

# LEARNING IS HEALING

“When we know better, we do better.”

## SASKATCHEWAN SEXUAL VIOLENCE EDUCATION INITIATIVE

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# CORE SERVICES FRAMEWORK



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# INTRODUCTION

Extensive research and reports developed by Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan (SASS) and the Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR), University of Saskatchewan, have identified a significant need for educational programming that addresses the intersectional forms of sexual violence experienced in Saskatchewan by Indigenous Peoples, newcomers, 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, seniors, and those living with disabilities in rural, urban, and remote contexts. These studies have demonstrated that the complex historical and social dynamics contributing to the continued and disproportionate victimization of targeted groups need to be better understood—and that evidence-based and trauma-informed educational programming (age-friendly and culturally-appropriate) needs to be developed to address the pervasive gaps in knowledge. COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated the conditions that produce vulnerabilities to sexual violence and has verified the need for education development and training at the heart of this initiative. COVID-19 has also added barriers to education and training initiatives. Restrictions, isolation orders, and reduced safe shelter capacities have added to victimization of adults and children, intensifying systemic barriers and the inequities that reinforce biases targeting gender, ability, race, income, immigrants, citizenship status, critical education, and those facing precarious employment.

Training and resources that reflect the realities of violence perpetration in Saskatchewan require ongoing evaluation to ensure the best deployments of sexual violence educational program(s). These recognized needs have led to a partnership involving SASS, the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, and the Community University Institution for Social Research on the Saskatchewan Sexual Violence Education Initiative (SSVE).

A literature review and environmental scan helped to identify the content and context of existing sexual violence education programming, outline present inequities, as well as the extent of current efforts to address the forms of ignorance that maintain them.



**That structural feature of current conditions becomes particularly damaging when Indigenous girls comprise over half of all those enduring sexual exploitation in Western Canada—and a compounding source of mistrust, resulting in ingrained reluctance to report or seek assistance.**

### **Violent Colonial Legacies**

A 2017 Human Rights Watch report documented 64 cases of violent abuse against Indigenous women by police in Saskatchewan, mirroring similar reported cases in BC and Quebec, indicative of how the legacy of colonialism impacts the relationship between Indigenous communities and police services. That structural feature of current conditions becomes particularly damaging when Indigenous girls comprise over half of all those enduring sexual exploitation in Western Canada—and a compounding source of mistrust, resulting in ingrained reluctance to report or seek assistance. The 2015 final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada similarly identifies colonial legacies as a social determinant of health for Indigenous people.

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# DIVERSE TARGETS

## Diverse Targets of Disproportionate Sexual Violence

A 2020 study found that 20.9% of primary survivors of sexual assault within Saskatchewan were living with a disability, while national research has found that members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities report assaults at rates six times higher than their heterosexual counterparts. Many have difficulties accessing services in rural or remote communities with disproportionately high rates of sexual violence. This prevailing condition produces rural and remote environments as underserved spaces, isolated from centralizing service models. When marginalized people experience discrimination, they learn not to seek support, which in turn, keeps documented assaults and related costs low, while unresolved traumas add other kinds of social costs.

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## **The Need for a Common Comprehensive Sexual Health Education Program**

The literature review confirmed that comprehensive curricula in school-based sexual health education programs are associated with both the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of sexual and intimate partner violence. Canada, however, lacks a common comprehensive sexual health education curricular program. While sexual health in education is a component of the national health curriculum, curricular decisions fall under provincial/territorial jurisdictions, frequently leaving them up to individual school boards and even teachers to determine. For example, in Saskatchewan, sexual health education in schools often emphasizes abstinence, long since proven to be ineffective in failing to address consent, a topic crucial to building healthy sexual identities and preventing gender-based violence (GBV). Colonialism itself is based on disregard for consent among those most affected, so the structural links between sexual ignorance, violence, and assimilationist colonialist coercions are easily traced in a province with the second highest provincial rate of sexual violence.

