



Youth Engagement on the Topic of Sexualized Violence in Nova Scotia

Sexual Violence Strategy of Nova Scotia Youth Engagement Conversations

Sexual Violence Strategy
Youth Engagement Conversations
Heartwood Centre Youth Engagement Team
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Completed by Tamsyn Loat, Briana Miller, Rena Kulczycki, Louise Lyman and Laura Swaine

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Purpose: To include representation of diverse youth perspectives in the strategic plan for Nova Scotia's Sexual Violence Strategy. A provincial strategy addressing the complex issue of sexual violence must be informed by the voices, experiences and realities of Nova Scotian youth. The Sexual Violence Strategy (SVS) partnered with the HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development and Leaders of Today (LOT) to host province-wide conversations specifically pertaining to the two main themes of the Sexual Violence Strategy: **services and supports**, and **prevention**.

Approach/Philosophy: Authentic and engaged youth working in partnership with adults on the issues that impact their communities.

HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development

HeartWood is a non-profit, registered charity that has been serving the province of Nova Scotia since 1988. HeartWood is a values-based organization that strives to create transformational experiences. HeartWood works directly with youth, youth-serving organizations and broader systems to build better communities through youth engagement and leadership. Programming is structured on the "HeartWood Way" where our focus is on creating a culture of empowerment and support through youth-adult partnerships, peer relationships, meaningful contributions and experiential learning.

Leaders Of Today

Housed within HeartWood, Leaders Of Today (LOT) is a provincial program that amplifies youth voice. LOT recognizes that youth are marginalized in their communities and are not always reflected in the programs and services that are meant to serve them. In the face of this marginalization, LOT aims to create safe, stigma-free spaces to connect youth, communities, youth-serving organizations and governments in the Province of Nova Scotia. These spaces enable collaborative and meaningful discussions on youth issues that build understanding and partnership between youth, communities and government, and inform youth-serving policies, strategies, services and programs to better serve the needs of all.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic the youth engagement team also worked from a trauma informed approach when designing and facilitating these conversations using the guidance and input of the Avalon Centre for Sexual Assault.

16 youth engagement conversations were offered, and 14 conversations were hosted across the province between October and December 2014. Each conversation invited up to 15 youth, aged 14-25, and 115 youth participated. Conversations were hosted and facilitated by HeartWood, LOT, and two Youth Engagement Coordinators with the Sexual Violence Strategy.

Experience shows that providing safer spaces for youth, from often under-represented groups, to speak with others who share a similar experience will enhance their capacity to share openly and honestly. All conversations followed a similar process. Several of the conversations were supported by co-facilitators who shared an identity with or who had worked extensively with that group of youth. The designated conversations offered were as follows:

Female-Identified
Male-Identified
LGBTQ*
Aboriginal and Indigenous

Refugees and Immigrants
Racialized Minorities and African Nova
Scotians
Youth Living with Disabilities*

Unfortunately, we were unable to host a conversation for youth living with disabilities due to scheduling conflicts.

Conversation Locations:

Shelburne
Lunenburg
Eskasoni
Sydney
Tatamagouche

Millwood
Truro
Bear River
North Preston
Fairview

Spryfield
Kentville
New Minas
Halifax

Content

Youth were asked to identify what they saw as gaps and barriers in services and supports, and to highlight key ways to create improvements. They were asked about their understanding of sexual violence and the factors that contribute to its prevalence; what services and supports they are aware of, and what is needed to improve the accessibility and effectiveness for youth of those services and supports. Furthermore, recognizing that sexual violence is a complex social phenomenon fuelled by a variety of factors, we asked participants to identify innovative ideas for prevention that would be most effective for youth in addressing the contributing factors they identified.

Partnering with Community

When working with marginalized populations, working directly with community champions of those populations was an essential piece in ensuring that the design and context was culturally sensitive, accessible and inclusive. This partnership model allowed for flexibility in approach, depending on the needs or level of interest in involvement from specific groups. Often, the conversations were co-facilitated with a champion from that community.

