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Understanding the violence and help-seeking experiences of Mi'gmaq women: Qualitative and applied results from a partnered study in the community of Listuguj

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Article abstract

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ARTICLE HORSTHÈME

Understanding the violence and help-seeking experiences of Mi'gmaq women: Qualitative and applied results from a partnered study in the community of Listuguj



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Résumé

Indigenous women and girls in Canada are at increased risk of experiencing any type of violence throughout their lives. This pressing public health issue is receiving growing attention as Indigenous communities and others across the country and internationally continue to demand respect for Indigenous women's human rights to health, safety, and justice. To support their claims, we conducted a five-year partnered study with Indigenous and non-Indigenous non-governmental organizations in the Mi'gmaq community of Listuguj, in the province of Québec. Our objective was to better understand the violence and help-seeking experiences of women from Listuguj, and to initiate actions to improve services offered to Mi'gmaq violence survivors. Based on interviews with violence survivors and workshops with service providers, we created an intervention tool to increase the collaboration among service providers in Listuguj in their actions against violence. This study, the first to focus on the services sought by Mi'gmaq women in Québec, presents another account of the interrelations between interpersonal and structural violence in the lives of Indigenous women. Its partnered approach led to applied results that can be used by Indigenous partners to better meet the needs of violence survivors and their families in their community.



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Background

Indigenous women and girls in Canada are particularly at risk of experiencing any type of violence throughout their lives (Gouvernement du Québec, 2019). Data suggests that around 40% of Indigenous women report having been abused physically or sexually during childhood, while 60% report having experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetimes (Heidinger, 2022; Government of Canada, 2021). This pressing public health issue has received increasing attention over the last decades as Indigenous communities, activists, and non-governmental organizations across the country and internationally continue to demand respect for Indigenous women's human rights to health, safety, and justice (Palmater, 2016; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). Canadian colonial policies – including the Indian Act, residential schools, and the Sixties scoop, are at the heart of numerous health, social, cultural, and economic inequalities conducive to violence against Indigenous women (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). Colonialism, understood as a structure perpetuating colonial relations rather than a historical event, aims at dispossessing Indigenous Peoples from their lands and erasing Indigenous sociocultural life (Dorries et Harjo, 2020). Colonialism targets Indigenous women in specific ways, severing them from their traditional community roles through the imposition of racist, sexist, and patriarchal ideologies that normalize and condone violence against women (Dorries et Harjo, 2020; Hunt, 2015). The consequences of colonialism in countries like Canada are ongoing, producing a context in which Indigenous women face violence perpetrated both by individuals and state institutions (Dorries et Harjo, 2020). The main group of researchers working on violence against Indigenous women in Québec recognizes the need for understanding the complex relationships between family, domestic, and colonial violence (Lessard et al., 2015; Brassard et al., 2015). Their work highlights the colonial roots of the domestic (Flynn, 2010; Brassard et al., 2015) and family (Bourque et al., 2009; Bergeron, 2017) violence endured by Indigenous women.

A recent literature review argues that participatory research approaches can contribute to overcoming the exploitative legacy of research on gender-based violence in Indigenous communities and in the Global South (Thomas et al., 2022). Researchers working on this issue in Canada and elsewhere recommend conducting research that is driven by local needs, privileges community voices, and includes disseminating results to the community to help improve practices/interventions (Thomas et al., 2022; Ragavan et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2015; Navarro-Mantas et Ozemela, 2021). While various studies on violence against Indigenous women in Québec were conducted in collaboration with Indigenous partners, there is little account of dissemination efforts and applied results stemming from these partnerships. Furthermore, most focus on urban, highly remote and/or French-speaking Indigenous communities. To our knowledge, no study has examined Mi'gmaq women's experiences of violence and help-seeking in Québec. This article therefore presents the qualitative and applied results of a partnered study conducted in the Mi'gmaq community of Listuguj.

Listuguj is located in the Gaspésie region of Québec, at the border with New Brunswick. Being mainly Anglophone in a Francophone province, community members in Listuguj have closer ties with the town of Campbellton in New Brunswick than with Pointe-à-la-Croix, the neighbouring town in Québec. This can complicate access to services for community members. Listuguj is home to the Haven House, a women's shelter known for its leadership in demanding that more work be done locally, provincially, and nationally to prevent violence against Indigenous women. We conducted this study in collaboration with the Haven House to support their advocacy efforts.

Our objective was to better understand the violence and help-seeking experiences of women from Listuguj, and to initiate actions to improve services offered to Mi'gmaq violence survivors in and outside the community. In doing so, our research had three main parts. First, after training local partners and collaboratively adapting the methodology, we conducted interviews with violence survivors and analyzed data thematically. Second, we shared results to local stakeholders in policy briefs and organized community workshops to identify barriers, action priorities, and recommendations to address violence against women in the community. Third, based on interviews and workshop discussions, we developed a tool to facilitate the collaboration of service providers in Listuguj. In putting forth the experiential knowledge of Mi'gmaq women, research partners, and community stakeholders, we aimed at producing qualitative and applied results that would be useful to the community.

