

Section 1-

Key findings, issues raised and policy gaps

The following pages summarize key points raised by Aboriginal women and girls who participated in the Arrest the Legacy dialogues.

The majority of participants were either direct or inter-generational survivors of the residential schools. This document does not attempt to represent all survivors experiences or views, rather is a snapshot of those who shared their experiences at a particular point in time. It is our hope that their voices, help to raise awareness of the residential schools' impacts while pointing to more hopeful future directions.

“When participants were asked to speak about what ‘Residential Schools Broke’ or took away, there were so many answers. I think if we had asked the question in reverse: on what part of Aboriginal life residential schools did not impact - there could only have been a deafening silence.” - facilitator

Residential Schools Broke

Aboriginal women and girls speak

Survivors, or former students as some prefer to be called, highlighted the devastating impact residential schools had on family units, community cohesion, first languages, cultural knowledge and traditions, and one's personal sense of identity and worth.

The losses were profound: Children were isolated from families and separated from siblings, they weren't taught their languages. Everything was so regimented in the schools. One survivor referred to the kids who went there as the little soldiers. They all had to look the same, their hair was cut, they weren't allowed to cry or return home to grieve the losses of family. Many told stories of family, and many told stories of horrific abuse, or the silent witnessing of other crimes against children, that they are just beginning to understand.

Children's dignity, confidence, sense of safety and confidence was taken away. The nuns and priests used corporal punishment publicly, and sexual abuse privately -and the fear of the devil was instilled in children to keep them silent.

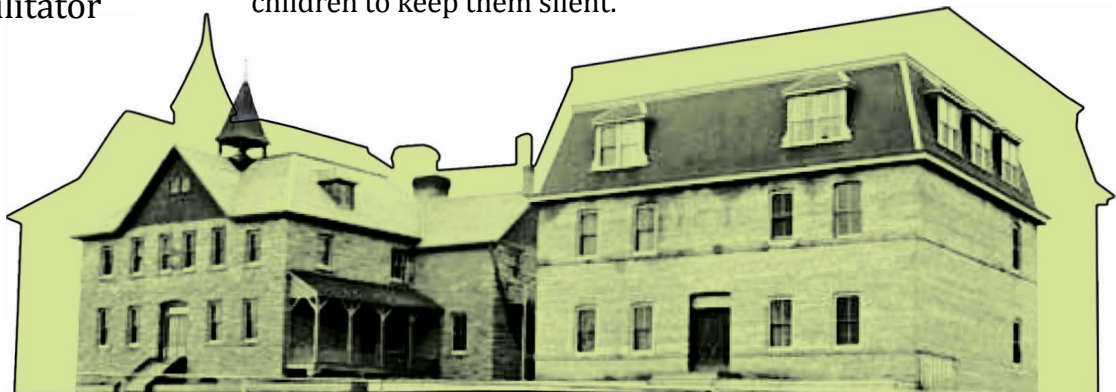
“We were told it was sinful to talk about the nuns that way and that the devil would get us.”

The women spoke about how the rules and order of balanced relationships was reversed:

“respect for women and girls, women's leadership and authority - was destroyed. I was made to clean houses all day. That wasn't a school.”

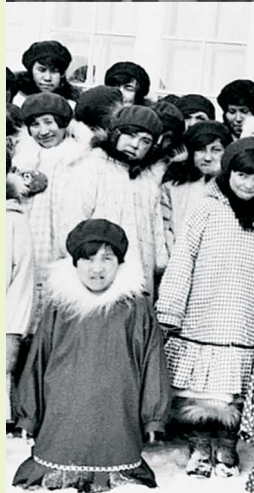
“We were taught our bodies were shameful, we were sinful. As if everything bad came from that.”

“The parents were not our teachers anymore. The Elders were not looked to with respect for their teachings.”



Many people also expressed anger at those in the Canadian population who think that Aboriginal people have it easy and need to *just get over it*.

“People don’t even know how we live - the rest of Canada doesn’t even know the legacy I have to live. People don’t know about Canada’s residential schools. To say we were privileged is BS.”



1. Families ties and rules, separation of boys and girls

2. Communities dismantled, sense of belonging lost

3. My dignity of who I truly am, cultural ways and Indigenous knowledge(s) denied

4. Respect for women and girls, and two-spirit trampled

5. Languages silenced

6. Trust in humanness, confidence and autonomy stolen

7. Children assaulted, victimized, or never returned

8. Those who returned were unprepared for life back in broken communities, poverty



**I remember seeing these people, all men
In black and hat
And women in black and white hat
And everything was so silent.**

**And I remember the parents
taking the kids
on the boat.
And then
they would come back.**

**And I remember my dad,
And I asked him what was going on?
And he never said
Anything.**

**I could still see
the parents....
heads all down.
That town, was
so quiet
for so many days.
All this heaviness.**

**And then
eventually
everyone
came out.**

**There were no kids.
There were no kids in the town.**

**It was
just
silent.**

- Arrest the Legacy participant, NWT

Understanding residential school impacts on over-incarceration / criminalization today

My Mooshum (grandfather) sold my Mom when she was a little girl (5 or so) for 6 packs of beer to his friends.

