



MWIA CASE STUDIES

CHILDREN AT SERIOUS RISK OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Case 16: Yvonne

Objective

- To illustrate an all too common scenario of domestic violence and sexual violence involving First Nations people in Canada

Narrative Case

** At the end of the case study you can find “Learning points” related to information presented in the narrative case, denoted by numbers in square brackets.*

Yvonne was a 15-year-old First Nations teenager from the Niiska nation in the province of British Columbia in Canada. She was born on a First Nations reserve where she was raised in a family where violence was the norm. [1] Her mother and father married at 16 years of age and had six living children and several miscarriages. [2] Her mother was an alcoholic and found it difficult to cope with the duties of motherhood and being a housewife—she also had tremendous guilt as two of her children had been diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome and were extremely difficult to handle. Her father was a labourer and was often away from home working in the oil and gas industry in other parts of the province. When he did come home, he introduced his wife to cocaine, a habit that he had acquired while away. [3] As soon as her parents were together there were episodes of verbal abuse often followed by her father beating her mother. [4]

As the oldest of six children, Yvonne often took on the responsibility for her younger siblings. [5] She frequently had to miss school to look after the house and her brothers and sisters.

At age 14 years, her best friend Brenda urged Yvonne to move with her to Vancouver. Brenda’s older sister said she could get them a similar job if they came down and they could share her accommodation until they had

money of their own. It was hard for Yvonne to tell her mother that she was going to leave, but she felt so hopeless and thought this would be a chance to get away from her present life, which was so miserable. [6]

Soon after arriving in Vancouver, Yvonne and Brenda found that things were not as rosy as Brenda’s sister had promised. The sister’s accommodation consisted of a room with a single bed and a hot plate in a converted old hotel in the Downtown Eastside that the government had provided for those in dire need. The sister’s waitressing job had ended when she repeatedly missed work due to being hung over from using drugs and alcohol the night before. Brenda’s sister had started working for a pimp who supplied her with drugs. [7] Yvonne and Brenda could not find work and were therefore unable to afford to leave the sister’s accommodation. The pimp soon had them working for him as well.

One day Yvonne decided that she must leave and return home, despite all the dangers in doing so. She did not have the bus fare so was planning to hitchhike back home. She was never seen again. Her picture appears on the list of Missing Women—Prostitutes Kidnapped and Presumed Dead while hitchhiking along the Highway of Tears. [8]

Learning Points

- [1] Research indicates that males exposed to domestic violence as children are more likely to engage in domestic violence as adults; similarly, females are more likely to be victims.
- [2] Girls who marry before 18 years are more likely to experience domestic violence than their peers who marry later. Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression.
- [3] Women who have been abused are fifteen times more likely to abuse alcohol and nine times more likely to abuse drugs than women who have not been abused.
- [4] This is a typical pattern in Domestic Violence: alcohol and/or drug abuse leads to fighting and then reconciliation. In many cultures a woman had little option but to endure the situation since leaving the man may make her more stigmatized or vulnerable or she may have no economic support without him.
- [5] Female children especially become 'parentified', taking on the role of 'little mother' in the household. This pattern of caring for others – no matter how dysfunctional or even abusive they are - becomes entrenched and is repeated in adult life. Generally it is reinforced by cultural prescriptions of appropriate female roles and behaviours.
- [6] Most people with this profile are running away from impoverished and/or neglectful and/or abusive families. They are impulsive and aggressive – they have a fragile sense of self worth and cultural mores of masculinity may dictate that they not acknowledge this fragility but rather that they express aggressive and challenging behaviours.
- [7] Adolescent girls who have been abused and neglected are easily attracted to a man who seems able to take care of them and offer protection. There was also the social imperative that she be attached to a man – in most cultures this is necessary to provide a woman with status and with 'protection'. In some cultures a woman has no social and/or economic option but to remain with her male partner.
- [8] First Nations women disappear while hitchhiking along the Highway of Tears and are never found again. The communities along the highway share a situation of colonization resulting in experiences of poverty, violence, cultural genocide, residential school impacts, addictions and displacement from land. In 2006 there was a Symposium to raise public awareness and create a call for action. To see the full Highway of Tears Symposium Recommendations Report please [click here](#).

Background information on domestic violence

Child marriage directly threatens the health and well-being of girls: complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the main cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years in developing countries. Girls aged 15 to 20 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as those in their 20s, and girls under the age of 15 are five times as likely to die.

Women who have been abused are fifteen times more likely to abuse alcohol and nine times more likely to abuse drugs than women who have not been abused. The American Department of Justice, in 2002, found that 36% of victims in domestic violence programs also had substance abuse problems.

In a report from Statistics Canada on violent victimisation of Aboriginal women in 2009, 15% of Aboriginal women reported being a victim of spousal violence in the preceding five years compared with 6% of non-Aboriginal women, and 59% were more likely to report injury than the 41% of non-Aboriginal women.

From 1989 to 2006 nine young women went missing or were found murdered along the 724 kilometre length of highway 16 – now commonly referred to as the Highway of Tears. All but one of these victims were Aboriginal women.

First Nations women are overrepresented in prostitution, with an especially high number of Canadian youth in prostitution from First Nations.

Useful Resources

- Oppal, W. T. (2012). *Forsaken, The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry*. Retrieved from: <http://www.missingwomeninquiry.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Forsaken-ES-web-RGB.pdf>
- Carrier Sekani Family Services. (n.d.). Highway of Tears, Preventing Violence Against Women [website]. Retrieved from: <https://www.highwayoftears.org/about-us/highway-of-tears>
- The Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, Carrier Sekani Family Services, Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment and Training Association & Prince George Native Friendship Center. (2006). *Highway of Tears Symposium Recommendations Report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.highwayoftears.org/uploads/Highway%20of%20Tears%20Symposium%20Recommendations%20Report%20-%20January%202013.pdf>