



Centering Community-Led Indigenous Gender Sovereignty

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ACTION-RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Kinship Rising is an Indigenous community partnership project that offers urgently needed action research led by Indigenous youth and communities impacted by colonial histories of gendered and sexualized violence. Working with hundreds of Indigenous youth, practitioners, Elders, and knowledge keepers across diverse rural and urban Indigenous communities in western Canada, our project engages land- and arts-based practices, intergenerational mentoring, and community leadership to recenter Indigenous knowledges of gender and sexual wellbeing and sovereignty.

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Our circle truly rises with each other in their compassion and care for one another. I have such gratitude to belong to such a transformative group working towards Indigenous resurgence and honoring dignity. Being witness to people's revelations and resurgence is such an honor. It reminds me how we have strength in community. (Chantal Adams, Haida Nation, Kinship Rising student facilitator)

Canada, like other Western countries such as Australia and the United States that were colonized by European empires, is a settler state, meaning that EuroWestern colonial rule was and continues to be forcefully imposed on Indigenous homelands, communities, and governance systems (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Like other white settler countries, Canada has a shameful record of violence targeting Indigenous people. Colonial policies have trapped generations of Indigenous children in residential schools, hospitals, and child welfare institutions; criminalized and incarcerated Indigenous people through racist legal systems and law enforcement practices; chronically underfunded essential services like health, housing, and education; subverted sacred Indigenous gender and kinship teachings; and forcefully removed Indigenous nations from their homelands to benefit colonial expansion (Greenwood & deLeeuw, 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit¹ people have been particular targets of violence (Anaya, 2013; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG], 2019). In 2019, the federal government released the findings of its National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which investigated root causes of the exploitation and murder of thousands of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people, who continue to face the highest rates of gendered and sexualized violence in Canada, including trafficking, sexual exploitation, survival sex work, and intimate partner violence (Anaya, 2013; Dhillon, 2015). The report found that these groups have always been the target of “deliberate race, identity and gender-based genocide” (MMIWG, 2019, p. 5).

Kinship Rising is a community partnership research project that offers urgently needed research-based actions led by Indigenous youth and communities most impacted by colonial gendered and sexualized violence. Over the past eight years, Kinship Rising (formerly called Sisters Rising) has had the great honor of working with hundreds of youth, practitioners, Elders, and knowledge keepers across diverse rural and urban Indigenous communities in western Canada to respond to disproportionate rates of violence. Our workshops engage Indigenous youth and communities in arts- and land-based research and practices that support Indigenous gender well-being and promote intersecting

land and gender sovereignty. Our intergenerational and intersectoral partnership model involves ten First Nations community partners and agencies as well as Indigenous researchers and students from the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care, a program that trains children, youth, and family frontline practitioners and is located on the unceded homelands of the Lekwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ First Nations.

Across our partner communities, Kinship Rising youth participants have told us that white, mainstream violence prevention frameworks do not speak to their histories and realities. They tell us they urgently need productive alternatives to common depictions of Indigenous youth as “walking risk factors” who will inevitably be targeted for violence and further policed and criminalized, yet will receive few preventive and supportive services—let alone culturally relevant ones—while also being largely excluded from research on gender-based violence.

This call to action forms the impetus behind the Kinship Rising research partnership model. In this paper, we outline how we collaborate with Indigenous communities to mobilize land- and water-based research on gender and sexual well-being to disrupt colonial legacies that objectify and dehumanize young Indigenous people and their worldviews. Finally, we share key learning and challenges from our long-standing partnerships and community networks, and from our history of collectively promoting Indigenous, community-led, land- and water-based research approaches.

