

Sexual Assault: Indigenous Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police

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Abstract

Rates of sexual victimization among Indigenous women are 3 times higher when compared with non-Indigenous women. The purpose of this secondary data analysis was to explore the experiences and recommendations of Indigenous women who reported sexual assault to the police and were not believed. This qualitative study of the experiences of 11 Indigenous women reflects four themes. The women experienced (a) victimization across the lifespan, (b) violent sexual assault, (c) dismissal by police, and (d) survival and resilience. These women were determined to voice their experience and make recommendations for change in the way police respond to sexual assault.

Keywords

sexual assault, Indigenous, police response

In North America, there are hundreds of thousands of self-reported incidents of sexual assault in a 1-year period, with women representing the vast majority (87%) of victims (Conroy & Cotter, 2017; Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). The high rates of sexual assault are prevalent on a global scale (Krug et al., 2002), indicating a serious societal problem that is associated with negative health outcomes (Dworkin et al., 2017). Indigenous women are at an even higher risk for sexual assault (Brennan, 2011; Scrim, 2017), and rates of sexual victimization are 3 times higher when compared with non-Indigenous

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women (Conroy & Cotter, 2017). These statistics are congruent with the chronic sexual victimization of Indigenous women that has occurred since colonization and continues to the present (Wieskamp & Smith, 2020). Indigenous women are currently regarded as one of the most victimized groups in Canada (Palmater, 2016b; Scrim, 2017; Wilson et al., 2013) and are disproportionately represented as victims of crime, with dramatically higher rates of violent victimization than non-Indigenous people (Scrim, 2017). Indigenous people are too often treated abysmally by police, both when charged with criminal conduct and when victims of crime (Razack, 2015). However, few studies have looked specifically at Indigenous women's stories of sexual assault and/or the response of police (Palmater, 2016b). It is therefore very important to hear the specific stories of Indigenous women who have experienced sexual violence. Learning from these stories is also essential to the process of Truth and Reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In a call to action from the report of the Missing, Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry (MMIWG), Indigenous women advocated being included as meaningful participants in research to break down patriarchy, misogyny, and colonialism, stating "nothing about us, without us at the table" (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 85). As such, to move forward with the calls to action of MMIWG, and developing capacity for the investigation of sexualized violence, the stories of Indigenous women and their firsthand recommendations for change need to be heard and respected.

Police are in a unique position to ensure justice for sexual assault cases by investigating sexual assault allegations and holding perpetrators accountable (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018). As the first point of contact for victims of sexual assault, the primary role of police is to "ensure that a thorough, unbiased and professional investigation is conducted" (Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, n.d.). In Canada, a tripartite agreement between federal, provincial, and First Nations' authorities is in place to provide funding for self-administered police services to Indigenous people on reserve. However, not all Indigenous communities have self-administered policing, and are thereby provided with law enforcement from provincial police (Clairmont, 2006). Indigenous people living off-reserve are provided with police services at the provincial or municipal level, depending on geographic boundaries. Despite a variety of policing models, all officers play a pivotal role in contributing to the healing process of women by supporting their claims and assisting them to access formal support for their physical and mental health post-assault (Haskell & Randall, 2019). However, given the known racism within police forces (Souhami, 2014), Indigenous women may be at greater risk of a failed police response.

Sexual assaults reported to the police rarely result in conviction (Rotenberg, 2017), often lack a thorough investigative process, and one in five sexual assault reports are deemed unfounded (disbelieved) by the police (Doolittle et al., 2017), with no further action taken. The "unfounded" code is allocated to sexual assault cases that have been deemed false or baseless by the police after a thorough investigation (Rotenberg, 2017). However, the prevalence of unfounded cases must be evaluated with caution as evidence suggests that police officers ascribe to rape myths and base many decisions

on the credibility of the victim in sexual assault cases (Patterson, 2011). A stereotypical “real rape” victim is one who is credible, assaulted with a weapon by a stranger, and sustains physical injury (Quinlan, 2016; Sleath & Bull, 2017). Sexual assault victims who are not believed by the police often experience secondary victimization, and ultimately do not attain justice for victimization (Patterson, 2011).

Improving the disclosure experience is necessary for women to obtain justice (Haskell & Randall, 2019). Evidence suggests that many women who report their sexual assault to the police often feel revictimized from the lack of investigation, insensitivity, perceived judgment, and low rates of arrests and sentencing of the perpetrator(s) (Alderden & Long, 2016). Revictimization by the police is even more common among Indigenous women and racial minorities due to ongoing systemic racism and perceived lack of credibility (Classen et al., 2005). However, no studies were identified related to the specific experience of Indigenous women who have been sexually assaulted, reported to the police, and were not believed. This is perhaps not surprising. Early studies of rape treated the experience of White women as paradigmatic (Brownmiller, 1976; MacKinnon, 1987). While the failure to acknowledge the unique experiences of Black (Harris, 1990) and Indigenous (Kline, 1989) women has been critiqued, the lessons of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994) have not been well applied in practice (Hillsburg, 2013). Most work about rape and sexual violence starts implicitly from the experience of White women. Instead, we need to listen directly to Indigenous women to understand their unique needs in the context of sexual violence.

