lived here for two to five years, and two arrived within the last 18 months. Some of the women had lived in more than one community in the North and in southern communities before coming to Ottawa, and others had gone back and forth between Ottawa and their home communities. Two women were single and two lived with a partner, while the other six were single parents with at least two children living with them. One woman also was caring for a number of grandchildren.

Findings from the interviews are presented below. All of the quotes are from participants; in some cases, details have been removed to ensure anonymity.

Experiences with Health, Social and Justice Services

The women reported mixed experiences using health and social services in general in Ottawa. Eight of the women said they had had some positive experiences with the health care system, social services, counselling services, the police and lawyers.

By far it's been good with health agencies. CHEO has been great. My daughter suffers from depression and anxiety. It took about six months to get into a program. It was a long wait but it's been very good for us.

One police officer seemed nice. It seemed he had more of an open mind. The other not so nice... he talked in a way that it was not very comfortable.

Several mentioned good relations with Ontario Social Assistance workers (Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program) – who treated them respectfully, helped them access services and were personally supportive.

ODSP [Ontario Disability Support Program] was very good – I was respected and my needs were taken care of.

Women also talked about positive experiences with Inuit organizations, including Akausivik Inuit Health Clinic, Tungasuvvingat Inuit and OICC.

I had a very understanding lawyer. TI supported me with that. It would be hard alone.

A few women reported not being believed or taken seriously by service providers. In one case, a mother recounted taking her two children who were ill to a health clinic only to be told they were fine, and they became worse. However, she also said that overall, her experience with the clinic has been positive. Another woman described a negative experience with police.

One time with OPS [Ottawa Police Service], the female officer was very mean. Kept asking me to repeat my name because she could not find anything on me. I told her I didn't have any record. She told me to be quiet or she would have to arrest me.

Several women reported distressful dealings with the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa. One woman believed she was under greater scrutiny because she was Inuk, and that workers believed untrue things that her ex-partner was saying about her, but that the relationship improved over time. Another woman who had her children removed went to court to get them back. She felt "wrongly judged" by CAS, and a judge sided with her and she got her children back. Another participant said:

... my ex would threaten me and say stuff like if you try to leave me CAS will get our kids. I called OICC and I got a lot of support. I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't for OICC. I think the services were good because OICC was involved. I would not call without OICC being involved because I would be afraid of what would happen.

Women talked about difficulties in "speaking up" with service providers. One woman said "it's hard when you've been taught not to talk back," and others had to get family members and Inuit organization staff to help advocate for them.

I have accessed counselling services and social services that have been positive; my personal dealings with the child welfare system have not been all positive. I have found them to be very pushy and have little respect. I had to be very assertive and challenge them as well.

Two other women recounted their experiences as a youth in CAS care.

When I was younger I was in and out of group homes in my early teens... When I was dealing with CAS I totally didn't like it. My sister was in and out of hospital ... and CAS wouldn't let me see her. For four to five months I had no social worker helping me as a teenager. That was very hard because I had nobody on my side.

The staff at the group home was really nice... I thought the police were really mean and being very physical – they threw me on the ground – I still have the scar. I know I did something bad but in those days I know I was being harassed by one officer in particular, pressuring me all the time and always coming to me for information about other people. Once I grew up I didn't have any more trouble with the police.

Other problems accessing services and supports included: too short counselling sessions (half an hour), unprofessional staff, and having to pay for medication and be reimbursed by Non-Insured Health Benefits.

Two women recognized that some of their negative experiences with service agencies came from them not being ready to accept help.

I was referred [to a mental health agency] by my school. At first it wasn't good but that's because I didn't like it. Once I could open up, it was better.

[An agency] got me a psychologist but I got scared and didn't go because I am not ready to go there [emotionally].

Two women felt that their sons had been badly treated by police. In one instance the woman thought it was because he was Inuk and drunk – “the police have no time for drunk people.” In another case, a minor was questioned for five hours after a traumatic event without his parents being present.

Violence and Abuse

All of the women had personally experienced violence and abuse by a partner, friend or family member (someone known to them). They described situations of physical, mental and emotional abuse, including when they were children.