# TARGET BLAMING

## **“Risk Factors” as Target Blaming**

Studies find common cross-provincial risk factors for sexual violence. These include being an Indigenous woman, a woman with a disability, a gender and/or sexually diverse individual, and a worker in the sex trade. Additional risk factors for both victimization and perpetration include early initiation to sexual intercourse, substance use, poverty, and poor education. Those “risk factors” focus on targeted identities without engaging the structures that produce them, indicating complicity of such constructions with the prevailing colonialist order. Because the co-occurring nature of many of these “risk” factors reflect prevailing inequities, decolonizing sexual violence education that adopts a reparative approach, will recognize the specificity of diverse needs and social realities, as well as the uniquely situated knowledges emerging from participating communities about the ways current power systems produce and ascribe risks.





## Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both existing inequities and the asymmetric effects of the pandemic itself on marginalized communities with increased GBV rates and increasing recognition of “shadow pandemics” such as violence against women predicated upon contributing forms of isolation, technology deficits, and food insecurity (Alhassan et al., 2021; Doll et al., 2022). As early as April 2020, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, was warning that the protective measures in place, including lockdowns and sheltering at home, were bringing “another deadly danger” in the form of violence against women that costs globally an estimated \$1.5 trillion USD. A 2020 UN Women rapid assessment found data deficits underestimating the scale of the GBV problem, but found helplines and hotlines to be important resources: 80% of reporting countries noted increased calls and particular discrimination targeting older women and those with disabilities. There was also decreased access to services (legal, health, and social) with providers overextended and under-resourced to provide “essential services.” While one in two women reporting direct experience or knowing someone who had experienced violence since COVID-19, a 2021 UN Women report underlined asymmetric effects impacting: younger women (48% of those between 18 and 49); 50% of women living with children; 52% of unemployed women; 43% employed women; 44% of women living in rural areas. In the face of the shadow pandemic, the Canadian Women’s Foundation called for shockproofing communities by filling gaps in essential GBV services and ensuring adequate tools to address intersectional forms of GBV.

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# SEXUAL ASSAULT MYTHS

## Sexual Assault Myths

A common myth about sexual assault is that in instances of ‘real rape’ the victim will disclose immediately, with delays in disclosure often leading to survivors being perceived as perpetrators of false allegations. Indeed, the #MeToo movement saw backlash in the form of public concern about men being falsely accused of rape despite the statistical rarity (likely only 3%) of fabricated assaults. While social media may have amplified the voices of those calling survivors liars, it did not create the circumstances in which survivors are forced to decide whether and when to disclose; it is simply a vehicle for old ideas about worthy and unworthy victims. The persistence of these ideas makes it all the more vital that educators provide more accurate and accountable frameworks for understanding sexual violence.

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## **Intersectionalities and Programming**

At present, there is minimal literature using a consciously intersectional lens to evaluate existing educational interventions, as well as an unfortunate dearth of consciously intersectional programming to address sexual violence. Current responses to sexual violence tend to assume equivalence across demographics, leading to both blind spots and discrimination. First Responder to Sexual Assault and Abuse Training™, for example, while increasing professional sensitivities to the lived impacts of sexual assaults and their disclosures, may fail to recognize how widely sexual violence permeates all demographics, thereby drawing upon triggering scenarios or missing opportunities to engage the ways specific communities experience sexual violence. Because standardization excludes, distinguishing factors and features of participant learners need to be considered prior to the delivery of sexual violence education in diverse settings.

## Survey Findings

A total of 143 diverse respondents completed the survey portion of this study. When asked to disclose which supported language they would prefer when accessing educational tools, 78.2% indicated English, 3.5% preferred Cree, while others indicated French, Spanish, Urdu, Michif, Dene, Arabic, German, Polish, or Tagalog. Providing materials in preferred languages is a substantive move toward decolonization. Respondents felt programming was difficult to find or access, limited in rural areas of Saskatchewan, and not readily available for youth. As far as time commitment was concerned, 39.44% of respondents favoured programming segments of about four hours.

