**Kai’sastensera** (Strength): Haudenosaunee Women’s Experiences of Healing from Sexual Violence

By

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**Abstract**

This research study explores how various historical and contemporary influences impact Haudenosaunee women’s experience in healing from sexual violence. The study evolved in response to how Haudenosaunee women continuously display grace, determination, and drive in a society where Indigenous women experience disproportionate rates of sexual violence. This research study utilizes an Indigenous Feminism theoretical approach while employing interviews that followed a traditional storytelling method with two survivors of sexual violence from Six Nations of the Grand River and three Indigenous women service providers who work with Haudenosaunee women. Notably, this research project was completed with the support and guidance of Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services. Five themes became evident during the thematic analysis, including: reclaiming one’s voice as an Indigenous survivor, the value of psychoeducation, the intergenerational impacts of colonization, effective therapeutic modalities, and the importance of genuine therapeutic relationships. Findings indicate a need for the social work field to value Haudenosaunee stories in their raw and honest form, and for social workers to develop a holistic approach that includes an advanced understanding of community contexts. The research project confirms that Haudenosaunee women’s acts of healing are acts of resistance and self-determination, affirming that these women are sacred, wise, and powerful.

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My thesis is dedicated to all Haudenosaunee women who have felt the impacts of sexual violence. More specifically, I am carrying the story of a 16-year-old girl who showed me that strength can come in many forms. To my nieces, aunties, grandmother, and late niece Alexis Jane, who have all shown me what it looks like to combine having a backbone with grace and patience.

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Unfortunately, there is value in acknowledging the people over time who dubbed me too passionate, belittled the crisis of GBV, and called me an angry feminist. Although not the most prevalent motivator, my passion to be heard pushed me to keep on writing.

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# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Sexual violence is a violation that reaches into someone’s core, an unconsensual obstruction in one’s life, leading to a forced healing journey. Many Haudenosaunee women bear the burdens of determining how to heal in a social environment that does not wish for them to exist, much less thrive. Despite the desire to illustrate the harrowing nature of these experiences of violence, this research study instead aims to highlight the intense stalwartness and steadiness many Haudenosaunee women have naturally displayed. Ultimately, this research study emerged from a state of desperation to understand how social workers can aid Haudenosaunee women in their healing, particularly since adequate research on therapeutic approaches for Indigenous peoples is limited in both academic and practice settings.

This study is an amalgamation of personal and professional passions. I began working within my home community of Six Nations in 2020 and simultaneously started volunteering with the Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton and Area. Whether in an elementary school, a courtroom, or a shelter, I have had the honour of working with Haudenosaunee women and girls of all ages. No matter the type of interaction, I evolved as a social worker and community member while in these positions. Specific classroom environments at McMaster allowed me to authentically explore my discomfort with the lateral nature of the experiences of my clients, the convoluted influence of the criminal justice system, and my feelings of helplessness and fatigue when considering how best to help the women I admired.

Verbalizing the complex nature of and experiencing healing from sexual violence for Haudenosaunee women is an arduous process. The discussion can evoke distasteful perspectives rooted in myths and prejudice. This study aims to verbalize the determination, beauty, and grace that Haudenosaunee women display, which is also an arduous process. However, this study sought to clearly outline key facets that contribute to healing for the women from Six Nations.

## **Locating the Researcher**

When entering the graduate program, I knew that I wanted to amplify the voices of Haudenosaunee women. Throughout my life, I had been exposed to news at all hours of the day, as my family always emphasized the importance of staying informed about global events. When I was seven years old, I was moved off-reserve. It was incredibly confusing for a seven-year-old to move to a community where, instead of hearing and learning the Cayuga, I was taught French. Instead of traditional teachings, I had to dress up as a pioneer for ‘Canadian History’. I could not verbalize it, but I understood that I did not quite fit because of my already complex life experiences. With a very real understanding and awareness of injustices across the country (and entire world), I developed into what many had described as an ‘angry feminist’ by about age 12.

Throughout my teens, I navigated my own identity as a Haudenosaunee woman while simultaneously growing increasingly aware of the gender-based violence crisis across Canada. I was put into self-defence classes as a 10-year-old because my family wanted to help mitigate the likelihood that I would become one of the statistics of Haudenosaunee women. Not unlike every other woman, I have held the hands of my friends while they tried to make sense of the violation that had occurred to them. As I grew, so did my desperation to understand the reason behind such rampant rates of sexual violence. I have constantly cycled through emotions of rage, despair, anguish, fear, and hope.

Entering university, I explored many of my academic passions. I continued to return to the issue of gender-based violence, with a specific focus on intersectionality. Almost without realizing it, sexual violence and Haudenosaunee women’s experience of healing entered the forefront of my passions. This evolution could be due to finally being able to critically analyse the casual misogyny and racism I had witnessed throughout my life, both experienced by myself, my family, and my peers. My focus on this topic might also be attributed to finally being comfortable in my voice as an academic. A few professors who hold my admiration still impressed upon me the idea of emotion existing within literature and academia. I took this validation and ran to write this thesis.

While exploring my personal identity, I recognized that my voice held value as a storyteller. By valuing other Haudenosaunee women’s stories, I grew to value my own. Ultimately, my location as a researcher can be summarized as a passionate-Indigenous-angry-feminist-storyteller.

Since beginning my research project, I have been employed at Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services located at Six Nations of the Grand River, Ontario. Specifically, I work within the *Etiya’takenhas* (We Are Helping Them in Cayuga) shelter program. My reflections and inquiries have evolved since the beginning of my employment. I have not only been able to see the beauty of a Haudenosaunee-centred therapeutic environment, but I have seen how colonialism and patriarchy combine to make it so that our shelter is almost always at capacity.

## **Rationale**

To begin, there is an importance in establishing the intense need for this type of research project. Looking at statistics and data can be complicated and can (re)create the same level of harm that sexual violence has caused a person, allowing outsiders not to grapple with the full extent of the crisis. However, the significance of numbers and statistics cannot be stated without a grave precursor. Each of the following numbers of a statistic belongs to a person: a mother, auntie, sibling, teacher, or friend. An individual’s absence or pain is felt throughout a community, as each Indigenous community is interconnected and intertwined. The hurt of one person has a ripple effect on a family and community, and no incident happens in isolation. Therefore, the sharing of statistics can become monotonous, with the meaning attached to them lessening over time. This research project, above all else, aims to value the experiences of each Haudenosaunee woman, which is why this preamble is important to explain before delving into the statistics.

There is a distinct and pressing need for research that discusses how women from Six Nations find healing after experiencing sexual violence. When reviewing the statistics, an overwhelmingly high rate of Indigenous women encountered sexual violence. All Indigenous peoples are more likely to face physical violence during their lifetime compared to non-Indigenous people (Ridgen, 2022). More specifically, “Indigenous women are 3.5 times more likely to experience any form of violence, than non-Indigenous women” (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2015). Indigenous women are at risk of experiencing sexual violence, which is often more violent and life-threatening in nature (Du Mont et al., 2017). However, statistics do not account for the high rates of gender-based and sexual violence that go unreported or are invalidated by police throughout Canada (McGuire & Murdoch, 2022, p. 536). Data cannot account for all the women who feel as if they must keep their experiences silent and have never felt supported enough to utter what they have lived through. Despite the likelihood that the statistics are an underestimation, they prove nonetheless that there is a need for therapeutic practices that can effectively support women from Six Nations in their healing journey.

## **Current Socio-Political Landscape Across Canada**

Misogyny and sexual violence are not new forms of women’s oppression, yet their appearances and manifestations shift over time. Gender inequity looks different than it did one hundred years ago, or is it? Women in Canada can vote and work in the government; however, online, some forums encourage raping women into submission (Bates, 2020, p. 5). While women are closer to making the same wage as men, 89% of all sexual violence survivors are women (Cotter, 2024). Young men continue to fall hopelessly into the “manosphere, ingesting red-pill media that shares the notion men are naturally dominant and that feminism is the reason for all of men’s problems” (McCullough, 2023; Fields, 2024). Despite thoughts that older generations hold the most antiquated and harmful views, studies have shown that “Gen Z and millennials” hold viewpoints rooted in sexism and misogyny at higher rates than Boomers and Gen X (Haslop et al., 2024). There is an entire industry of “macho/alpha” males that not only tolerate violence against women but spread the thought processes that women lack basic empathy and instead are cruel and calculating (McCullough, 2023; Fields, 2024). One can look no further than Andrew Tate saying that women must “take some of the blame for their rape” (McCullough, 2023; Haslop et al., 2024). Research on the manosphere by Halpin et al. (2023) indicates that men who engage in this media are likely holding anti-women values that were furthered and validated by the men in these realms. Looking past Indigenous communities, it becomes clear that there are constant barrages of media in broader Canadian society that foster violent perspectives surrounding women. Although many Indigenous communities are achieving increasing levels of sovereignty, larger societal trends fester and leak into the makeup of our communities and contributing to the misogynist views of Indigenous women.

As noted by Cotter (2024) for Statistics Canada Online, “sexual violence is the only form of violent crime not on the decline”. There is a widespread notion that men are “better” in all respects, which leads to mindsets that think men are more powerful. This power differential leads to sexual violence, as sexual violence is rooted in power and control (Brownmiller, 1975; Native Women’s Association, 2015). Someone who believes they are superior, or more powerful, is less likely to feel remorse or question their abusive behaviours and sexual violence (Canadian Women, 2025).

# CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework

## **Indigenous Feminism**

It can easily be argued that Indigenous feminism has always existed among the Haudenosaunee; it just has not been named or formalized within the realm of research and academia. Prior to colonization, Haudenosaunee women did not require feminism, as they held empowered positions at the centre of their culture and community (Wagner, 2001). While designing this study, it became evident that only Indigenous feminism can adequately recognize the historical factors that are so central to my research.

Indigenous feminism not only recognizes historical facets, but it also provides an evolved understanding of current-day circumstances surrounding Indigenous women across Turtle Island, which is the way that Indigenous peoples refer to North America. Gina Starblanket (2024) discusses what Indigenous feminism entails, noting that Indigenous Feminism addresses how gender and conceptions of gender impact Indigenous people, both historically and currently. Indigenous feminism goes beyond mainstream feminism and instead is based in traditional and cultural values that empower Indigenous women and promote equality for all genders, including two-spirited people (Starblanket, 2024, p. 1997). Indigenous feminism moves past theory and acknowledges the importance of integrating decolonization efforts into practice (Starblanket, 2024, p. 1997; Gearon, 2021). It is also important to understand the significant role Haudenosaunee women played in shaping early feminist thought and movement. Haudenosaunee clan mothers played a crucial role in selecting chiefs, making decisions, and possessed rights to their bodies, land, and children even when unmarried. Early suffrage women, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were inspired by the role, respect, and political power Haudenosaunee women held within their society. They viewed Haudenosaunee women as having full control over their lives. They were a model that provided early American women with the agency and activism that would later become a cornerstone of the women’s rights movement (Wagner, 2001).

## **Application To Research Study**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how Haudenosaunee women find a sense of healing in the wake of sexual violence. The aim is to centre Haudenosaunee women’s voices in exploring how they personally conceptualize healing and what influences the avenue they take to find their sense of wellness. In the discussion of healing, I aim to explore the roles that traditional culture, community engagement, kinship, and justice play in an individual’s definition of healing.

Johnstone & Lee (2021) note that Indigenous feminism draws upon both feminist theories and the strengths of Indigenous culture and ideologies. It gives a pointed recognition to the violent impacts that a combination of colonialism, racism, and sexism that Indigenous women uniquely face as discrimination due to their gender and racial identities (Green, 2017, p.). As noted by Green (2017) “issues of identity, connection to land/water, decolonization, and politics (p. 5)'' and are all embedded into the framework of this approach. Indigenous feminism also gives notice to the “racial and gendered nature of social experiences for Indigenous women” (Green, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, Indigenous feminism can both be an “ideology and methodology” as it informs the way one views the world, and can inform research (Green, 2017). The theory examines the structural impact of day-to-day interactions and common discourses on an Indigenous woman’s life.

Indigenous epistemology is widely recognized as holistic, with consideration given to the interconnection of all living beings' lives (Kovach, 2009, p. 56). It is arduous to develop an overarching understanding of Indigenous epistemology, as each nation has its individual histories and beliefs. The Haudenosaunee system of knowledge believes that each person and community have connections as spiritual beings who revel in the value of relationships with the land and water (Watts, 2016). It is also valuable to note that Haudenosaunee people strive to have *kanikonriio* (Good Mind), where a constant goal is to find balance and peace within themselves and with the natural world around them (Mann, 1997). For me, Indigenous feminism parallels Haudenosaunee knowledge and is rooted in its cultural histories that begin with our Creation stories (Green, 2017). For Haudenosaunee women, the teachings from our Creation story and the story of Sky Woman (Mann, 1997) reveal that women were at the beginning of life and are deserving of respect and admiration. Therefore, Indigenous feminism means applying the concepts from the Great Law of Peace, the story of Sky Woman and Creation, *kanikonriio*, and the interconnectedness within our world.

