



CHAPTER 6

Indigenous Women & Children:

Perspectives and Impacts of GBV & Substance Use

6.1. INDIGENOUS WOMEN & CHILDREN: PERSPECTIVES AND IMPACTS OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) & SUBSTANCE USE

The following chapter provides an initial overview of GBV and substance use as it relates to the experiences of Indigenous women and the impact on children in a very high-level way, which is limited in scope and expertise. We draw from key Indigenous documents and scholars, and we encourage readers to access and review the resources listed below for a much deeper understanding of the issues and solutions.

Essential Resources and Key Documents Related to Truth and Reconciliation and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Practices:

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (NCTR): Official history, 94 Calls to Action, and background on the TRC; links to records now stewarded by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. <https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/>

Indigenous Watchdog: An Indigenous-led, continuously updated tracker that monitors progress and gaps across all 94 Calls to Action, with issue pages and primary source links to inform local action. indigenouwatchdog.org [indigenou...tchdog.org]

Assembly of First Nations (AFN): National advocacy organization advancing First Nations' rights, self-determination, and policy change; good starting point for positions, resolutions, and national initiatives. afn.ca

Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC): National Indigenous organization advancing the rights and well-being of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people, with resources on GBV, MMIWG2S+, health, and culturally relevant gender-based analysis. nwac.ca

Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC): Provincial body supporting Friendship Centres as urban Indigenous hubs for culture-based programs, youth leadership, research, and community advocacy. ofifc.org

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST): Indigenous-led multiservice agency providing culture-based child and family well-being, early years, youth, and holistic services in Toronto. nativechild.org

Anishnawbe Health Toronto (AHT): Toronto's Indigenous governed community health centre integrating Traditional Healers and western care across 60 programs (primary care, mental health, diabetes, perinatal, traditional healing). aht.ca

Four Directions Teachings (Interactive): A visually rich, Elder-narrated site sharing foundational teachings from five First Nations (e.g., Mi'kmaq, Mohawk, Ojibwe, Cree, Blackfoot), with classroom resources. fourdirectionsteachings.com [fourdirect...chings.com]

Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society (TWHLS) – Indigenous-led, trauma-informed housing and supports for First Nations, Inuit and Métis 2SLGBTQIA+ women exiting the justice system; healing lodge programming, safe housing, and cultural reconnection in the GTA. twhls.ca

Indigenous scholars and Indigenous-led inquiries show that GBV and substance use are intertwined outcomes of settler colonialism that disrupted governance, gender roles, lands, and kinship systems, creating persistent structural risks (Anderson, 2016; MMIWG, 2019).



The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) documents how historical and ongoing colonialism, including residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and jurisdictional gaps, has produced intergenerational trauma and structural conditions that elevate exposure to violence and limit avenues to redress and promote healing. These conditions are not only historical; they remain active drivers of risk today.

Indigenous women often face unequal access to timely, culturally safe justice and a pattern of responses that minimize or misclassify harms, deterring reporting and help-seeking. The MMIWG Final Report highlights longstanding barriers such as inadequate investigations, poor coordination across jurisdictions, and limited trauma- and violence-informed practices alongside Calls for Justice that require systemic reform and Indigenous-led solutions.



Practice Pearl: Defining Trauma from a Trauma- Informed Approach

- “Don’t guess, ask and learn.”
- When supporting Indigenous women and children experiencing GBV and substance use, pause and seek guidance from Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and Indigenous-led services rather than assuming how to incorporate “traditional” practices.
- Invite local expertise and co-create next steps that honour Nation-specific teachings, language, ceremony, and consent.
- Your role is to make space, listen, and follow Indigenous leadership—not to interpret or improvise cultural practices.
- Colonial histories and ongoing systems shape risk and access for Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people. Indigenous-led approaches are evidence-informed and central to safety.

6.2. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Trauma from residential schools and forced assimilation is transmitted across generations, manifesting as mental health challenges, substance use, and cycles of violence (Bombay et al., 2014).

Empirical work led by Anishinaabe scholar Amy Bombay links family residential school histories to higher contemporary stress exposure, poorer mental health, and increased susceptibility to substance use, with cumulative, multigenerational effects (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014).

6.3. IMPACTS ON INDIGENOUS CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Trauma reverberates through parenting stress, family disruption, and child welfare involvement; integrated, women-only, culturally grounded programs (e.g., Sheway) show promise for mothers and infants (Bombay et al., 2014; CAMH KE Snapshot—Niccols et al.).

Indigenous scholars and leaders have documented how colonial policies continue to separate families and erode safety, with the MMIWG Final Report naming multigenerational and intergenerational trauma, insecure housing, and barriers to health and cultural supports as ongoing drivers of harm.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND COLONIZATION IN CANADA

- COLONIAL POLICIES AND SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE**
Measures such as the Indian Act and residential schools disrupted traditional gender roles, increasing vulnerability.
- INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA**
Trauma from residential schools and forced assimilation has been transmitted across generations, contributing to cycles of violence.
- GENDERED IMPACT OF COLONIZATION**
The displacement of traditional roles and marginalization of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people has increased exposure to violence.
- STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES AND ONGOING COLONIALISM**
Systemic discrimination, jurisdictional gaps, and socioeconomic disparities continue to perpetuate violence and limit access to justice and healing.



In child welfare specifically, Indigenous children are persistently overrepresented, a pattern tied less to “parental deficits” than to structural conditions and policy design—calling for Indigenous self-determination and culturally safe approaches.

6.4. WHAT WORKS (INDIGENOUS-LED)

Culture as foundation (ceremony, language, Elders, land) through Indigenous harm reduction and land-based healing; culturally relevant approaches to address colonial and gendered racism; whole-family, trauma- and violence-informed care to keep families safely together; and cross-sector implementation of MMIWG Calls for Justice are essential (FNHA, n.d.; Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2023; NWAC, 2020; MMIWG, 2019).

Of note is the recognition and acknowledgement of the differences between Western and Indigenous worldviews, especially when non-Indigenous care workers are developing treatment plans with Indigenous women.

Due to the impacts of colonization and structural inequities, there may be mistrust of formal institutions. Indigenous ways of knowing and healing have been discredited despite many being similar and aligned with Western science. As such, Indigenous ways of healing and intervention need to be at the centre of GBV and substance use interventions for Indigenous women. This approach includes interventions for men and boys to return to Indigenous ways of knowing that may contrast with Western approaches to intervention.