RECONNECTING BODY AND LAND SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH COMMUNITY- LED RESEARCH

We know that research and communities alone cannot redress the damaging impacts of pervasive colonial policies, sharp structural inequities, and racialized poverty that fuel high rates of gendered violence. Nonetheless, culturally and politically appropriate community-led services can mobilize Indigenous research capacity and knowledge sovereignty (de Finney et al., 2020; Saramo, 2016). Our research findings highlight the vital benefit of youth- and community-created visual and land-based methods to contest enduring colonial violence and recenter Indigenous dignity and leadership. Our research questions, methods, and theoretical framework follow Indigenous, participatory, land-based, and community-led methodologies (e.g., Absolon, 2011; Claxton & de France, 2018; Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2010). Several questions guide our work: What impact do colonial policies and practices have on gender and sexual violence experienced by Indigenous youth of all genders across diverse urban and rural communities? How can Indigenous-specific knowledges and practices of gender and sexual well-being be mobilized in violence prevention research,

practice, and policy? How can Indigenous knowledges and art creation be respectfully documented and effectively translated to other Indigenous communities and to researchers, policymakers, frontline service providers (including in postsecondary training), and the public?

Each of our ten Indigenous partners is located in a distinct region in western Canada with a diverse population, so the needs and priorities of each community and site are deeply situated in their particular cultural and geopolitical realities. Hands-on art- and land-based research workshops are our main vehicle to engage youth participants together with key community members, such as service providers and youth workers, and knowledge keepers such as Elders. Our land- and water-based workshops are generated locally, with and by knowledge and language keepers and people who can teach land-based skills, such as tanning hides, preparing and weaving wool and cedar, food gathering, beading, and drumming. This approach foregrounds the vital importance of reclaiming Indigenous languages and practices of gender well-being and resurgence. In addition to land-based materials, we also use arts-based and multimedia methods, such as digital storytelling, photovoice, painting, photography, poetry, and collage. Our workshops and sessions last anywhere from a few hours to a few days. We explore topics like dignity, consent, sexualized and gendered violence, land-based well-being, lateral and horizontal forms of violence, gender decolonization, healing, and body-land resurgence.

Our youth participants are Indigenous youth/young adults aged 13–25 of all genders and sexual identities from on- and off- reserve, and from both rural and urban communities across western Canada. We include all self-identified Indigenous identities (First Nations, Indigenous, Métis, Inuit, Aboriginal, Native, mixed, etc.). Meeting the needs of various ages and developmental levels requires open discussions and assessments to create responsive spaces and activities, including flexible groups, tailored supports, and peer-to-peer mentoring among older and younger youth. We also account for diverse skills, languages, and literacies (Indigenous languages, social media/digital literacies, modalities that are inclusive of diverse abilities, etc.).

Participants are invited to our workshops through youth-friendly methods including community, agency, and partner outreach, community visits, word of mouth, relational engagement, and social media. Each participant receives a cash honorarium and a locally made, culturally relevant gift, such as a pouch. Elders and knowledge keepers are invited to guide intergenerational knowledge exchange; they too receive appropriate honoraria, gifts, and resources (e.g., transportation, food, and assistants) to support their engagement. We invest significant time to ensure evolving and relational consent at every stage of research, from initial advisories and consultations to

knowledge mobilization, with participants choosing how they want to be involved and represented (or not) at every stage, including in images, reports, and digital media.

Our knowledge mobilization activities include art-making projects with public installations, workshops, presentations, circles, and land- and water-based cultural activities. The Kinship Rising website (<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/kinshiprising/>) acts as an accessible hub for our activities and outcomes; it features digital storytelling, artwork, photo essays, music, newsletters, and widely disseminated publications, several with student, youth, and community coauthors. We have also hosted provincial and international knowledge mobilization forums and public events featuring Indigenous youth, community members, and Elders as leaders and mentors. More than 600 participants, including policy and frontline stakeholders, have attended these events.

In the next section, we discuss four pillars of our work: community-generated research protocols; a gender-inclusive lens; land-based research; and networks of care and support. Drawing on examples of our projects across various communities, we then explore challenges, examples of research in action, and key outcomes of our approach.