Jennifer Ma shared that epistemology is about knowing where knowledge comes from, how it is created, and who has access to knowledge (personal communication, 2023). For Haudenosaunee people, knowledge has been passed down through generations orally through storytelling. However, during colonization, our knowledge was passed down in whispers by our elders (Wagner, 2001, p. 13). Despite the difficulty of maintaining knowledge, it is now shared openly in schools, conversations, and during events. Personally, my family never discussed our history or traditions; it was done quietly. Nonetheless, there has been a notable shift in the younger generations, as they are gently probing our older family members.

Dr. Jennifer Ma also discussed the term ontology, and the nature of being, and “it provides us the WHAT of our research” (Ma, personal communication, November 2023). From my perspective, Indigenous ontologies boil down to an understanding of the state of being as the interconnectedness of life, land, water, nature, seasons, the sky, and the moon. One example that easily comes to mind is that Haudenosaunee women have always believed in our connection and power with the cycles of the moon, with our moon time (menstruation), and the birth of babies. This facet of information has now been explored in scientific journals. However, Indigenous women have known this knowledge for generations. Ultimately, from my perspective, the ontological roots of Indigenous feminism are grounded in the understanding that our reality and nature of being are connected to one another, and to the world in which we live.

My research question explores how Indigenous women have found healing from sexual violence. In breaking down this question, it becomes evident how interconnected it is to Indigenous feminism. When we understand sexual violence as a gendered experience, with roots in patriarchal and sexist ideas that (Brockbank, 2022) come from an exertion of power and control (Brownmiller, 1975). Feminism gives recognition to the damaging impacts of the idea that women are the passive sex, where women are not seen as powerful, strong, or aggressive (Suzack et al., 2010, p. 81) Although feminism recognizes the gendered nature of sexual violence, it does not give enough recognition to the racialized woman’s experience. With the emergence of intersectionality, society has finally begun to listen to racialized women’s experiences, and feminism has become less “whitewashed”. However, many Indigenous authors (Starblanket, 2024; Green, 2017; Smith, 2006; Johnstone & Lee, 2021) explain that feminism still does not encapsulate Indigenous women’s experience. A central part of colonialism was the exertion of patriarchal ideas of gender roles and binaries. The ideas of patriarchy support colonialism, and colonialism supports patriarchy (hooks, 2004). Sexual violence, as experienced by Indigenous women, is linked to these two systems, patriarchy and colonialism (Green, 2017). They combine to create discourses, attitudes, and beliefs surrounding Indigenous and minority women.

# CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

## **Historical Contexts**

Central to Indigenous epistemology is the valuing of knowledge from those who came before us (Wagner, 2001). With this in mind, an exploration of the historical events that have long impacted contemporary experiences of sexual violence for Haudenosaunee women.

Life for Haudenosaunee women was markedly different prior to contact with European settlers (Wagner, 2001, pp. 28-34). In all aspects of their existence, Haudenosaunee women were valued (Montour & Bomberry, 2019, p. 358). In Wagner’s (2001) exploration of Haudenosaunee women’s influence on the feminist movement, there is a clear distinction between Haudenosaunee women and settler women (pp. 30-32). Haudenosaunee families were matrilineal, with children becoming members and citizens under their mother’s clan. Women worked communally with men, taking care of crops and home environments (Wagner, 2001, p. 30). Women were and are stewards of the land (Wagner, 2011, p. 30). Clan mothers held the power to choose who would become a male representative or chief on behalf of their clan family. Women were and are central facets in the Longhouse. Ultimately, Haudenosaunee women worked in equal partnership with Haudenosaunee men, with equally important roles that supported the function of the entire community. Although a limited picture of what life looked like for Haudenosaunee women, an accurate image can be drawn of how men and women interacted and lived.

This starts with the Haudenosaunee Creation Story. The story begins with Sky Woman, a pregnant woman who falls from the Sky World after becoming curious about a hole near a tree (Mann, 1997). As noted by Sultana et al. (2022), our “creation story begins with Sky Woman falling from the sky onto the turtle’s back in the water” (p.1), and our world was created. The woman from the sky gave birth to a female child. As this child grew, she became impregnated with twins by the Western Wind Spirit. When it was time for the twins to be born, one chose a natural way and the other through the armpit of their mother, which killed their mother (Sultana et al., 2022, p. 1). Monture (2008) notes that the Creation Story shows how “life came from a woman, and when she died and was buried, our major foods of sustenance grew from her body” (p. 158). Haudenosaunee women are the centre of creation, where life comes from and is sustained by them. What might currently be seen as empowering or breaking down barriers within Western communities was what everyday life looked like for the Haudenosaunee (Monture, 2008, p. 155). Cannon (2019) discusses how Haudenosaunee women were so respected because they were complemented by men who held just as prestigious and important roles (p. 13).

Euro-American Christian women had little to no rights or respect due to patriarchy, fuelled by strong Christian faith and beliefs (Wagner, 2001, p. 32). Wagner (2001) states that “Euro-American women’s subordination had a religious foundation” (p. 21). Women did not own their bodies, children, land, or any objects. They had no space in spirituality or politics (p. 31). A woman in a Euro-American, or a settler’s home, was forced to withstand holding no value and was “punished just for being a woman” (p. 63). One does not need to look any further than the creation stories between Haudenosaunee peoples and Christianity to see the stark differences, as “the bible teaches that women brought sin and death into the world with the story of Adam and Eve” (p.63). Although themes of kindness, care, love, and peace can be drawn from both spiritual ideologies, a significant difference lies in the views and treatment of women.

Sexual violence was a normal aspect of a settler’s life (Wagner, 2001, p. 64). For these women, they had to withstand their husbands' beating and raping them into submission (Wagner, 2001, p. 65). Martin Cannon's (2019) book, *Men, Masculinity and the Indian Act,* shares how sexism was able to thrive in European society because “it was rooted in religiously authorized ethnocentrism… which normalized heterosexuality as a mode of gender exclusion” (p. 14). Everything that Euro-American women had could be taken, even their safety and bodily autonomy (Hill, 2017, p. 12).

Violence within Haudenosaunee communities was scarce (Monture, 2008, p. 156). That is not to say Haudenosaunee peoples did not have periods of violence with other Indigenous nations, but rape and sexual violence were not accepted or tolerated (Wagner, 2001, p. 66). The teaching of the Great Law of Peace promoted harmony within our communities by the burying of weapons that represented violence and harm (Montour & Bomberry, 2019). European women were shocked to hear and observe that Haudenosaunee women were not raped or violated in harmful ways (Wagner, 2001, p. 66).

White supremacy has a long history throughout the world and is inextricably linked to colonization. Turner and Bomberry (2018, p. 3) succinctly describe White supremacy as an “unnamed global political system based on the belief that one’s race is superior to all others” (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019, p. 101). Ideas of white supremacy “invade every aspect of our society and culture” (hooks, 2015). Many scholars like hooks (2015) have linked White supremacy to colonization, patriarchy, and capitalism; each invading our society’s minds continuously. McCleary & Simard (2021) note that “White supremacy uses the social construction of race and the racialization of people to assert social control, hierarchies of power, and legitimize the oppression of people racially coded as Black and Brown.” (p. 261). Joseph (2022) also succinctly encapsulates these interlocking systems:

In order for exploitation, slavery, indentureship, the colonization of lands, the upheaval of governments, and the imposition of religion to occur, a group had to be differentiated, subordinated into a general type, seen through a lens of difference, as an inferior group, in need of wester civility, democracy, psychiatry, Christianity, worthy of violence and reasoned out of humanity (slide 27).

During the process of colonization, many European settlers “did not believe that Indigenous peoples had any culture, traditions, spirituality or value” (McNally, 2020, p. 33). It is well known that European settlers worked tremendously hard to eliminate Indigenous people, culture, and bodies to possess the land. Nevertheless, few publications take precise note of how Christianity and corresponding gender roles shifted gender roles within Haudenosaunee communities (Wager, 2001, p. 13). In her work documenting a timeline of broken treaties and the history of Haudenosaunee land possession, Susan Hill (2017) explores how Missionaries found Haudenosaunee peoples hard to convert (pp 89-92). With persistence, missionaries achieved success by learning the local language and understanding the culture. The onslaught of diseases that Haudenosaunee communities had never seen or experienced before contributed to many deaths. Hill discusses that missionaries would commonly enter a community or country after a disaster to provide aid. It is during these moments that communities are vulnerable and desperate for help. Individuals facing devastating loss will also question why something so horrible could happen, which missionaries would capitalize on to convert Haudenosaunee peoples to Christianity. They would bring upon illnesses that traditional medicines could not combat, and then, when a natural doubt in faith occurred, they would impress Christianity upon Haudenosaunee peoples (Hill, 2017, p. 91). Missionaries thought their work was saving Indigenous populations from the devil, as they thought Haudenosaunee culture promoted evil (Elliott, 2019, p. 5). Joseph Brant, a well-known Haudenosaunee figure, was even weaponized to promote conversion to Christianity (Monture, 2014, p. 38). Concludingly, many forces worked together to promote conversion to Christianity, which is, in part, how views on Haudenosaunee women shifted so drastically. It can also be noted that this is when settlers also inflicted intense harm onto Indigenous peoples' sense of identity, an impact which continues to be felt today.

Aside from the clear harm caused by the act of converting Haudenosaunee peoples to Christianity, Christianity has also had an impact on rates of sexual violence. Although sexual violence is a nuanced topic, many factors come into play when discussing sexual violence experienced by Haudenosaunee women. Christianity shifted the way women were viewed within Haudenosaunee communities, as themes of purity and moral righteousness commonly blamed a woman for an experience of violence (Scarsella & Krehbiel, 2019, p. 2). Dr. Clough, a professor in London, England, spent considerable time exploring the church’s long history of influence on a woman’s body, sexuality, and violence (2017). Her work encompasses concepts of shame associated with sex, morality and sex, and the role that power plays in sexual violence (Clough, 2017, p. 3). Her work is valuable as it clearly lays out how purity and morality come into play in sexual violence, and that women are often left to blame instead of men. There is significant research dedicated to Christianity, sexual abuse, complicity, and blame. This research project is concerned more so with the discourses of morality and shame, and how the upbringing of these religious beliefs influences Haudenosaunee people’s conceptualization of violence, sexuality, purity, and power/control.

Scarsella and Kiehbiel explore how those engaging in sex outside of marriage are seen as corrupt within a settler’s lens (2019, p. 4). Themes of obedience, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice combine to create ideologies and environments where a woman who experiences sexual violence feels the need to set aside their safety to appear godly (p. 6). Although these discourses of blame exist in other realms, it is important to note that missionaries brought these discourses (Hill, 2017).

Shifting focus, there is value in analysing how settlers came to view Indigenous women. Indigenous women were viewed as less than human, “immoral, lustful, dirty, and faceless” (Monchalin, 2016, p. 178). Not only as expendable and disposable, but as “rape-able” because they were not seen as human beings (Monchalin, 2016, p. 177). Abuse of Indigenous women was a common act settlers took during colonization, with many settlers and explorers capturing and raping Indigenous women across Turtle Island (Whyatt, 2023). Early explorer, John Chivington, is stating, “kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice” (Croisy, 2017). In detailed letters written by George Washington is the promotion of overtaking Haudenosaunee people by any means possible (Whyatt, 2023). The impact of various media depictions, notably ‘Pocahontas,’ has always spread the idea that Indigenous women are “exotic and erotic” (Monchalin, 2016, p. 179). Since colonization, Indigenous women have been sexualized in such an intense and pervasive form that their humanity is removed. Today, sexualization continues in the form of inaccurate television shows, Halloween costumes, music, photo shoots, burlesque shows, and much more (Croisy, 2017). Although brief, it is easy to see how Indigenous women have been brutalized and sexualized throughout history.

On top of devastatingly racist and sexist depictions in the media, a major aspect of history that impacts Indigenous women to this day is the experience and history of the Indian Residential School System (IRSS). For this research project, the focus is on the sexual and lateral abuse that occurred over generations. Although all violence and pain inflicted is relevant due to the consequent impacts of intergenerational trauma.

The IRSS began in 1831, and the final residential school closed in 1996 (NCTR, 2024). The Canadian government incorporated funding for residential schools through the Indian Act (NTRC, 2024). Indian Agents were appointed by the Canadian government to enforce Canadian laws on reserves (NCTR, 2024). The primary function of Indian Agents was to enforce the Indian Act in Indigenous communities. This also meant that Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities to attend and live at residential schools that were often hundreds of miles away from their homes (NCTR, 2024).