Exploring the unique experiences of Indigenous women who report sexual assault and are not being believed is an important step in understanding the needs of women, improving their health and well-being, and influencing the legal and justice systems to meet the needs of women at a time of increased vulnerability. It is widely recognized that Indigenous women in Canada experience oppression, discrimination, and victimization due to the ongoing impact of colonization (Palmater, 2016a; Snelgrove et al., 2014). For instance, Indigenous children experience child sexual abuse at alarmingly high rates, thereby increasing their risk for future sexual victimization (Classen et al., 2005; Relyea & Ullman, 2017). Yet, little specific action has been taken to understand the meaning of oppression and discrimination in the context of sexual violence and/or to take concrete steps to improve police response to Indigenous women who have experienced sexual assault. As such, the purpose of this secondary data analysis was to explore the experiences and recommendations of Indigenous women who reported sexual assault to the police and were not believed.

Method

This article reports on a secondary analysis of a larger study on women’s experiences with unfounded sexual assault (not believed by the police). A detailed description of the methodology for the primary study is cited in the original publication (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2020). The sample included 23 women from Northwestern Ontario who experienced sexual assault, reported to the police, and no further action was taken. Among the sample, almost 50% self-identified as Indigenous women

highlighting the disproportionate representation of Indigenous women within the sample. Thus, this research is an extension of the qualitative exploration of the primary research. An amendment was obtained from the Research Ethics Board (REB) to complete a secondary analysis of the data specific to the Indigenous women's experiences. The amended REB approval included additional interviews with Indigenous women who consented to participate in the primary study, a revised consent form acknowledging the secondary data analysis, and approval to analyze the data from Indigenous women independent from the primary study. Thus, this descriptive phenomenological study explored Indigenous women's experience with unfounded sexual assault to ensure that their uniqueness was not homogenized with the voices of women in the original sample. Descriptive phenomenology was the method of choice as it enabled an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of an underexplored area of research. The geographic location of the research occurred on the traditional lands of the Anishnaabeg people in the Robinson Superior treaty, as well as the traditional lands of the Ojibway/Chippewa people in Treaty 3 territory.

Participants meeting the following inclusion criteria were eligible to participate in the independent analysis: (a) self-identified as an Indigenous woman, (b) English-speaking, (c) had experienced a sexual assault and reported it to the police, (d) self-reported that the sexual assault was deemed unfounded or not believed by the police, and (e) was able to participate in interviews in the geographic location of the study. Participants were excluded from the research if (a) police laid charges and the perpetrator was taken to court, (b) the survivor of the sexual assault did not wish to pursue charges, (c) the survivor self-identified an unconfirmed sexual assault (unclear events or memories), and/or (d) the survivor was unable to provide consent to the research.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Recruitment for this research occurred between April 13 and July 21, 2019. The majority of research participants contacted the research team to participate through a Facebook advertisement. A research assistant screened prospective participants to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for the research.

Data collection included one to two face-to-face ($n = 9$) or telephone interviews ($n = 2$) with sexual assault survivors who met the inclusion criteria. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average length was 52 min. Two members of the research team were present throughout all interviews. At the onset of the interview, an information letter outlining the study was verbally reviewed with participants, and consent to participate and be audio-recorded was subsequently signed before initiation of the interview. A demographic questionnaire was completed with participants and included questions regarding the characteristics of the participant, the perpetrator, the assault, and interactions with the police. As a component of the secondary analysis, a question was added regarding Indigenous identity, as this emerged as unique data for Indigenous women. The women were asked whether they felt their Indigenous identity affected their experience of sexual assault and/or the response of police to the assault. Following each

interview, participants were provided with a US\$50 honorarium as a token of appreciation for their time and with a list of support services available in the community and the district to ensure emotional safety.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were entered into NVivo version 11 for analysis. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step analytic method as it is a rigorous analytic approach used in descriptive phenomenology that maintains immersion in the data throughout the process. This approach included an extensive review of both audio files and transcribed data by all members of the research team. Subsequently, three researchers (J.M.-O., L.C., and a research assistant) completed the remaining steps of the analysis. These steps included extraction of significant phrases directly from participants' verbal accounts and formulation of meanings associated with significant phrases. Next, meanings were clustered into themes through discussion as a research team. The researchers engaged in a constant comparative method and an exhaustive description of the themes. Finally, a comprehensive thematic description of the accounts of participants using excerpts from participants' verbal accounts was completed to represent the themes. The remaining two members of the research team (K.M. and A.M.) reviewed all themes and the data collected within each theme to verify the findings. Discussion occurred between all members of the research team to ensure the interpretation of findings was accurate; no changes to the initial thematic analysis were deemed necessary.

