Indigenous Women and Girls are Overrepresented in Sex Trafficking and Canada Is at Fault

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Human trafficking is not a new problem in Canada; it is an incontrovertible aspect of the history of this country. According to John Winterdyk and Alexandra Ford in the article "Disrupting Human Trafficking in Canada: A Case Study in the Gaps of Meeting the UN Trafficking Protocols," human trafficking in Canada began during colonization, with the transportation of enslaved people into the country and the enslavement of Indigenous people. Over time, it transformed into indentureship, was formally abolished in 1834, and was largely considered a solved problem, until conversations around human trafficking, and specifically, sex trafficking arose around 2000 (240). Today, human trafficking refers to modern-day slavery, where individuals are illegally transported through force or deception for labour or sexual exploitation. In Canada, human trafficking has resulted in disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous women and girls being trafficked for sex, with Winterdyk and Ford asserting that this demographic comprises around 50% of the victims (247). This high national rate sits in stark contrast to the actual population of Indigenous women in Canada, which sits at only 4%, according to Ashley Lawrenson, who works at an Indigenous support centre for women (Orth). In the case study "Sexual Exploitation Prevention Education for Indigenous Girls," First Nations scholar Dustin Louie posits that Indigenous girls and women are at higher risk of being trafficked for sex in

Canada because of the effects of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) system, which resulted in intergenerational trauma that culminated in multiple "pathways" for exploitation (645). These pathways are exacerbated by a lack of institutional change and victim-blaming by the public (635). Louie argues that prevention education would give Indigenous girls the tools to resist being trafficked (636-37). Canada's inability to curb the disproportionately high rates of Indigenous women and girls being trafficked for sex within the country is due to a twofold failure: failure to adequately protect Indigenous women and girls from vulnerabilities to exploitation via a robust prevention education program, and failure to fix the systems of colonization that lead to those vulnerabilities in the first place.

Canada would be able to curb the high rates of Indigenous girls and women being trafficked for sex through a comprehensive prevention education system but has failed to implement such protocols throughout schools across the country. Mandatory prevention education in schools and homeschooling programs is desperately needed and is a sensible way to prevent the exploitation of Indigenous girls and women both today and in the future. Most people who are trafficked for sex are trafficked by people they know, and it can happen in any area; victims can be exploited by friends, partners, family members, or even gangs, and it can happen online, at home, or even at school (Orth; Louie 649). Nationally-mandated prevention education programs would be especially crucial for Indigenous girls and women, as these programs can provide important information on warning signs of exploitation, and act as a layer of armour against would-be perpetrators. According to Louie, "school-based prevention education could interrupt cyclical progressions of trauma for Indigenous girls who have experienced multiple pathways before they are sexually exploited" (641). Unfortunately, Canada has failed to provide this

critical prevention education nationally. According to Winterdyk and Ford, there has been some effort, mainly through The Canadian National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019–2024, that, in part, aims to help raise awareness of sex trafficking, but "none of the main priorities listed prevention as an essential priority of the National Strategy" (246). Winterdyk and Ford note that the National Strategy only mentions a single prevention initiative in Ontario; however, that initiative received funding before the National Strategy was even adopted and "only reached a remote area of the province and a small number of community members" (246). This finding is mirrored in Janice Dickson's article "Schools Inconsistent in Teaching Students About Sex Trafficking in Canada," where she writes, "Not one province in Canada mandates teaching students about sex trafficking, even though schools are prime targets for perpetrators. Across the country, provincial efforts to teach students about sex trafficking are inconsistent." Dickson explains that although students may be taught about exploitation and what healthy relationships should look like, many prevention education programs outside of the province of Ontario do not mention the phrase "sex trafficking." Dickson notes that teachers may not even know that students are being recruited in school. Until prevention education is nationally mandated throughout schools in Canada, Indigenous girls and women will continue to be at risk of, and ill-equipped to respond to, exploitation through sex trafficking.

While the implementation of a national prevention education protocol would help the Indigenous girls and women at risk of being trafficked for sex in the present and future, the failure by Canada to repair the root cause of victimization—the systemic issues borne of colonization, and the intergenerational trauma caused by the IRS system that lead to exploitation—ensures that they will continue to be at risk unless these root causes