The Mohawk Institute was the first residential school established in Brantford, Ontario, opened in 1831 and operated until 1972 (NCTR, 2024). The Mohawk Institute was known as the Mush Hole by students, as their daily sustenance often came only from mushy oatmeal (NCTR, 2024). The Mush Hole was only thirty minutes away from the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve. Many Indigenous children from near and far were sent to the Mohawk Institute/Mush Hole (NCTR, 2024). Conditions in the Mush Hole were deplorable. During its operation, approximately 15,000 children had to endure poor nutrition, rampant lack of cleanliness, and negligent medical care. They were treated as labourers, alongside perpetual physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, verbal, and sexual abuse by the clergy and teachers (Purdon & Palleja, 2021). The Anglican Church operated the Mohawk Institute until the federal government took charge of it in 1945 (NCTR, 2024). Often described as a prison by survivors, it was recounted that sexual assaults occurred in the laundry room, boiler room, or basement because the sounds of the children’s screams would be drowned out (Powless, 2016). The abusers rarely faced any repercussions, and if a child attempted to ask for help, they would be physically abused (Miller, 2024). Abuse was repetitive, violent, and created emotions in the children that the harsh environment only made worse.

It is crucial to look outside of academic texts for a multitude of reasons. Dennis and Minor (2019) state that understanding the lives of Indigenous peoples cannot be explored accurately unless “we recognize that Indigenous perspectives will be found in all aspects of Indigenous life, not just scholarly texts or literature” (p. 1475). Survivors of the IRSS had to find a way to survive and heal, and share their stories takes immense courage. Whatever form their sharing comes in, it should be valued.

This research project is grounded in the work of Miranda Fricker (2007), whose concept of epistemic justice acknowledges that individuals with marginalized identities often face disrespect in their role as experts (Fricker, 2007, p. 44; Johnstone & Lee, 2021, p. 381). Fricker states that “to be wronged in one’s capacity as a knower, is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human life” (2007). The concepts that Fricker identifies within the overarching concept include “hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice, where testimonial is when someone does not give credibility to a knower based on prejudice, and hermeneutical is when there are not the resources for a group or individual to conceptualize what occurred” (Fricker, 2007; Johnstone & Lee, 2021, p. 381).

Johnstone and Lee (2021) extensively explore Indigenous women’s experiences of epistemic injustice in their article, "Epistemic Injustice and Indigenous Women: Toward Centering Indigeneity in Social Work."They explore how Indigenous peoples’ stories have been continuously seen as not credible, while others are viewed as attention and money seeking (p. 382). This research project on Haudenosaunee women will continuously attempt to uplift Indigenous peoples’ stories, in any format that they come. The Survivors Secretariat (2024) is a group of Mush Hole Survivors who came together to share their stories and provide advocacy for others impacted by the school’s abuse. They talk within the community, at public events, or do interviews with various news outlets (Survivors Secretariat, 2024). There has been a recent uptick in “residential school denialism,” where some people within the Canadian population refuse to acknowledge that residential schools ever existed or caused intense harm (Stefanovich, 2024). With this knowledge, it becomes increasingly valuable to ensure epistemic justice is promoted.

The Sixties Scoop is another era of incredible loss (Hanson, 2009). When the IRS was slowly coming to an end, the Federal government encouraged and enabled an epidemic of violent and unjustified child apprehensions across Indigenous communities (Hanson, 2009). Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and “placed with families outside of the community and culture, with no hope of future reunification” (Pon et al., 2011, p. 386; Wabano Centre, 2022). Social workers had little training and would take Indigenous children at unprecedented rates, with minimal legitimate child welfare concerns existing (Hanson, 2009). Once again, sexual abuse was common when the children moved into foster or adoptive families, but was not acknowledged by those in authority positions (Hanson, 2009). Many of those who experienced sexual abuse would not speak up until years later (Johnstone & Lee, 2021, p. 385). The role of social work in the Sixties Scoop crisis will be explored further in upcoming portions of this literature review.

Although a snapshot picture of the violence Indigenous peoples have had to endure, understanding colonization, gender roles, Christian missionaries, Creation Stories, IRS, and the Sixties Scoop is of utmost importance when discussing sexual violence experienced by Haudenosaunee women.

## **Sexual Violence: The Roots, Impacts, and Healing**

One might believe that sexual violence is only between individuals. However, the roots of sexual violence are embedded within systems of discrimination (Scarsella & Kiehbiel, 2019, p. 3). Kimberle Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality laid the groundwork for understanding how sexual violence disproportionately impacts marginalized bodies (Crenshaw, 1991; Tulane, 2024). For the purpose of this research project, the definition of sexual violence employed is from the Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton and Area (2024), which reads; “sexual violence is any abuse that is sexual in nature (touching, harassment, molestation, rape, coercion etc), it is any act that undermines an individual’s sexual integrity”. A broad definition is being used, as it is up to survivors to define what sexual violence is to them.

Susan Brownmiller’s work in the 1970s also established that the root reason for sexual violence is power and control (Brownmiller, 1975). Brownmiller (1975) explores how men wield power and intimidation over women in the form of sexual violence to exert domination. The book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape,* notably establishes how forces of culture, language, and history all combine to create the horrid acts of rape and sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 3). Since Brownmiller’s book was released in 1975, there have been many critiques of aspects of the work, yet the understanding of control remains. Although steeped with slurs and stereotypes, Brownmiller’s book does recognize how Indigenous people did not experience rape before colonization, and it was the settlers who brought high rates of sexual violence to Turtle Island (1975, pp. 140-152). Brownmiller shares in her chapter on “Indians” that Indigenous women experienced intense rates of violence during colonization, and that the average historian would never record how settler men treated Indigenous women (1975, p. 152).

With Brownmiller’s understanding of power and control being a tool for patriarchy, Crenshaw’s work is crucial to apply as it discusses how social identity and marginalization lead to higher rates of sexual violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Brownmiller, 1975). Crenshaw’s work has been monumental for racialized women, as it has finally given recognition to other aspects of identity such as economic class, gender identity, sexuality, culture, and language (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1467). Crenshaw’s work also sheds light on the complex facets that discourage women from speaking out, stating that further “degradation can occur when one attempts to share their experience” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1467). Additionally, Crenshaw’s work has combated rape myths that consistently place blame on the woman (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1468).

With the establishment of the roots of sexual violence, there is value in exploring the cyclical nature of sexual abuse that can occur in any group or culture. The type of sexual violence that becomes cyclical is often incest and pedophilia, where abuse happens to a child, and the child goes on to abuse a child (Dorais, 2002). Abusers will take into account the vulnerability and will push that vulnerability further (Dorais, 2002, p. 31). As noted by Michael Dorais’ work on sexual abuse, it commonly occurs in four stages:” engagement, abuse, survival, leaving” (2002, p. 47). In 2001, Glasser et al. explored the frequency with which those in childhood would perpetrate sexual abuse in adulthood. Clinical findings indicate that there is significant data to support the belief that those victimized in childhood will continue that trauma (Glasser et al., 2001). This is relevant when considering the high rates of children at residential schools who experienced intense sexual abuse. Residential schools did not provide an environment where children could make sense of or cope with their experience of sexual abuse. Instead, they were sent home once they became of age into the world, having experienced intense sexual and other abuses.

Amy Bombay published groundbreaking work on lateral violence within Indigenous communities (2014). She explores the history of residential schools and the intense and constant abuse that occurred. For this research project, the definition of lateral violence used by Bombay reads that “lateral violence can occur within oppressed societies and include bullying, gossiping, feuding, shaming, and blaming of other members within the same social group” (2014, p. 2). For Indigenous peoples, lateral violence can occur within workplaces, schools, homes, social events, and more. Bombay completed a mixed-methods research project and concluded that students in residential schools endured physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, and sexual abuse, leading to students perpetrating student-on-student abuse (p. 6). Bombay also theorizes that “abuse was common enough to have contributed to a number of unique outcomes, such as a lack of trust and feelings of shame and guilt” (p. 6). Bombay reflects on current-day realities and explores how high rates of violence within residential schools led to an “internalization of normalized violence” (p. 47). This indicates that students who attended residential schools experienced abuse so often that it became a normal aspect of their lives. When sent home, they carried with them a feeling of shame because of their experiences, and a sense that violence was normal (Bombay, 2014, p. 47). Bombay notes that a small number of students left residential schools and continued abusive behaviour within communities (2014, p. 99).

Concludingly, Bombay’s work shows that peer-to-peer abuse and staff abuse have had a direct connection to lateral violence today (2014, p. 7). Johnstone and Lee (2021) also explored how both non-Indigenous and Indigenous men have turned to violence against Indigenous women.

Equally important to the understanding of the roots of violence is understanding the array of impacts it can have on an individual, family, and community. As previously discussed, the roots of sexual violence are much larger than an individual act, and the same can be said for the impact. This research project will continue to define an individual’s journey with sexual violence, and it must be emphasized that there is no ‘normal’ response to sexual violence. Sexual violence can invade and impact every aspect of a person’s life, or only impact parts. Some individuals might experience guilt, shame, difficulty sleeping, avoidance, triggers, hypervigilance, flashbacks, dissociation, suicidal ideation, poor physical health due to stress, and increased substance use (Paquette et al., 2021). The response to sexual violence will vary for everyone, yet it is easy to see how it can impact all facets of someone’s being. Paquette et al. (2021) explore how those who exist within a marginalized identity will experience differing reactions to non-racialized people, and the identity of the perpetrator also influences one’s response.

Sexual violence can have immediate impacts on someone, but it can also impact long-term aspects of a person’s life. These impacts can be seen in social and familial relationships, behaviours, habits, finances, sex life, work, and daily routine (Rape Crisis, 2024). There is no limit to the differing reactions that might arise, but it is vital to note that sexual violence can impact families and communities. Family members might have reactions to sexual violence that include fear, shock, denial, blaming, pity, confusion, despair (Rape Crisis, 2024). The makeup of a family may shift, particularly if there is division, more focus on one person, changing communication, or blaming behaviours (Somerset, 2024). For someone who is the first to hear a disclosure of sexual violence, intense emotional responses are common (Somerset, 2024). Familial and social reactions to sexual violence can “help or hinder someone’s healing journey” (Morrison, 2007, p. 55). For anyone involved, feelings of trust can be shattered (Morrison, 2007, p. 60).

In any community, when news of sexual violence spreads, the reactions can be different but potentially damaging. The definition of a community varies. Some might consider community to be based on geography. Others might think of it as being related to a job, school, or social group. Other definitions believe that it is a group of people with shared interests and experiences (Dathorne & Lawrence, 2024). When sexual violence occurs, those within a community may feel shocked, anger, distrust, motivation towards change, blame, and despair (Dathorne & Lawrence, 2024). It can expose how much a community believes in rape myths and rape culture, depending on how treatment is directed to those involved (The Advocates, 2018). In some communities, sexual violence is hidden away in secret, while in others, some are more open (Rogers & Ali, 2023). Because of the widespread impact, policies, practices, and attitudes must be addressed at a national, regional, and international level (Rogers & Ali, 2023). Many sociological theories address the impact of gender-based and sexual violence at the societal level (Rogers & Ali, 2023). Concludingly, sexual violence has impacts on social spheres, physical health and wellness, and within the larger economy, which indicates how large the impact of sexual violence is (Rogers & Ali, 2023).

The approach to aiding survivors of sexual violence has evolved over time. It is important to establish the different avenues that are taken when assisting those who have experienced sexual violence, as it displays the expansive modalities that exist within social and therapeutic services. Helping those with any emotional or mental ailment is a historical practice that spans across generations. The 20th century witnessed significant advances in helping individuals in clinical and psychological settings (History of Psychotherapy, 2013). The fascination with thoughts and mood is not new, and with an evolution of social understanding came a broadening understanding of assisting those who had experienced sexual violence (Somerville & Gall, 2013).

In Canada, the original law that existed for sexual violence required “proof that a man has sexual intercourse with a woman other than his wife without her consent” (Somerville & Gall, 2013). After 1982, the law changed to include rape, molestation, and sexual assault with a weapon (Somerville & Gall, 2013). Given the delayed legal developments, it is obvious that research and therapeutic approaches also took time to evolve. This is important to note, particularly when considering racialized women, who have rarely had a specific spot in sexual violence research within academia.

As of right now, sexual violence healing in a therapeutic sense includes: “Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Narrative Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT)” (Draucker et al., 2019; Deprince & Gagnon, 2018; Senn et al., 2018). Notably, there has been growing recognition given to the importance of care being trauma informed. Meaning, that the aid given is holistic and takes into consideration physical health, social wellbeing, psychological health, with an evolved understanding of the traumatic impacts that can occur with sexual violence (Deprince & Gagnon, 2018). These various approaches have been studied for their efficacy, but only minimal effort has been placed on how these approaches work with Indigenous women. It is crucial to understand where mainstream therapeutic services currently stand to get a full idea of how a survivor will be helped (Cowan et al., 2020).

## **Skepticism and Distrust of Social Work**

The issue of Indigenous peoples trusting social workers demands attention as it sets the stage for understanding a path forward. As noted by Dr. Bonnie Freeman (2017), many Indigenous communities thrived prior to colonization by assisting each other genuinely, without any interference from social workers (p. 113). It is well documented and explored that social work as a profession has caused decades of harm to Indigenous peoples, mainly through the child welfare system (Pon et al., 2011, p. 73). During the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and even into the current day, social workers often lacked adequate cultural competency training. They instead would “employ race to legitimize exploitation and apprehensions” (Pon et al., 2011, p. 73).

Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2019) demonstrated academic bravery in writing the article, *The Settler Colonialism of Social Work and the Social Work of Settler Colonialism*. The authors argue that social work would not have thrived without colonialism and the continued assimilation of Indigenous peoples (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Early social workers were White settlers who thought the best course of action for Indigenous peoples was assimilation and cultural death. The Canadian State utilized social workers to “lessen the burden that Indigenous people appeared to be to the colonial state” (p. 439).

As mentioned before, Indian Agents were appointed by the Canadian government to govern and control Indigenous communities (NTCR, 2024). As noted by Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong (2019), “the transition of the social welfare roles of the Indian Agent to professional social workers was seamless” (p. 441). When the Indian Act was amended in 1951, social workers gained power. Indigenous child welfare was now in a social worker’s realm of practice (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 440). The continued practice of social workers apprehending Indigenous children unjustifiably displayed a lack of humanity, cultural understanding, and showed a complete disregard for ethical practice.

The Legacy of Hope Foundation was established in 2000, with the goal to share survivor testimonies from the Sixties Scoop and the IRS (2024). Survivors of the Sixties Scoop have shared the turmoil caused by the forcible removal from their home communities, where physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse occurred (Legacy of Hope, 2024; Simard, 2020). There has been a continued discussion surrounding the traumatic loss of identity that occurred because of the Sixties Scoop (Legacy of Hope, 2024). The impacts of the Sixties Scoop are far-reaching, and like the IRS system, would take immense time to share adequately.

Today, many Indigenous parents worry about their children being apprehended by social workers (Steritt & Woodward, 2019). Even a mention of social workers will lead to panic among Indigenous parents. Racism invaded past social workers’ decision making, yet it can be argued that racist stereotyping and binaries persist (Sterrit & Woodward, 2019). Cindy Blackstock is a notable force advocating for change in the child welfare system, continuously exposing the racist acts targeting Indigenous children (2007; Blackstock, 2009).

Pon et al. (2011) also analyse current day realities concerning Indigenous and Black overrepresentation in the child welfare system. The article, *Immediate Response: Addressing Anti-Native and Anti-Black Racism in Child Welfare* argues that the Canadian state is furthering White supremacy in the child welfare system (Pon et al., 2011, p. 390). The article shares the statistic that “there are three times more Indigenous children in the system in comparison to non-Indigenous children” (Pon et al., 2011, p. 386). Pon et al. give recognition to the stereotypes Indigenous mothers grapple with, including the idea that they are unfit and neglectful (p. 392).

Given the history of social work and the profession’s current role in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, it is entirely understandable that distrust exists between Indigenous peoples, notably women and mothers, and social workers (Fortier & Hon-Sing Won, 2019, p. 439). Growing literature in the realm of social work indicates a recognition that social work has a role to play in reconciliation. In fact, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action emphasize the need for social work’s evolution towards culturally centred education and care (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Social work scholar Jennifer Ma notes how social work, and Canada as a nation, must recognize how the long history of colonialism impacts current realities in child welfare, despite “efforts of the state to continually depict racialized and Aboriginal peoples as inferior or deviant” (p. 911).

Many Indigenous social workers have written literature outlining how non-Indigenous social workers can engage with Indigenous populations. Freeman (2017) outlines in a first-year social work textbook how non-Indigenous social workers must approach their work with an understanding of the community they wish to work with, and “look at the wounds experienced over generations of oppression” (2017, p. 112). A non-Indigenous social worker cannot assist a community responsibly unless they take the time to understand the “norms, beliefs, values, and expectations of a community” (DeGrace & McBain, 2019). Indigenous scholars, like DeGrace and McBain (2019), have written about the importance of relationships, and Wilson (2017) discusses how harm will always be inflicted when historical contexts are not recognized.

As continuously stated, historical contexts are central to understanding current day realities. Social work education commonly shares that social work began with Jane Addams and Mary Richmond (McCleary & Simard, 2021, p. 259). McCleary and Simard note that these White women are seen as the beginning forces of social work, despite other cultures having established systems of helping (2021, p. 260). Pon et al. recognize that because of social work beginning with White women, they have become “a part of a master narrative of compassion and care” (2011, p. 393). They are framed as saviours, full of grace and empathy (Pon et al., 2011, p. 393). Social work’s commitment to combating these notions of White supremacy has ebbed and flowed over time. The profession’s dedication to social justice has sometimes been powerful and sometimes been quite weak (Almeida et al., 2019, p. 156).

In combination with Indigenous social workers outlining how to work with Indigenous populations, literature has also been calling for the decolonization of social work (Almeida et al., 2019, p. 156). Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have recognized the need to de-centre Whiteness from the profession (Dennis & Minor, 2019, p. 1472; McCauley & Matheson, 2018). The promotion of Indigenous ways of knowing is crucial, as many social service agencies have continuously “valued the appearance of White civility over an Indigenous person’s need for family” (Dennis & Minor, 2019, p. 1480). In connection to this research project, decolonization is crucial as scholars note that an Indigenous woman’s wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of their family and community; something that can only be achieved with attempts of decolonization (Dennis & Minor, 2019, p. 1481).

## **Haudenosaunee Approaches to Healing**

Six Nations of the Grand River is a large Haudenosaunee community, thirty minutes from Hamilton, Ontario. This Indigenous reservation is now only a small portion of the original allotment that was from mouth to the source and six miles on either side of the Grand River. At the centre of our village is Ohsweken, and it is where Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services is located (Ganohkwasra, 2024). Sandra Montour and Julia Bomberry (2019) share information about the organization in *Holistic Healing: Theories, Practices, and Social Change.* They explain that the Cayuga word *Ganohkwasra* means *love* and that the building of Ganohkwasra was built in the middle of the community to stand as a reminder to fight against violence (p. 356). The organization opened in 1988, after several women in the community recognized the need for a dedicated space to heal from violence (p. 358). The shelter has been operating since 1991. Montour and Bomberry (2019) also noted other programs and services located at Ganohkwasra, including the Youth Lodge, Children’s Counselling, Indigenous Partner Assault Response program, community counselling, and sexual violence healing (Ganohkwasra, 2024). Montour and Bomberry are notable figures in the community, both dedicating their lives to assisting the community holistically and authentically. Their article shares how Ganohkwasra’s vision for care is holistic in nature and is based on Indigenous understandings of life. The organization has committed to looking at the whole person, and they consistently teach traditional teachings. Ganohkwasra recognizes that all people hold the capacity to harm, but that does not define a person. The workers at Ganohkwasra teach “healthy conflict” and promote learning about mental health, communication, life skills, and healthy relationships. Montour and Bomberry share the organization’s expansive usage of various healing techniques, with a specific appreciation given to storytelling. They hold space for tears, laughter, silence, and relationship building. They hold the belief that it is not shameful for a client to know about a practitioner on a human level, and that care can only be enhanced when laughter and joy are incorporated.

Sonhatsi:wa is the first sexual violence healing centre on First Nations’ territory in all of Canada. It is under the umbrella of Ganohkwasra, and it opened in June 2024. Practitioners are Sonhatsi:wa employ approaches like EMDR, psychodrama, traditional teachings, storytelling, and Reiki (Montour & Bomberry, 2019). They recognize that the needs of their clients vary, and their toolbox for care must be developed (Montour & Bomberry, 2019). Within the Six Nations community, there are multiple other counselling practitioners and a developed social service department under the Six Nations Elected Council. As the needs of the community have grown, so have the services within the community.

Despite continued efforts towards collective healing, acts of violence are still occurring on and off the reserve. The community has become seasoned in the act of grieving, indicating the distinct need for further exploration surrounding how Haudenosaunee women heal from sexual violence. This literature review began by exploring how centuries of colonial violence are still impacting Haudenosaunee women today. The complexities of sexual violence were explored, with an emphasis being placed on power and control, identity, and current therapeutic practices being utilized. There was an exploration of social work’s role in harming Indigenous populations, which was rounded out by exploring literature that discusses decolonization. Finally, there was a discussion on how current services are assisting Haudenosaunee women, and the groundbreaking work being done within the community that has rarely been documented to showcase its impressive impact.

# CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

## **Eligibility Criteria**

For this research project, a significant focus is placed upon ensuring that involvement in the project would not cause re-traumatization. Haudenosaunee women as research subjects have rarely held any weight in the realm of research. When research regarding Indigenous women is completed, the focus is on the horrors they have faced. The questions for eligibility were designed to foster inclusivity and the valuing of voices in whatever form they come, while working to ensure that no one is caused unnecessary stress or pain. The screening questions were included on both the Letter of Information and Consent and on a separate Screening Document held by researchers (Appendix A and Appendix C).

The research study aimed to recruit people who identify as women and who would consider themselves to have been in healing from sexual violence for five years. This was done for the protection of the participants, and to also allow for the conversations to be focused on their healing journeys instead of being forced to talk about a traumatic and personal incident. Participants define healing for themselves, but the experience of sexual violence must be historical. Participation will be limited to Indigenous women from Six Nations of the Grand River, status or non-status. Service providers will be from the community and must have experience working with survivors of sexual violence.

Recruitment was done in partnership with community organizations in Six Nations of the Grand River. Notably, Sonhatsi:wa Sexual Violence Healing Centre was a significant resource for recruitment. The staff at Sonhatsi:wa embody the focus of this research study, and it would have been irresponsible not to have their support and involvement (Appendix F). Staff at Sonhatsi:wa circulated emails for recruitment, keeping a knowledge and appreciation for their caseload and staff. My employment at Ganohkwasra was not part of any formal recruitment process; it was secured during my time as a student at McMaster. I took steps to ensure that my employment would not influence or impede my ability to be an efficient researcher and efficient shelter counsellor. All correspondence was conducted via McMaster's email (Appendix E), and any meetings were held in a completely different building. As a researcher, I wanted to promote self-determination in every stage of the research project. Instead of the recruitment being imposing and flashy, I wanted it to be warm, patient, and welcoming (Appendix D & Appendix E).

Screening Questions for Service Providers:

* Do you identify as someone from Six Nations of the Grand River?
* Have you assisted Haudenosaunee women heal from the experience of sexual violence throughout your career?
* Are you a service provider within social services (counsellor, social worker, psychotherapist, etc.,)
* Are you over 18 years of age?
* Are there any potential risks in you participating in this study, that researcher should be aware of? (Current legal involvement, perpetrator violence).
* Do you have any accessibility concerns?

Screening Questions for Survivors:

* Do you identify as a woman from Six Nations of the Grand River?
* Have you been in healing from sexual violence for over five years? Healing can be up to you to identify. Sexual violence is defined as a type of abuse/violence that is sexual in nature, and is done without explicit consent (sexual harassment, sexual assault, etc).
* Are you over 18 years of age?
* Are there any potential risks in you participating in this study, that researcher should be aware of? (Current legal involvement, perpetrator violence).
* Do you have any accessibility concerns?

Once emails were circulated, and participants indicated their interest and eligibility, the Letter of Information and Consent was forwarded to participants to review (Appendix C). Interview times and locations were confirmed over email, and with the assistance of Ganohkwasra. At the beginning of interviews, the Letter of Information and Consent was read to participants and by participants. Participants took a moment to contemplate or ask questions of the form before signing and agreeing to participate in the study.

## **Data Collection: Interview Questions, Approach Used**

As previously mentioned, the research interviews and questions were shaped with an Indigenous feminism perspective, which led to the approach of storytelling to be at the forefront. The questions are open-ended and allow participants to include anything that they view as valuable to their stories. Interviews with a storytelling approach “organize experience in a tellable and understandable format” and create an environment that is welcoming to all perspectives and experiences of the interviewees (Fraser, 2002, p. 227; Kasper & Prior, 2015). Aside from storytelling being a respected data collection approach, it is also the way that Indigenous histories have always been shared (Christensen, 2012, p. 232; Kasper & Prior, 2015). The research project’s entire hope was to be culturally significant and valuable to Indigenous peoples, which means that any approach outside of storytelling would be futile.

## **Service Provider Questions:**

* When working with Ohgohoweh women, what do you think uniquely impacts their experience of sexual violence (i.e., lateral nature of experience, internalized sexism/racism, family, historical contexts, community involvement)?
* In your work with women who have experienced sexual violence, what approaches do you take to support their healing journey?
* When working with survivors of sexual violence, what different approaches do you find effective or not effective? (i.e.. appreciation for the incorporation of culture/tradition, decolonized/Indigenized approaches, efficacy of Westernized approaches like CBT)
* How do you support a survivor in finding a feeling of justice pertaining to the sexual violence they encountered?
* What do you think is important for people to know about Haudenosaunee women?

## **Questions for Survivors:**

* In your personal journey of healing from the experience of sexual violence, what have you found works for you?
* What influenced the approach you took to healing from sexual violence?
* Can you share if you have engaged in an Indigenous or culturally centered approach to healing from sexual violence?
* How does kinship and community engagement assist you in healing from what you experienced with sexual violence?
* Can you share with me what you think in receiving justice from sexual violence could support yourself or others in their healing journey?
* Do you think Haudenosaunee/Indigenous perspectives towards justice could support yourself or others in their healing journey?
* What do you think is important for people to know about Haudenosaunee women?