1. COMMUNITY-GENERATED RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

“We exist and we are here,” Anishinaabe scholar Kathy Absolon asserts. “Our knowledge is valid, real and concrete” (Absolon, 2011, p. 12). In violence prevention research, however, Indigenous land-based knowledges of gender and sexual well-being, dignity, and sovereignty are drastically underresearched and undermobilized (Clark, 2016; de Finney et al., 2020; Suzack, 2015). Given epidemic levels of violence (Anaya, 2013) against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people, it is critical to center Indigenous methodologies and ontologies in violence prevention research. Our approach is not new; we are guided by and indebted to generations of our ancestors who maintained sacred relationships with our homelands, and by Indigenous advocates and knowledge keepers who have spoken out against colonial violence and promoted Indigenous well-being and resurgence in their communities, even under the threat of significant and even lethal colonial retribution.

It is crucial for Indigenous communities to have meaningful ownership and self-governance of their research at the local level. Therefore, in addition to having approval from our institutional human research ethics board, we invest significant time and resources into following local Indigenous ethical protocols, always in consistent consultation with Elders, youth, and community members. Because many of our team come from and/or work in our partner communities, our familial, cultural, and professional relationships in all

partner communities are extensive. These relationships foster transparency and accountability and also amplify our recruitment, referral, and wraparound capacity to address barriers to research access. In small and under-resourced partner communities, these barriers include the high cost of food, lack of social services support, limited infrastructure and technological capabilities, stigma and lack of privacy (both in relation to the topic of violence and regarding participation in research), social and geographical isolation, and precarious and expensive transportation and housing.

In terms of how we engage with the stories, information, and artwork shared, Elders and knowledge holders guide how to respectfully document, store, and share cultural and oral knowledges, in what forms and for which audiences. Key outcomes and learnings of our research workshops and activities are continually evaluated and analyzed by youth and research facilitators trained in our research methods, including documentation through pictures and audio/video recordings using iPads; circle debriefs and interviews with youth co-researchers and participants; and land- and water-based methods such as circles, land and beach walks, medicine and plant teachings, and visits with Elders and knowledge holders. Collaborative data analysis of visual and textual stories, experiences, and content then generate key themes, stories, and findings that are collated by the research team and shared in our knowledge exchange and mobilization activities. To ensure sustainable resourcing of community capacity building, we provide resources and honoraria throughout the whole process.

2. A GENDER-INCLUSIVE LENS

We use an “all genders” lens to support Indigenous youth to self-identify along the entire gender spectrum, including self-identified girls, young women, two-spirit, gender-fluid and trans youth, boys, and young men. We are mindful that these English-language terms are limited and that Indigenous communities have their own words to identify genders and sexualities. Recentring Indigenous gender and sexuality teachings in our work is crucial to a process of body decolonization, as is blanketing youth with care, safety, and dignity. This is particularly important for young people who have been taught to be ashamed of who they are, as one Kinship Rising participant expressed:

As a two-spirited person I have experienced it—being made to feel like my existence isn't even worth a crumb of bread. Being made to feel like everything I am is shameful. Yes, I would want to extend to youth to say we are surrounding you with love and dignity.

Our all-genders framework offers a way to refuse EuroWestern colonial ci-hetero binaries that have

severely destabilized Indigenous gender and sexuality teachings. Historically, Indigenous girls and two-spirit youth in particular have been subjected to discriminatory colonial policies rooted in white, Christian understandings of gender and sexuality. Centuries of these policies have entrenched white, male, heteronormative, ableist norms in legal, health, and human services, as well as in research about gender-based violence (Clark, 2016; de Finney et al., 2018; Suzack, 2015). Although Indigenous girls and two-spirit/gender-fluid youth are overrepresented in high-risk environments that maintain intersecting forms of violence (Lyons et al., 2016), their invaluable perspectives are largely absent in research and policy related to violence prevention. Indigenous boys and young men also tend to be excluded from such initiatives because they are labeled as inevitable perpetrators of violence (de Finney, 2018; Hunt, 2016; Morgensen, 2015).