I have had violence since I could remember – bullying from family, partner and community members and a teacher.

I have been a part of emotional and mental abuse and I am just getting out of it... Emotional abuse is harder than physical. It's internal. Others don't see it. It took me a long time to finally walk out of it. I was told so many times that I would not be able to get help because I am Inuk, I believed that. As soon as my kids came to Ottawa I took that step because I had to take care of them. I prepared my kids telling them “today might be the day we go to a shelter,” always preparing them. Finally, it happened. My fear was always like if I am in a shelter are my kids going to be taken away? I did not want that. It scared me to go to a shelter.

Several women left the North and came to Ottawa to escape abuse.

... domestic violence from the father of my children for almost four years. When he left, I was with a physical abuser. That's why I left [my home community] – to get away from a bad relationship. I chose Ottawa because I was here before and I have family and friends here. There are lots of Inuit. There's lots of support for Inuit here.

With my last pay cheque I bought a one-way ticket and that was it. I packed two suitcases and just left. I just couldn't take it anymore.

A few women acknowledged they had experienced abuse but didn't want to talk further about it.

I have nothing to say – very emotional at this point – it was when I was a kid.

I have been the victim of violence from my partner and family. I don't want to talk more about it.

Telling Others about the Violence

Among the 10 women interviewed, seven told someone they knew about the violence and abuse they experienced and three did not.

When it was happening, I did not tell anyone. But my best friend would try to help me. Up North, people don't talk about it. They just turn the other way.

I keep a lot inside because I tried speaking about the stuff but when I tried telling someone about some of the stuff that happened to me and I tried to talk to someone else I was told to be quiet about it. I was a child and I was afraid and our name could get a bad rep.

A few women living in Ottawa at the time of the violence told friends and family in the North but did not tell anyone here, saying that they didn't know anyone well enough or didn't trust others enough yet. A few women got help from family members or friends.

My best friend helped a lot.

Mainly my best friend and my mom and sister and friends helped me leave my ex.

My parents would house us when it became too hard and my friend was there for me.

Six women approached an organization for help, for example, social assistance, their workplace, a health centre, OICC, Minwaashin Lodge, and Mamisarvik Healing Centre.

Four of the women didn't go to an organization about the violence they experienced. One woman commented "I tried using a help line but it was always busy." Two women mentioned not wanting to seek help from Inuit organizations.

I didn't go to Inuit orgs because I did not want to open to the Inuit community. I used the OW [Ontario Works] worker to help get me into the shelter. I did not want to be judged by my community.

Supporting Others

Of the 10 women, six had supported others who had experienced violence (including one son), two had not done so, and two chose not to answer the question.

I have helped a lot of women experiencing violence or abuse. Since living in Ottawa I have connected two Inuit women with supports they may need. They were both very satisfied with the services that were made available to them.

I have supported many women and a few men who were abused by someone. The one I will never forget is an Inuk woman who was being physically abused by a partner out in the open, there were people passing by and not stopping to help her. I managed to help her to get away from him.

For some, growing up with violence in the home, women start supporting other family members while they were children themselves

My whole life until I moved out...with my stepdad I seen a lot of it. I ended up having to leave with my little sister – she was 6 at the time. I was maybe around 9 or 10. I'd just leave when my stepdad was being mean to my mom. I'd leave and go to the park. I did not want my sister to know what was going on.

I also helped one of my friends, a while ago, maybe six years ago. A friend of mine came over around midnight. She was telling me about all the things that were happening. I called the police and they came...

[I helped] my Mom... growing up, my dad was abusive to my mom. I was 16 and I would have to protect my mom. He was never abusive towards me – just to my mom and once to my brother. Me and my brother had to take care of her and stop him.

One woman spoke of feeling good about helping others.

[I have used] my experience to give someone else hope. I am of the generation that [believes violence] is not OK and I can support someone else because of my own experiences.

Violence and Abuse Services in Ottawa Agencies

In many cases, women appreciated the help they got related to violence and abuse, especially that from Inuit or Indigenous organizations.