A majority (89.2%) of participants felt that they would be comfortable with learning on virtual platforms. Many participants liked the anonymity of an online platform, especially for people in smaller communities. Online formats could also help protect from COVID-19 or other infectious diseases, while allowing access for those without the capacity to travel. Older adults are among those who may not be as comfortable using online platforms; in-person formats may be better able to hold participants accountable for their engagements with the materials and each other.

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Participants were also asked to describe any addition to current programming they would value. Some common themes requested were: education (about consent, the meaning or continuum of sexual assault experiences, trauma-informed care, targeted education for women, for men, for children, or specific subcultures); work (workplace harassment, safe workplaces, emotional labour); consent (teaching ongoing consent as a decolonizing practice); violence (sexual violence, intimate partner violence—the differences and links); safety (dating safety, internet safety, financial safety); setting boundaries (including safety in interpersonal and group settings); healthy relationships; communities (specific resources for Indigenous and other minoritized communities); survivor-specific education (safer disclosures, survivor training, PTSD responses, bystander intervention, sexual assault first aid); and age-appropriate education through the school system.

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## Interview Findings

A total of 21 interviews (at least one from each geographical subregion representing professionals from education, victim services, community supports, and crisis intervention) were prompted with 10 questions. Participants indicated that selective programming was available, but not accessible to every community (none were reported in some rural and remote communities). Specific programming on grooming and/or sexual assault, abuse, and violence was typically offered off the sides of people's desks. Some interviewees noted that their organizations acted primarily as a liaison between clients and service organizations, but that often, these referrals bounced back to them as "boomerang referrals."

When asked about any other sexual violence educational programs they would like to access, participants listed McGill University's programming as a model that could be adapted to the Prairie context. Programming specifically for men, youth, perpetrators/offenders, bystanders, children in foster care, children in schools, people who are incarcerated, people with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous peoples, people of colour and newcomers would be required, ensuring specific and culturally relevant approaches. While many people and communities do not feel safe around police or other service providers who mandate law, many rural communities (i.e., north of Prince Albert) do not have local police stations, and if they do, the level of community respect varies from community to community.

Programming needs to be fully and freely accessible to people with mental and/or physical disabilities, people who speak languages other than English, those who live and work outside of academe and other professions (avoiding jargon), people who have diverse preferred methods of learning, and must be facilitated by members from and familiar with their own communities. Interviewees stressed the importance of education about these topics: how to become an ally to victims rather than a bystander to sexual violence; how sexual violence does not necessarily occur exclusively in intimate relationships and can range from derogatory comments and/or inappropriate touching through to harassment and assault; the importance and relevance of culturally accurate, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed approaches; how to recognize signs of abuse; what sexual abuse is and how to respond appropriately to disclosures; the legalities and procedures surrounding disclosures; how service funding, priorities, and policy affect capacities for service provision; how to safely escape

a dangerous situation; internet safety; dating apps; human trafficking; sexual orientation; GBV; intersectionality, the colonial roots of sexual violence, and the western lenses that are commonly applied to sexual violence education; STIs; and safe sex.

Many indicated that programming should be shorter for children and youth and provided as part of their public education wherever possible, with alternative longer certificate courses provided for professionals. Interviewees also stressed the importance of holding ongoing programming sessions, rather than occasional one-off presentations that support sensationalism.