Theoretical framework

We used structural violence as a theoretical framework for this study. Structural violence refers to the social structures (*i.e.*, political, legal, economic, cultural) that stop individuals from reaching their full potential by impeding their ability to meet their needs (Farmer et al., 2006). Examples of structural violence include colonialism, racism, sexism, and ableism, which lead to unequal access to resources, healthcare, education, political power or legal standing for certain social groups (Farmer et al., 2006; Lessard et al., 2015). Structural violence is embedded in the organization of societies, reproduced by stable institutions and everyday practices (Farmer et al., 2006). It is often so normalized in our ordinary life that it appears invisible (Farmer et al., 2006).

Interpreting our data through the lens of structural violence helped situate Mi'gmaq women's experiences of interpersonal (*i.e.*, domestic, family, sexual) violence within the broader context of ongoing discrimination against First Peoples in Québec/Canada. By examining how structural violence interacted with interpersonal violence in women's help-seeking process, we uncovered how violence is simultaneously taking place *within* and *against* Indigenous communities (Holmes et al., 2015). Using this framework helped guide our collaborative actions at each step of the research process, while being mindful of the structures making Indigenous women more vulnerable to violence, thus complicating violence prevention and intervention (Holmes et al., 2015; Lessard et al., 2015).

Methods

Partnered research approach

Our goal was to better understand the violence and help-seeking experiences of women from Listuguj, and to initiate actions to improve services offered to Mi'gmaq violence survivors in and outside the community. This study arose from a collaboration between Trajetvi/SAS-Femmes at the University of Montréal, Indigenous and non-Indigenous provincial community-based organizations (Québec Native Women and the Alliance of second stage shelters), and the Listuguj Haven House women's shelter. Adopting a partnered approach, which falls under the umbrella of participatory action research and is in contrast with *traditional* research, the study involved Indigenous partners at each step of the process through the creation of a long-term partnership (Dumais, 2011; Nolet et al., 2018). The study was a co-learning experience in which all partners contributed expertise and learned from each other, valuing the complementarity and co-construction of knowledge (Nolet et al., 2018; Wallerstein et Duran, 2006).

When launching the study in 2019, Québec Native Women trained non-Indigenous research team members (*i.e.*, one research coordinator, one research assistant, and one manager from a non-Indigenous

provincial organization) on colonialism in Canada and its impacts on violence against Indigenous women. Researchers from the University of Montréal and Québec Native Women developed the study design and methodology. Before beginning data collection, members of the research team (*i.e.*, one Indigenous and three non-Indigenous members) travelled to Listuguj to meet with community stakeholders (e.g., chief, manager of social services, director and outreach workers at the Haven House) to present the study, get feedback, and seek approval. We adapted the methodology, consent forms and data collection tools with the Haven House to better fit their needs and Mi'gmaq culture. To build local capacity, we trained two Mi'gmaq outreach workers in qualitative research and research ethics.

Recruitment

We purposefully selected participants who had experienced any form of violence and were comfortable sharing their stories. All genders could participate, recognizing Indigenous partners' views that everyone should be included in discussions of violence against women. Community members were invited to participate by Mi'gmaq partners through community Facebook pages. Potential participants were contacted by phone to present the objectives and interview process. While 15 participants manifested their interest, some decided not to participate because of the sensitive topic. We conducted interviews with nine women and one man aged 27 to 60 years old. Table 1 presents participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants (N=10)

Sociodemographic characteristics	n
Gender	
Woman	9
Man	1
Type(s) of violence experience (non-mutually exclusive)*	
Intergenerational and/or family violence	8
Domestic violence	10
Sexual violence	7
Structural violence	6
Relationship status	
Single	2
Married	3
Divorced or separated	4
Widowed	1
Children	
Yes	9
No	1
Education	
High school not completed	1
High school degree	1
Some post-secondary education	4
Post-secondary degree (CEGEP, university, other)	4
Employment	
Unemployed	0
Part-time or contractually employed	2
Full-time employed	5
Social assistance or disability	3

*It is important to note that during the interviews, participants could choose which experiences of violence to share or not share with the interviewers. This report of the type(s) of violence experienced therefore reflects what was shared by participants and our interpretation of their stories.

