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## The Report in Brief

Gendered violence against Inuit women is a problem of massive proportions. Women in Nunavut are the victims of violent crime at a rate more than 13 times higher than the rate for women in Canada as a whole. The risk of a woman being sexually assaulted in Nunavut is 12 times greater than the provincial/territorial average. In 2016, Nunavut had the highest rate of female victims of police-reported family violence in Canada, the Northwest Territories had the second highest rate, and Yukon had the third highest.

As the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has emphasized, this gendered and racialized violence is a genocide that is rooted in systemic factors woven into the fabric of Canadian society.

Understanding gendered violence against Inuit women requires situating the issue within its colonial context, including how Inuit ways of living and being were dramatically disrupted as corporate colonialism took root and developed in the North.

In just a few decades (1950s to 1970s), Inuit underwent a profound transformation in their lives and livelihoods—a transformation that was orchestrated by colonial forces largely outside of their control. Their land-based economy and the cooperative ethos and informal mechanisms of social control on which it is based—along with the interdependent relations between Inuit men and women—were unsettled as Inuit were moved to permanent settlements, their children sent to residential schools where they could be taught qallunaat culture in preparation for their assimilation into the colonial social order, and their sled dogs slaughtered, effectively cutting Inuit ties to the land and access to their traditional source of livelihood.

Canada's national police force, the RCMP, played a key role in this transformation. The RCMP were involved in relocating Inuit to the permanent settlements, transporting Inuit children to residential schools, and slaughtering Inuit sled dogs. In short, the policing that the RCMP were engaged in was decidedly “racialized”; it was designed to enforce Inuit conformity to the emerging colonial regime.

In more recent times, social and economic issues—poor living conditions, food insecurity, and the shift in gender roles of Inuit men and women—are some of the more obvious manifestations of this colonial encounter with qallunaat. The intergenerational trauma that colonialism generates is also a key factor. This lived experience of trauma manifests in high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, a suicide crisis, and the pervasiveness of gendered violence against Inuit women.

Every Inuk woman deserves to live free from the threat and reality of violence. Police play a principal role in advancing and maintaining public safety. In Inuit Nunangat, policing is the responsibility of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), except for Nunavik, which has been policed by the Kativik Regional Police Force (KRPF) since 1996.

Official statements by the RCMP and KRPF as to their roles and responsibilities assert that policing is carried out in a manner that upholds justice and the safety and security of all citizens. Contributing to safer and healthier Indigenous communities is one of the five strategic priorities of the RCMP. The vision of the KRPF is “to provide the people of Nunavik with the best professional, respectful and efficient police services and to become a benchmark for police services in Inuit and Indigenous communities, both in operational and administrative matters.”

However, a number of challenges have been raised in the literature that call into question whether policing in Inuit Nunangat is being carried out in a manner that upholds justice and protects the safety and security of the communities being served, including: problems with policing in remote communities; the short duration of RCMP postings; the inexperience of officers; staffing shortages and turnover; language barriers; failure to recruit Inuit police officers; lack of cultural competency; lack of resources; underfunding; and lack of wrap-around services.

To explore what policing looks like on-the-ground and how these challenges manifest in relation to the police response to gendered violence against Inuit women, in-depth, qualitative interviews with 45 Inuit women and 40 service providers (including police officers) were conducted in the four regions in Inuit Nunangat.

### **Inuvialuit**

Inuvialuit participants believed that gendered violence has become normalized for Inuit women, to the point where they have come “to expect it” in their lives. Participants attributed this violence to “the fallout of the residential school” and “people feeling really disempowered” due to the imposition of the colonial system.

While the RCMP’s G Division encourages a community policing approach, the continual rotation of officers, the perception that officers live separate and apart from the community, and the inexperience of new recruits have led to the belief that police officers are racist in their dealings with the Inuit community. Some participants, however, framed the issue as one of cultural misunderstanding rather than racism, as police are not aware of the colonial history and have little training on how to work cross-culturally, especially with victims of gendered violence.

Another source of the divide between the police and the community was police protocols when dealing with citizen reports, particularly the police dispatch system whereby calls are routed through the Yellowknife detachment, which is especially problematic for women in abusive relationships when they call on the police for help.

Several Inuvialuit women shared their stories of calling on the police for help to deal with domestic violence and their concerns about police not responding in a timely manner, having to be removed from their home instead of the abuser, court-imposed sanctions not being properly monitored and acted upon, and women not being taken seriously when they express fears for their safety.

A RCMP officer offered a different standpoint on the role of police in responding to domestic violence, and police frustrations with women who utilize the criminal justice system to play a vindictive game against their partners. Other service providers, however, pointed to the limited resources (such as shelters) available to Inuvialuit women who encounter gendered violence.