Creating a Safe and Supported Space

Taking into consideration the safety and vulnerability of the youth participating, and recognizing the limited time in each community, youth under 19 were required to be accompanied by an adult supporter who could offer support during and after each session.

Recognizing the sensitive nature of the conversation topic, a community support worker, preferably somebody who had worked extensively with that population, with professional counselling experience was present during the entire conversation should youth need them.

In order to attend a designated conversation youth were asked to self-identify which conversations best suited their needs for participation so as to make attendance as accessible as possible.

Limitations

These conversations were designed so that young people could participate in a safe and inclusive process informing the Sexual Violence Strategy from their perspective. That being said, time frame, transportation, the adult supporter requirement for youth under 19,

needing parental consent, limitations on how public the invitation could be, and the extremely sensitive nature of the topic of sexual violence were real limitations that hindered youth participation.

SECTION 1 | CONTEXT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

1.1 WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Refer to Appendix 1 for an infographic depicting all contributions.

Recognizing that youth come with diverse knowledge, experience, backgrounds and potential assumptions around sexual violence, it was important to have an opportunity to see what their understanding was. This also paved a way to enter the conversation with a shared understanding. During this process youth were asked “What is Sexual Violence?” and facilitators offered ‘rape’ and ‘street harassment’ as examples in the introduction. Doing so may have influenced participants to either include or exclude these in their responses.

Generally speaking, the understanding of sexual violence amongst youth varies greatly across the province. Some have only a basic understanding of sexual violence and lack capacity to conceptualize its variety of manifestations and influencing factors. However there are those who had a deep level of understanding including the various physical, verbal, mental and psychological elements.

An issue that proves to be most unclear for youth across the province is consent: what it is, the need for it in *all* kinds of sexual activity, the influence of alcohol/drugs on consent, and the various legalities that apply to people under 18. In many conversations, it appeared to be the first time youth learned various ages and legalities of consent. This demonstrates that while youth are being taught that consent is necessary and that sexual activity without consent is sexual violence, there is a vast gap in understanding of what actually constitutes as consent.

1.2 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Youth were asked to discuss what broader aspects of society impact and influence sexual violence. Participants identified many aspects they understood to influence sexual violence including media, technology, peer or partner pressure, porn, alcohol/drugs, lack of support for victims, gangs, cycles of abuse, sports culture, poverty, sexual exploitation, mental health stigma, religion, small town environments. Many of the aspects youth identified address much larger issues which are outline below.

Oppression – Youth named sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, racism, “feminazis”, and violence due to gender identity or sexual orientation as elements that encourage sexual violence. These elements are key components of oppression and are often used to impose power imbalances.

Systemic Violence – Youth identified how problematic it is that the responsibility for sexual violence is often placed on both victims and offenders and not on the government for its role in keeping the factors that contribute to sexual violence legal.

Cultural Understanding and Social Norms – Youth explained that gendered stereotypes, slut shaming, hypersexualization, victim blaming, stigma, rape culture, bullying, power, anger, using people, and party environments are elements of their understanding of sexual violence. These also contribute to the larger social narratives and rationales that promote the glorification of sex and sexual violence.

Lack of Education on Sexual Violence – Youth recognized that a lack of understanding of sexuality and sexual violence can in itself perpetuate sexual violence. Various levels of understanding of consent, sexual urges and expression, as well as the potential of confusing sexual attention with affection were also contributing factors.

An Inadequate or Ineffective Justice System – Youth noted that having a broken or failing justice system contributes to sexual violence by encouraging offenders to feel invincible. They recognized that victims may feel the system is so traumatic that they will not want to access it, and that punishment is not severe enough to deter perpetrators from using sexual violence.

Porn - Youth say today's porn normalizes and sexualizes violence, while also promoting sexual harassment and assault. It is described as influential for young people who are exposed to it and sends strong messages that could contribute to the way people feel about and react toward sexual violence.

School Environment - Youth perceive the consequences for sexual harassment and violence within school walls as not being severe enough to act as a deterrent for those students who would be offenders or perpetrators.