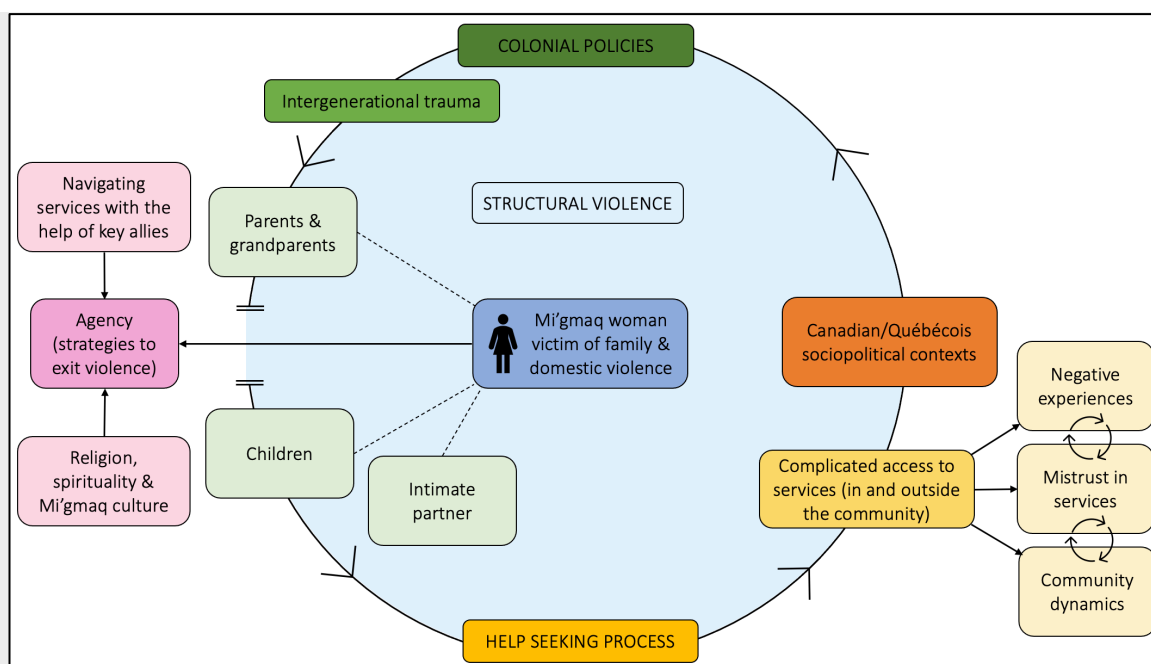
Data collection

Mi'gmaq partners suggested that individual interviews were most suitable to collect data on violence in Listuguj and to protect participants' confidentiality. Four research team members (one Mi'gmaq man, one Mi'gmaq woman, and two non-Indigenous women) conducted interviews in English in August 2019. To honour the storytelling traditions of First Peoples, we used an in-depth, unstructured, and conversational interview style (Kovach, 2021). Participants were invited to share their life stories, discussing violence and their help-seeking experiences. This open-ended interview style helped build relationships with participants, allowing for flexible exchanges where they could decide what they wanted to share (Kovach, 2021). The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 52 minutes and three hours, 24 minutes.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants and imported into NVivo for coding. Interview data were thematically analyzed by the first author following the approach of Braun & Clarke (2006). We used a hybrid deductive/inductive coding approach (Saldaña, 2013). We deductively identified, with Indigenous partners, information to explore based on our objectives (*i.e.*, types of violence and their consequences, formal/informal support received, enablers/barriers to the help-seeking process). We created codes inductively to closely reflect the words of participants, and developed themes to represent patterns in the data (Braun et Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). We reviewed themes iteratively with the research team through debriefing sessions, kept an audit trail of methodological decisions and reflections, and used direct quotes and thick descriptions in reporting results to increase their credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Figure 1 shows a visual representation of themes created from the analysis of interview data.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of themes



(See legend and explanation on next page)

Legend for Figure 1

- **Dark blue box:** Represents Mi'gmaq women who have experienced family and/or domestic violence.
- **Dark orange box:** Represents the Canadian and/or Québécois sociopolitical contexts, including colonial policies (i.e., the Indian Act, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop), as well as the services provided by governments (i.e., health and social services, judiciary services, the police).
- **Black circle with arrows:** Represents the interactions between Indigenous women and the Québécois and/or Canadian governments and services, through which structural violence is reproduced (as symbolized by the light blue circle in the background).
- **Green boxes:** Represent the first theme, illustrating that women's narratives of family and domestic violence are built around relationships with kin (grandparents, parents, partners, children). Family violence is perceived as inextricably linked to the trauma experienced by previous generations as a result of violence is understood as being tied to women's gender roles within the family as partners and mothers, influencing their decision to seek support.
- **Orange boxes:** Represent the second theme, suggesting that Mi'gmaq women's access to services is complicated by mutually reinforcing factors. Having had negative experiences when interacting with service providers in the past, they have a generalized lack of trust in services in and outside their community. Some women mention having experienced discrimination from Québécois service providers, while others highlight confidentiality issues in their tightly knit community. Facing multiple challenges as a result of violence, they often wished they had more support.
- **Pink boxes:** Represent the third theme, highlighting the agency of women in relation to the violence experienced. It shows that women often find ways to navigate services with the support of allies. They also find alternative solutions to move past the violence experienced, including seeking help from resources anchored in Mi'gmaq culture.

Mobilization of research results

As we wanted research results to be useful for Indigenous partners, we developed different activities in Listuguj to mobilize qualitative results to engender positive change in the community. Firstly, we summarized results in a policy brief to distribute to stakeholders in Listuguj prior to community workshops. Policy briefs are knowledge translation tools summarizing research results and identifying recommendations for decision-makers and practitioners in a concise, clear and attractive document (Dagenais et Ridde, 2018). They are often used as the basis of discussions with stakeholders (Dagenais et Ridde, 2018).