When the interviews came to a natural endpoint, I provided participants with thank-you notes and gifts of gratitude. Reciprocity and giving thanks are honoured in Haudenosaunee cultural practices and are highly important in situations such as the interview process. Each participant received their gift card, a water bottle, a notepad, tobacco, essential oils, chocolates, and their note of thanks (Appendix G).

**Data Analysis**

For data analysis, the approach of a thematic analysis was chosen for this research study. The simple goal of a thematic analysis was to attempt to find patterns in the participants’ responses (Fugard & Potts, 2019). The researcher transcribed each interview. Once all interviews were completed, the lens of Indigenous feminism was again employed. Indigenous feminism allows for the themes to form with an understanding of the broader sociopolitical contexts at play (Green, 2017). Instead of finding themes that indicate clinical psychological findings, the Indigenous feminism lens puts focus on aspects like sexism, racism, heterosexism, and colonialism. Indigenous feminism also allows for epistemic justice to be promoted, as all answers are valued (Fricker, 2007). A thematic analysis with an Indigenous feminism lens allows flexibility and reflexivity. Fugard and Potts (2019) note that a central benefit of a thematic analysis is that a researcher’s natural intuition and knowledge are central parts of the coding process. Each transcript was studied, and initial codes were noted. After these codes emerged, Indigenous literature will be brought in to make further sense of the data. As stated prior, the approach to data collection was rooted in Indigenous knowledge production, which meant that interviews were meant to be about storytelling. Christensen (2012) brings forth the idea that having interviews with a storytelling approach also allows for the researcher to become their own storyteller when they complete data analysis.

## **Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity**

Self-determination and sovereignty are of utmost importance for Indigenous peoples. With this being a goal of the research project, it is valuable to review confidentiality, informed consent, and participant well-being. Participants’ confidentiality is promoted with this research project, and when requested, their names have been anonymized and randomized. As well, participants could choose to share their name as their journey can be a source of pride. Participants were able to review and approve their transcripts; they were reminded that they can choose to omit any part of the interview from the final research findings. It was also reminded to each participant that stories can be identifiable, and they were encouraged to be vague about specifics.

As a researcher, I intimately realize that emotions will inevitably emerge when discussing Haudenosaunee women’s experiences throughout history. To address this, the interviews were done in an environment that the participants felt comfortable in. As well, there were various grounding tools and comfort items available to the participants (fidget toys, ice, essential oils, traditional medicines). Participants were reminded that they could take breaks whenever they felt they needed to and received a list of mental health and crisis resources (Appendix B). Along with being a researcher, I also hold training and experience as a social worker with crisis intervention skills. A list of resources was available to participants, including crisis lines and counselling services.

Every possible effort for reflexivity was undertaken. I took time to do structured preparation and reflection, and also allowed time for personal debriefing. I used my thesis supervisor as a resource for discussing difficult emotions and providing a space to explore aspects of the research results that I could not. Critical reflexivity includes recognizing my limitations, privileges, and blind spots. It also means knowing that this work is emotional, and my passions cannot overshadow the participants' passions and stories.

# CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

## **Participant Introduction**

As noted, participants were given time to contemplate and ask questions of the informed consent, and were given the self-determination to include their name, or be given an alias. Participants’ safety and comfort are of utmost importance. For some participants, comfort came in sharing their name and taking pride in their journey. For other participants, comfort came in sharing their story and keeping their name between the researcher and participant. No matter the inclusion or exclusion of a name, the findings were rich, powerful, and will have a lasting impact on the researcher and hopefully, the broader community.

*Julia Bomberry, MSW,* is the manager of therapeutic services at Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services and has been working with the agency for almost 30 years. Julia shared in her interview that she is also the Clan Mother of the Turtle Clan, Cayuga Nation. Julia’s professional role as manager entails employee supervision of community counselling, outreach services, and Sonhatsi:wa Sexual Violence Healing Centre. Julia is warm, passionate, driven, and resolute. Above all, Julia embodies what it means to be a genuinely loving helper.

*Samantha Cook* is the succession leader at Sonhatsi:wa Sexual Violence Healing Centre. Samantha dedicates her work to serving survivors of sexual violence, where every day she passionately and thoughtfully develops and enacts care for her clients. She has worked tirelessly to evolve her practice to include a multitude of therapeutic modalities, while developing a dedication to personal wellness and reflexivity. Samantha is a kind, dedicated, and meditative service provider who is creating noticeable change in those she interacts with daily.

*Peggy Logan* is an established helper in the Six Nations community and is currently the supervisor of Sonhatsi:wa Sexual Violence Healing Centre. Peggy provides daily support to staff and survivors, and she ensures that daily activities at Sonhatsi:wa run smoothly and safely. Peggy is a helper to her core, and her help has had a long-reaching impact on the community. She is wise, kind-hearted, and steadfast in self-development and community development.

*Maria* is the fourth interview participant, who shared invaluable anecdotes of her life experiences, including both experiences as a helper in the community and as a survivor. She works to assist children and young adults, providing tangible care to support their current and future wellness. She came to her career choice after reflecting on adverse life experiences. Maria is a mother, scholar, and auntie, and holds extensive love and appreciation for the Six Nations community. Her infectious determination and thoughtfulness are evident in the way she speaks and shares.

*Celina* is the fifth and final participant, who shared that she is an entrepreneur, mother, community member, survivor, and all-around powerhouse. Celina candidly shared her healing journey, exploring how she has found peace and healing, and works to provide that peace for her children. The peace that Celina worked hard to find is evident upon first glance; she exudes balance and amiability. Celina thoughtfully arranges her life to be genuinely supportive of her continued healing.

## **Thematic Analysis Findings**

### Education

In each interview, the theme of education was explored extensively. For service providers, providing education was stated to be one of the first aspects of developing the therapeutic relationship. As well, service providers found that continually educating themselves with a wide range of topics equipped them with a dynamic therapeutic practice. For survivors, education was transformative, leading to realizations and epiphanies that served as catalysts for healing.

As noted in the literature review of this research project, all forms of violence were common in residential schools, foster homes, and day schools (Bombay, 2014). The abuse was so rampant that any form of abuse/violence became normalized within Indigenous communities, including Six Nations. Because of this normalization of violence and overarching systemic oppression, many individuals do not hold an understanding of what violence and abuse entail, including sexual violence. Participants expressed that they felt discomfort and had a sense of violation, but that their vocabulary could not express why that discomfort and violation were felt. This was also mentioned as a potential protective factor. Julia states:

One of the biggest things at the very beginning is naming it. Naming it as sexual assault, naming it as rape, using those words. Know what a sexual violation is… You know, they might have had false beliefs around [the experience], they might say it was inappropriate, but I’m sorry, a rape is not inappropriate, a rape is a rape. People couldn’t find that language, and it just was not talked about. (Julia)

Maria shared that what helped her on her journey was “finding the words to describe what happened, because when you’re sexually abused as a child, a lot of that is stripped from you.” Maria found hope, along with a feeling of pain, when she finally learned about healthy touch, relationships, and intimacy. Both Maria and Celina mentioned a psychoeducational group that completely shifted their understanding of violence from an Indigenous perspective. Celina explained:

That group really gave me a bigger picture of sexual violence and the education and the meaning behind it. I really loved how the facilitators combined culture and education and teachings... What was transformative for me was that the facilitator had said that we’re not the sexual violence, it’s something that happened to you, but you have to kind of separate the two... The education on the different forms of sexual violence [was transformative] too, it could be like behaviours or, something you wouldn’t think of. (Celina)

Samantha noted early on in our interview that education “was a starting point”. She later detailed that even later in the therapeutic journey, education serves as a central aspect. It was shared that it is powerful for survivors to understand things like how sexual trauma can impact and be held in the body. She also mentioned that at any point in the therapeutic journey, she explains the modalities she uses and her reasoning for choosing different pathways, as she wants to promote their feelings of control by keeping them informed about the process. She states:

Even just the education part of it [therapeutic journey] can be really healing and freeing. And when you do get to the part of cathartic releasing parts of it, that is one of the most beautiful pieces of working with people, is you can see them walking lighter. Their coping mechanisms turn into something new, they’re releasing the fear that they had in their soul. (Samantha)

Peggy explained that education is at the forefront of her work. She shared that sexual violence distorts every aspect of someone’s life, and shares with those she is helping how the violation can change the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual parts of someone. Peggy stated that “education shows up all along the way through, from beginning, middle, and even closure”. She expressed that she provides education to help those she works with make balanced and mindful decisions.

Although felt by every community member, it can be difficult to understand the depth of the impacts of intergenerational trauma. At the beginning of the interview with Julia, she shared the value of “service providers and survivors understanding the impacts of residential schools, day schools, Sixties Scoop, displacement of our people from land, and overall colonial violence”. As explained also by Maria, understanding that the sexual violence started with colonization helped her to know to her core that the pain was not hers to carry. She stated that “the pain is not ours, it was pushed down upon us”. Maria continued this exploration later in the interview and shared:

I think what worked for me was acknowledging it, the sexual violence, and a lot of education, learning how it affects our people and was passed down, because I think as Indigenous people, we obviously carry a lot of stuff from what happened to us in the past. (Maria)

Celina echoed this thought in her interview, stating she “is breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma that started centuries ago with colonization”. For Peggy and Samantha, it was shared that space is always given in their practice to understanding how intergenerational trauma and the lasting impacts of colonization play into the lives of themselves and their clients.

### Silence

During the analysis of the interviews, a theme emerged of shattering silence and embracing one’s voice. With service providers (Julia, Samatha, and Peggy), each noted they had a goal of sharing tools that would assist survivors in feeling confident in their voices. With both survivors (Celina and Maria), it was noted that healing was partially gauged by their feelings of freedom, in speaking up, and how comfortable they felt in verbalizing what happened to them.

Julia shared, “we start with building those psychoeducation materials, because survivors didn’t know they could talk about things, didn’t know they could set a boundary.” Later, she shared that she promotes openness in her practice, and she appreciates disagreements, anger, sadness, and combativeness in any form. She explained, “you can even be angry with me if you want, it’s okay. This is a great place to fight fear. To be able to have our feelings and express ourselves and work through it, versus separating and never talking about it again”. She brings forth an approach centred in respect and her constant encouragement for those she works with to “speak their truth”. Later, when discussing the justice system, Julia again brought forth the powerful concept of letting survivors speak their truth and having someone believe them. She shared that, in addition to being believed, survivors can find it powerful when candid language is employed. She does not shy away from using words like rape, incest, sexual assault, and violence. She wants those she works with to feel able to share bluntly, and to hear responses that are truthful, open, respectful, and loving.

For Samantha, a crucial aspect of her practice is honouring that people trust her enough to share parts of their life stories, “especially when safety was breached for them”. Samantha shared throughout the interview how she gets to know clients from their own perspective and encourages all goals to grow from them only. She shared that even when other aspects of the system are failing, “I try my best to assist them on the power they’re going to get from finding their voice and returning from healing their trauma, and I think that empowerment is more than the system could ever give”.

Peggy discussed how, as a manager, she helps her staff feel comfortable to talk openly about violence in an honest, no-nonsense way. She appreciates and sees the importance of service providers showing courage, honesty, and sensibility. She uniquely explores that even for the closure of services, she wants people to know how to do it in a healthy way, as many have not experienced that in their life. Like Julia, Peggy also discussed how she uses the actual word for what happened and does not shy from talking about taboo things like assault and rape. She explains that she eventually will discuss openly with those she is helping about what a healthy sex life looks like, what safe touch is, and how important it is to eventually and positively say words like orgasms and sex.

When looking at survivors’ conceptualizations of finding their voices, the goal of feeling empowered was a consistent finding. For Maria, a way that she saw healing in herself was by sharing her story with others, including counsellors and her partner. She expressed pride that she now feels comfortable in setting boundaries, verbalizing that she “sets boundaries in my own home for my children”. In looking back at her life, Maria reflected upon having a counsellor earlier in her life that she did not feel comfortable with, and who she felt did not authentically hear her. When she switched counsellors and agencies, she found comfort with her service provider as she was listened to. She also found personal development in a psychoeducational group for survivors of sexual violence. Participants in that group shared their stories and listened to one another without judgement. She stated that, “I measure my success by how much counselling I’ve gotten, and how much I’ve grown into the person that I want to be”.

Celina discussed the complexities of healing and finding her voice in a balanced way. She shared that she was proud to find her voice, and in turn, taught her children lessons of love. She stated, “our community has to be vulnerable and confident, if we want to get to collective healing”. One aspect of moving out of silence for Celina was knowing that what happened to her was the truth, to her core. She explained that even when a judge couldn’t see what happened to her as true, she was okay because she knew. Finding her voice was not always literal; it was knowing her truth and listening to her own narrative despite a system that tried to silence her.