Home Environment - Youth recognized that when parents convey problematic ideas about sexual violence, or are not open and engaging with youth on the topic, there is a lack of positive guidance or support in navigating a world where sexual violence is prevalent. In addition, intergenerational violence within the family contributes to the development of young people's concepts of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

SECTION 2 | PARTICIPATORY CONVERSATION ON SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

2.1 WHERE YOUTH GO FOR SUPPORT FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Friends/Family

Youth identified that they tend to seek support where they feel accepted, comfortable, and safe. Therefore, friends and family are often the initial and primary sources of support for youth who are experiencing violence, harassment, or assault.

However, not all youth are privileged with positive family and peer relationships that would be supportive after experiencing sexual violence. In these cases, youth highlighted the following reasons for hesitating when seeking support from friends and family:

- They may not always have the professional expertise or knowledge of resources in one's community.
- Confidentiality is not guaranteed when disclosing to a family member, it may lead to sharing amongst relatives, and friends - your social circles.
- The impact of disclosing to someone who cares deeply about them – youth express concern that family and friends are not ideal sources of support as they may not know how to handle a disclosure, or may react much more intensely than a youth is comfortable with.
- Fear of abandonment and rejection by loved ones.

School Based Supports

Second perhaps only to friends and family, schools are often described as ideal places for youth to access support and services. Schools provide many of the characteristics mentioned above and are relatively accessible for most youth. In addition to building rapport with the staff that they see every school day, youth appreciate the professional competency of school staff and their legal obligation to maintain confidentiality.

Furthermore, within the school system in NS, Gay Straight Alliance or Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) networks serve as a resource to support LGBTQ youth and their allies. GSA's were appreciated as a safe space where members of its community could feel maximum comfort. They were also said to be valuable avenues for youth to access resources and workshops.

However, youth also reported that they would not turn to school staff for support for a variety of reasons. They felt that potentially once they disclose they would have to see that staff everyday, their relationship and rapport would change and become awkward and embarrassing. Some youth also fear that disclosing at school would mean risking that other youth or staff would find out and that would lead to gossiping and rumours. Youth very strongly expressed that visiting the guidance counsellor's office is *not* a private or anonymous experience. And may result in many of the mentioned consequences.

Therapeutic Professionals

Youth mentioned feeling particularly supported by counsellors and psychologists for their professional knowledge and capacity to give psychological guidance, yet identified two specific concerns when attempting to access therapeutic professional services.

The first is the perception that professional therapists, counsellors, and psychologists have a cost that serves as a major financial barrier. It is key to note that this is a perceived cost that is not always real, however the perception is enough to block youth from accessing these services.

The second barrier unique to this kind of service is the role these service providers may have in prescribing medication. While medication can be a useful and at times necessary tool for healing, some youth explain that they are displeased with the frequency and speed at which some professionals will resort to prescribing them medication.

Medical Centers

Youth recognize the value of medical providers, detox centers and counselling services that are offered, however, some youth report that they find the hospital environment to feel very intimidating. One youth explained that the power imbalance between themselves and hospital staff made them feel like “once you are there, you are under their control”. This negative impact is furthered by intrusive and re-traumatizing processes such as invasive medical exams or multiple disclosures and story sharing. Youth shared that accessing hospital services is also very time consuming – enough to deter them from visiting entirely. Once a youth does get through the initial process and are able to receive medical help they feel that doctors often do not offer any emotional support. Youth also fear that medical staff will go one step further and may make a formal report without their consent.

Police

Youth recognized that police are an avenue through which they were able to access power and authority in order to address illegal or harmful activity. In the context of sexual violence, they noted that police are an appropriate support if a youth needs protection or security, legal justice, or if an arrest needs to take place.

The primary factor discouraging youth from turning to police is their perception that the system is ineffective and that all too often doesn’t achieve justice for victims and survivors. At the same time youth expressed that police officers may take legal action to a level higher than the youth is comfortable with. At times the offender is somebody the young person knows, and they don’t actually want them to “get in trouble”. Youth understand the societal implications of reporting sexual assault and worry about being “considered a rat” in their community.