Secondly, we organized community workshops in October 2022 and follow-up meetings in February 2023. Five two-hour workshops were held in person with 31 service providers and managers from key departments of the Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government (i.e., chief and band council, police department, restorative justice, the women's shelter, and social services). Because we were unable to mobilize community members for in-person workshops, we organized one online, on the Haven House's Facebook group, attracting eight community members and reaching close to 500 people with the recording afterwards. Workshops began with a presentation of research results, and followed with a discussion where stakeholders identified the biggest barriers to addressing violence against women in Listuguj, and recommendations for improving violence prevention and interventions in the community. We brought all service providers and managers together for a follow-up meeting in February 2023 to share the barriers and recommendations to encourage collaboration across departments.

Thirdly, we developed a tool to guide interventions on violence against women in the community. We created a committee in the spring of 2023 formed of the research coordinator, one of the Mi'gmaq outreach workers who conducted the interviews, one Mi'gmaq social worker who was also a participant in the interviews, one Kanien'kehá:ka woman working on violence prevention at Québec Native Women, and one non-Indigenous research assistant with experience working with Indigenous women in women's shelters. Based on research results and workshop discussions, the committee identified elements that should be included in the tool, and the research assistant suggested ideas based on existing tools. The committee decided to develop guidelines for the creation of an interdepartmental committee on violence against women in Listuguj. We organized a launch event for the guidelines in the community in March 2024. Workshop discussions and content of the guidelines are described in the results section.

Reflexivity

We come from different cultural (Mi'gmaq, Abenaki, French Canadian) and professional (outreach workers and managers within Indigenous and non-Indigenous community-based organizations, researchers in public health and social work) backgrounds. Yet, we agree that research is often exploitative of First Peoples. We share the vision that research should be done collaboratively, centred around local needs, and used to engender positive change for communities. We situate our work within the broader movement to decolonize research, acknowledging that decolonizing involves active, intentional resistance towards unjust practices and institutions (Kessi et al., 2020). We integrate four intersecting dimensions of decolonizing work within our research: structural decolonizing by redistributing resources and opportunities to Indigenous partners; epistemic decolonizing by valuing non-Western and experiential knowledge; relational decolonizing by listening and creating space for Indigenous voices; and personal decolonizing by showing our commitment to disrupting dominant research practices (Kessi et al., 2020). We recognize that this project was initiated and funded by settler institutions. However, we continue to commit ourselves to our partnership, five years after our first meeting. When we started the project in 2019, we did not imagine that the partnership would survive a pandemic, nor that it would grow into sustainable, trusting relationships that go beyond research.

Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee for Society & Culture at the University of Montréal (CERAS-2016-17-267-P) approved this study. Before the interviews, we reminded participants of study objectives and their rights (e.g., to refuse to participate, withdraw consent at any time, not answer questions, take breaks). All gave their written informed consent. Participants could smudge before and after interviews. They were gifted smudging kits and received CAD\$40 for participating. Mi'gmaq outreach workers and an Elder were present for participants before, during, and after the interviews. With their consent, local partners followed up with participants one week after the interviews to offer additional support. We deliberately provide few sociodemographic characteristics in study reports to ensure participants' safety, and give them pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Results

Thematic analysis of interview data: violence, help-seeking and coping strategies

Building narratives of violence around relationships with kin

Participants' narratives of interpersonal violence were built around relationships with kin. On the one hand, most participants mentioned having experienced family violence as children, abused by parents or other family members. Many perceived that their experiences of violence were part of a "linear of abuse" coming from previous generations because of Canadian colonial policies. Melissa, like others, explained that the abuse endured by previous generations in residential schools impacted her, as they repeated this violence as parents:



I probably endured violence my whole life. And it started with my mother, like my grandmother was a residential school survivor. So, everything that happened to my grandmother kind of trickled down to my mother and like, I'm the product of colonialism. (Melissa, woman)

Participants also discussed normalizing the violence that they witnessed as children. For instance, Madeline explained that, living in close vicinity to her extended family, she witnessed kin being physically, emotionally, and sexually abused:



So, when you look at the environment of where you grew up. [...] There was violence all around us. We grew up... It was normal (Madeline, woman).

Consequently, participants made sense of their own experiences by situating them within a broader context of family violence, connecting them to their relatives.

On the other hand, all participants experienced domestic violence. Women participants stressed that their partners often targeted their expected roles as women, wives, and mothers to control them. For example, Julie explained that her partner attempted to stop her from seeing friends or taking time for herself:



He kind of kept me in the house all the time. [...] He also kept telling me that he wouldn't give me a free ride [...] and that I was expected to do everything [...] like the cooking, the cleaning, [...] organizing and caring for the house. (Julie, woman)

Additionally, some participants mentioned choosing not to press charges or to stay in violent relationships to protect their children. Gloria said that it took her a long time to leave her partner: “That’s why I would never leave [...] I didn’t want anything to happen to the children” (Gloria, woman). Participants’ roles within the family were central to their stories of domestic violence, as their desire to make the best decisions for their children often impacted their decision not to seek support when experiencing violence. Gender norms around womanhood can therefore significantly impact women’s experiences of violence and help-seeking.