Results

Sample

Convenience sampling was used to recruit the original sample ($n = 23$) who experienced sexual assault, reported the sexual assault to the police, and no further action was taken by the police to substantiate the report. Eleven women who self-identified as Indigenous comprise the sample for this research. All participants lived off-reserve at the time of the interview and were recruited from three different communities. Demographic data for research participants are listed in Table 1, and the characteristics of the assault are listed in Table 2.

The thematic analysis revealed four themes. These themes included: (a) victimization across the lifespan, (b) violent sexual assault, (c) dismissal by the police, and (d) survival and resilience. These themes are explored with direct statements from participants (women).

Victimization Across the Lifespan

Early experiences. The women in this research disclosed numerous accounts of violence in their lives that often started at an early age. They perceived there were contributing factors toward the victimization they experienced, including family dysfunction,

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant Characteristics	n = 11
Age	
24–34	4 (36.4%)
35–44	5 (45.5%)
45–54	2 (18.2%)
Education	
Partial highschool	5 (45.5%)
Highschool diploma received	1 (9.1%)
Partial university	2 (18.2%)
University graduate degree	2 (18.2%)
Unknown	1 (9.1%)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	10 (90.9%)
Two-Spirit	1 (9.1%)
Marital status	
Married/Common law	3 (27.3%)
Single	8(72.7%)
Number of children	
0	1 (9.1%)
1–2	5 (45.5%)
3–4	3 (27.3%)
5–6	2 (18.2%)
Employment status	
Unemployed	7 (63.6%)
Student	1 (9.1%)
Part-time employment/Casual	2 (18.2%)
Unknown	1 (9.1%)
Income status	
Under US\$5,000	1 (9.1%)
US\$5,000–US\$9,999	3 (27.3%)
US\$10,000–US\$14,999	5 (45.5%)
US\$15,000–US\$19,999	1 (9.1%)
US\$30,000–US\$34,999	1 (9.1%)
Currently receiving social assistance	
Yes	11 (100%)
Type of social assistance currently receiving	
Welfare	6 (54.5%)
Disability	5 (45.5%)
Receiving social assistance at time of sexual assault	
Yes	5 (45.5%)
No	6 (54.4%)

involvement in foster care, early exposure to drugs and alcohol, criminal activity at a young age, child physical abuse, and their Indigenous identity, and subsequent racism. Each of these factors was perceived to increase the risk of victimization. For example,

Table 2. Characteristics of the Assault.

Assault Characteristics	n = 11
Perpetrator known	
Yes	7 (63.6%)
No	4 (36.4%)
Relationship with perpetrator	
Stranger	4 (36.4%)
Acquaintance	5 (45.5%)
Family member	1 (9.1%)
Friend	1 (9.1%)
Alcohol use by victim	
Yes	6 (54.5%)
No	5 (45.5%)
Drug use by victim	
Yes	5 (45.5%)
No	6 (54.5%)
Alcohol use by perpetrator	
Yes	7 (63.6%)
No	1 (9.1%)
Unknown	3 (27.3%)
Drug use by perpetrator	
Yes	6 (54.5%)
No	1 (9.1%)
Unknown	4 (36.4%)
Health outcomes experienced	
Mental health	11 (100%)
Physical health	6 (45.5%)
Sexual health	4 (36.4%)
Defense during sexual assault	
Physically resisted attack	5 (45.5%)
Verbally resisted attack	5 (45.5%)
Report of sexual assault made to police	
Within 24 hr	9 (81.9%)
After 24 hr	2 (18.2%)
Subsequent sexual assault experienced and not reported to police	
Yes	7 (63.6%)
No	4 (36.4%)
Follow-up services offered by police	
Yes	2 (18.2%)
No	9 (81.8%)

one participant who experienced numerous sexual assaults throughout her life described adverse child experiences that she perceived as contributory to being sexually assaulted,

My Granny allowed this to happen. You know in the 11 years I lived there, every day that lady beat me; sometimes twice a day. And when her sons were finished with me, I was

called a whore, a slut. I thought I was going to have 20 children by the time I'm 30. I was raped until I was 27 years old by my family.

Many of the women in this research disclosed child sexual abuse from a very young age. "I just go by ages. I was 5 years old when my cousin started having sex with me, because I remember being in JK, and I grew up that way." For many participants, their life circumstances, and the lack of protective capacities from their parents, placed them in risky situations and exposed them to people who took advantage of them sexually. Some of the women described the normalization of child sexual activity in their lives. One participant disclosed,

So, 9–10 [years old], I was already drinking, experimenting, and doing bad stuff. I was already having, like not sex but, because I had been sexually molested and sexually raped by my cousin, sex was normal, I didn't see anything wrong with it at that age, and there was everything wrong with it.

Participants described sexual victimization primarily from family members; however, they also experienced sexual assault from other men and boys in the communities in which they resided. The perpetrators of the sexual abuse were older, and often used their age and size to threaten young girls into compliance due to fear for themselves and others; for example, "He kept with the threats, you know, telling me I will kill you, this is normal, this is normal, just let me do it. And having those sexual sensations as a child, you get used to it."