are remedied. Louie notes that the apprehension of Indigenous children during the IRS era led to abuse against Indigenous children by those running and working at the schools, which resulted in negatively modeled parental practices (637-38). This ensured that Indigenous families would experience generations of trauma, including higher risks of child apprehension, poverty, sexual abuse. Furthermore, Louie states that "The traumatic cycles of abuse and neglect pervasive in IRS led to Indigenous girls being susceptible to the pathways to sexual exploitation" (638). These pathways, including "sexual abuse" and "family disorganization" which can result in child apprehension through foster care (645), contribute to escalated rates of exploitation because they ensure that Indigenous women and girls remain disadvantaged and continuously vulnerable to predation. Unfortunately, Canada has not done enough to repair the damage from these systems and instead seems to contribute to them. This harm is evident in the drastically increased child apprehension rates for Indigenous populations noted by Louie, who writes "Statistics Canada (2016b) reported that 48% of the 76,000 children in out-of-home care were Indigenous, despite comprising less than 7% of the youth population" (638). In "Colonial Exploitation," Robyn Bourgeois notes that the harm caused by these systems can also be found in the high percentage of Indigenous women and girls who experience sexual abuse, which is a significant pathway to exploitation (1428). Bourgeois asserts that "Indigenous women and girls also experience extremely high rates of sexual violence, with 75 percent of Indigenous females experiencing some form of sexual abuse before age eighteen, with 50 percent experiencing this violence before age fourteen, and 25 percent experiencing this violence before age seven" (1428). Sexual abuse heightens vulnerability to sex trafficking because sexual abuse normalizes inappropriate or unwanted sexual attention, and links

sexual acts to survival. Louie also observes this, writing,

> The expectation of abuse in childhood establishes similar assumptions for Indigenous girls as they mature. The normalization of sexual abuse at such a young age encourages the commodification of sexual activity. The sexualization of Indigenous femininity has been continually reinforced, and translates into a perceived loss of control of their bodies when forced into sexually exploitative activities. In many cases survivors did not recognize that their “boyfriends” were exploiting them, because these activities were being normalized when they were children. (646)

Until Canada can repair the systemic issues that have resulted from colonization, Indigenous women and girls will remain especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Some might think that focusing on prevention education for Indigenous girls and women and tackling the systemic issues is misdirected, and that efforts should instead be focused on the drivers of sex trafficking: the perpetrators themselves. This avenue for reducing exploitation does require attention. In the article "Expanding Our Understanding of Traffickers and Their Operations," Barrick et al. discuss the significant lack of research and data on those responsible for sex trafficking, and write, “Our lack of information about traffickers (e.g., vulnerabilities, motivations, perceptions of their behavior) and their operations (e.g., organizational characteristics, connections with other illicit markets) limits our ability to develop and implement policies and programs aimed at reducing or even preventing perpetration” (2349). There is a sound argument to be made that an increased focus on perpetration would help remove some traffickers from the industry, at least temporarily. Unfortunately, Canada has failed to prosecute traffickers

effectively, as described in "Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada" by Hodgins et al. These authors note that an investigation by Hayli Millar and Tamara O'Doherty from 2020 found that "compared to 937 police-reported charges, only 87 were actually prosecuted and just 48.8% of those cases resulted in trafficking-specific convictions; 92% of these cases reflected domestic sex trafficking charges while only 7% involved cross-border trafficking allegations" (2371). These statistics indicate Canada's failure to effectively prosecute traffickers, and acknowledges that domestic sex trafficking, which overly affects Indigenous women and girls, is the primary issue. Canada's poor track record with removing perpetrators from the sex trafficking industry shows that maintaining focus on the more pressing issues of prevention education and repairing the systemic issues caused by colonization must take precedence. Keeping focus on these areas will ensure that Indigenous women and girls are educated to resist exploitation attempts, and that future generations will not experience the same pathways to exploitation.

The issues leading to the ongoing sexual exploitation of Indigenous girls and women in Canada are complex and not easily solvable. Canada must address the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous women and girls through comprehensive, nationally mandated prevention education protocols, and by repairing the intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and the Indian Residential Schools System. While the lack of information and focus on perpetrators of sex trafficking is concerning and needs to be addressed, Canada's lack of success with prosecution indicates that most effective means to curb the high rates of Indigenous women and girls being trafficked lay elsewhere. Prevention education is key to reducing exploitation in the present and future. In the article "Helping Indigenous

Women Out of Human Trafficking," Marissa Kokkoros, who is the executive director of Aura Freedom, an organization in Toronto which does advocacy and research, says that "You can't traffic an empowered youth" (Orth). Prevention education would empower Indigenous girls and women so that they are less likely to be trafficked. Addressing the pathways to victimization that Indigenous girls and women experience as a result of colonization and the IRS system will ensure that the root cause no longer produces an endless supply of potential victims. Human trafficking is a defining feature of Canada's past and present, and without increased efforts to combat the trafficking of Indigenous women and girls for sex through prevention education and mending the trauma of colonization, it will continue to be the country's future.

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