In response to such erasures, Kinship Rising operates with a critical, anticolonial, Indigenous, and intersectional analysis of violence and community-based research. This lens names the contingent, interlocking, racialized, sexualized, classed, and ableist dimensions of both gendered/sexualized violence and research, their historical underpinnings in settler colonialism, and the connections between exploiting Indigenous bodies, knowledges, and lands throughout colonial history. Contesting degrading EuroWestern gender and sexuality roles is incredibly difficult; it requires upholding our own sovereign gender and sexuality frameworks in the face of pervasive practices and structures that reinstate white cis-heteronormativity at every turn. Therefore, our team is trained to respectfully engage with youths' diverse self-identifications and their often-shifting experiences around gender and sexuality, as well as with more sensitive disclosures about stigma and discrimination. Supporting Indigenous young people to self-identify and build community using terminology and concepts that fit best for them is certainly a complex battle, but it is vital to decolonizing colonial violence.

3. LAND-BASED RESEARCH

Our focus on land- and water-based activities reflects our investment in restoring sovereignty over both Indigenous bodies and our lands as key to undoing colonial violence. Colonial gender violence has always been linked to the exploitation of land; under a colonial ethos, both Indigenous land and Indigenous women have been constructed as exploitable, disposable colonial property (Holmes & Hunt, 2017; Sikka, 2009). Thus, restoring positive, consensual relationships with land is not only crucial; it enables more positive, consensual relationships with bodies. Our research approach weaves together a deeply decolonial place- and community-rooted approach that prioritizes Indigenous methods and land- and water-based practices. These have included cedar

and wool weaving, beading, storytelling, Elder-led circles and land walks, mask making, and ceremonial practices of gender well-being such as coming of age and healing ceremonies. Land-based, community-led research is a vital tool for restoring the inseparable connections between place-based Indigenous ways of knowing and gender frameworks. Many of our workshops involve the healing power and good medicine of land and water foods, plants, and ceremonies (see **Figure 1**). A knowledge keeper sharing cedar teachings at one of our workshops explained:

Our land is our relative. Our land has everything we need to live a good life. Cedar is sacred and important for us: It is the tree of life that provides

shelter, nourishment, materials, and our medicine. Cedar connects us with our lands and how our ancestors lived on these lands.

Working with and decolonizing our land-based relatives is essential. As our kin, they enable a deep reconnection with ancestral ways of being that imported, store-bought art materials could never achieve.

4. NETWORKS OF CARE AND SUPPORT

Given the highly sensitive and stigmatized nature of sexual and gender-based violence, research about it can never simply be about timelines and outputs. Our project involves frequent disclosures of violence that require safety planning and long-term supports, and some of



Figure 1 Cedar figure created by youth participants showing medicine bundles and messages painted on birch bark and rocks sharing their vision for a future free from gender-based violence. Photo credit: S. de Finney.

these also require legal follow-up. This poem written by a 16-year-old participant conveys the despair that violence—and fear of disclosing it—can cause.

*Feeling isolated, feeling empty, having heartbreak,
feeling anxious, my sadness turns into anger, it
impacted my sleep, my eating, and my lifestyle,
living in pain, with bruises and bumps.*

Sparse resources in small rural and remote communities means that most victims of violence never disclose it and supports are too rarely accessed, leading to further isolation and trauma that compounds vulnerability to other forms of violence (de Finney et al., 2019). Shaming, silencing, stigma, fear of retribution, and service gaps are the most frequently noted barriers to Indigenous youth accessing research on gender-based violence (de Finney et al., 2019). Backlash and retribution have been documented to come from peers, family, community, and authority figures such as teachers, law enforcement

officers, pimps, and traffickers (de Finney et al., 2019). Thus, in addition to setting up accessible local supports through our community partners, we provide an on-call Indigenous clinical counselor to consult with all sites throughout the entirety of the project. The counselor is available by phone and digital/social media to ensure accessibility even to small communities that do not have consistent health and counseling services, and to our own research team and partners. This helps ensure that our research facilitators and community partners are not overburdened by vicarious trauma. On this note, our facilitators are all Indigenous and are trained for frontline child, youth, and family services. Our teams bring a wealth of counseling and clinical skills for dealing with disclosures, violence, and trauma. Our investment in sustaining adaptable and responsive networks of care is crucial to maintaining trust and long-term relationships in communities that are chronically under-resourced and that have had too many negative experiences with exploitative and resource-depleting research.



Figure 2 Youth presentation, international gender well-being forum. First Peoples House, Lekwungen territories. Photo credit: S. de Finney.