To increase program impact, interviewees suggested diverse delivery formats/multi-modal approaches for up-to-date, evidence based, and trauma-informed information; including Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+ and newcomer perspectives together with insights from people with disabilities; a library of multi-media formats rather than handouts that has the potential to be lost; offering gentle role-playing exercises (though some feared these could be trivializing, triggering, or retraumatizing) along with “choose your own adventure” formats to help participants understand links between actions and reactions; sharing statistics sparingly and leaving space for stories; building a toolkit; developing interpersonal connections with program attendees; providing opportunities for follow-up and feedback; having on-site counselling and debriefing after every session. Some warned about assuming literacies and pointed to Str8 Up programming as a model. Interviewees were uncertain about online-only programming and affirmed the importance of respecting specific community needs. Interviewees noted that English resources also need to be edited for readability for people with lower English proficiency levels. Animated vignettes might be helpful in this regard. Including community members in document creation could help ensure widest possible accessibility. All interviewees recommended programming that is flexible to and respectful of the needs of nonverbal people, as well as people with vision and/or hearing loss.

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# FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

## Focus Group Findings

Ten face-to-face focus groups (with 5-18 participants each) were conducted in person and virtually across the province. A total of 61 of the focus group participants were service providers, primarily from member and collaborating agencies across Saskatchewan. Mutual Respect Agreements were elicited from each group, with an emphasis on the primary conditions necessary for providing an educational program based on respectful care for self and others. Professional and Culturally Safe Approaches engaged participants in discussions of the ways professionals might interact with each other to maximize program efficiency and mutual efforts to support participants from diverse ethno-cultures. The third prompt on Program Delivery, highlighted the multiple contexts in which sexual violence education programs might be delivered, recognizing that the most effective, creative, affordable, and accessible methods might vary considerably depending on the geographic, social, cultural, and professional locations of participants, as well as their ages and stages of familiarity with the issues. By asking about the Impacts of COVID-19, the research team sought to explore how the provision of sexual violence education services was affected by the pandemic. The prompt on Existing Programs among service providers was designed to avoid duplication of services and to identify educational gaps and ways to fill them effectively. A theme of Sensitivity to Others appeared 73 times across all participating regions, pinpointing the need for ‘mutual respect agreements’ at every stage of program delivery, establishing and maintaining ongoing informed consent as a cornerstone of responsible sexual violence education. Sensitivity to Others includes “avoiding service silos” by working for more effective service collaboration through sexual violence education training.





### ***Trauma-Informed Care***

Trauma-Informed Care appeared a total of 43 times when participants discussed mutual respect and professional and culturally safe approaches in offering sexual violence programming. Since sexual violence experiences vary widely, service providers must learn how to build trustworthy relationships that are simultaneously open to people's needs, while acknowledging that "healing looks different for everyone."

### ***The Impact of a Global Health Crisis on Service Delivery***

COVID-19 disrupted sexual violence educational services provision across Saskatchewan, increasing mental health impacts and decreasing access for those already living in a state of emergency. The pandemic affected some social groups more profoundly, including but not limited to northern Indigenous and queer communities, people with disabilities, the elderly, children, and women. Many vulnerable women and children, for example, had to stay with their perpetrators, which increased their exposures to violence during lockdowns. Seniors received limited family support, which put more strain on them and their care workers. Many participants expressed mistrust of governmental approaches to service provision that fail to consider or meet the needs of vulnerable people.

### ***Community Co-Biographies***

Like individuals, communities experience and contain life-cycles that can help to frame an adaptable shared program for sexual violence education. When participants across communities were asked to consider the needs of preschool, primary, secondary, post-secondary, employment, and retirement life stages, together with the needs of specific minoritized groups, they produced profiles of needs and expectations that helped the team to construct a customizable sexual violence educational framework, a key goal of this project.

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## *“Learning is Healing”*

Service providers were, for the most part, excited at the prospect of being able to access shared training and materials for sexual violence education, without being required to produce them, ad hoc, off the sides of their busy desks. Consistency of messaging, combined with the flexibility to meet the specific needs of their catchment communities, were seen as desirable features of the emerging sexual violence educational framework. However, several participants expressed trepidation at the increased disclosures that could result. Because knowledge about and meaningful responses to sexual violence are systematically suppressed through structural barriers to disclosures and neglect of underserved populations in Saskatchewan, this remains a very real possibility.