When mistrust in services and community dynamics are barriers to getting support

Participants faced different barriers that impacted their help-seeking journey. One of the main barriers to disclosing violence and getting support was their mistrust in services, both in and outside the community, because of past negative experiences. For instance, Jade spoke of having experienced discrimination in the Québec court system when she was younger, as her violent partner was granted full custody of their children:



[The judge] compared my culture to a parade [...] And then, he started to compare [my children’s] blood quantum, that [they] don’t even look Indian. Made a lot of inappropriate comments. So, I lose my kids. I was devastated. (Jade, woman)


As a result, she later decided not to disclose another situation of violence because she said that the police would “put [her] through the wringer” if she pressed charges against her abuser, as “the system didn’t work for [her].” Similarly, Sky expressed her frustration because her relatives called the Québec or Listuguj police when she was experiencing domestic violence, even if she did not want to involve them or press charges. She mentioned not trusting the police because of how they handled violence against her mother when she was young, showing her wariness about having the police intervene without her consent:




There was a lot of times, it was other people calling [the police]. It wasn’t even me calling them. [...] And to this day, I still don’t like dealing with the police. [...] Because growing up, my mom and dad, there was a lot of police activity. [...] And that’s why I don’t really like being around police. [...] The police were always taking my dad out of the house. (Sky, woman)

Relationships with the judicial system and the police, in and outside the community, can be strained when victims feel like they are not protected. Some participants, like Korey, tried to explain this mistrust towards service providers, mentioning that “if [Indigenous Peoples] weren’t already stereotyped” and if they could rip “the labels off” maybe there would be greater trust.


Furthermore, violence had numerous repercussions on participants’ lives, including physical and mental health issues, alcohol and drug use, and financial and housing insecurity. Participants mentioned that it was difficult to rebuild their lives after having experienced violence, not getting adequate support in the community and surrounding towns (Pointe-à-la-Croix in Québec and Campbellton in New Brunswick). For instance, Jade discussed having post-traumatic stress disorder, impeding her ability to work:

 I can't work full-time. And there's nobody supporting me because I have PTSD. Nobody out there saying, ‘This girl has been through a lot.’ (Jade, woman)

Similarly, Sky explained having a hard time finding housing in neighbouring towns, feeling stigmatized: “I’m trying to look for a place of my own, but it’s very hard because a lot of landlords, they label me because of my ex” (Sky, woman). Some participants, like Lucia who had experienced physical sexual abuse in foster care, spoke of starting to use alcohol and/or drugs as a result of the violence experienced:

 My self-esteem was really low at the time. Then I came home, partied. I continued to party a lot, drinking. Mainly drinking. [...] And, you know, I took it on myself, like it was my fault, or it was me, you know. (Lucia, woman)


For Madeline, it was easier to cope with violence and seek services once she left the community, where her abuser was living:

 I moved to [away]. I started dealing with sexual abuse disclosure information, I started getting counselling. I went to support groups [...] It became easier for me to deal with that load because I was not home. (Madeline, woman)

Consequently, mistrust in services in and outside the community, as well as dynamics associated with living in an area where everyone knows each other, hindered access to adequate services for participants.

Developing strategies to overcome challenges and cope with violence

Participants developed various strategies to overcome challenges and cope with violence. One of their strategies was to find allies, Indigenous or not. While many first turned to their social network for support, some spoke of leaning on service providers to help them navigate public services, such as the healthcare and judicial systems. Samantha explained that the support of police officers in Listuguj was crucial in building her domestic violence case for court:

 One police officer that I talked to was very helpful because [they] report everything to my prosecutor. [They were] the head one on the case. [...] Anything that I say, if [my ex-partner] does an online threat or something, I'll just send it to [them] and then [they'll] do the court part of it. (Samantha, woman)

Others discussed seeking support from women’s or homeless shelters, often presented as having helped them turn their lives around. Lucia went to shelters outside the community multiple times before leaving her partner: “I went maybe five-six times. [...] So finally, after being in the shelters, I finally got my own house” (Lucia, woman). The support of trustworthy allies and resources therefore greatly eased the help-seeking process of participants.

Another strategy discussed was to seek resources anchored in their cultural, spiritual, or religious beliefs. For Mason, learning more about his culture changed his perspective on violence:



When I ran away from home and the abuse wasn't there, I started [to self-harm]. I started like, hurting myself because I missed the pain. [...] This is why I said like, my culture saved my life because what I learned from it is, let's respect who we are as Mi'gmaq. (Mason, man)

For others, like Madeline, engaging in ceremonies was the only strategy that helped them cope with the pain related to violence:



But the actual letting go, the only relief I ever got was through ceremony. Because it's in your language. It's in your belief system. It's something that you can't explain, but it helped me in many ways. I think I would have lost my sanity. I think I would have gone after that man, if it wasn't for the ceremonies. (Madeline, woman)

Therefore, finding service providers and resources in whom they could trust, and relying on culturally safe resources helped participants and empowered them in their healing journey.

Community workshops: barriers and recommendations for addressing violence

Barriers

During the workshops, service providers and community members discussed what they thought were the main barriers to addressing violence against women in Listuguj. They identified three types of barriers, namely those related to the organization of services in the community, the relationships between community members and service providers, and contextual elements in the community hindering the ability of service providers to prevent and intervene in situations of violence (see Table 2 in the section **Synthesis of barriers and recommendations**).