OICC staff was very helpful. I don't know what I would have done without them. They helped me get into a shelter. Dealt with CAS. OICC helped from beginning to end. OICC is still being supportive today. I've made the right choices. It's hard to raise four kids alone, but it's good they are not seeing violence.

[At Ontario Works] I did not have to use my regular worker because I share her with my ex. I asked for a specific worker to help me escape my relationship. It was very helpful.

[The shelter] staff was very nice. They were all native. It would be nice if an Inuk was on staff.

I went to Mamisarvik Healing Centre and got help for my trauma. I have also used the Aboriginal shelter at different times.

I am so grateful for the help I have gotten. If I had not done my healing I would still be in a very hard place. I can share my experience without getting emotional now.

The women participating in the interviews felt that some of their encounters with agencies were helpful while others weren't as helpful.

I found that the male police were more responsive to the male than to me. I made the call! He is injured but I'm the victim here! He always abused me...they didn't hear what I was saying...I was the victim. I don't have trust in the police. I try to not teach my children that but that's how I see it.

In general..., without even thinking... [service providers] start saying things. They don't understand where we are coming from or what we've been through. They need to know more about where we are coming from.

Some felt that race played a part in how they were treated.

The police were very nice until they found out about [my friend's] situation and that we were Inuit. I felt like they were a bit racist and bunching us in the group of other Inuit that are having problems. They were talking in French and my partner understood them and stood up for us. It was a long time ago and it was one officer who seemed racist.

It's very scary when I can't call for help because I am afraid of the service providers that are supposed to be there to help me. They automatically think we have problems because we are Inuit. I am not a drinker or a drug addict. I am a good mom who was in an emotional and abusive relationship. I needed help but was afraid to ask for it because of the racism and pre-judgement.

With the police, there was no attempt to help me or find out who assaulted me. I also felt like there were stereotypes made against me that I was just another drunken native.

How Agencies Can Better Serve Inuit Women

The women had a number of suggestions for how agencies could improve their services to Inuit affected by violence. Communication is an important issue. Inuit may struggle to express themselves in a second language, especially if they are in a stressful situation. Misunderstandings can occur when Inuit are trying to emulate western ways of communicating.

I think us Inuit, English is not our first language, so when we try to talk to qallunaat [non-Inuit], they get offended because we can't say it right. They get offended! They think we talk mean but it's the way we say things. I think being very honest can get us into more trouble. I try to be honest, but when I am I get into more trouble.

I used to not like CAS, but now I understand they are doing their job. They explained their job. Having a conversation to explain what is going on helps.

The women also raised the importance of service providers:

- really listening;
- being trustworthy;
- showing respect; and
- providing continuity so they don't always have to repeat their stories.

In their words:

[Service providers] need to learn to listen better and have easier processes for accessing their services.

[Without trust], Inuit women won't open up unless they are desperate. We don't have typical emotional breakdowns. We may seem calm. The providers need to read between the lines and trust that they are here for a good reason.

I would like them to approach me with more of an open mind... All Inuit are not drunks... We are not all bad. They come into dealing with Inuit with a preconception that we all have the same issues.

It is important to get workers that can be with us from beginning to end, so we are not alone fighting a system that needs a lot of change.

How Agencies Can Improve their Response to the Inuit Community

Several women mentioned long waiting lists, a lack of interpreters and location of services as problems in accessing services.

Agencies need to continually reach out and build relationships with Inuit and Indigenous organizations so that services providers know where to refer women for support and where to go themselves for information. Kindness, patience and being non-judgmental were mentioned most often in improving services and responses to the Inuit community.

Kindness builds trust. Kindness and patience would go a long way in supporting those who are traumatized and are dealing with very stressful situations.

My ex tried to teach the children that police are no good. [Police] need to have more community interactions because you never know what is going on at home. The police need to show kindness and support and build relationships so when we need them we are not afraid to call them... Courts/police need to not enable my ex to be the way he is towards me.