### Therapeutic Modalities

For all interviews, there were questions about what therapeutic modalities they found effective. Below is a chart of each participant and the corresponding therapeutic interventions they have found to have a positive impact.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Participant Name** | **Therapeutic Modalities** |
| Julia | * Energetic healing; focusing on the connection between healing, body, mind, spirit. * Reality therapy and choice theory * Trauma informed practice. * Grief work involving traditional teachings and practices. * Psychodramatic bodywork |
| Samantha | * Ascertaining a comprehensive assessment, utilizing a genogram as a tool. * Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) * Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) * Psychodramatic bodywork * Any approach or modality was trauma-informed. |
| Peggy  Peggy *continue* | * EMDR * Reality therapy choice theory * Psychoeducation * Trauma informed practice. * Centering traditional Haudenosaunee teachings constantly. * Psychodramatic bodywork. |
| Maria | * Emotionally focused therapy * Emotional releases * Traditional Haudenosaunee teachings * Trauma-informed psychoeducation * Psychodramatic bodywork. |
| Celina | * Traditional Haudenosaunee teachings   + Great Law of Peace   + Goodmind   + Peacemaker * Harmonic Egg Therapy * Somatic therapy * EMDR |

### Colonization: Intergenerational Trauma and Intergenerational Healing

The theme of intergenerational trauma and healing was consistent; there was a constant noting of how all the pain started centuries ago. Participants brought up residential schools, Sixties Scoop, Day Schools, land-theft, child welfare, and the cycle of violence. It became overwhelmingly evident that in discussing sexual violence, participants could not exclude talking about colonization as the two are interconnected and intertwined. Below are notable quotes and aspects of the interviews.

1. Residential schools, Sixties Scoop, Day Schools
   1. Julia shared, “The whole thought process of ‘don’t talk, don’t tell, don’t trust, don’t feel’ comes from many forms of colonization… residential schools, day schools, displacement, Sixties Scoop, it’s all still having an impact”.
   2. Samantha discussed, “Trauma is passed down all the way from the prevalence of sexual violence in residential schools”.
   3. Maria explained that “we need social workers that know what the community has been through”.
2. Child Welfare
   1. Maria explored her life during the interview, stating that “I was moved a lot, fifteen or sixteen times in my life, my [family member] struggled with drinking and showed me what I don’t want, which sounds sad, but he was dealing with his past traumas”.
   2. Celina and I (researcher) took a break in the interview to discuss our applications to the First Nations Child and Family Services and Jordan’s Principle settlement. Celina shared updates with the researcher, as a community member helping another community member. Child welfare was a casual aspect of the conversation, but had a formative impact on Celina’s life. The discussion of child welfare was not mentioned again, but it established an understanding of an additional adverse experience for Celina that is also shared by many Indigenous women.
3. Breaking the cycle
   1. Julia explored grief, “I remember one training I was going through intense grief. It was ancestral. I was doing the grieving from what my grandma experienced, that passed onto my mother”.
   2. Samantha discussed the history of the cycle, sharing “It’s blood memory. We remember to our cores what our families went through.”
   3. Peggy shared that “both our men and women are capable of healing and ending the hurt”.
   4. Maria has innately engaged in intergenerational healing; she holds those in her family that haven’t embraced her healing journey with empathy but is pushing for the cycle to end with her.
   5. Celina powerfully stated, “I’ve acknowledged that sexual violence happened to me. It happened before me. I am going to squish it. It won’t be leaking into this generation, it’s done now.”

### Therapeutic Relationship

In every interview, it was stressed how it is crucial that the relationship between service provider and survivor is patient, trusting, warm, and understanding of what it means to be a Haudenosaunee woman. All interviews quickly established that the healing work was only possible after the therapeutic relationship was established as strong and healthy. Below are the subthemes that emerged regarding therapeutic relationships, what the subthemes entail, and what precisely participants stated regarding the topic.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Subtheme** | **Description** | **Participant Quote** |
| Trust building, feeling safe as a Haudenosaunee woman. | For all participants, it was identified that trust came from consistency, remaining non-judgemental, and being aware of cultural/social aspects of the community. This trust then allowed for a feeling of safety, which allowed for the healing journey to evolve. | Julia: “It’s the start of safety, building that relationship. You can’t do the work if you don’t build the relationship. Consistency is important.”  Samantha: “To be able to be trusted, to sit with someone and help them release and process their trauma, it’s the biggest honour, to create that safety and build that relationship with them, when it was taken from them.”  Peggy: “Haudenosaunee women helping Haudenosaunee women is the most impactful process because you don’t have to explain certain things, you don’t have to go back and explain history.”  Celina: “I’m so grateful that I can do my healing in the community, and it’s like, if I couldn’t do it here, I’d have to go off-rez and that would be hard, and I would feel different about sexual violence counselling, and not rooted in my community.”  Maria: “I know that there’s things social workers aren’t to do, like accept gift, but as Indigenous peoples we give gifts. For me, creating that relationship with some counselors, a big thing is no judgement. Also, if someone is working with me, and they’re genuine, and maybe sharing a bit about their life, and how they overcame things, that helps me because it makes me feel that they’re not better than me, and I’m not alone.” |
| Boundaries, self-care, and reflexivity as a service provider to Haudenosaunee women | In order to adequately serve Haudenosaunee women, service providers knew that they had to take care of themselves and do their own healing. Survivors noted that their service providers, who were doing personal healing work, helped them with their healing. | Julia: “When you walk through the agency doors, there’s that abuser energy attached to people, so as staff, it’s very important to look at personal wellness plans.” Furthermore, “The therapeutic relationship is less clinical, we still have our boundaries in place, but you’re holding space for them to talk about possibly their worst experience in life, so you need the relationship to be good and have respect, kindness, and compassion.”  Peggy: “I used tough talk, it didn’t work for me… I needed to stay true to who I am in my practice.” Moreover,“If you take care of yourself, learn your warning signs, you won’t burn out, and if you do burn out, you won’t break”.  Samantha: “We can only take someone as far as you’re willing to go yourself… I learn from what helped me in the past.” and I have walked quite a journey, just like a lot of Indigenous women in the field, I feel from my perspective that we need to know where our healthy boundary is, that that is part of the healing.” |
| Feeling valued and seen as Haudenosaunee women. | The final question in the interview was what the participant thought was important for people to know about Haudenosaunee women, and how these viewpoints aided the therapeutic relationship and healing journey. | Julia: “Haudenosaunee women are sacred. From the beginning of time. How can we relearn ways of being to honour that sacredness? Haudenosaunee women embody reciprocal respect and caring.”  Samantha: “Haudenosaunee women are powerful. Wise. Connected. Leaders. We have to unlearn messages that combat these characteristics.”  Peggy: “Haudenosaunee women are wisdom. They’re love (*ganohkwasra*).  Maria: Haudenosaunee women are kind. Holistic. Strong. Patient. People need to ask questions to know the truth.  Celina: “Haudenosaunee women are beautiful. They’re purpose. A gift. Leaders, self-sufficient.” |

# CHAPTER 6: Discussion

## **Summary of Findings**

In the five interviews, five clear themes emerged as central to the discussion of Haudenosaunee women healing from sexual violence. Firstly, a theme of finding and using one’s voice emerged as a main aspect of healing. For survivors, finding comfort in using their voice to communicate their experiences, their boundaries, and their internalized belief that they were not at fault was crucial to their sense of healing and recovery. Service providers felt their approaches were successful when the client voiced how they are approaching their relationships and setting boundaries. The second theme was education, which was described as one of the first steps in the therapeutic process, catalyzing noticeable change. In extension of this, the third theme that emerged was what therapeutic modalities also served as beneficial for survivors’ healing journeys. Findings indicated that successful approaches always included a focus on the interconnectedness of body/mind/spirit, and that all beneficial modalities were Indigenized and centred on traditional teachings. Notable therapeutic modalities included Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), and psychodramatic body work. The fourth theme that emerged in the findings was that therapeutic interventions also had to be grounded in an understanding of how colonization has shifted the community’s makeup. Most therapeutic journeys described by participants included conversations of the Indian Residential School System, the Sixties Scoop, Millennial Scoop, and continued land theft and daily occurrences of racism. Finally, there was always a consistent focus placed on the therapeutic relationship, and the role that it plays in survivors’ feeling that they were in a safe, trustworthy, and respectful environment. These themes indicate how complex and unique the healing journey is for Haudenosaunee women and display that therapeutic interventions must be balanced, holistic, gradual, and consistently rooted in an understanding and appreciation for the population served.

## **Gauging Healing: Moving Past Silence with Education**

This research project’s objective was to explore how Haudenosaunee women find healing from sexual violence, using a lens of Indigenous feminism and promoting an approach of storytelling and self-determination. This research was not undertaken to create a firm to-do list for those working with Haudenosaunee women. Instead, the desire was to promote and share authentically how Haudenosaunee women define feeling, and what barriers and successes they have encountered while attempting to heal in a system wracked with colonial violence and oppression for Indigenous women.

At the beginning of each interview, it was shared with participants that the definition of healing was up to them to determine. It was also under the participants’ discretion how they gauged healing. Every interview participant discussed the concept of feeling confident in one’s voice, whether it was a service provider stating that as a goal, or a survivor feeling pride in reclaiming their voice. All service providers explained that education served as a catalyst to move survivors into feeling confident in speaking for themselves, as they had developed a holistic understanding of sexual violence, colonization, and trauma. For survivors, they shared that they felt they were moving forward from sexual violence when setting boundaries and sharing candidly no longer felt dangerous or impossible.

Education as self-determination is a well-documented therapeutic and social justice tool. It is a developed theory in the realm of education development, and is employed to understand “behaviours, motivations, and motivations” (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For therapists and counsellors who employ psychoeducational frameworks, central aspects include “autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (Davis, 2023). The definition of psychoeducation is shared to be “the process of teaching clients with mental illness and their family members about the nature of the illness, including its etiology, progression, consequences, prognosis, treatment, and alternatives” (Barker, 2003; Sarkhel et al., 2020). Psychoeducation is considered an effective therapeutic approach in both clinical and community settings, as it fosters a mutual understanding of wellness and provides insights that reduce negative symptomatology and relapse (Sarkhel et al., 2020). When understanding the usefulness of education in most therapeutic environments and combining that understanding with knowledge of how sexual violence leads to feelings of powerlessness, it is very logical to understand why service providers will often decide to begin a therapeutic journey with education on sexual violence and trauma.

As noted in various other studies, trauma-informed approaches are widely creating positive results for individuals in counselling (Knipschild et al., 2024). In a meta-analysis completed by researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), it has been determined that psychoeducation on trauma assists in lessening feelings of shame, guilt, and blame, which subsequently lead to more candid communication and a reduction of symptoms associated with sexual violence trauma (Knipschild et al., 2024). Ultimately, existing literature combines with findings from the interviews, where participants discussed that understanding the impacts and intricacies of sexual violence trauma assisted in their healing.

Social work literature on Indigenous perspectives is growing in frequency and power (Middelton-Moz et al., 2023). Many Indigenous social workers have advocated for advancements in the field, including the promotion of the principle that non-Indigenous social workers hold knowledge and consideration prior to engaging in service provision with Indigenous populations. Study participants confirmed this importance. One participant stated that she wants non-Indigenous service providers to learn and ask questions. In an article discussing intergenerational trauma, Middelton-Moz et al., state: “the importance of individuals being seen, felt, and respected for their unique experiences, cultures, beliefs, and adaptation to traumatic experiences is crucial, and a healing relationship [must be] built on attunement, understanding, empowerment, respect and choice” (2023). Ultimately, research findings align with existing literature to conclude that trauma-informed education fosters feelings of power and hope.

Not in mainstream academic articles is the efficacy of Haudenosaunee service providers discussing with clients how intergenerational trauma manifests, and the precise conditions that began the cycle of violence that exists in Haudenosaunee communities. Most information on residential schools is designed to teach non-Indigenous populations about the trauma Indigenous peoples experienced. Although this education is necessary and crucial for collective development, there is also a distinct impact on Indigenous peoples' understanding of the full range of colonization's effects. When there is a collective comprehension of how colonial violence manifests in the everyday lives of Haudenosaunee peoples now, participants state that it is easier for there to be community-wide healing. The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health released two publications that exhibit the desperate need to interrupt intergenerational trauma cycles in Indigenous communities (2015). It is explained that many families are trapped in the cycle of experiencing abuse, and in turn exhibiting abusive behaviour to others, who will later inflict that abuse on others. This cycle creates an increasingly complex crisis of healing both intergenerational trauma and contemporary trauma (Bombay, 2014; National Coalition Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2014). Interview participant Julia noted that, “the oppressors did such a good job at oppressing us, we do the job for them now”. Other service providers discussed that many individuals come to them seeking help for sexual violence, amongst other experiences of trauma. Peggy explained that “the traumas are interwoven and interconnected, they don’t happen in isolation”.

Combining the themes of education on trauma and colonization with the theme of reclaiming one’s voice is a relatively new aspect of exploration. Impacts of intergenerational trauma are taught, but rarely is it taught by Indigenous peoples to Indigenous peoples with the goal of alleviating feelings of guilt and self-blame. This research study explored and found that these facets are all central to the helping process with Haudenosaunee women. Education for Haudenosaunee women includes sexual violence, community history, traditional teachings, and intergenerational trauma impacts. All interview participants made a note that either learning traditional teachings or being reminded of them, in the context of sexual violence, was particularly impactful. Participants also discussed that learning these lessons from an Indigenous woman aided in feelings of hope and comfort, which is a newer finding in the context of sexual violence support services. It is known broadly that Indigenous peoples struggle with trusting social work professionals, so knowing their comfort levels correlate with service providers’ identity and life experiences is no surprise.