When she was 11 yrs old, she was grabbed out of a restaurant in the city, by the man that became my dad. He put her on the street.

At 15, though I had the support of my group home Mother; my daughter was taken away at the hospital - the social worker that took her said that if I didn't sign the papers she would take her away anyways, like she took us from my Mother - "You Indians don't know how to take care of your children, she'll end up a whore like you and your Mom".

Needless to say my daughter ended up on the streets at 12...she'd been abused. My story is I was sexually abused when I was 5. 5 is when I remember the first time... I was paid to shut up -prep for when I was put out on the corner at 15.



"People in pain don't think they have a chance in this world"
-arrest the legacy participant

Those who participated in the Arrest the Legacy circles made it clear that large numbers of First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and girls are criminalized above all, because of traumas they have lived. To this day, we see extremely high levels of violence against Aboriginal women and girls, both direct and systemic. The link between early violence and inter-generational trauma experienced by Aboriginal girls, and criminalization is undeniable, and has been further exposed in this project.

Today's jails are full of Aboriginal women and girls who are using and abusing substances to numb generations of pain. The participants spoke of how Aboriginal women in crisis had a history of feeling disconnected and angry:

"I became mean and aggressive. I kept other people away and believed that we could never change or get better".

It was not uncommon in our circles to hear how two or more generations of women in participants' families, had suffered poverty, been abused, struggled with addictions, depression, engaged in prostitution, been in the child welfare system, and/or had their own children forcibly removed. Invariably, social workers who removed children never once asked how they could help the family as a whole.

Women spoke about how they had carried multiple grief, shame, and rage because of it, for years.

They also spoke about needing some sense of connection or family somewhere:

"One of the reasons you see so many girls in gangs today is that when you have a family that's been taken away, the street gangs—that becomes your family".

Others mentioned the ways that both gangs and prisons replicate some of what the residential schools were like:

"It's all rule based. Your life is regimented. It's authoritarian. There's a lot of punishment for breaking the rules.

And while gangs are hard to get out of because they become "like a family", some of the women mentioned how it was hard to stay out of prison:

"I got comfortable getting locked up, like an addict you get used to it"

A number of the youth correctional workers who joined our circles mentioned that their centres were filled with First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth who had Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

"The youth we see with FASD, they don't want to leave. The problem is not with any of our programs inside, it's where do they go after? They get really dependent, they feel safe inside, but there is nowhere for them to go afterwards"

“We can’t do it alone”

Jails have become unacceptable replacements for the lack of programs and services for: those dealing with residential school and trauma based addiction issues, for those who defy authority, for persons living with FASD or other mental health challenges, and for homeless women and girls.

Participants in our circles said that in the mainstream correctional facilities the support needed to deal with individual, but also historical and cultural trauma’s was absent. *“I needed support to turn these negatives into positives”*, one Survivor said, but *“jail just added one more layer of oppression”*. Jailing women also continues the cycle of child removals, and increases the chances that the next generation of children will end up in custody.

The women and girls who participated in these circles were incredibly strong. They lived through experiences that many other people could not. They didn’t get there alone. Some of the women were now working to support other women who were incarcerated, or transitioning out into the community.



“When people are traumatized they need a lot of help to get out of survival mode. It’s really hard to prioritize your life goals if you need a place to sleep or are dealing with repeated victimization.”

There was consensus among many that while important steps had been made to ensure greater access to Elders and Aboriginal programs within the prisons, not all women could access these programs.

Learning new ways to deal with ones emotions and habits can take a long time, and participants felt the programs in prisons in general are too short and fail to deal with the traumas that underlie the behaviours. Once in prison, many women are re-traumatized and re-victimized by the system’s standard procedures.

Almost all of those in our circles who work with Aboriginal women and girls in custody mentioned a critical gap:- how to support women who have started to make some strides in prison, on release.

“Where do we discharge women to? Back on the street? To the drug houses that they know?”

A lack of housing and longer term services targeted to Aboriginal women and girls

With the lack of safe affordable housing, and with shelters and hospitals closing their doors, to those who are in crisis, many Aboriginal women and girls in difficulty end up homeless. We heard from one presenter that women and girls who are homeless are at their highest risk for being approached by predators and traffickers within the first 48 hours on the street.

The 9-5 centers, and professional dogma that says people have to come in and ask for help themselves and 'want to change' is very prevalent.

But the women in our circles said that inter-generational residential school survivors who are in pain, need more of a **peer-based outreach approach**, and above all, a sense that they are **not being judged**, pitied, or dumped on. The women in our circle who had been in jail also stressed that getting to a new place in their life took a **very long time**. They needed judges, and diversion program staff who would be tough, but also give them chances. They also really appreciated working with Elders and **women mentors** who knew their traditions and who could conduct **women's ceremonies and traditional teachings**. Having the support of good sponsors in sobriety was

critical. Importantly, women also needed support to **mend inter-generational relations** and find a new form of **family support**. This was the basis that they said they needed to be able to take the next steps, including learning life skills, traditional parenting skills, healthy relationship awareness, employment training, having decent work and housing opportunities, and regaining custody of children lost.