I don't know – with all the experiences, the person tends to lash out and they may be dealing with triggers. [Service providers] need to be more understanding because what we are bringing forward is very difficult and we need to be made more comfortable with bringing things up to feel safe. It's hard! We need time to feel comfortable.

Be non-judgmental.

The women observed there are many differences between Inuit and non-Inuit culture and ways of living that also affect interactions between Inuit clients and non-Inuit service providers. Service providers require more training in dealing with Inuit.

They need to be taught more about our culture and where we are coming from. Learn more of our history..., what we went through. I learned a lot about things that happened to us... our hurt is current.

I think they need to be educated about Inuit and all Aboriginal Peoples. They need education on how Inuit live and how we don't raise our kids the same way [as non-Inuit]. Our lifestyle is different. ... Our way of eating is different. There's a lot of little differences.

It would be greatly beneficial if all the agencies could take cultural orientation and to learn some Inuktitut, particularly the ones that have been assigned to Inuit clients. Or have these agencies work with an Inuit organization and do case management with them. It does not help anyone when Inuit are still being pre-judged and there are still racist people out there.

They also called for more thorough investigations, more interagency work, and better supports for parents.

A lot of it has to do with the relationship and trust already built. It helped that I could be comfortable in being vulnerable.

I find I have to help my children a lot. They miss their dad. I am able to help them but it would be good to have supports for the moms to help their children. My children are affected. They saw and heard things. We need support to support our children.

What Service Providers Need to Know

Here is what the women thought service providers needed to know about Inuit women and children and violence.

They need to understand that Inuit typically are not very vocal, especially the women. Also, that we have a lot of non-verbal communication ways.

Inuit mentality around the topic of violence is a little bit different than the western way.

[Service providers] need to understand that it takes a lot of courage to come out and speak up. Up North and even here you don't talk about it. It's behind closed doors. They need to know we need help and support.

I want [service providers] to know that we don't have the same privileges as First Nations. We are not First Nations..., we are Inuit. Even my lawyer thought we are all the same.

[They need to know] Inuit history, time lines, losses and trauma that we have experienced. They need to listen and learn from us. They also need to inform Inuit agencies about any issues they might have in working with Inuit clients.

All the agencies should get cultural orientation so they understand better where we are coming from. They need to know our history and have Inuit staff and interpreters.

Conclusion

The interviews with Inuit women affected by violence provided insight into their experiences of violence, the Ottawa service system, and what can be done to improve responses to violence against women in the Inuit community.

Some of the themes that emerged in the interviews are presented below.

Violence and Abuse

- The women had considerable experience of violence against them personally as children and as adults, and against those they are close to.
- Not all women are comfortable talking about abuse and violence, even in a supportive, Inuit-specific environment. Some did not tell anyone about the abuse while it was going on, and only 6 out of 10 sought help from community agencies.
- Some of the women came to Ottawa to escape violence in their home communities in the North, and still seek out emotional support from friends and family members there.
- Violence and abuse are not openly talked about in the Inuit community.
- Protecting their children and getting help for them after they experienced family violence was a priority.

Ottawa Service Agencies

- The women had many positive things to say about Ottawa service agencies. In many cases, they saw staff as being responsive, caring and helpful. However, in other instances, women experienced a lack of awareness of Inuit, problems with communication, and in some cases what seemed like overt racism.
- Key components of positive relationships with service providers were: respect, unbiased knowledge of Inuit, and being heard and understood.
- Some women had difficulties communicating with service providers in stressful situations in a language that was not their original language, and because Inuit women in particular can have difficulty speaking up to authority.
- Women may be reluctant to seek help if they fear judgement, a lack of confidentiality, and have shame or fear. They may delay seeking help for the abuse until it is at a crisis, and more damaging and dangerous, level.
- Women reported particularly problematic relationships with the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa and the Ottawa Police Service.
- Most women appreciated getting help from Inuit-specific organizations because they felt understood and supported, and staff was knowledgeable about Inuit and provided a comfortable, familiar environment. However, a few women preferred to get help outside of the Inuit community for privacy reasons.