Recommendations and action priorities

After having discussed the barriers described above, service providers and community members offered recommendations for the Band Council and department managers for preventing and improving interventions on violence against women in Listuguj, and for identifying action priorities related to these recommendations (see Table 3 in the section **Synthesis of barriers and recommendations**).

Guidelines for the Listuguj interdepartmental committee on violence against women

Rationale and objectives

Based on research results and recommendations emerging from workshop discussions, we developed guidelines for the creation of an interdepartmental committee on violence against women in Listuguj. This committee, based on the concept of the Montréal concertation table on domestic violence, provides a structure for facilitating the collaboration of departments and service providers in Listuguj to address violence (de concertation en violence conjugale de Montréal, s. d.-b). Its mission is to centralize decision-making in planning community actions to prevent violence and coordinate intervention responses in situations of violence, so that victims and their families receive all necessary services. Its specific objectives are to: 1) provide guidelines for the collaboration of departments in planning interventions to address situations of violence against women in the community; 2) identify, mobilize, and train local and regional resources to ensure that their work with Mi'gmaq violence survivors is trauma-informed and culturally safe; 3) identify evolving prevention and intervention needs based on the main types of violence, obstacles to accessing services, and other interrelated issues emerging in the community; 4)

plan actions to prevent violence in the community. With at least one representative from each relevant department sitting on the committee (e.g., women's shelter, social and family services, health services, police department, restorative justice), members will be key references for responding to violence in their respective departments. Through monthly meetings and case-by-case meetings in crisis situations, committee members will contribute to planning preventive community actions and developing collaborative intervention plans.

Guidelines content

The guidelines are presented in a document comprising four main sections. The first section provides an overview of the study and its main activities. It summarizes qualitative results regarding the types of violence experienced, barriers to accessing services, and strategies developed to overcome challenges and cope with violence. It also details the barriers, recommendations and action priorities identified during workshops.

The second section describes the rationale for the creation of the committee, its mission and objectives, composition and functioning, roles and responsibilities, and potential partner organizations in Listuguj and the Gaspésie region. It also presents a decision tree to guide the collaborative intervention process, inspired by the functioning of the concerted action unit of the Montréal concertation table on domestic violence (Table de concertation en violence conjugale de Montréal, s. d.-a).

The third section presents definitions of different types of violence so that all committee members have a common understanding to guide their work. It defines violence against women, types of interpersonal violence (e.g., family, domestic, sexual, physical, spiritual), and types of structural violence (e.g., colonial, lateral). Based on interview data and workshop discussions, this section also presents specific needs and challenges to consider when intervening with women who have experienced violence. These needs and challenges include having children, being an older adult, being a member of the 2S/LGBTQ+ community, experiencing mental health issues, having a disability, having a low socioeconomic status, facing housing insecurity, and accessing services in one's preferred language. It introduces the concept of intersectionality and explains how it can impact the causes and consequences of violence against women (Imkaan, 2019; UN Women et UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2022).

The fourth section offers a list of local, regional, provincial, national, and online resources available to support the work of the committee. It includes resources to support women who have experienced violence, children and youth, men, people with disabilities, members of the 2S/LGBTQ+ community, older adults, people with mental health issues, and people who struggle with alcohol or drug use.

Discussion

Anchored in the experiential knowledge of research partners, community stakeholders, and women violence survivors, this partnered study provides useful insights into the violence and help-seeking experiences of Mi'gmaq women from Listuguj. Using structural violence as a theoretical framework, we explored, through in-depth interviews, the interpersonal violence experienced by participants, the formal and informal support received, as well as the strategies put in place to overcome challenges related to violence and help-seeking. We organized community workshops with service providers and community members in Listuguj to interpret results and identify barriers and recommendations to address violence against women in the community. Based on needs expressed during interviews and workshop discussions, we developed guidelines for services providers to create an interdepartmental committee on violence against women in Listuguj.

Interview results reiterate the ongoing impacts of colonialism on the health and well-being of First Peoples, in Canada and in other settler colonized countries (Wispelwey et al., 2023). Our results explored women's experiences of interpersonal violence, suggesting that patterns of family and domestic violence are still structured by the interlocking racist and sexist ideals of settler colonialism. Participants made sense of their experiences of violence in relational terms, discussing their relationships with their grandparents, parents, partners, and children. Participants' stories of family violence are consistent with international literature on violence against First Peoples, suggesting that intergenerational trauma stemming from colonial policies can lead to the unintentional transmission of trauma from victims to their children, which can manifest in the form of family violence and its normalization in Indigenous communities (Atkinson et al., 2010; O'Neill et al., 2018). Consistent with research on Indigenous worldviews, the concept of *self-in-relation* is used to explain the interconnectedness felt by First Peoples as they understand themselves in relation to their family and community (Pooyak, 2009; Brunette-Debassige, 2018; Kovach, 2021). Studies conducted in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts add a gendered lens to this concept, suggesting that women's compassion and care for others can influence their decision-making in situations of violence, feeling responsible for nurturing relationships in their lives (Pilkinton, 2007; Samardzic, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). Patriarchal gender norms, which are often internalized by Indigenous men as a result of colonialism, can lead intimate partners to use women's expected roles within the family (*i.e.*, wife, mother, homemaker) to threaten them and limit their freedom (Burnette et Renner, 2017; Kuokkanen, 2015). Overlapping (Indigenous and women) and cumulative (family and domestic violence) disadvantage and patriarchal gender norms put Indigenous women at increased risk of violence (Burnette et Renner, 2017). These findings reiterate the interrelations between interpersonal and structural violence in the lives of Indigenous women, pointing to the need for intervention approaches to be anchored in their historical and gendered contexts.