During sexual assault. This victimization continued at the time of the assault that was reported and disbelieved by the police. Some participants perceived that their Indigenous identity precipitated the sexual assault; for example, "I was drunk, they were putting the bottles down my throat, shoving them down my throat and telling me that I liked that and laughing at me, throwing rags at me, calling me a dirty Indian." Women described being targeted due to their Indigenous identity and felt that the perpetrators perceived them as disposable:

I was just used as an object for somebody's pleasure, somebody's sick fantasy that him and his buddies got together, decided we are gonna go get a native girl, and fuck the shit out of her, kill her, and we are never gonna tell anybody and we aren't ever gonna get caught.

For other women, they connected their experience of sexual victimization to their personal life circumstances such as criminal history, and drug and alcohol use:

Maybe it was my nationality, or my prior criminal history, or my situation that I was in with a sociopathic liar, that all contributed to me getting raped that night. I wasn't taken serious. If it was maybe the prime minister's daughter, you know, it would be national headlines, my story. But, since I'm just a foster kid that got date raped, it wasn't important enough.

Several participants disclosed use of drugs or alcohol at the time of the assault. At times, this use was intended to be casual with friends at a party; for others, they disclosed losing their inhibitions due to being drugged by the perpetrator. Many of the women described their use of drugs and alcohol as a contributing factor in the sexual assault. This was primarily due to a loss of control of their senses, or a need to lie down and sleep due to intoxication. It was during these times that women were sexually assaulted. One participant described her loss of control and subsequent assault: "I was in the vehicle in the back seat, and one of them was in the backseat kinda propping me up, and I was spinning; like I was dizzy, I couldn't talk, I didn't have control of my body." Another participant disclosed her experience of waking up and realizing she had been assaulted while she was passed out from alcohol use:

I woke up alone, so that's when I started crying more because I felt like I had been raped. Because, I had been sleeping when they left, and so I had always felt like it was a rape because I wouldn't have consented and I wouldn't have done that.

Future victimization. Following the sexual assault that was reported to the police and not believed, women reported continued physical and sexual victimization throughout their lives. Sixty-four percent of women in the study experienced additional sexual assaults that were not reported to the police, thereby highlighting their vulnerability. Many women described physically violent interpersonal or intimate relationships that resulted in numerous physical injuries such as black eyes and broken bones. Participants often articulated that their experience of sexual assault, and the disclosure that was disbelieved by the police, placed them in greater danger thereafter. They missed red flags of abuse and tolerated abuse or sexual assault from men because they could not rely on the police to help them. One participant described the experience of trauma and its impact on subsequent victimization:

Once you have suffered from trauma, like, I have complex post-traumatic stress disorder because I have had multiple traumas, you don't see the red flags like a lot of the other people that haven't experienced trauma seen in any relationships, friendships, relations with strangers, romantic relationships. You don't see the red flags like a normal person would, so you get involved in relationships and more often than not, at least to my experience, they are abusive to an extent; whether its emotional, physical or whatever, and because of the way the police had dealt with me previously I have been physically assaulted in my past 3 relationships numerous times and I would not phone the police.

The victimization the women experienced throughout their lives was traumatizing and resulted in numerous negative outcomes that affected their daily lives and long-term well-being; for example, "I felt like I was bruised; like I was a bruised person. Everyone else was perfect, but I was different now after that." The women disclosed fear of being alone, daily concerns for their safety, avoiding crowds, hypervigilance, and social isolation. Others spoke about relationship problems including a fear of being touched, fear of abandonment, inability to have sexual intercourse for years, and inability to trust others and establish relationships. Participants also disclosed

numerous mental health outcomes, including low self-esteem, self-harm, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation. Among the most common outcomes, women disclosed use of drugs and alcohol to numb the pain from trauma. Many of these women had not previously struggled with substance use until it was used as a means of coping. One woman who committed her life to helping other young women who experienced sexual victimization explained the importance of the police response for healing:

They [police] should actually really believe them. When they are being told something, follow up on it. Because a lot of people turn to alcohol and drugs, if they didn't do that [not believe] I think more people would be a lot more successful than having to deal with the hurt that way.

Violent Sexual Assault

All sexual assaults are inherently violent, but the women in this research described being particularly brutalized at the time of their assaults. For example, one participant who was drinking alone at a bar at the time of the assault, felt that she was targeted as a victim of gang rape when three men approached her in the parking lot, drugged her, and raped and sodomized her repeatedly. Another woman stated,

I went on a drinking binge and I was awoken by someone punching me in the head. I tried fighting back, it was in my home. I woke up being punched and blood down my face, and I couldn't fight back anymore.

