4. “WE ARE STRONG. WE ARE BEAUTIFUL. WE ARE SMART. WE ARE ISKWEW”

Saskatoon Indigenous Girls Use Cellphilms to Speak Back to Gender-Based Violence

INTRODUCTION

We are a group of concerned women, activists, scholars, educators, artists, and community members who have come together to support a group of Indigenous girls in Saskatoon to speak back to the elevated rates of violence they experience in their daily lives. We, Jennifer Altenberg (Michif), Sarah Flicker (Jewish-European), Katie MacEntee (Irish-Canadian), and Kari Wuttunee (Cree), come from many nations and traditions. We were joined in this work by Tenielle Campbell (Dene), Kirsten Lindquist (Métis), and Melody McKiver (Anishinaabe). What unites us is our concern for the health, safety, and well-being of Indigenous girls and our passion for working with them in ways that honour and build on their considerable resilience, strengths, and talents. The work we describe here comes out of one of the Networks for Change and Well-being sites in Canada. Together, we planned a series of workshops last spring that culminated in the creation of a girl-led short movie made entirely on tablets. In response to their experiences and understandings of violence in their lives, the film documented a contextual vision of an Indigenous Women’s Utopia. In this chapter, we unpack the various forms of violence to which urban Indigenous young women in Saskatchewan, a Western Canadian prairie province, are exposed every day. We then explore the ways in which they speak back by producing cellphilms in which they consider their utopian visions for the future.

Background Context: An Ongoing History of Violence

According to Statistics Canada, in 2009 close to 67,000 Aboriginal women reported being the victim of violence in the previous 12 months. This number showed that Aboriginal women are more than three times more likely to experience violence than non-Aboriginal women and the forms of violence they experience are more likely to be severe and potentially life-threatening (Brennan, 2011). This violence is deeply rooted in systemic and ongoing social, cultural, and physical manifestations of state-sanctioned colonial violence and cultural genocide.
Decades of government policy have impoverished and broken apart Indigenous families and communities, leaving many Indigenous women and girls at heightened risk of exploitation and attack. … Acts of violence against Indigenous women and girls may be motivated by racism, or may be carried out in the expectation that society’s indifference to the welfare and safety of these women will allow the perpetrators to escape justice. (Amnesty International, 2014, p. 3)

As the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) (2015) has argued, legislation such as the Gradual Civilization Act in 1857 and the Indian Act in 1876 has “entrenched sex-based discrimination against First Nations women” (p. 4) into our national fabric. These policies, along with residential schooling and the sixties scoop, have had dire consequences for the security and safety of Indigenous girls. To date, NWAC has documented over 600 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada over the past 30 years (NWAC & Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2013). Indigenous women and girls are more likely to be killed by strangers than non-Indigenous women. Young Aboriginal women are five times more likely than other Canadian women of the same age to die of violence (NWAC & Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2013). The crisis has reached such epidemic proportions that in September 2016 the Government of Canada launched an independent National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Indigenous women’s and girls’ vulnerability is most certainly exacerbated by poverty and systemic socioeconomic exclusion. Saskatoon has one of the highest proportions of Aboriginal people living below the statistical poverty line in Canada; in 2001 more than half (52%) of Saskatoon Aboriginal residents were below the Low Income Cut Off (LICO), compared to about 15% of the non-Aboriginal population. In Saskatoon, inner-city neighborhoods on the west side are among the poorest in the city with high concentrations of Indigenous residents (Anderson, 2005). These socioeconomic disparities manifest in extreme health inequities. A report, by Lemstra and Neudorf (2008), released by the Saskatoon Health Region noted that

although disparity in health outcomes by socioeconomic status is well known, the magnitude of the disparity in health outcomes found in Saskatoon is shocking for a city in the western world. For example, the infant mortality rate in Saskatoon’s low income neighbourhoods was 448% higher than the rest of the city; which is worse than developing nations. (p. 3)

Consequently, Indigenous residents who experience the dual oppressions of poverty and social exclusion related to their cultural identity are at extremely elevated risk for poor health outcomes. Targeted policies to improve the social conditions for Indigenous residents, coupled with generic policies to reduce social inequalities, would provide helpful adjuncts to current population-based health strategies (Neudorf et al., 2009).