Once the training and materials are available, participants agreed that it would be wise to ensure that SASS has one or two designated full-time sexual violence education facilitators who can offer train-the-trainer and on-site delivery of requested programming in cooperation with a cadre of full-time designated facilitators working with service provider organizations and representing the needs of minoritized groups, as appropriate to their communities. Focus groups insisted upon the value of collaborative planning discussions, engaging trauma-informed, preparatory steps respectful of local protocols and processes. This consideration includes engaging people in the languages in which they live, and ensuring that program providers are funded to offer translations and well-trained non-English language speakers, including sign-language, as necessary.

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# STATE VIOLENCE

<b>NUMBER OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS</b>	
<b>Surveys</b>	143
<b>Key Informant Interviews</b>	21
<b>Focus Group Participants</b>	64
<b>TOTAL</b>	228

## **State Violence Requires Decolonization and Reconciliation**

Because our nation state has been founded on structural violence targeting Indigenous and other communities, changing historically produced structures of sexual violence will require deep commitments by all parties involved. Stronger, decolonizing healing processes are called for on all sides. The aspiration to teach healing through kindness not only requires recognition of critical knowledges emerging from diverse communities; it also recognizes that idealized claims from the past and geographical inequities in the present, have facilitated public ignorance of shared complicities in cultures of sexual perpetration.

## **Collaborating with Community**

The gendered impacts of COVID-19 have only reaffirmed the need for an evidence-based, trauma-informed program engaging people from all walks of life in sexual violence education designed to create informed, supportive communities. Ongoing access to an evolving provincial sexual violence education framework ensures contextually sensitive accountabilities, continuity of primary messaging across participant groups, and quality control that empowers sensitive engagements with the issues across diverse platforms and contexts for information dissemination, resource sharing, and skill building.

The gendered impacts of large-scale stressors, like pandemics and the climate disasters of which they are but a symptom, only exacerbate existing asymmetric impacts on marginalized communities—and reproduce prevailing forms of structural ignorance and conditioned refusals to care about those lived effects. While targeted groups experience the deepest harms, the cultivation of callousness among the privileged and the downtrodden is an enduring form of self- and mutual harm that diminishes the humanity of all parties complicit with or directly involved in the reproduction of violence.

Shockproofing communities from structural violence and its consequences requires the repair and reconstruction of relational capacities that refuse false exceptionalisms and affirm the lasting value of mutual flourishing. All participants clearly recognize the need for decolonizing, equity-invested processes, moving toward deeper processes of inclusion and the enlightened mutual interest that supports sustainable communities and economies. Externalizing the costs of aggression into the lives of the marginalized diminishes everyone.



# FRAMING NEXT STEPS

## **Framing Next Steps**

This project has produced a solid sexual violence education framework for critical development with a team of diversely skilled and community-engaged program experts. Our goal now is to pilot an initial core group of modules, to establish a group of project champions, and secure stable funding for SASS member-organizations to hire locally grounded facilitators who can work with a SASS program coordinator, modelling the very practices of collaboration and connection across diverse social locations that this project endorses.

A unique feature of the program is its investment in up-front co-development of community-engaged workshops, drawing on both the available modules and local expertise about community needs. As such, the sexual violence education framework is itself a living program designed to establish and support networks of mutual care and constructive action to prevent and heal the harms produced by sexual violence across our province.

# THANK YOU

## **Our thanks**

On behalf of the Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan and the Community University Institute for Social Research, we want to thank all 228 participants across 18 Saskatchewan communities that engaged in the study titled: *Preventing and Addressing Sexual Violence and the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 through Education and Awareness*.

We realize that participating in this study was time consuming and may have asked a lot of you. We value the time you committed to our research efforts. Your contribution has supported us in embarking on a path to create an evidence-based, trauma-informed, and intersectional sexual violence education program(s) for the province.





# STAY CONNECTED

**If you wish to stay connected and learn more about the program in the future, we invite you to visit our website at [sassk.ca](http://sassk.ca).**



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