Sixty-four percent of participants sustained some form of physical injury; for instance, "I had that man's shoe print on my face for 3 days." The violence women endured included being "grabbed," "pushed," "slapped," "hit," "beaten," "brutalized," "suffocated in water," "choked," and "injected with drugs." One woman, who experienced a gang rape with multiple perpetrators, described the violent nature of the crime:

I wasn't able to move, and I think instinctively went in possum mode and they brutalized me with a baseball bat. They sodomized me, and they beat me black and blue with the baseball bat. And, then they basically dragged me across the road, they took me out to the outskirts of town and they put me in a dumpster, and I think that they thought I was dead. I was there for approximately 12 hours; my pants were ripped, my clothes were shredded, there was blood everywhere, I was black and blue and my head was pounding.

Participants described the terror that they felt due to the extreme violence during the assault; for example, "I thought he was actually going to start choking me and I was going to die." For some women, the level of violence was even more substantial when they were victims of human trafficking. One participant who was "saved" from a man in a back alley after she was violently abducted from her home and tied up in a van with several other victims, described the level of violence she endured for 18 days:

He grabbed me and he shoved my face in a bucket of water and strung me up and started grabbing my hands, I still have marks. They were shooting us up with drugs. I have a couple marks there, a couple of marks right there [showing scars to researcher]. My hand is never going to be the same; my face is never going to be the same. They dropped battery acid on my face because I wasn't shutting up. I was screaming and yelling and they rubbed it on my face and neck. I had it on my hands, it was bad. I was just pure red and my skin was burning from the sweat all the time.

The woman experienced this violence while she was pregnant, and her perpetrators threatened to take her baby for human trafficking. Another victim of human trafficking described the violence she endured:

For 5 days I was slapped around; beaten on my body, they said they had to have something to look at so they didn't touch my face, and they called me a lamb and sacrifice for them to rape me.

The women experienced threats of harm to themselves or their loved ones and described the fear they lived with through the violence of the assault; for example, "I had to physically give myself to them or they would kill us. So I did." The level of violence and control from the perpetrators created fear in victims and robbed them of their sense of safety and options.

For many of the women, the sexual assaults occurred at opportunistic moments or moments of increased vulnerability. For instance, one woman described her sexual assault occurring in her own home when she was simply going about her daily activities, "They [gang] had somebody standing outside my place when I got there. All I remember was a knock at the door and when I opened it I got punched in the face and dragged out of my house." Others felt they were targeted due to the vulnerability of their young age. For example, one participant described that while she was walking on a highway at the age of 15 years, she was picked up by a truck driver who subsequently sexually assaulted her and also enabled other truck drivers who followed his truck to sexually assault her:

Fifteen years old with truckers giving me booze and shots; alcohol and weed. So, we got closer to [town], I was like ok we can get off here, this is where we want to get off. He goes, "Well, you should have thought about that before you got in this truck, there is no fuckin way you are getting off this truck now."

Dismissal by the Police

All the women who experienced sexual assault made reports to the police with hope that the police would help them and would bring perpetrators to justice. However, overwhelmingly, women reported their experience with the police was negative, not what they expected, and for many, it was retraumatizing. Participants self-reported that they felt dismissed by the police and that police believed their sexual assault was either untrue or unimportant. The feeling of police dismissal of women's accounts was exemplified in

numerous ways. The first indication occurred when the women contacted the police to file a report of sexual assault. Some women indicated that, despite a 911 call and a disclosure of sexual assault, they waited for many hours before the police attended. This left them confused about what they should do, and prompted a sense that they, and their stories, lacked importance to the authorities. One woman, who contacted the police to report sexual assault and waited 5–6 hr for them to come and take a statement, expressed her experience when the police finally arrived the next day:

I kind of felt pretty discouraged and I went home and I think I had called one more time that night and they said that an officer would be there tomorrow. When the officer came it was just a normal uniformed patrol officer and I don't want to say he sluffed me off, but by that point I had showered twice. I just remember scrubbing in really hot water, because I felt really dirty, like really ashamed . . . and the cop just kind of blew me off.

For the majority of women, their report occurred over the phone, in a police car, or at a residence, with no opportunity provided to attend the police station to make a formal video-recorded statement. As a result, participants felt that their sexual assaults were being dismissed; for example, "There was no police station; there were no cops in uniform. There was nothing." In addition to the lack of opportunity for a formal report, women recalled the interaction with the police at the time of the report as very short in duration, with most stating that the interaction was 5–10 min, thereby contributing to the sense of dismissal of their account. During the disclosure of sexual assault, participants felt that police lacked compassion, that they appeared they "didn't want to be there," and that there was a "complete lack of concern." For example, one victim of human trafficking who was tied up in a van for weeks and was provided only minimal food and water, described her interaction with the police when she was finally "rescued" by a bystander: [One cop stated] "you should look into going to the hospital." [The other police officer stated] "We don't do hospital runs." Furthermore, the police officer continued to dismiss the woman's needs: "When we were riding, I asked for water and he says I only have my water bottle, sorry. I had been without water for a long time and I said ok." Despite the fact that this woman was pregnant, weak, and seriously injured, the police took her to her apartment where one of the perpetrators was waiting and she was assaulted again.