Youth also mentioned a fear that victims won’t be taken seriously and that officers may make a situation worse by taking advantage of their power – however they did not elaborate on these points.

Culturally Relevant Supports

Specific to culturally relevant services, youth share that it is easier for them to open up to somebody who shares their culture. Despite other concerns around confidentiality when accessing services, within this context youth stated that it is a strength when their support worker knows and understands their community. During these conversations, youth did not attach any barriers to the idea of having culturally relevant supports.

Internet Based Supports

Seeking support online has different benefits from seeking support in person. Youth describe the major advantages of online support to be accessibility for residents of rural areas, anonymity in accessing support, a greater feeling of safety in sharing their experiences than if they were to do so in person, and finding solidarity amongst people from all over the world who share similar experiences.

Despite these advantages, youth recognize that anonymous online support may lack professional knowledge of supports and services within their communities.

Religious/Faith-Based Supports

During these conversations, religious/faith-based resources were mentioned as a potential source of support for sexual violence. Youth explained that in a place of worship a youth can disclose their information and be prayed for. This was one way of supporting them and meeting their needs. They did not elaborate further.

Gender Specific Resources

While youth recognized that it may be beneficial to design services for certain identities, they also gave specific feedback around limitations. Gender specific services are often limited to youth who identify with that gender. Youth who don't identify with a certain gender or are transgender are often excluded from these services. Youth may have to resort to misrepresenting their gender in order to receive services. Certain youth also perceive the lack of resources accessible for male identified youth to "perpetuate stereotypes that men don't get assaulted/are less important".

2.2 WHAT MAKES SERVICES ACCESSIBLE FOR YOUTH

Capacity to Respond

Resources to Respond to Immediate Needs

When looking to meet immediate practical needs, youth are seeking supports equipped and capable of providing medical examinations, emergency shelter, professional services, and information and referrals for other community resources. Informal means of providing immediate care are identified as a place to go and someone to talk to.

Support

Whether formally or informally, the person supporting a youth must be available to listen, be open to understanding their perspective, and offer wisdom and support in a caring and nonjudgmental way. When physical resources and services are not necessary, youth still seek safe spaces, empathy, and a sense of care.

Professional Competencies

Youth need to connect with people who feel comfortable navigating this topic and who have accurate information on the realities and complexities of sexual violence. They state that they are affected if a support worker is not properly trained, educated, or has no experience supporting people who have experienced sexual violence. Staff who do not operate with a trauma informed approach are a barrier to youth accessing care they need. Youth articulate they would be better able to relate to people who have similar experiences to them, however it is not mandatory.

Power and Authority

Youth felt that engaging people with positive power and authority was necessary when they were seeking to take action that is beyond their means. Examples of supports with this power are parents, principals, role models, and police.

Relationship Dynamics

Trust

According to youth trust is the essence of a supportive relationship. They prioritize it as the essential foundation for them to experience a sense of safety when they are in the vulnerable position of navigating the pathway to support.

Rapport

Having a pre-existing relationship, regardless of how close it is, strengthens the route to support for young people. Youth explain that this is why teachers, doctors, family members, and friends are often the first people they turn to when seeking support. Youth described a supportive rapport as demonstrating genuine care, comfortable and non-judgmental dialogue, and an open, accepting attitude.

Confidentiality

Given the extremely sensitive nature and complex layers at work within sexual violence, youth state that confidentiality is absolutely paramount when they disclose their experiences. Youth hold the legitimate concern that should their confidentiality be breached, the impact would be extremely negative and potentially prevent them from taking further action or seeking the support they need.