## **Determining Therapeutic Approach: Therapeutic Relationships, Traditional Knowledge, Indigenizing Social Work Theories**

As established, this research project’s findings demonstrated the central role the therapeutic relationship plays in enabling survivors to feel their environment is safe and stable. Another aspect of these feelings of safety was the therapeutic modalities that service providers employed, and if they were Indigenized with an understanding of the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous communities.

When analysing the efficacy of therapeutic approaches used with sexual violence survivors, a multitude of theories emerge in the literature. Miles et al. state that “cognitive behavioural theory (CBT), EMDR, Narrative Exposure Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” are used to assist survivors, but that any approach should be trauma-informed (2023, p.1532). In a comprehensive study with a large sample size, researchers noted that participants identified the therapeutic relationship as central to the entire therapeutic process, noting specifically that practitioners who exemplified warmth, empathy, and significant knowledge were key factors indicating positive results (Brown et al., 2022). Looking at literature more focused on Indigenous peoples, Dupuis-Rossi details that trust and rapport building is increasingly complex with Indigenous peoples due to continued fears of social work (2021, pp. 113-116). With an environment of warmth, openness, support, and safety, a therapeutic relationship with Indigenous clients can grow (Dupuis-Rossi, 2021, p. 114). Through interviews for this research project, participants further expanded this knowledge. Celina shared that community history was central to her seeking to begin her healing process, and having a service provider truly understand such a large moment for Celina was beneficial. In combination with various social work texts by researchers such as Monture (2008), DeGrace and McBain (2019), and Freeman (2017), research findings emphasize that an eclectic modality roster and a deep understanding of Haudenosaunee culture and history are crucial.

Service providers indicated that their use of any therapeutic modalities was done in a way that took into consideration body, mind, and spirit. The modalities mentioned include EMDR, Psychodramatic Bodywork, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), and Reality Therapy Choice Theory (RT/CT). All three service providers mentioned the importance of conducting sessions with an understanding of intergenerational trauma, and that it took the survivor significant bravery to trust them with their stories. For service providers, it was felt that “they can only take their client as far as they’ve gone” (Samantha), meaning that unless they had healed from their own adverse experiences, it was difficult to help others on that journey. All service providers shared this sentiment, explaining that helpers first need to help themselves, adding that self-care has become an innate part of their approach as they quickly learned to combat fatigue early in their careers. Survivors noted that when their service provider utilized healthy self-disclosure, they felt the power differences in the therapeutic relationship to be levelled, and they could be authentic and transparent. Instead of the expert being the service provider, survivors shared that they wanted to feel that their counsellor had walked similar steps, so that they could be more of a role model than an expert figure. These conclusions align with established perspectives that peer support interventions are effective in mental wellness programs (Simmons, 2023).

A significant goal of this research study was to determine the extent to which Haudenosaunee traditional teachings and culture influence one’s healing journey. Research findings confirmed that not only is traditional knowledge central to healing, but it also plays a crucial role in shifting and decolonizing a survivor’s mindset. Both survivors shared that teachings such as the Two Row Wampum, The Great Law, Peacemaker, and others have helped them in their search for well-being. The feeling of belongingness that grew from the knowledge of, and belief in, traditional knowledge aided in positive self-perception and de-centred the abuser. Celina used the example of the Two Row to discuss healing, notably in the criminal justice system. She stated:

What row are you going to step into? Are you going to get into that boat [engaging in Western systems of justice and wellness] and be able to come out of it believing in that system? Or are you going to get into your canoe and heal with our people? … Go back to your roots, your teachings, that can be your justice. (Celina)

For the service providers, they described their natural process of Indigenizing new modalities. An article by Dennis and Minor (2019) details how traditional knowledge and the Indigenization of social work practices are a central form of resistance and healing. Notably, their research concludes that “storytelling is one of the important and interwoven Indigenous knowledges that can and should be used to Indigenise social work” (Dennis & Minor, 2019, p. 1488).

## **Limitations and Reflections**

This study sparked numerous valuable conversations on healing, Haudenosaunee women, and traditional teachings. However, one evident limitation is that the study’s sample size is small and focused, which limits the ability to apply its findings to other populations.

Five interviews were conducted, and although each interview was significant in terms of length and topic, the small participant pool means that the findings can only be applied to Haudenosaunee women. This design was intentional, as centering Haudenosaunee women’s voices is a priority, and promoting the dangers of pan-Indigenous approaches was also a key objective. This research is conducted by and for Haudenosaunee women.

Another potential limitation is the researcher's positionality. The researcher and research supervisor are from the community and have both dedicated their careers to uplifting Indigenous perspectives. Interviews began with the primary researcher sharing their passions and discussing their proximity to the research topic. This was done to promote warmth, familiarity, and a sense of safety. This closeness facilitated data analysis conducted with an evolved cultural lens. However, it is possible that the closeness led to personal critiques of Western systems to bleed into the interview process, or could have led to assumptions. The researcher, with the guidance of their supervisor, engaged in critical reflexivity to attempt to stray away from bias.

## **Implications for Practice**

This research study was done by centering and honouring Haudenosaunee women. The findings cannot be explicitly applied to other groups, as the goal was to prevent such occurrences. Despite this objective, social workers can internalize and reflect on findings, applying them accordingly to the populations they work with. Additionally, there are broader concepts of justice, safe therapeutic relationships, and the importance of historical context. Possible implications will be explored further.

### Epistemic Justice (Fricker, 2007)

The work of Fricker (2007) informed this research project, as the study was designed to value Haudenosaunee women’s stories and knowledge, in whatever form they took. Findings showed that the silence of Haudenosaunee survivors of sexual violence stems from a multitude of sources, including: the feeling of guilt/shame that emerges from sexual violence, fear of disbelief, fear of persecution and re-traumatization, and the worry of outside forces judging the Haudenosaunee community and Haudenosaunee beliefs. As noted by two service providers, silence can stem from a desire to protect the community from outside scrutiny, particularly if the violence was lateral. Social workers must appreciate the survivor’s journey and all that it entails. The journey a survivor takes to find comfort and wellness may not include what others consider acceptable. That view should be shattered when working with any survivor, including Haudenosaunee women. Participants in the study shared that anything that aids in survival deserves respect and honour. The notion of an “ideal victim” is outdated and harmful, as explored by numerous scholars and confirmed by this study (Gotell, 2002; Sweet, 2018). Carrying an understanding of historical contexts is also valuable when discussing the appreciation of a Haudenosaunee woman’s story, as prior to colonization, Haudenosaunee women held positions of respect, power, and influence. Returning to this is crucial, and achieving it can be facilitated by concepts of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007).

### Reframing and Re-Imagining the Therapeutic Relationship

Key takeaways from this research study include the findings on therapeutic relationships. Findings indicate that appropriate use of self-disclosure, consistency, warmth, laughter, and traditional practices all combine to create positive results. As previously established, these practices indicate Indigenized approaches. Straying outside the cold, neoliberal constraints of short-term band-aid fixes can benefit many service users. Dupuis-Rossi (2021) explores this sentiment with a fitting quote:

Mainstream therapists, mental health workers, and healthcare providers are encouraged to honour our wisdom, our forms of resistance, and our strength, and to act in solidarity with Indigenous peoples by engaging in a process of decolonizing their therapeutic practices and relationships (p. 115).

To find oneself in the position to engage and give Indigenized help, a service provider must engage in practices of accountability and reflexivity. One participant shared her dedication when she explained that she encouraged a client to bring a formal complaint against her because she did not use an approach authentic to her practice. This type of help leads to evolved and holistic support.

### Internalizing the Community’s Rich History

Individual Indigenous communities all hold unique and profound histories, experiences, hardships, and successes. For this research study, the community was Six Nations. Many knowledge keepers can detail the history of the community from the dawn of time. Broad historical facets of communities are important to be aware of, but so are the contemporary milestones, tragedies, proceedings, and developments. Service providers have a responsibility to attempt to understand what makes a community tick, as community is a core part of many Indigenous peoples, including Haudenosaunee people. Individual service providers who are unaware of community events or unwilling to learn history have led to survivors being forced to endure more emotional labour. Ultimately, to responsibly do social work with Indigenous communities means studying and understanding each community’s history. When this study has occurred, and gaps in knowledge still appear, it is essential that social workers/service providers feel comfortable not being the expert. Situating oneself as malleable is valuable, as it shows the survivor that their voice is incredibly impactful.

Healing is an Act of Community

For the participants in this study, they detailed that they felt an inclination to heal themselves, their families, and the community’s greater well-being. Julia explained that healing and relearning ways of being helped to honour the sacredness of all Haudenosaunee women. Both survivors interviewed hold positions that are in the helping fields. All participants shared their investment in the community, and all explained the concept of collective healing from intergenerational trauma. Healing and learning in an Indigenized way about the impacts of systemic racism, trauma, therapeutic modalities/relationships, lead to Haudenosaunee women reclaiming pride and agency. They learn to heal in a system that does not honour them as sacred, and by doing so, they model for other community members their power, resistance, and sacredness. Remaining community-minded is an aspect of service provision that can easily get overlooked, particularly when working with individuals only on a daily basis. Julia found great comfort in knowing that multiple generations are coming to her agency for counselling. The grandmother, mother, and daughter will continue their healing journeys and subsequently share these experiences within the community.

### Recommendations and Reminders

The final interview question was open-ended and read as: “What do you think people need to know about Haudenosaunee women?” With this question came reminders and recommendations.

1. Attend Indigenous-led trainings and seminars. Ask questions.
2. Whenever possible, stray outside of short-term, clinical, and cold care. Consistency and warmth have a greater impact than one might think.
3. Support social workers in their healing and genuine self-care. Remember the impacts of energy. For Indigenous social workers, remember that you carry blood memory (the grief and trauma from our ancestors).
4. Remember that Haudenosaunee women are **sacred, wise, beautiful, independent, powerful, connected, compassionate, loving, and loved**.

## **Concluding Reflections, Thoughts, and Expressions of Gratitude**

I began this research project with an overwhelming objective: to display the unique, complex, sacred, and beautiful journeys that women from my community have had to undertake. This research study aimed to demonstrate the evolving approaches that service providers are implementing on-reserve. As a social worker, I wanted to personally explore how Haudenosaunee women have found healing in a society that often fosters pain and hopelessness for them. This research study aimed to create space for authentic Haudenosaunee storytelling amid dominant discourses that promote awareness only of Indigenous hardships, rather than their subsequent successes.

Research findings indicate that Haudenosaunee communities are still grappling with the issues instilled by colonization. More strikingly, this study displayed brilliantly holistic, reflective, and empathetic journeys towards healing. Participant testimonies illuminated the distinct need to continue valuing raw and honest stories.

This study analyzed how every Haudenosaunee healing journey will look different but often displays an alluring web of community relations, traditional teachings, and a strong determination to find equilibrium and resurgence for self, family, and community.

It is challenging to find words that adequately express my sincere gratitude to the interview participants and my thesis supervisor. As a researcher, I gained a profound understanding of therapeutic approaches and practice guidelines that will best serve Haudenosaunee women. As a Haudenosaunee woman, the study participants shared knowledge and new perspectives that I will carry with me throughout my life. The survivors displayed an astounding combination of quiet pride, empathy, determination, passion, and tenacity. The service providers exhibited unwavering dedication and a contemplative warmth. All participants possess such a fire within that it is factual they will continue to impart wisdom throughout the community in a positive manner. It is an honour to have been trusted with their stories, and an honour to have the chance to amplify their beauty.

The women in this study (along with many other Haudenosaunee women) prove that healing is resistance, power, and resurgence. Their stories are direct proof of the great sacredness of Haudenosaunee women, who will undoubtedly continue to influence the Six Nations community.

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# Appendices

**Appendix A – Screening Questions**

Do you identify as a woman from Six Nations of the Grand River?

Have you been in healing from sexual violence for over five years? Healing can be up to you to identify. Sexual violence is defined as a type of abuse/violence that is sexual in nature, and is done without explicit consent (sexual harassment, sexual assault, etc).

Are you over 18 years of age?

Are there any potential risks in you participating in this study, that researcher should be aware of? (Current legal involvement, perpetrator violence).

Do you have any accessibility concerns?