The sense of dismissal was exacerbated by the approach officers took with women during the report of sexual assault. Women disclosed feeling blamed for the assault due to their lifestyles or histories:

They didn't come in and sit down, you know what I mean? They didn't come in acting like they were coming to question a victim of sexual assault. They came in acting like there are a couple of drunk teens.

This sense of blame was experienced by others:

I don't know if they just didn't believe me, or if they just didn't care, but they made me feel like it was my fault because I had previously been an exotic dancer and I had been in a known drug area, so that I had brought that on myself.

The experience of blame made women feel like they were being dismissed as victims of serious crimes. This continued when women felt that police were interrogating them instead of supporting them as victims; for example, “I felt like it was an interrogation, I’m like oh my God am I the perpetrator? My gut felt like, I feel like I’m being bullied, well not bullied but re-victimized almost.” Another woman felt that the police were insinuating that she was responsible for the assault since she did not fight back:

They didn’t say did you fight him? But, *why* [emphasis added] didn’t you fight him? Why didn’t you fight him off? That one was a trigger for me, big time. I was like, I don’t know. How would I know, actually even to this day I remember thinking while I was at his house, how do I know he’s not going to physically attack me and try and kill me? I don’t know him. I only met him twice.

Several participants disclosed that they perceived the treatment from the police was attributed to their identity as Indigenous women. Some women expressed that they were dismissed due to racism and the negative perceptions of Indigenous people; for example, “Cops just don’t like dealing with drunk Indians basically.” Another woman stated, “These cops around here I believe they are racist, I dealt with them too when I was intoxicated.” Participants in this study felt stigmatized in many ways throughout their reports to the police, thereby contributing to their sense of judgment and racism. Most women expressed that they feel they would have been treated differently if they were “a white girl.” Women expressed feeling threatened by the police while making reports to them. They indicated police threatened to involve child welfare because they had been drinking and accused some of making false reports. The perception of participants is that police assume engagement in drinking alcohol in some way dismisses or excuses sexual assault: Women have brought it on themselves. One participant recalled the police response when she was picked up after being a victim of sexual assault: “They said she’s just gonna be drunk, she’s drunk; another native, another native woman being a drunk.”

Perhaps the most dismissive aspect of the police response occurred with a lack of follow-up after the disclosure. Many of the women stated that they did not receive an incident number when they made their reports, thereby making any follow-up with the police difficult, if not impossible. One woman described the impact of the absence of an incident number:

Nobody ever called back and I had called once and tried to ask dispatch and one of the first things they asked me was for the incident report number. I said that there was none, and I kind of left a message trying to explain and they said they would have to look into it. Nobody called back and I dropped it. By that point I felt that they didn’t believe me and I kind of started to second guess and question myself as well.

Other participants felt dismissed when police stated that their files would be transferred to other jurisdictions, yet no one ever called. Many of the women stated that they attempted to take matters into their own hands and called the police themselves

to find out the status of their reports but never received a call back; for example, “The responding officer said they would call me back, and they just never did.” This lack of follow-up made women feel that they were being dismissed and that the sexual violence they had experienced was unimportant or unworthy of justice:

They took a description and then they said that’s a really vague description then they left. They never followed up with me after that. So, I don’t know if they just didn’t believe me, or if they just didn’t care.

The women expressed feeling a lack of closure and feared revictimization. Participants articulated the importance of follow-up on their well-being: “If they would have followed up sooner, I would have been ok, well they believe me.” The dismissive nature of the interaction with the police was emotionally damaging for women and contributed to a lack of trust in the police. This lack of trust may be dangerous for women if they have no one to turn to:

I didn’t have any information on how to access the file and I honestly didn’t want to, because of the way that they [police] made me feel. After that I have avoided reporting crimes against myself several times to the police, whether it’s assault by a partner, or I actually had a rape in 2017 that wasn’t reported. . . . I didn’t feel that there was any point in reporting to them or in trying to follow up with them, because they never ever really seemed to care.

Survival and Resilience

Despite the traumatic circumstances of their lives, the lack of support they received from the police, and the negative outcomes they experienced, these women were resilient. At the time of the assault, they did what they needed to do to survive: “I had to survive, I had no choice.” For some, that meant fighting back; for others, it meant freezing to protect themselves, and for some women, forced compliance was their survival strategy. One participant who was repeatedly sexually assaulted by numerous men and was threatened that her younger cousin, who had also been abducted, would be harmed, explained how she survived the terror she lived through:

I begged for them not to hurt her. I said do whatever you have to do to me, just leave her alone, just don’t hurt her. So, they didn’t. I laid in the bed and acted like nothing, just do what you got to do. They all took their turns and this one guy was strangling me and then I passed out. Like ok, this is it, you know this is where the [body] bag comes in play and all the tools that they had they were going to chop me up there and I thought I was done for. Then I woke up, and I remember softly turning my head and looking and he was sleeping, he was lying there, and I didn’t hear anything, it was quiet, so I rolled off the bed, because at that point they thought they killed me (crying). I went into the living room area and grabbed my cousin by the hair, I grabbed a wallet that was on the shelf, I grabbed all the money out, and I threw his wallet and I just ran.

