

Healthy Messages for Métis Women at Risk of Sexual Exploitation

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Background

Our aim is to better understand the influences, vulnerabilities, available supports and services, and role of health promotion messaging for Métis women at risk of sexual exploitation in several urban centres in British Columbia. This builds on previous work on healthy messaging undertaken by the Métis Centre of NAHO in collaboration with Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) and the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO), respectively, to examine the concepts of Métis specificity, identity and cultural safety from a health perspective. The research aims to fill a gap in knowledge about the sexual exploitation of Métis women and identify specific responses to increase well-being.

Objectives

- To identify and examine the vulnerabilities and resilience of Métis women to sexual exploitation, including the role of Métis culture and identity.
- To understand the nature of supports and services available to and used by Métis women, including opportunities and barriers.
- To design Métis-specific health promotion messaging products that address issues relating to Métis women at risk of sexual exploitation.

Through the use of participatory methods such as focus groups with front-line workers and interviews with Métis women, we are taking important steps in the process of exploring meaning for Métis as it relates to identity, cultural safety and effective health messaging. This will provide insight into the most appropriate messaging to engage Métis women, and guide the Métis Centre and provincial Métis organizations in advancing their approaches to health promotion, with the aim of encouraging and facilitating health and well-being options.

Methods

We selected three urban centres for our fieldwork, including Fort St. John, Prince George, and Vancouver's Downtown East Side. These cover a range of urban densities, remoteness and geographic locations across British Columbia; they have significant Métis populations; and they are identified as areas of risk for the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women.

We identified and engaged individuals and organizations that work on Métis-specific issues and/or Aboriginal health in the selected communities. Participants were recruited using targeted information flyers distributed by the local contacts. Interviewees were self-selected based on self-reported identification as Métis. Twelve Métis women with knowledge of sexual exploitation were interviewed. Twenty individuals participated in three service provider focus groups, the majority of whom identified as Métis.

What We Heard

"...The big factor has been a loss of identity. A lot of them knew they were half breeds, but they could not put a name to being Métis. They knew they were Aboriginal and it's not until a few years ago that Métis Nation Canada started propelling that big truth about Métis and how we've been unrecognized. And they're making strides, but you don't see those strides as positive, you don't see those on the front page of a local newspaper. It's still a hidden force ... Why were we not told what we were not? Is it because of shame or pain, or possibly ... because of the prejudice?" (Métis service provider, Prince George)

"But even when we go like this, how do you identify yourself, I just write First Nations because I don't know. There is a card you can get that says you're Métis. I've never applied for it. My sister has hers, my brother has his but I don't have mine." (Métis interviewee, Vancouver)

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"I think politics really hurts us and divides us. And I just think knowing who you are and what your family lineage is and, you know, your self-identification is super important ... I always say I know who I am and nobody can take that away from me." (Métis service provider, Prince George)

"Even as Métis now we're coming up, you know, and for a long time First Nations didn't want us. We have first cousins that were chiefs and the Caucasians—the mainstream didn't want us. We were in between; we were half breeds, and this is how we were labeled." (Métis service provider, Prince George)



Next Steps

Guided by the research results, we developed a range of health promotion tools for Métis women and service providers, including:

- Pocket booklet: Métis Women: Strong and Beautiful.
- Poster: Métis Women: Strong and Beautiful.
- Pamphlet: Understanding Sexual Exploitation: A Quick Guide for Métis Women.
- Booklet: Métis Children Safe in Cyberspace: A Guide for Parents & Guardians.
- Booklet: Métis Youth Respect Yourself: A Guide to Healthy Intimate Relationships.
- "You Are Beautiful" pocket mirrors.
- Online tutorial: Cultural Competency for Service Providers (under development).

Preliminary Results

Métis Identity

- Loss of culture and identity was a recurring theme. The majority of participants did not have a strong sense of what it meant to be Métis. They tended to refer to Métis identity in relation to Native and/or White identities, rather than as its own entity.
- A significant number of participants indicated that they had little knowledge of their Métis roots, with some noting that they were taught to repress their identities from an early age.
- Most Métis participants indicated having experienced significant prejudice due to their Métis (or Native) identity, both from outside and inside the Métis community. Some participants indicated that they change how they outwardly identify depending on the situation, e.g., identifying either as Native, White or Métis. A majority of Métis participants are interested in learning more about their roots and developing their Métis identity.

Culturally Appropriate Services

- Participants indicated a discomfort with accessing some Aboriginal services due to not being 'Native' enough.
- The following characteristics contribute to culturally safe spaces for Métis women:
 - A focus on client-practitioner relationships, which provide a foundation for all future interactions.
 - Practitioners who are open, non-judgmental, and accepting of clients regardless of who they are.
 - Practitioners who value each individual and treat everyone with equal respect.
 - Practitioners who are experiential, who are able to connect with clients and their experience on a personal level.
 - Provision of a range of interconnected services (holistic model).
 - Sensitivity to Aboriginal people and issues, including an understanding of who Métis are.
 - Services that are Aboriginal-driven and Aboriginal-focused.
 - Inclusion of Métis-specific resources and services.
 - Positive, supportive signage and messaging.

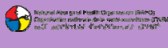
Health Promotion Products

- Target groups: in addition to Métis women, youth were deemed an important target group for messaging; public (both Métis and non-Métis) awareness-building was deemed important, although the priority focus should be Métis women; service providers would benefit from improved awareness of Métis issues.
- Products: text-based products should be pocket-sized; links to web-based information are useful; posters should include eye-catching imagery and a straightforward message; short audio-visual skits/scenarios are effective; social networking sites like Facebook are popular; use bright colours and include Métis images/symbols (e.g., infinity symbol, sash, buffalo, diverse images of healthy Métis women).
- Messages for Métis women: positive messaging about strength, beauty and health to empower women and improve connection to their Métis identity and community; information on healthy parenting and raising strong daughters; acknowledgement that sexual exploitation can happen to anyone; actions to protect oneself from harm and/or exploitation; reminders that women are not alone and that it is OK to ask for help; and information about relevant, culturally safe services.
- Messages for service providers: It is important to recognize that Métis women in challenging situations did not choose their path, that each individual deserves to be treated with respect, that women should not be pre-judged or stereotyped based on their appearance or background. There is a need for a greater understanding about the cultural history of Métis within a broader cultural competency framework, and its connections to current-day issues including awareness-building about strengths within Métis community. Moreover, there must be an increased awareness about the often negative history between Métis and authorities, particularly police, and about ways to improve contemporary relationships.

"But now that I am back in touch with my culture... that's what grounds me. You know, I have to be honest; there's still a little tiny piece, I think, of living so many years with loss of identity and cultural loss ... There's still a piece missing. I haven't come full circle yet ... I don't know if we ever do fully heal in our lifetime." (Métis interviewee, Fort St. John)



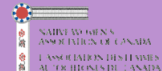
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