CHALLENGES: THE VIOLENCE OF RISK-FOCUSED RESEARCH

Our land-based, gender-inclusive, networks-of-care approach stands in stark contrast to the harm done by what Eve Tuck, an Aleut Indigenous community researcher, calls “damage-centered research”:

Much of social science and educational research seeks to document pain, loss, brokenness or damage in order to establish the grounds to informally or formally petition for reparations composed of political, material, or sovereign gains (Tuck 2009). Examples are easy to locate—they are studies that depict entire schools, tribes, and communities as flattened, ruined, devastated. These depictions are then communicated up the power chain in order to secure money, resources, and other benefits. In these studies, implicit promises are made by researchers to their research subjects, “All we have to do is prove that you are damaged, and then we can get you what you need.” (2010, p. 638)

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that lack-focused processes reduce Indigenous people to “making claims about our rights and dues” (p. 143), and Tuck stresses that such research is based on a flawed theory of change that “assumes that it is outsiders, not communities, who hold the power to make changes” (p. 638).

We too are concerned about the message we are sending to young people in our communities when their lives are characterized by research that reiterates gaps and deficits. Further, many participants in our training sessions hold conflicted feelings about the very notion of research due to their negative experiences in educational systems that have long excluded their worldviews. Rewriting this narrative requires investment in research approaches that contest the dominant story of Indigenous people as broken, incapable, and perpetually at risk. While urgent attention is of course required to research and redress systemic inequities, we also put forward methodologies of hope and change that work from within and circle out. As Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1998) reminds us, such stories constitute “the creases of transmotion and sovereignty” (p. 15). Indigenous researchers have a critical role to play in the transmotion of sovereignty-making: remembering, advocating, listening, responding, and ensuring that irreplaceable teachings are upheld intergenerationally. In our work to document oral and land-based knowledges that “resist measurement” (Carini, 2001, p. 173), we have certainly encountered significant tensions. It is precisely because of its visceral, oral nature that traditional knowledge has been devalued and negated by EuroWestern academic formations. The

danger lies in the fact that “when the immeasurable isn’t recognized or valued, it tends to slip from view” (Carini, 2001, p. 175). Much of the Indigenous knowledge about gender well-being our participants speak of is deeply rooted in place-based, oral ontological understandings of the world. These teachings and ceremonial practices—infininitely complex, rich, and sacred—cannot be neatly captured in research documentation, nor should they be. Far from being easily prescribed sets of cultural practices, ontologies of land-based gender well-being represent a way of being, a daily ceremony, values that are woven into the fabric of our lives. Here is where the pivotal role of relational ethics comes into play. What differentiates Indigenous research, in our view, is the centrality of ethical relationships of accountability and answerability. Indigenous research, although incredibly diverse in its focuses and applications, is about fostering self-determination—of people, communities, and Nations—not simply supporting “knowledge” as abstract, disembodied content to collect. Indigenous methodologies are rooted in kinship-based practices, and the people who live these relationships and do the work are the ones who keep knowledge alive.

In our journey to reconnect and reclaim living knowledges in communities decimated by hundreds of years of colonial violence, we too often hear “I have nothing to recover!” Many participants express a deep sense of longing and grief for cultural knowledges disrupted by colonialism:

Growing up not knowing my culture, I wonder how I do research using teachings I don’t have, and I don’t want to do it the white way either. (youth participant)

My biggest hardship is not having my culture during hard times. Colonial institutions have stripped me from my culture, and being raised in an urban setting has made it hard to learn about where I come from, and our traditional practices. I have built my own small community with this [Kinship Rising] team, one which I can turn to during my hardships. (Kathryn McLeod, youth participant)

The struggle for reconnection, echoed by so many Indigenous communities seeking to engage in sovereignty-making, is a source of much discussion in our research partnerships. How do we conduct Indigenous, land-based research when some community members are disconnected from the teachings and practices that would inform Indigenous land-based ontologies and methodologies? How do we proceed without participants feeling inadequate for not holding this vital knowledge? How do we meet community requests for gender restoration and sovereignty when so many of these frameworks have been assaulted and criminalized by centuries of colonial violence and when shame, stigma,

and silence about violence sometimes permeate our community relationships?