Authenticity

Youth expressed the need for the people they go to for support to demonstrate passion and genuine care through their interactions. They explain that sometimes they feel that the people supporting them seem like they are “only in it for the pay cheque”. This is not conducive to true support or healing.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SPACE

Safe Space

When accessing support services youth assess the safety of the space in relation to whether or not they see themselves reflected in it. This means that they look for environments where they can easily discern that their identity is accepted and welcomed without judgment. Young people seek out environments within which they are taken seriously and respected, and where there are no significant power imbalances. Comfort and trust can be more quickly achieved when youth see their culture, age, and religion reflected within the organization or support person.

Anonymity

When youth refer to anonymity, they indicate a need for physical security and safety to access support without being seen, rather than the need to remain anonymous within an organization. They explain that their need for privacy is rooted in the fear of adverse reactions from society and the relentless insensitivity to victims.

Youth Leadership

Youth speak positively about seeing their peers in leadership positions within organizations, and express more immediate comfort in a space when they are amongst peers. It becomes a positive attribute for an organization and helps youth build those relationships of trust.

Accessibility

Many rural youth have either limited or no access to formal services. They express that the most accessible resources they have are family, peers and resources offered within the school system. Not surprisingly, the internet was discussed as a format for resource distribution and service delivery that was easily accessible for rural youth and for youth who do not feel comfortable connecting in person.

Comfortable Environment

Young people say that they are deterred by colder, formal, and impersonal environments. They describe feeling much more comfortable in environments with color, warm lighting, comfortable seating, and a casual ambiance.

Awareness/Visibility

In order for youth to consider accessing a service in their community, they need to know about it. They often expressed that they don't know where to go or what services are offered at existing organizations in their community.

2.3 BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

Service Delivery

Confidentiality

Confidentiality held the most weight for youth as a barrier to accessing supports or services regarding sexual violence. Although the professional duty to report must be explained before providing services, youth stated that they do not always have a good understanding of the parameters of this agreement and what the implications are when they start speaking about sexual violence. When they are uncertain about these boundaries, they worry that police will be contacted and that a formal report will be made when they do not want to initiate legal action. When uncertain about how their disclosures will be received, youth become reluctant to share any information at all.

This concern grows into fear that their disclosure will either be leaked back to their family, or become known in their communities. Adverse family reactions and the risk of widespread gossip and rumour spreading amongst communities are significant barriers to disclosing and is discussed later on in the context of community reactions.

Furthermore, youth worry that the media may try to latch onto cases of sexual violence and invade a person's privacy with unwanted attention or publicity.

Finally, youth expressed fear that someone with authority in their lives will learn about their disclosure and use their authority to punish the victim for engaging in sexual activity (whether it was consensual or not).

Transportation

Many youth who participated in these conversations do not have their driver's licenses, do not have access to a vehicle, or live in areas where public transportation is insufficient or non-existent. Access to resources were further restricted depending on the proximity to the youth, whether it was in the same town, somewhere in their region, or not available within a reasonable distance at all.

If services are too far away, youth may not be able to gain access to a vehicle, find somebody to drive them, or rely on insufficient public transportation. Even when a service is accessible within a community, if a young person needs to ask for a drive or use of a vehicle, they may need to disclose where they are going and why. Both disclosing and concealing the real reason for needing transportation are enough for a youth to dismiss this option of seeking care.

Hours of operation

Services that are only open during business hours are inaccessible to youth who attend school. Even services whose hours extend outside of regular school hours must consider that youth need to travel to their location, which takes time if the resource is not located within a youth's community. Also discussed as a barrier were services that youth perceived to be closed during summer months when students have the most availability.

Inclusivity

Youth share experiences of feeling unwelcome when accessing services because of their gender, sexual orientation, age, and culture. Some youth recognize that certain services exist to serve a specific population, but acknowledge that this often means that youth with other identities are missed entirely.

Others explain the discrimination they have experienced has occurred within organizations that claim to be inclusive, but in reality don't welcome certain people such as queer or trans youth. If youth do not see themselves reflected in the staff, the space can remain uncomfortable and be perceived as unwelcoming.