Despite sexual assaults and negative outcomes, participants overcame adversity. Some women turned to prayer to help them, while others found support in their children. Some women persevered through their pain and managed to graduate and earn a degree; for example, “I was in university, I was hospitalized in a mental health unit for about 6 weeks, but I managed to graduate.” Many women who developed addictions fought to “get sober.” One woman disclosed her perseverance to overcome the adversity she experienced, “I am sober today, and I don’t think that way anymore, I just live my life and go to meetings and counselling and I just have to, I have to do it.” Other women used their stories and experiences to help others and ensure young women at risk had someone to turn to who would always believe them and support them. This was also exemplified in participants’ willingness to speak to researchers about their experiences. All of them explained that they were telling their stories to help other women:

That’s why I am here. Something has to be done. You wouldn’t believe how much people want help, that need the help, need to report this stuff and they don’t know where to go. A lot of people don’t trust the police. They walk around with this, and people wonder why all this crime happens.

Although many women expressed a sense of isolation and the need to rely on themselves to overcome the pain in their lives, they demonstrated remarkable strength, self-advocacy, concern for others, and tremendous resilience: “I have healed from it, and I have let it go, and I just want my story to be told.”

Discussion

The findings from this research are important as they make visible the issue of violence against Indigenous women and the injustice they experience from the police when they make a report of sexual victimization. In addition, the recommendations for change directly from the women who experienced the assault and disbelief from the police provide useful insight to improve the police response to victims. Among the Indigenous women in this study, the sexual assault that was reported to the police was often not their first experience of being victimized. Participants experienced sexual violence throughout their lives, beginning in early childhood. The sexual assault that was reported to the police was frequently combined with physical violence that ranged in severity from broken teeth and head injuries, to being left barely conscious in secluded areas. This violence, combined with the trauma and powerlessness of sexual assault, resulted in numerous lifelong adverse health outcomes. Despite their attempts to reach out to the police for justice and practical assistance, participants were dismissed and ultimately not believed by the authorities whose job was to serve and protect. Upon police dismissal of sexual victimization, participants lost faith in the police and did not report future victimization to authorities, thereby increasing their risk of victimization. Despite their traumatic experiences, these women displayed remarkable resilience. They parented their children, cared for other women, pursued education, overcame addiction, and found the strength to keep living, despite the ongoing oppression in their lives.

The violence women experienced at a young age is consistent with the literature on child sexual abuse among Indigenous children. Research findings indicate that 25–50% of Indigenous women have experienced sexual victimization before reaching adulthood (Collin-Vézina et al., 2009). The sexual victimization of young Indigenous girls is considered a risk factor for future victimization (Classen et al., 2005; Relyea & Ullman, 2017). Indigenous women are sexually assaulted at a rate 3 times that of non-Indigenous women (Department of Justice, 2017). Research has linked the abuse and mistreatment of Indigenous women to ongoing colonial violence (Dhillon, 2015; Hunt, 2015; Palmater, 2016b; Savarese, 2017). Our findings support this as the majority of participants were sexually assaulted (e.g., revictimized) numerous times in their lives. Revictimization occurs among two thirds of victims of sexual assault, with Indigenous women and racial minorities among the highest risk groups (Classen et al., 2005). The women in this research share many of the factors associated with sexual revictimization. These include a dysfunctional family environment, alcohol and substance use, feelings of shame and blame, post-traumatic stress disorder and other emotional and psychiatric concerns (Classen et al., 2005), increased exposure to potential perpetrators, environments where violence is normative, and being a woman of color (Relyea & Ullman, 2017).

Given the breadth of knowledge of Indigenous women's high risk for sexual assault and revictimization, it is essential for police officers to respond with compassion for and belief of victims. Yet, the women in this research felt dismissed by the police and blamed for their sexual assault. Victim-blaming attitudes from police and lack of follow through with an investigation are factors associated with increased experiences of trauma exacerbated by law enforcement (Maier, 2008), thereby contributing to increased distress and trauma among victims. Shaw and colleagues (2017) explored the presence of rape myths in police reports and concluded that many officers endorse rape myths of who the "real" victims are and subsequently blame the victim for the assault. A victim of sexual assault is more likely to be deemed credible by police, and subsequently believed, if they are visibly distressed during the sexual assault disclosure, offer a coherent narrative, report to police independently and in a timely manner, and have no apparent motivation for lying (Quinlan, 2016). Conversely, victims of sexual assault are less likely to be believed if they are young, have a psychiatric illness, are unfaithful to their spouse (Maddox et al., 2012; Quinlan, 2016), are involved in sex work, admit to feelings of regret, have no physical injury or evidence, and generally lack credibility (Venema, 2016). With rape myth acceptance pervasive in law enforcement (Shaw et al., 2017), the women in this research are at a disadvantage as they rarely met the misguided assumptions of who the "real" victims are. Ascription to rape myths impedes justice for victims of sexual assault (Shaw et al., 2017); thus, the need to discredit current rape myths is of utmost importance for the equitable treatment of Indigenous women during their disclosures to the police.