Interestingly, none of the women and girls mentioned the anger-management skills learned in prisons as a factor in their transformation. The key factors mentioned by the women who went on to break out of the trauma-addictions-prison cycle, included a lot of help from mentors, not feeling judged, increased contact with women's cultural teachings and access to long term treatment and diversion programs that engaged First Nations, Métis or Inuit staff.



Alternatives to incarceration strength based, gender sensitive ways as a means of moving forward:

During our dialogues we were fortunate to hear from many presenters who work with women and girls in strength based Aboriginal justice programs, or in related community based services. This section highlights just a small sample of alternative sentencing, diversion and women's wellness programs:

Alternative directions: <

Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Society

Located in Vancouver, this program acts as a diversion program for Aboriginal women and girls on their first offence, including young Aboriginal girls, most if not all of whom are inter-generational residential school survivors. They take referrals from Crown, Probation Officers, and the Vancouver Police, as well as self-referrals from those on charges with specific non-violent crimes. Aboriginal women and girls must want to participate, and engage in a healing circle with Elders, the victim, and work on a wellness plan. They can be returned to mainstream corrections/custody if they don't work with the plan. The program, also offers a range of support programs, including help with Aboriginal homelessness issues.

Tsow-Tun Le Lum Society is an Aboriginal Substance Abuse Treatment Centre in British Columbia that provides programs that address the issues behind addictions and substance abuse. Their programs are also specific to supporting the survivors of trauma and residential schools, while strengthening the ability of First Nations people to live healthy, happy lives with pride in their native identity. The program provides a strong bridge to healing for many, including a number of Aboriginal women and girls who have been criminalized/in conflict with the law.



Nekaneet horse program at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge. The healing lodge is a minimum-medium security prison for women in Saskatchewan. It is run by Correctional Services Canada, and is mandated to help rehabilitate federally sentenced women. It's programs reflect Aboriginal teachings, traditions and beliefs. In the healing lodge, women have access to Elders, interact with community, and children. We were very fortunate to have Dale Mosquito, a gifted traditional teacher and horseman come to talk about the Nekaneet horse program. Through work with the horses, and through the support of gifted horsewomen and Dale's teachings, women learn more about themselves, confront their fears, and open up to a new side of themselves. The program has been credited for contributing to a very low recidivism rate and has garnered international attention.



The Centre for Northern Families provides shelter and counseling services to women and children suffering poverty as a result of emotional, substance, physical, or sexual abuse or trauma in Yellowknife, NWT. It's wrap around services, include: health and wellness programs, early childhood development, employment training, job search programs, healthy recreation, parenting skills, and positive family relationships. Many of the women and youth who use the services are residential school survivors , or children of survivors.

Nihdawin Homelessness Project:

The Nihdawin Homelessness Project is a collaborative effort between the John Howard Society of Thunder Bay and the Ontario Native Women's Association. This project assists Aboriginal women in conflict with the law, as they exit into the community. It includes meeting women while still incarcerated, going through the court process, and assisting women at risk of homeless with specific re-integration needs. A number of transitional housing units have been specifically set aside for women.

The participation of those working front line in the justice diversion and community -based programs added a lot of strength and hope to the Arrest the Legacy dialogues. A tremendous amount of work is being done across the country by those working with Aboriginal women and girls. Many of these same people can be found at the front lines advocating for community safety, better community and police relations, transparency and accountability, and improved opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and girls.

Despite the many programs operating, participants identified a number of serious gaps in programs and services for women and girls in conflict with the law.

- 1. Resources targeted to support gendered learning and spaces for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and girls: including on the land and traditional programs led by Elders and female cultural workers, and ongoing cultural and recreational programs for girls that are free.**
- 2. Gender specific diversion programs which help First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and girls address the traumas below their addictions and criminalization.**

- 3. Better exit support, and “wrap around services” for First Nations, Métis and Inuit women and girls who have been in custody -including non co-ed transitional housing and shelters and non co-ed substance abuse treatment programs. Women being released from prisons also want to have more support to learn about where to access cultural services, programs, and ceremonies on release. Exit support programs should help women with life skills and traditional parenting support, employment training and job finding support. It was recommended that users of services, and peer support workers be hired to help implement programs. Key to a successful release also lies in women being able to find housing and jobs. It was recommended that safe affordable housing for women and girls living in poverty be prioritized. The pardon fee should also be reduced.**
- 4. Programs to support Aboriginal women exiting prostitution should be developed by Aboriginal organizations in collaboration with a range of housing, public safety, addictions and other support services. Aboriginal peer workers should be hired to help deliver the program with Elders, and counselors.**