Perceived negative attitudes and reactions of service providers

Some youth report experiencing victim blaming when reaching out for help, having their experiences minimized by service providers, and encountering staff who don't seem to genuinely care about their position or role in supporting youth. Some youth describe having services feel "impersonal", "not welcoming", and as if support workers "won't understand" or "can't relate".

Cultural Relevance

Cultural relevance includes, but is not limited to whether or not a service is inclusive of a young person's culture or language. Youth expressed a deep critique of how approaches to support and cultures of care do not always align. In conversations for Indigenous and Aboriginal youth, as well as immigrant and refugee populations, youth report being less inclined to access services that do not have culturally relevant support and healing. In Indigenous and Aboriginal communities this has been described to having access to support from Elders. For immigrant and refugee youth, racism and language was more of a focus.

Capacity to Respond

Youth perceive some service provisions to be inadequate in their capacity to respond to the specific needs of those seeking support for sexual violence for several reasons. This is sometimes described as having inadequate training or possessing inadequate qualifications to respond to the issue of sexual violence. Other times, it is understood that youth may seek support from organizations that are not specifically mandated to address these issues. For example accessing support from a guidance counsellor who youth perceive is only mandated to provide academic guidance.

Lack of Services

Many youth shared that the services they need for sexual violence either don't exist within their communities, or they don't actually know where to turn should they ever need this kind of support. Others explained that when they do access the limited and often unrelated resources available to them, they do so because they don't know of anywhere that could support them with more specialized care. While rural youth identified a general lack of youth specific resources that address sexual violence, urban youth focused more on the lack of culturally specific and appropriate resources. If inclusive, accessible, and financially accessible resources are not known by youth, they might assume that specialized care is too costly.

Community Reactions

Stigma

To the youth who participated, stigma presented as judgment, shame, blame, loss of privacy, damaged reputation and social relationships, being stereotyped, not being taken seriously, and rejection from family or community.

Not Being Believed, Understood, or Taken Seriously

Youth report often having to bear the weight of not being believed, understood, or taken seriously after they reach out for support. In anticipation of this, many young people feel they are left with minimal options or are forced to turn inward and rely on their own capacities for healing. Compounded with mental states such as experiencing anxiety, this can further propel them into isolation.

Gender Stereotypes

Although gender stereotypes were discussed across genders, specific experiences faced by male identified youth were highlighted. These stereotypes were centered around the images of either “macho-ism” or “weakness.” Youth described that many of their male identified peers were “afraid to report because they should be considered tough” and that reporting would “damage the masculine image”, and didn’t want to “seem weak”. Youth also acknowledged the existence of the idea that “if it [sexual violence] happened [to you as a male] – you wanted it to”. This myth was referred to multiple times as the problematic assumption that male youth can only be perpetrators – not victims. In multiple conversations youth explained how difficult it is for male identified youth to seek or accept support when they are not taken seriously.

Gossip and Rumours

Stigma, a lack of understanding of the complexity of sexual violence, and a culture of bullying in peer groups can all manifest themselves in the form of gossip and rumours. Amongst groups of youth, the gossip and rumours that accompanies broken confidentiality is a legitimate barrier to seeking supports.

Within the LGBTQ community, youth who do not publicly identify their sexual orientation can be put in the spotlight as others make judgments and assumptions about their sexual orientation, thereby subjecting youth to prejudice and discrimination in their communities. Small towns were identified multiple times as a conducive environment to this problematic behaviour when a youth’s privacy is breached. Parallels were also drawn to Indigenous and Aboriginal communities, where “everyone knows each other”.

Youth understand that gossip can originate from the lack of understanding or commitment to confidentiality amongst peer groups. Even if youth are witnessed visiting a service, is enough for their peers to start making and spreading assumptions.

Minimized Experience

Youth recognize that minimization of their experience may happen both internally and by others. Some youth find themselves in situations where they are unsure if their experience was severe enough to seek help, if their experience was “as bad as someone else’s”, or later realized that they had a “lack of understanding that sexual violence had happened” at the time.