These questions are especially complex in diverse urban contexts with many different cultural traditions, highly mobile populations, and no central Indigenous government to guide and uphold research ethics and protocols. Indigenous lands are being taken rapidly for settler resource exploitation and urbanization, and Indigenous people—particularly women and two-spirit people—face high rates of poverty and a lack of housing and resources in their home communities. Colonial urban gentrification limits opportunities for Indigenous land-based well-being and amplify risk for racialized gendered and sexualized violence for those already experiencing deeply entrenched structural forms of exclusion. Further, as specific local lands, waterways, and sacred places are lost to colonial expansion, Indigenous research methods risk being diluted by a pan-Indigenous model and urbanized practices. Our participants talk about how blending or mixing EuroWestern approaches with Indigenous ones is both a limiting and a fruitful task, one with its own complexities and ethical dilemmas that we are just beginning to unpack. Given the sticky complexities of restorative research work, our research and knowledge mobilization efforts are always emergent and in progress, with layers of challenges and gaps as well as benefits and transformative outcomes. We learned early on to eschew one-dimensional, stereotypical, or prescriptive views. Engaging directly with complexities firsthand through continuous, honest dialogue (in and with community, during circles and presentations, in negotiations and meetings, etc.) is critical to the negotiations Indigenous agencies and communities must engage in to develop their own research models to support gender and sexual well-being and sovereignty in both rural and urban areas. Such discussions are essential to shifting our research paradigms away from tokenism and superficial accommodations and toward truly Indigenous-led and Indigenous-owned research pathways.

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION: EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH WORKSHOPS

Across all our partner communities, our workshops and activities have responded to the needs and goals of youth participants; youth have identified their desire to engage with peers regarding consent, peer and lateral violence and relationships, and holistic and nature-based well-being. Their requests have included intergenerational connections with Elders and mentors, accessible, culturally relevant information related to their gender development and sexual well-being, traditional and contemporary art making, cultural practices that support safer and more respectful gender relations, and services and advocacy from a strong social justice and land- and

water-based perspective. With these requests as our guiding vision, we have supported the development of community-specific workshops and activities.

As one example, one of our longest and most involved partnerships is with the Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Society (NIFCS). NIFCS is a child and family-serving agency on the northwest coast of British Columbia that works with communities both on- and off- reserve, including small rural northern communities accessible only by boat and larger urban centers along the infamous “Highway of Tears,” a region with particularly high rates of murders and disappearances of Indigenous girls and women. NIFCS works with young people involved in government systems who tend to face disproportionate rates of gender and sexual violence and who may have limited access to culturally grounded supports. Kinship Rising youth participants are supported by staff, such as child and family workers. Elders and knowledge keepers from each community are invited to share insights into both the historical roots of sexualized violence and culturally congruent responses that promote well-being and dignity. In addition to always-popular methods such as body mapping, multimedia stories, collages, and painting, our activities have included youth working with Elders to document traditional gender teachings and practices, planning transition and/or aging-out-of-care ceremonies, and incorporating community teachings into agency policies and practices to ensure study outcomes have long-term impact (see **Figure 2**). These include training youth as community researchers, sharing study findings and concrete steps with local agencies and service providers, resourcing more sustained engagement of Elders in anti-violence youth programming, and promoting vital land-based knowledges at the local level. NIFCS youth, service providers, and Elders have been directly engaged in numerous knowledge sharing and knowledge mobilization activities over the years, including being lead presenters at several high-profile national and international conferences and events and coauthoring reports and publications. They have generously shared their vision for a strong community and supported dignity, well-being, leadership, cultural healing, being on the land, healthy relationships, and consent.