How Agencies Can Better Help Inuit Women

- Agencies can better help Inuit women by: listening; being trustworthy; showing respect; having an understanding of Inuit and how they experience violence and abuse; providing continuity in services; and hiring Inuit staff.
- Kindness, patience and being non-judgmental were important key qualities in service providers.
- Cultural safety training was seen as essential in providing historical and cultural context for interactions, overcoming stereotypes, distinguishing Inuit from First Nations, and explaining Inuit ways of communicating.
- The women would like to see more Inuit-specific programs, and more services provided in the Inuit language.
- Community agencies should work closely with Inuit organizations to improve their services and to coordinate responses to violence and abuse.

Appendix A – Interview Guide

WOMEN'S SERVICES AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN INTERVIEWS

Introduction

Read the consent form with the woman and get her to sign it. Keep the bottom portion and give the portion with Trudy's name on it to her.

Let her know she can stop anytime and take breaks.

Remind her that what she says is confidential unless you are worried about someone's safety.

Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself – where are you from, how long have you lived in Ottawa, do you have children, who do you live with?
2. Since you have lived in Ottawa, what kinds of experiences have you had with different health, social and justice services? Did they meet your or your family's needs?
For example:
 - a. health clinics, hospitals, doctors?
 - b. social services, child welfare, counselling services?
 - c. the police and court system?
3. How could these agencies better serve Inuit women and their families?
4. We are interested in learning more about how you might have been affected by violence. Can you tell us about any experiences you have had supporting someone close to you who experienced violence or abuse?
5. Can you tell us about any situations where you have been a victim of physical, sexual or emotional violence or abuse by a partner, friend, or family member?
 - a. Did you tell anyone about the situation?
 - b. Did you get help from family and friends?
 - c. Did you get help from any community agencies?
6. Thinking just about the time you have lived in Ottawa and got help for a situation involving violence or abuse, which community agencies did you contact for help?
 - a. Were they helpful to you? What was helpful?
 - b. How could they have been more helpful?
 - c. Were there any barriers or problems in getting the help you needed?
7. How could agencies in Ottawa improve their services related to violence and abuse in the Inuit community?
For example:
 - a. health clinics, hospitals, physicians?
 - b. social services and counselling services?

c. the police and court system?

8. What do service providers need to know about Inuit and the kinds of violence and abuse issues we face in order to better serve the community?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me to help this project make a difference in how Ottawa agencies and service providers respond to violence and abuse?

FILL OUT THE INFORMATION SHEET

Interviewer Concluding Comments (Your own words, as appropriate)

Thank you very much for talking with me today.

We know it takes courage to talk about painful experiences, but in sharing what you have lived through, sometimes the burden of carrying those feelings becomes lighter.

What you have told us also will help to improve services for others. You have made an important contribution to the community today.

Remember if you need additional support or a referral to another agency, please get in touch with me.

Appendix B – Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH ON INUIT WOMEN’S COMMUNITY SERVICES NEEDS

The Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre (OICC) provides services and programs for Inuit children, youth and their families. The Centre is doing research on Inuit women’s experiences and needs for community services, including those related to situations of violence and abuse toward them and those they are close to.

The information we collect will be used to improve services for Inuit women and their families in Ottawa, including developing educational resources and training workshops for healthcare providers, counsellors, police officers and justice workers.

All of the information we collect will remain confidential (private), unless we believe that a child or underage youth is at risk of harm – then we are obligated to report our concerns to a child welfare agency.

We won’t identify any of your comments by name, or include personal details in the reports we write. The information we will only be used by OICC and not given to other organizations.

It’s up to you how much personal information you share with us. You can choose not to answer some questions or stop participating at any time. If you find the discussion upsetting, we can provide support for you, both today and in the future.

**If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact
Trudy Metcalfe at 613-744-3133 ext. 219**

230 McArthur Ave., Ottawa, ON, K1L 6P5, Phone: 613-744-3133, www.ottawainuitchildrens.com

_____ Print Name _____
of _____ Community _____ Territory/Province _____

agrees to participate in the OICC research on Inuit women’s community services and needs.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness: _____ Signature _____ Print Name _____