Existing literature on rape myths suggests that police, prosecutors, and judges are more likely to believe a sexual assault has occurred if serious injuries are present (Du Mont et al., 2003). However, even with extensive injuries, the women in our study were dismissed by the police. Indigenous women are at an increased risk of violent

victimization and are frequently dismissed by the justice system (Palmer, 2016b; Ritchie, 2017; Scrim, 2017). This is consistent with ongoing structural violence resulting from colonization, and may be associated with unconscious or conscious racial discrimination. As such, the firsthand accounts of the needs of Indigenous women during the disclosure experience with the police are critically important to influence structural change within law enforcement.

Indigenous women have been silenced in colonial societies and are subjected to systemic violence (Razack, 2016; Weaver, 2009). Much of society remains ill-informed about the violence experienced by Indigenous women, and their suffering is ignored in the press (Gilchrist, 2010). Indigenous women's voices have also largely been absent in feminist responses to violence, including sexual assault, despite the prevalence of assault among this population (Green, 2007). Indigenous women cannot heal from the trauma of colonialism in a context of violence and police dismissal and community indifference to their suffering (Du Mont et al., 2017; Palmer, 2016b). Justice for Indigenous women, and reconciliation between settler and Indigenous communities, require that the voices of women who have experienced racialized sexual violence inform systematic change (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Furthermore, police services are called upon to break down bias, discrimination, and ongoing colonial power by hearing the voices of Indigenous women, engaging in respectful dialogue and understanding, and facilitating justice for victims (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

Recommendations

This research honors the voices of Indigenous women and their firsthand recommendations for change based on their lived experience. Overall, women indicated that the human element associated with a traumatic disclosure is of utmost importance to ensure that they felt safe and comfortable. They suggested simple changes by police that would be valuable to ensure their sense of safety. These included responding to the call for help in a timely manner, developing a rapport to increase trust, sitting down rather than standing over the woman while taking the report, offering water or a cigarette to ensure comfort, introducing themselves and appearing sincere and interested in the disclosure, and enabling sufficient time to complete the reporting process. Interest could be conveyed by the police through sensitive and empathic communication and explanations of the process and the rationale for asking certain questions, as opposed to being sterile and mechanical.

Furthermore, women expressed wanting to feel protected by the police. This includes addressing racism, having a female officer take the report if possible, taking them to the hospital, or recommending a hospital visit. They expressed wanting to be spoken to with compassion and understanding, and wished for police officers to set their bias aside, particularly as it relates to the victim's past, any previous criminal activity, or the use of drugs and alcohol. Women overwhelmingly indicated that they wanted police officers to refrain from asking blaming questions, and to overall believe their sexual assault report without judgment. In a practical sense, women wanted

officers to avoid any preconceived beliefs they have and investigate fully, write things down, offer to take the report at the police station, and provide incident numbers so women could follow up on their case. Women also spoke about their need for support during and after the sexual assault disclosure. They wanted a support person present, particularly an Indigenous person or an elder with whom they could identify, or a social worker or victim support worker who understood trauma. They also would like a list of external counseling supports to help them heal. And finally, all women spoke about the strong need for ongoing communication and follow-up. Although the police may have competing priorities, the trauma of sexual assault is monumental in the lives of women, and an knowing how their case was being managed would assist with understanding, safety, and closure. Overall, women expressed a need for police officers to treat them the way they would want to be treated themselves: "I just wish they didn't treat people like me different than they would treat someone like them." Consistent with the words of the global campaign to transform the way we respond to sexual assault, police officers are called to "Start by Believing!" (End Violence Against Women International, n.d.)

Limitations

Our research team did not specifically seek to recruit Indigenous women; however, they responded disproportionately and entrusted our research team to share their stories. Our research team is limited in our own lived experience as we do not identify as Indigenous and therefore did not intentionally seek out an Indigenous sample. However, it was clear the women trusted us, and we maintained our commitment to ensure their voices were at the forefront of our work. Furthermore, our sample size comprised a limited number of 11 Indigenous women from one geographic area and thus may not be generalizable. In addition, the self-identified sample disclosed that their sexual assault report was not believed by the police and police classification of cases could not be confirmed. Also, this sample was selected to explore the experience of not being believed by the police and may not represent all survivors' experiences.

Conclusion

Overall, this research is consistent with previous research demonstrating the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous women. The women in this study experienced vulnerability across the lifespan, and exceptional levels of violence during the assaults they reported to the police. Nonetheless, police responded with a failure of compassion and profound and pervasive disbelief. Despite this, the women were resilient survivors. Importantly, they were determined to tell their stories. By speaking their truths, they resisted the tendency of society and police to treat their assaults with dismissal, and the women themselves as disposable. While this is a small sample, the voices of these women are important and their recommendations for reform must be heard and acted upon by police organizations. Improving the disclosure experience of

women who have experienced sexual assault is an important step in improving healing and justice for sexual victimization.

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