**Appendix B**

**Resources for Interview Participants:**

[Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services](https://ganohkwasra.com/) | 519-445-4324

[Qualia Counselling Services](https://qualiacounselling.com/) | 519-445-1929

[Six Nations Child & Family Services Programs](https://www.sixnations.ca/department/social-services)  | 519-445-0230

[Six Nations Mental Health and Addictions](https://www.snhs.ca/mental-wellness/mental-health-and-addictions-services/) | 519-445-2143

[De dwa da dehs nye>s Aboriginal Health Centre](https://aboriginalhealthcentre.com/) 36 King Street, Brantford 519-752-4340

[Brant Region Indigenous Support Centre – BRISC](https://info-bhn.cioc.ca/record/SIM0393) 325 West Street, Unit B110, Brantford, 519-304-7400

[Brantford Native Housing](http://brantfordnativehousing.com/) 318 Colborne Street East, 519-756-2205

[Brantford Regional Indigenous Support Centre](https://ofifc.org/friendship-centre/brantford-regional-indigenous-support-centre/) | 519-304-7400

[Indian Residential School Survivors Society](https://www.irsss.ca/) | 1-800-721-0066

The National Residential School Crisis Line | 1-866-925-4419

[Residential School Resolution Health Support Program](https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1581971225188/1581971250953) | 1-888-301-6426

[Kids Help Phone](https://kidshelpphone.ca/) | *call* 1-800-668-6868 *text* 686868

Six Nations Crisis Services (24/7) | 519-445-2204

Six Nations Crisis Services Toll Free | 1-866-445-2204

Haldimand and Norfolk Women’s Services Crisis Line: 1-800-265-8076

Nova Vita: Domestic Violence / Shelter / Crisis Line: 519-752-1005

Native Women’s Services (Hamilton) - 905-977-0234.

Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton and Area (SACHA) Crisis Line: 905-525-4162

**Appendix C – Consent and Information**

**LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT**

**Haudenosaunee Women’s Experience of Healing from Sexual Violence**

**Student Investigator:** **Faculty Supervisor:**

Name: Melissa Elliott Name: Dr. Bonnie Freeman

Department of **Social Work** Department of Social Work

McMaster University McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

**(905) 525-9140** **(905) 525-9140**

E-mail: [elliom7@mcmaster.ca](mailto:elliom7@mcmaster.ca) E-mail: [freemanb@mcmaster.ca](mailto:freemanb@mcmaster.ca)

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this research is to determine how Haudenosaunee women from Six Nations of the Grand River search for healing from the experience of sexual violence, and what role traditional culture (language, connection to water/land, kinship, community) can play in relieving the pain of sexual violence. This research will locate all findings and analyses with consideration given to the history of Indigenous women across Turtle Island, and the depth of the impact of colonization. Research will include two survivors of sexual violence, and two service-providers from the community.

I am completing this research to satisfy requirements for the Master of Social Work Program, under the supervision of Dr. Bonnie Freeman.

**Procedures involved in the Research:**

* You will be invited to participate in an interview, at the location of your choosing, depending on your comfort level and safety considerations given to both you and the researcher. Interviews can be done over coffee, a meal, during a walk etc.
* The interview will be roughly sixty minutes, with no hard limitations on time. There will only be one interview completed.
* With your permission, notes will be taken. If permissible, audio-recording will supplement the interview. Audio-recording and notes will be used by researcher to support their analyses, audio-recording will not be made available to anyone other than researchers.
* For survivor participants, I will be discussing your experience of therapeutic practices and how you found peace after you had experienced sexual violence. The experience of sexual violence does not need to be discussed, instead the focus is on how you processed the situation afterwards.
* For service providers, I will be discussing therapeutic approaches taken to assist survivors of sexual violence, and how you have come to this approach.
* Interviews will be designed to meet you where you are at, and to ensure that you have the autonomy to lead the conversation in the way that you see fit.
* For survivors, I will ask questions like:
  + In your personal journey of healing from the experience of sexual violence, what have you found works for you?
  + What influenced the approach you took to healing from sexual violence?
  + Can you share if you have engaged in an Indigenous or culturally centered approach to healing from sexual violence?
  + How does kinship and community engagement assist you in healing from what you experienced with sexual violence?
  + Can you share with me what you think in receiving justice from sexual violence could support yourself or others in their healing journey?
  + Do you think Haudenosaunee/Indigenous perspectives towards justice could support yourself or others in their healing journey?
  + What do you think is important for people to know about Haudenosaunee women?
* For service providers, I will ask questions like:
  + When working with Ohgohoweh women, what do you think uniquely impacts their experience of sexual violence (ie. lateral nature of experience, internalized sexism/racism, family, historical contexts, community involvement)?
  + In your work with women who have experienced sexual violence, what approaches do you take to support their healing journey?
  + When working with survivors of sexual violence, what different approaches do you find effective or not effective? (ie. appreciation for the incorporation of culture/tradition, decolonized/Indigenize approaches, efficacy of Westernized approaches like CBT)
  + How do you support a survivor in finding a feeling of justice pertaining to the sexual violence they encountered?
  + What do you think is important for people to know about Haudenosaunee women?

**Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

There are minimal risks associated with this study. Anonymity is promoted. You may feel uncomfortable, anxious, or stress might emerge when discussing the topic of sexual violence, colonization and therapeutic practices. There may be discomfort in discussing how Haudenosaunee women have been experienced throughout history. You do not need to answer and questions that make you feel uncomfortable or wary. I will describe below the steps that I am taking to promote your privacy, safety, and emotional wellbeing.

**Potential Benefits:**

The research can potentially benefit you as it allows an open experience to discuss your experiences as a Haudenosaunee woman. Personal benefits can emerge when breaking down and talking openly about lived experiences. I hope to learn more about how Haudenosaunee women experience healing from sexual violence, and how it varies from non-Indigenous women. I hope that was is learned as a result of this study is that Haudenosaunee women are unique in their resilience, perspectives, and experiences. This study will help combat ideas of a pan-Indigenous approach to therapy and social services. This study can help service providers develop how best to help survivors of sexual violence.

**Incentive/Payment or Reimbursement**

You will receive a $125.00 gift card to a store of your choosing.

**Confidentiality**

Aside from myself your name, age, profession, family will not be shared within research project. Your contact/personal information will be kept in an encrypted document, only accessible to myself. The document with personal information will be password protected. Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

In the published findings of this research, only the information that you approve to be shared, will be shared. Your name will be redacted, unless your wish that it is shared. Pseudonyms will be used, unless specified by you.

Drafts of thesis document will be shared with you prior to submission, and you will be able to determine if you do not wish some information to be included. Included within the research might be quotations, your perspectives, and your feelings surrounding therapeutic practices. Notes, audio-recording and personal information will be stored in an encrypted file, only accessible to myself until January 2025. Once study has been completed, submitted, and published, information will be deleted and destroyed to protect your information.

**Legally Required Disclosure:**

Although I will protect your privacy as outlined above, if the law requires it, I will have to reveal certain personal information (e.g., suspected child abuse).

**Participation and Withdrawal:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your vhoice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdraw from the interview for whatever reason, even after giving consent or part-way through the study or up until August 1st, 2024, when I expect to submit my thesis. If you wish you withdraw, you can tell me your wishes in writing or verbally. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions, you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

**Information about the Study Results:**

I expect to have this study completed by September 2024. You will be provided with drafts prior to submission, if you wish, in case you wish to withdraw or adjust your responses. Please let me know the best way to have this sent to you, as physical or digital copies can be shared.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Melissa Elliott

1280 Main Street West, Kenneth Taylor Hall

[Elliom7@mcmaster.ca](mailto:Elliom7@mcmaster.ca)

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance under project #6962. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

E-mail: [mreb@mcmaster.ca](mailto:mreb@mcmaster.ca)

**Appendix D – Social Media Post & Recruitment Poster**

Poster for Survivors



Poster for Service Providers



**Appendix E – Email Scripts**

**Study Title: Haudenosaunee Women’s Experience of Sexual Violence**

**Recruitment Email Script sent DIRECTLY to Participants**

Email subject line: Haudenosaunee Women’s Experience of Sexual Violence

Hello. I’m Melissa Elliott. I am conducting research about Indigenous women’s experience of healing from sexual violence. This research study is part of my master's studies at McMaster

University’s in Hamilton, Ontario. I’m working under the supervision of Dr. Bonnie Freeman of McMaster’s department of social work.

I’m inviting you to participate in an interview that will take approximately one hour, for which you will receive a 75$ gift card, for a location of your choosing. The study will take place at your chosen location.

To be eligible to participate in this study, you must identify as a woman (cisgender/transgender) and be from Six Nations of the Grand River. You must have historically experienced sexual violence and consider yourself to have been in healing from this experience for five plus years. The screening will be done by Melissa Elliott, who will ask a few questions over the phone or email, depending on your preference.

For the full details of the study, please read the attached Letter of Information. I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please contact:

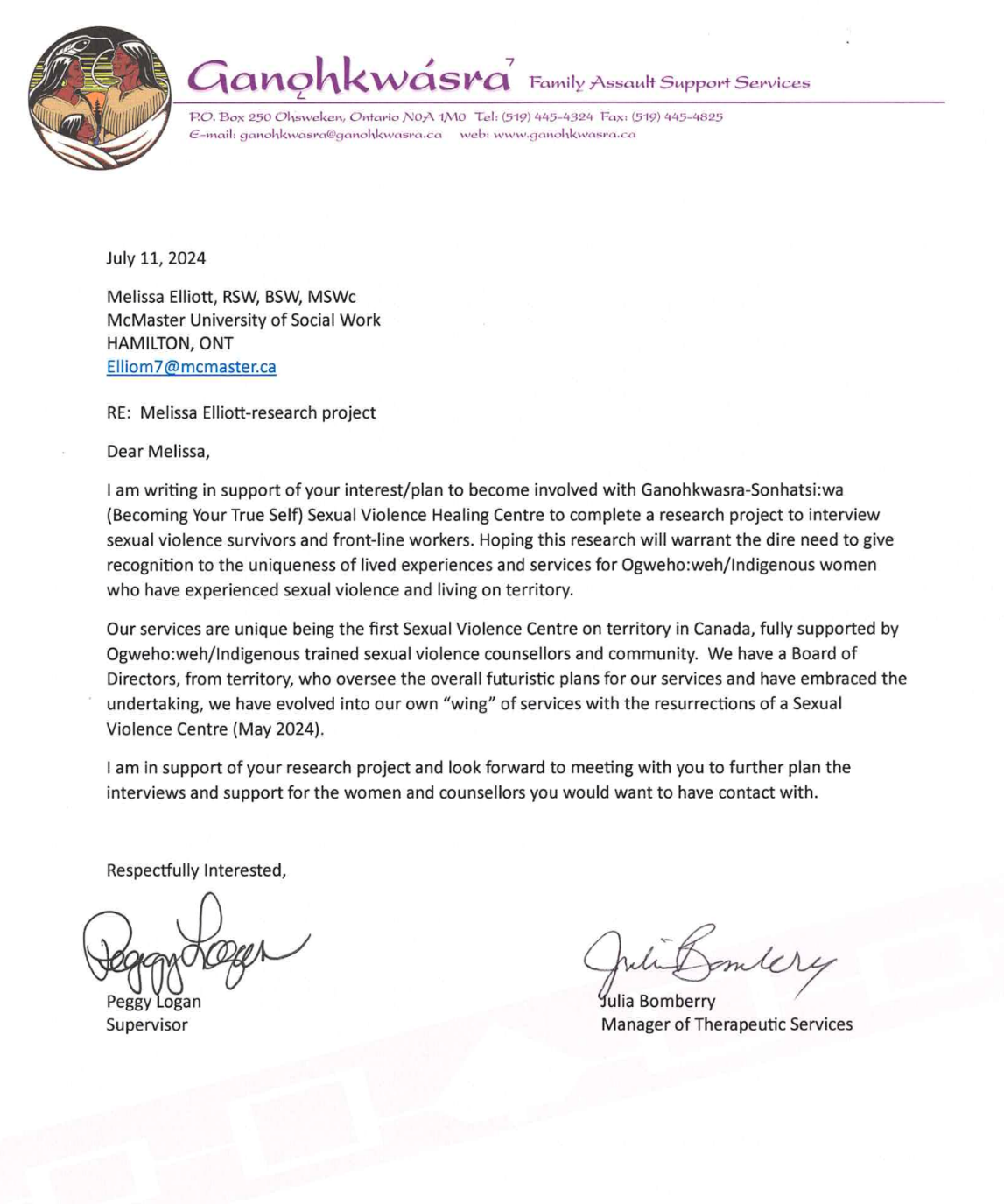
Melissa Elliott Dr. Bonnie Freeman

[Elliom7@mcmaster.ca](mailto:Elliom7@mcmaster.ca) [freemanb@mcmaster.ca](mailto:freemanb@mcmaster.ca)

**This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research**

**Ethics Board (Project #6962).**

**Appendix F – Letter of Support**



**Appendix G – Thank You Letter To Participants**

Haudenosaunee Women’s Experiences of Sexual Violence

Hello participant,

I am thanking you for participating in my research study. I appreciate the time, thought and effort you took. Your participation will assist in establishing research knowledge regarding the best therapeutic practices for Indigenous women’s experiences of sexual violence.

The Six Nations community is one full of beauty and knowledge, and I deeply appreciate your willingness to discuss with me your perspectives and ideas.

Please know your contributions are central to advancing knowledge within this sector, and your voice will have a definite impact on the broader community.

Thank you again, and if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Melissa