Many of our other partners also work extensively with traditional land- and water-based practices. Topics for research workshops in diverse communities have included healing work about gendered, sexualized, lateral, and peer-to-peer violence in relationships and identifying ceremonies and practices that support intergenerational knowledge transfer. In workshops in *WSÁNEĆ*, Nuuchahnulth, Haida Gwaii, and Cowichan homelands, for example, Elders joined youth participants to share teachings about their specific heritage, such as coming-of-age ceremonies, making family and clan crests, picking berries, making traditional wool headbands, ocean-based bathing and



Figure 3 Fearless Sisters Rising collective mural. Photo credit: Nicole Neidhardt and Brianna Bear, lead artists.

cleansing, and weaving cedar. In one community, a group of boys and young men gathered for four days to work with a master weaver to weave traditional cedar hats while discussing issues of consent, respectful relationships, and healing from historical violence. Another project used digital storytelling to document traditional teachings for water- and plant-based healing from intergenerational trauma. Yet another project involving urban youth in *W̱SÁNEĆ* partnered with Elders to learn and document land-based seasonal practices and language, including cedar and wool weaving.

Some of our most powerful activities across all communities have included Indigenous arts in the form of drumming, singing, storytelling, and ceremonial performances, which are critical to the enhancement and documentation of Indigenous languages and worldviews. During one large knowledge mobilization event, we brought together partners from our research network across Canada and South Africa. More than 100 presenters and participants from community groups, organizations, government, academia, and activist networks came to witness the important work of restoring dignity and sovereignty. For three days, each group and community shared ceremony, circles, presentations, art making, and workshops. Some of the most difficult topics explored included secrecy, shame, and stigma; how, where, and why sexual and gender violence happens; and lateral and systemic violence among youth, families, and communities. We also unveiled a public walk-through art exhibit that centered the strengths and vision of young people whose art stories refuse victim blaming and criminalizing narratives of racialized gender

violence. This exhibit included the creation of a digital story, publications, and an activity asking members of the public to make commitments to disrupting gender-based violence in Canada.

We have also supported public art workshops developed with local artists and Indigenous organizations that offer a permanent public statement on Indigenous gender well-being. One such project involved a partnership between Kinship Rising, young First Nations artists, the Innovative Young Indigenous Leaders Symposium (IYILS), and the Fearless Collective to create a large mural celebrating Indigenous body and land resurgence (see **Figure 3**). The mural design illustrates the inextricable ancestral links between humans, plant medicines, and land and water, as well as the vital connection between land and body sovereignty. The life-size mural is now permanently displayed at the University of Victoria and is viewed by thousands of visitors every year. To enable further knowledge mobilization, a scannable digital QR code brings viewers to our website, which showcases research findings and partners. Indigenous-led arts-based and new media like this mural and our website, proudly inserted into colonial academic spaces that have historically excluded Indigenous scholarship, activate Indigenous knowledges beyond academic audiences to advance broader public debates about redressing colonial violence.

OUTCOMES

In a context where Indigenous girls, young women, and two-spirit youth experience “epidemic” rates of cultural

(TRC, 2015) and gender-based (MMIWG, 2019) violence while a lack of legal, political, and public responses frame them as “disposable,” Kinship Rising aims to generate urgently needed short- and long-term actions and benefits led by Indigenous youth and communities most impacted by this violence. Our knowledge translation activities center the key questions outlined at the start of this paper. We document and name the impact of colonial policies and practices on gender and sexual violence experienced by Indigenous youth, and uplift and celebrate Indigenous-specific knowledges and practices of gender and sexual well-being to inform violence prevention. We invest in these objectives by engaging Indigenous youth of all genders in creative and cocreated knowledge generation that supports gender and sexual violence prevention through multimedia methods, youth- and community-led storying and action, and meaningful intergenerational and land-based connections.