Our results also highlight the challenges to women's help-seeking processes, as well as the strategies put in place to overcome them and cope with violence. In and outside their community, participants expressed a generalized mistrust in service providers, as past experiences of discrimination often deterred them from seeking support later on. Studies from Québec and elsewhere emphasize that Indigenous women are often stigmatized by service providers because of the vulnerable situations in which they find themselves, causing mistrust and reluctance to seek formal support (Bergeron, 2017; Brassard et al., 2015; Fiolet et al., 2021). In line with our findings, these studies also point to victims' feelings of being penalized for getting help, being revictimized, and being "let down by the system" (Flynn, 2010; Fiolet et al., 2021). This restates the pressing need to train service providers to offer trauma-informed care, centred on building trust with victims of violence, reducing retraumatization, and fostering women's holistic well-being (Cullen et al., 2022). Offering trauma-informed care would also mean affirming, rather than blaming, women for their responses to trauma and coping mechanisms (Cullen et al., 2022).

Participants often found specific community allies in whom they could trust to help them navigate services or turned to community-based resources anchored in Mi'gmaq culture. While many participants described being worried about confidentiality in their tight-knit community, they also spoke of the benefits of accessing resources anchored in Mi'gmaq culture. Even if confidentiality challenges and risks of harm when disclosing violence in small communities are often mentioned in the literature, so are the benefits of connecting with Indigenous traditions to facilitate healing (Fiolet et al., 2021; Allice et al., 2022; Cullen et al., 2022). The effects of this duality on Indigenous women's help-seeking processes must be acknowledged, as it can also complicate access to services for Indigenous violence survivors in their communities. One of the ways to recognize their agency is to ensure that they have a choice in deciding which services are appropriate to meet their needs. In Listuguj, this would require stronger partnerships

between community-based and government resources in the provinces of Québec and New Brunswick to ensure that mainstream services are culturally safe and that community services are confidential and respectful of privacy. In practice, this could mean creating collaborative structures (e.g., working groups) to address violence, focused on mutual learning and skill-development.

As our research partnership valued the production of results that would benefit the community of Listuguj, our study also generated applied results. Consistent with the guidelines that we developed for Listuguj service providers and decision-makers, organizational-level changes such as increased inter-institutional collaboration and communication could break down access barriers for violence victims and support more culturally safe services (Allice et al., 2022). Indigenous-led organizations and researchers from Québec and/or Canada highlight the need for sustainable collaborations among women's shelters working with Indigenous women and other key local organizations in and outside their communities, including Band councils, the police and healthcare services (Montminy et al., 2012; Olsen Harper, 2006; Pharand et Rousseau, 2008). Recognizing the need for a coordinated approach to family violence, identifying liaison workers to direct victims to appropriate resources and building frameworks to guide collaborative actions to address violence are identified as best practices (Olsen Harper, 2006).

Using research results for social change is a key ethical consideration for studying violence against women, and partnering with organizations that carry out advocacy and support to survivors is one way to improve the local relevance of research findings (Ellsberg et Heise, 2005). Our five-year partnership upheld core values of community-based participatory research in the field of violence against women, including building trusting relationships among research partners, attention to power distribution, equitable decision-making and accountability, responsiveness to the priorities of all partners, and shared ownership of project products (Ragavan et al., 2020). Our efforts to discuss research results with local stakeholders, to have them identify barriers and recommendations, and to collaboratively develop a tool for community use demonstrate our commitment to Indigenous partners' needs. We believe that this type of collaborative work – involving co-learning, co-production of knowledge, and action-oriented goals – is a first step towards reconciliation and decolonization of research.

Strengths and limitations

As participants were recruited through the Haven House, the study might not reflect the experiences of women who do not seek formal support when experiencing violence or did not feel safe to share their stories. We also recognize our small sample size, which did not include subgroups at increased risk of violence, including sexual and gender minorities, individuals experiencing homelessness or those living in urban settings. The difficulty in recruiting participants could be associated with the sensitive nature of the topic, fear of disclosing violence in small communities, and potential mistrust towards researchers. Future research in Listuguj would benefit from including a greater diversity of voices. Yet, the conversational interview style was helpful in holistically capturing participants' experiences. Furthermore, our data date from 2019, as the COVID-19 pandemic considerably slowed our research process. However, discussions with community stakeholders during the workshops conducted in 2022-2023 and the launch event for the interdepartmental committee guidelines in 2024 reiterated the relevance and importance of our results for the community. We believe that the partnered approach adopted throughout this study is one of its greatest strengths, supporting Listuguj's self-determined vision for violence prevention. Our commitment to the partnership ensured that the needs of Mi'gmaq partners were prioritized, and that the results would serve their community.