Inuvialuit participants offered a number of suggestions for improving policing in their region, including: reducing police response times; ensuring that police are knowledgeable about Inuit history and the challenges that Inuit have encountered as a result; learning the local Inuktitut dialect; training on trauma-informed approaches; and enhancing and better integrating the services being offered for women who are harmed by gendered violence. Primarily, participants saw the need for Inuvialuit communities to take ownership of their own affairs, a process that some believed was underway.

Finally, one Inuvialuit woman shared parts of her life story, providing an important teaching on how the trauma created by gendered violence can be so all-encompassing in Inuit women's lives—and their resilience and strength in combatting its harmful effects.

## **Nunavut**

Nunavut participants were especially concerned with the pervasiveness of domestic violence in their community, brought into bold relief with the death of a young Inuk woman shortly before interviews were conducted. An elder pointed to the breakdown of traditional Inuit ways as an explanation for this violence.

While the RCMP have a visible presence in the community, some participants believed that this presence was limited to driving around in their vehicles. Participants were also concerned about slow police response times, which in part was attributed to calls being routed through Iqaluit and then relayed to the community detachment.

For some Nunavut participants, police treatment of Inuit is racialized. In their view, police officers' encounters with Inuit are based on racialized assumptions and a legacy of tension stemming from the colonial history of police-Inuit relations, generating fear and distrust of police.

Several women spoke about their reluctance to call on police because of negative experiences they have had in the past. Other women spoke about the troublesome ways that police treated them when they reported gendered violence. These experiences have left the women feeling wary and distrustful of police.

Participants, however, were also aware of the challenges that police encounter in Nunavut, including: working in high-risk situations where domestic violence is present; the lack of referral resources to support those on the receiving end of violence; the high turnover of officers; officers' lack of knowledge and experience about the North; and difficulties in retaining Inuit officers. Also concerning was the language disconnect, which sets up a barrier for Inuit women when reporting their experiences of gendered violence to police.

In addition to voicing their concerns about the police response to gendered violence, Nunavut participants also highlighted the lack of community resources, especially related to housing.

Participants also pointed to more fundamental problems with policing in the North that are rooted in the distinctive differences between Inuit society and southern Canada. They offered suggestions for how the police could begin to make the dramatic shift that is required in how they are positioned within the communities they are mandated to serve, including: becoming better educated about Inuit history, culture, and language; connecting more effectively with community leadership; becoming more aware of their accountability to the community; and getting to know residents in order to break down fear and mistrust of police.

At the same time, participants believed that community residents need to take the lead in inviting police into the community, and community organizations and services need to work at connecting with police in building partnerships. As well, efforts need to be made to ensure that supports (such as Victim Services) are in place to assist women who are being victimized by gendered violence. Police too require supports to deal with vicarious trauma, and the good work that they do needs to be noticed and appreciated.

## Nunatsiavut

In Nunatsiavut, gendered violence is an ongoing concern. Participants were of the view that gendered violence has become normalized but hidden. However, women are reluctant to report the violence, and for a number of reasons: the isolation of their community; their reliance on their partner to maintain the household; threats from their partner; and the length of time it takes to process criminal charges.

Another significant reason cited for women not turning to police for help was the strained relationship with and lack of trust in police and the criminal justice system. Several women recounted their experiences in turning to the police for help. While some of those experiences were positive, several women found that the police response was unsupportive or jeopardized their safety. In some cases, the women found the police response to be unprofessional—and racialized.

Participants believed that the relationship between police and the community was a poor one, citing their residential separation in the community, their lack of interaction with community members, and the short period of time officers are stationed in the community. While police were seen to have a positive presence in the community (such as Canada Day events), most of that presence involved driving around in their vehicles. The automated call system was also mentioned as problematic, especially since calls are re-routed to St. John's Newfoundland after hours. The inaccessibility of police also extended to slow response times.

Participants, however, also spoke about the positive influence that individual officers can have in the community, especially in terms of their approachability and willingness to improve the police presence in the community.

Nevertheless, participants were also mindful of the challenges that police encounter in their work. These challenges included the weather and the lack of detachment resources (such as holding cells). But they also extended to a lack of understanding of life in the North and its colonial history and of Inuit culture.

To improve the relations between police and the Inuit community, as well as the police response to gendered violence, participants suggested: police officers need to be better educated about the communities they serve; new officers need to be better integrated into the community when they arrive; officers need to become more involved in the community; and the RCMP needs to work at building trust and rapport with community members. Hiring a cultural facilitator would facilitate this process. So too would ensuring that police officers have the necessary resources, including an increased staff complement and a call system that is accessible.

Participants also suggested that training in how to respond to disclosures of sexual violence and hiring more female officers to deal with cases of gendered violence would improve the police response to gendered violence. Employing community constables would also help to bridge the gap between police and the community and build trust.