Beyond our Kinship Rising partner communities, our target audiences for knowledge mobilization are both academic and nonacademic, including interdisciplinary researchers from fields such as Indigenous, gender and sexuality studies, social work, education, counseling, and Indigenous visual arts, as well as students, youth, social and legal services, and agency and government policymakers who serve Indigenous youth, families, and communities. Communities and participants lead how their knowledges and art creation are to be respectfully documented and effectively translated to these audiences. At the community level, we mobilize our team meetings, art creation, and field visits in each community to directly promote and disseminate research findings, with a focus on culturally appropriate outcomes, such as inviting youth, Elder, and service-provider speakers to community and regional cultural events, circles, and feasts. Youth-led dissemination of youth-produced products has included the creation of interactive visual art and multimedia digital archives showcasing Indigenous art production and research findings. Community participants have presented, designed, and coauthored numerous workshops, publications, reports, and multimedia resources, and we featured some of these on our website for easier community access and knowledge translation. Long-standing relationships with communities and youth—including resourcing youth as peer mentors and youth researchers, and working with agencies to adapt their practices and policies to reflect our findings—are all examples of how we strive to translate study outcomes into sustainable change. To promote Indigenous research sovereignty, we invest a great deal of time and resources in mentoring a new generation of Indigenous researchers beyond promoting employment skills (e.g., research, facilitation, writing, organizational, and leadership skills). This involves supporting Indigenous early-career faculty, as well as sponsoring youth participants and students to transition to postsecondary education.

Backing communities to design and conduct their own research also enables their knowledge sovereignty. As Adam Gaudry (2011) has expressed, rather than collaborations with outsiders, decolonizing academia requires Indigenous governance and full ownership over research agendas and designs. The long-term benefits of capacity building in partner communities occur on multiple levels: advanced intercommunity mentoring and exchange; strengthened capacity for communities to lead future research and knowledge mobilization activities on other research topics and in other sectors; skills training that is translatable to education and employment; and the use of youth- and community-produced resources in local schools, organizations, and youth and family-serving programs.

Finally, our knowledge translation and advocacy encompass diverse interdisciplinary academic and nonacademic audiences. Our aim is to amplify our ability to influence government, research, and postsecondary stakeholders to make Indigenous needs and knowledges much more visible in colonial institutions and systems that provide services to Indigenous youth, including the justice, education, health, and child protection systems. Our professional connections in these sectors extend knowledge translation directly to those who can implement the findings. Given that our faculty team develops postsecondary curriculum on these topics, trains and supervises future practitioners, and consults on practice, research, and policy agendas provincially and nationally, we see direct implications for the future landscape of social and legal services that contribute to intersectoral research and knowledge translation.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledges have long been excluded from mainstream violence-prevention research, policy, and practice. Mobilizing them—while emphasizing ethical safety and community consent and control—ensures they remain accessible to Indigenous youth and communities, public audiences, and research, policy, and practice stakeholders who govern many of the systems that directly shape Indigenous lives and homelands. Our academic and community commitment to decolonizing the dehumanization and hypersexualization of Indigenous youth is marshaled through land- and water-based research practices and Indigenous art creation that preserve sacred teachings and practices among diverse communities. These are all vital forms of contestation and reclamation. In brief, they are sovereignty-making practices.

This work is necessarily political, messy, and contradictory. Every community has incredibly complex histories, internal dynamics, power relations, concerns, strengths, and barriers. We do not work to erase or conflate these complexities. In fact, community research

cannot succeed if it ignores them. We commit to struggling together with our partners through the complicated issues of protocols, representation, accountability, accessibility, political tensions, and ownership that shape Indigenous-led research. This work is grounded in trust, built over years of “showing up,” owning our mistakes, and working through sustained accountability and transparency. We encourage ourselves and our partner communities to start from where they are and to draw on their own expertise and needs instead of striving to meet external ideals of what culturally centered community-based research should look like. Throughout, we uphold the many examples of effective Indigenous research that are proliferating around the world, the potential for valuable strategic partnerships with allied non-Indigenous stakeholders, and the possibilities offered by a reclaiming, restorying approach. Above all, we center strength, complexity, hope, and the inextricable links between sovereign bodies, sovereign knowledges, and sovereign lands.

We raise our hands in deep gratitude and appreciation to our ancestors and all our partners and relations who have contributed to our project, to those who have survived and to those who were stolen, and to all of those who grieve, resist, and walk in dignity through pain and resurgence.

NOTE

- 1 The term “two spirit,” from the Anishinaabeg term *niizh manidoowag*, is an umbrella concept that refers to a person who embodies more than just a male or female spirit (Filice, 2015; Hunt, 2016).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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