Conclusion

Much work has been done by Indigenous advocacy groups and their allies to raise awareness about the high rates of violence inflicted upon First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women across Canada, demanding that preventing this violence is made a political priority at all governmental levels. Supporting their claims, this partnered study conducted in-depth interviews with violence survivors and subsequently developed a concrete intervention tool for service providers and decision-makers in Listuguj to ensure service complementarity and continuity for women and their families. It is, to our knowledge, the first study to focus on Mi'gmaq women's stories of violence and help-seeking in Québec, and to discuss applied results stemming from an equitable, sustainable and decolonizing research partnership. We hope that our study contributes to discussions on governments' and service providers' responsibility for reflection, learning, and action, in and outside Indigenous communities. »

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Synthesis of barriers and recommendations

Table 2. Barriers identified by service providers and community members during workshops

Categories of barriers	Description
Organization of services within the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Departments working in silos</u>: The silo mentality and general lack of communication between the different departments result in victims not benefitting from all the help they can get, as service providers do not work together to support them. This often means that efforts are duplicated across services. • <u>Insufficient resources and time</u>: Insufficient resources and time make it difficult for service providers to ensure a follow-up with violence victims after their first use of services. Providers from different institutions find it difficult to determine when to deliver services to victims (right after an event, when deciding whether to press charges, throughout the judicial process, etc.). • <u>Lack of knowledge of existing services</u>: Service providers and community members are not aware of the different resources available in and outside the community. This directly impacts access to services for victims as it complicates communication between departments and the referral of victims to the right services. High staff turnover is another barrier contributing to this generalized lack of awareness of existing resources.
Relationships between community members and service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Confidentiality issues</u>: Victims of violence tend not to trust community services, so they will not necessarily seek support when they need it because they are scared that service providers will breach their confidentiality. • <u>Lateral violence</u>: There is a lot of lateral violence in the community. This violence materializes in different ways. For instance, people in power positions within the different departments do not always treat everyone who seeks support equally, blaming certain people or discrediting victims when speaking up against their abusers if these abusers are influential in the community. • <u>Service providers having experienced trauma</u>: While most decision-makers, service providers and people in leadership positions have experienced trauma, they are not all ready to recognize it. This makes it difficult to take concrete actions to stop intergenerational trauma and related violence in Listuguj.
Contextual elements hindering the prevention and intervention on violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Increased substance use</u>: Addiction and the increased presence of drugs in the community since the COVID-19 pandemic considerably complicated the work of service providers. Substance use can not only make women more reluctant to seek support if their partners support their drug use, but it also makes frontline workers feel less safe in their work environment. • <u>Use of social media</u>: Social media influences the way violence is perceived in the community, as community members who experience or perpetrate violence tend to use social media to denounce violence or deny allegations. • <u>Difficulty in mobilizing community members</u>: Community members mobilize themselves when a crisis happens and affects everyone in the community. However, as violence is a sensitive topic and a chronic problem, community members will not want to act by fear of being labelled as someone who experienced or perpetrated violence.

Table 3. Recommendations and action priorities identified during community workshops

Recommendations & action priorities
<p>1) Make preventing violence a political priority in Listuguj.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase collaboration between different services working with victims of violence in and outside the community to overcome silos and encourage networking. • Develop community-wide tools so that all departments can have a common base of knowledge in order to start working together to address violence. • Apply a 'structural violence' lens to all community policies to help recognize how colonial and lateral violence can impact interpersonal violence, and violence against women specifically. • Work on dismantling unequal and/or abusive dynamics in community institutions so that violence against women can be more easily identified and discussed.
<p>2) Improve communication and information-sharing about the available services to community members and departments in Listuguj.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a collaborative process for facilitating the referral of violence victims to different services in and outside Listuguj. • Create a committee formed of the main community departments which will hold monthly meetings to discuss and provide updates on the main situations of violence occurring in the community.
<p>3) Aim for cultural competency, and ultimately cultural safety, for all services in and outside Listuguj working with Mi'gmaq survivors of violence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and provide training on cultural safety, violence against women and trauma-informed interventions for the police, all frontline workers, and the different departments not specialized in violence prevention but working with violence survivors in Listuguj. • Work on building community trust towards services and providers during community events in Listuguj by raising awareness about the resources available and their roles in supporting victims of violence.
<p>4) Support violence survivors as they are going through the judicial process when pressing charges against the perpetrators of violence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen existing collaborations with court workers and Crown prosecutors to address criminal charges against perpetrators of violence. • Invite court workers to work in the community to improve their understanding of the contexts in which violence occurs and the resources available to violence victims in the community. • Improve collaboration between the court liaison worker, the women's shelter, and other services in Listuguj to improve follow-up services and support violence victims through the court process.
<p>5) Create an awareness campaign for the prevention of violence in Listuguj, notably aimed at youth in schools.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the different departments in Listuguj, find culturally safe, innovative and creative solutions to address issues of violence (domestic, family, sexual, lateral, etc.) in Listuguj. • Raise awareness on the ways in which gender roles can perpetuate and normalize domestic violence (all types of domestic violence). • Create spaces for youth (and specifically for young men) to express their emotions and support them in their healing journey to break the cycle of violence.

Une synthèse en français est disponible dans le même numéro d'*Alterstice*, p. 121-123.