Finally, participants emphasized the need for more social services and resources in the community, as well as a better coordination of the services currently being offered.

## Nunavik

In Nunavik, safety has become more of a matter of concern than in previous years, especially in terms of gendered violence. Women talked about their negative experiences with the police when their safety was threatened or violence occurred. In one case, fear for her safety resulted in one woman encountering violence from a police officer, leading her to lack trust in police.

Other women expressed a similar lack of trust, which was being generated by a number of factors, one of which was the divide that exists between Inuit and outsiders in the community. This divide between locals and non-locals extends to the police. Participants believed that KRPF officers are poorly integrated into the community. Officers are only in the community for a short period of time, lack experience and training, and hold a limited understanding of the history of Inuit communities and the root causes of the problems encountered, especially with drug and alcohol use and domestic violence. This divide is exacerbated by language barriers, given that most officers are Francophone with little knowledge of Inuktitut. Several participants believed that the police-community divide breaks down along racial lines.

Participants were also aware that the KRPF has been under-resourced. The lack of 24-hours-a-day patrols and under-staffing affects their ability to respond when gendered violence occurs.

Participants also expressed concerns about how police go about their investigation when gendered violence occurs. One woman shared her story of how police handled a sexual assault against her daughter, forcing the child to be questioned alone. Other participants were concerned about the police investigation of the death of a young girl in the community. Others talked about the lack of services and supports when women and girls have been sexually assaulted.

Women who encountered domestic violence told of how they were the ones removed from their home, and not the perpetrator. Other participants commented on how No Contact Orders are not working in small communities given their limited services and proximity.

For many Nunavik participants, the police are an outside force that imposes a form of justice that runs counter to the Inuit way of resolving conflicts.

To resolve these issues, Nunavik participants suggested that police need to become more approachable and better integrated into the community. Increasing their complement would enable the police to provide better services, as would hiring interpreters to improve communication between police and the community. Involving Inuit in conflict resolution, such as through the use of cultural workers or natural helpers, would also go a long way toward repairing the police-community divide. Participants also suggested that Inuit need to be better informed of their rights.

Police officers indicated that several initiatives are underway that have the potential to improve the police response to gendered violence in Nunavik (improved cultural training, use of cultural facilitators, a call centre with Inuktitut speakers, etc.). But participants were aware that policing alone cannot solve the pressing social issues confronting Nunavik communities. Meeting basic social needs—including adequate housing—is paramount.



## Moving Forward

Interviews with Inuit women and service providers have offered an important window into the police response to gendered violence. These interviews evidence the pervasiveness and severity of the violence that Inuit women experience—and the challenges they encounter in finding safety and security when violence occurs.

These interviews have also revealed that racialized policing persists in Inuit encounters with police officers. However, racialized policing is not simply a matter of some individual officers holding racist beliefs and stereotypes about Inuit. Rather, it is systemic in nature, embedded in institutional policies and practices.

Moving forward, therefore, will require a fundamental shift in how policing is carried out in Inuit Nunangat. In order for police to respond effectively to gendered violence, they need to move from being an outside force to become a part of community revitalization. Making this fundamental shift necessarily involves the police in a process of decolonization.

Essentially, decolonization means reversing the colonial strategy of assimilation. Rather than expecting Inuit to accept or comply with the colonial order, it is police and other social service agencies that need to assimilate into Inuit ways, including the “great guiding principles” of Inuit Qaujimagatqangit.

The way forward, therefore, is an approach to decolonizing policing that is grounded in Inuit knowledge and world views, holistic, and relationship-based. Rather than an outside force engaged in law enforcement and crime control, police are positioned as working in partnership with other social service agencies to foster community safety and well-being through problem solving and conflict resolution—all the while taking their lead from Inuit, especially Inuit women who have been harmed by gendered violence.

Adopting this decolonizing framework, a number of specific recommendations are offered that have the potential to assist the police in making this fundamental shift.

### Recommendations

- **Culturally competent policing:** Investments must be made to ensure that police officers receive ongoing, in-depth cultural competency training on Inuit history and culture. The training should be community-specific, developed and led by Inuit, and include language training on the local Inuktitut dialect.
- **Inuit Advisory Committees:** Composed of elders, community leaders, and cultural facilitators, the primary purpose of these committees will be to ensure that police practices and protocols are in line with Inuit Qaujimagatqangit principles. In addition to placing the emphasis on Inuit methods of problem solving and conflict resolution, these committees will foster mutual understanding and respect between the community and the police.
- **Trauma-informed policing:** Investments must be made to provide police with adequate training in trauma-informed approaches to policing. This training must be made relevant to the history and contemporary experiences of Inuit. With a firmer understanding of trauma and its indicators, police will be better positioned to de-escalate situations, build more positive relationships with the community, and assist in ensuring community wellness and safety.

- **Vicarious Trauma:** To help manage the personal stress resulting from daily policing activities in Inuit communities and the effects of vicarious trauma on first responders, police officers should be encouraged to seek emotional support and guidance from community elders, counsellors, or natural helpers.
- **Gender-Based Violence Training:** Police officers must undergo ongoing, specialized education on the dynamics of gender-based violence, training that would be more effective if it were delivered, at least in part, by victims' advocates. Second only to victims, advocates have the most comprehensive understanding of the realities of gender-based violence. An enriching element to the training would be the inclusion of input from Inuit survivors of domestic violence to educate the police on their experiences.
- **Gender-Based Policing Protocols:** Police protocols, including investigative strategies to respond to sexual assault and domestic violence, must be evaluated and revised to ensure that the police are responding in a culturally appropriate and victim-centred manner.
- **Female Officers:** To achieve a more supportive experience for female survivors of gendered violence, there should be a female police officer present, if not leading, the statement-gathering process.
- **Gendered Violence Prevention Liaison:** This community-based position would be geared toward providing those harmed by gendered violence with a dedicated support person tasked with coordinating access to resources offered by police and other social service agencies. Such a position would enhance partnerships between agencies in ensuring the multiple needs of those harmed by gendered violence—safety planning, counselling, housing, etc.—are being met.
- **Community Integration:** The RCMP and KRPF should develop protocols for introducing new officers to the communities they serve. These protocols would be developed in close consultation and collaboration with Inuit community leaders, elders, and cultural facilitators. The aim would be to reinforce officers' accountability to those communities as well as to facilitate the integration of officers into the community.
- **Duration of postings:** The RCMP should reconsider the policy of limiting postings to two years in duration. Where possible, posting contracts should be extended to sustain positive rapport between Inuit community members and regular service members, and enable trust and reciprocity to be built into police-community relations.
- **Inuit Civilian Positions:** In order to improve the effectiveness of policing services and better integrate police into the local community, Inuit must be employed at each police detachment, and in a number of capacities:
  - Inuit interpreters and translators to ensure that community residents can interact with police in the appropriate local dialect.
  - Cultural facilitators and/or natural healers to act as a liaison between police and community members, including identifying and responding to people at risk.
  - Special constables, police aides, community patrols and/or peacekeepers to assist officers in meeting the community's need for safety and security.
  - Administrative staff to relieve police of administrative and organizational tasks within the detachment in order to devote more time and energy to problem solving and community engagement activities.

- **Police Accessibility:** Funding must be immediately provided to address the lack of formalized and local police (and emergency services) dispatch systems across Inuit Nunangat. There must be Inuktitut speakers available to answer (emergency) calls at all times.
- **Community Education:** Investments must be made to create Inuit Nunangat-specific, bilingual public education programs in two main areas:
  - **Education about the Criminal Justice System:** To provide information to the public on the role and function of the police and citizen's rights in relation to the criminal justice system, these programs could take the form of messages through routine uses of existing media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and social media, as well as a variety of local community forums.
  - **Education about Gender-Based Violence:** To foster confidence in the criminal justice system, police need to take a key role in the development, design, and implementation of gender-based violence prevention and education efforts. This task could be accomplished through the police leading specialized workshops, campaigns, and programs focusing on encouraging victims to report abuse. Such police engagement with both the general community and those deemed to be at risk of gendered violence could help provide those suffering in silence with the assurance that the police are available to assist them, thereby increasing women's confidence in police and reducing their reluctance to report abuse.
- **Community engagement:** Police integration and presence in the community should be enhanced through planned events (such as sewing circles) and the dissemination of positive police-citizen encounters (through social media) in order to build trust and a positive police-community relationship.
- **Federal Government Responsibilities:** Given that policing is an essential service, the Government of Canada must ensure that all regions of Inuit Nunangat have effective and substantively equitable policing services. In addition, the government has a responsibility to ensure equitable funding of victim services in every community across Inuit Nunangat.

These recommendations emerge from the insights, knowledge, and experiences of Inuit women and service providers in the four regions across Inuit Nunangat. As one Nunatsiavut participant emphasized, "You can have all these recommendations, all these things that the community is saying, but there's never any follow-up, follow through, based on the recommendations that people are saying over and over and over again." She makes an important point. The changes needed to address the pressing problem of gendered violence against Inuit women will not occur without the funding, commitment, and support required to make that change happen.



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**PAUKTUUTIT**  
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA



1 Nicholas Street, Suite 520  
Ottawa, ON Canada K1N 7B7



1-800-667-0749



@pauktuutit



pauktuutit



@pauktuutit