Youth also expressed reluctance to reach out to services where they felt that “services are too busy to deal with it” and that the staff “won’t care”. Youth noted multiple times that they felt that the violence perpetrated needed to surpass a certain magnitude in order for the experience to be validated and addressed.

Relationship Based Barriers

Trust - “You can visit someone 20 times before talking”

Nearly every group of youth engaged in these conversations identified lack of trust as a barrier to reaching out. Youth referred to adults, family, friends, support workers, and figures of authority as potential relationships of support that would be undeveloped or damaged without sufficient trust. Youth do not want to and will resist disclosing to anyone they suspect may share information about their experience without their consent.

Personal Security

Fear of adverse family reactions is legitimate for youth who suspect their personal information may reach their family members and life at home. If youth think their family may react negatively, they worry about disrupting family peace or hurting and damaging the relationships within homes or friend groups. This demonstrates youth’s perception that it is the responsibility of the victim to maintain social peace and order within their relationships and the relationships of their loved ones.

Youth describe not wanting “to get others in trouble”, and this applies to both family members and friend circles. If the abuse is at home, youth may be afraid of becoming homeless if they bring the situation to light. Youth perceive the consequence of needing to flee home, or being rejected from their home as much worse than continuing on without reporting. Within boarding houses, youth describe living situations as unpredictable in relation to abuse, drugs and theft. Furthermore, youth feel inclined to protect their own family unit by not reporting if abuse came from within the home.

Youth also mention not wanting to disrupt social peace within their circle of friends. They also described the unique experience of sexual violence within the queer community as one largely not discussed within schools or community.

2.4 IDEAS FOR IMPROVING SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

Safer and Inclusive Spaces

Ensure There is No Victim Blaming

It is important that victims seeking support or services are *immediately* reminded that their experience is not their fault and the service or support focuses on ensuring that the victim never feels blamed. Because victim blaming was identified as both a contributing factor and barrier to accessing services, alleviating this experience is essential.

Choice Within Services

Upholding the personal agency of victims/survivors seeking support and services is of great importance in creating a safer space for them. Youth often mentioned wanting more “control” and this could be achieved through the provision of options within services, and empowering youth to make informed decisions based on their own assessment of what would be most comfortable or useful for them.

- Provide various options for next steps within a service, and include the option to decline a process or examination. If services currently do this, it is important to communicate the spectrum of options available clearly to service users.
- Ensure youth have decision-making power regarding who they share information with. When possible, youth want to be in control of who they share their information with and they need total transparency around where their information will go after they disclose.
- Allow youth to bring a supportive person with them when they are receiving a support, service or examination. This support may be a friend, mentor, or other support person, but would be someone the youth has chosen to be there.
- Provide art and play-based therapy.

Creating Safe And Inclusive Spaces For Particular Identities

Services need to be accessible to all ages, gender identities, sexual orientations, cultures, languages, abilities, etc. Youth recognize and recommended the development and support of population-specific services to reduce barriers for everyone. Overall, youth wanted to ensure that regardless of a person’s identity they could access a service or support that was safe and inclusive for them. Although not all populations are listed in the following, youth did offer some suggestions for how services could be improved for the following groups of people:

Male Identified Youth

Creating male specific services was highlighted during designated conversations with male identified youth. The majority stated they were unaware of services specifically for men and feel it is important to create a safe space for them. Given the stereotype of “not being masculine” if male identified victims seek help, having male specific programs that focus on identity, prevention, and peer support was recommended. Some male identified youth stated that they need to feel they can speak freely and comfortably without stigma or shame and without having “to watch their language”.

More male support workers within services is another recommendation for creating safer spaces. If a service serves male identified youth it is important to have options to work with male identified staff.

LGBTQ Youth*

It is important to ensure that services are demonstrably not homophobic or transphobic, and that LGBTQ youth's experiences and identities are respected, understood and included. Organizations must ensure that policies regarding legal names and pronouns are respected – particularly for youth who are transgender.

Youth suggested that advertisements for and promotion of services must demonstrate inclusivity by clearly communicating that they are not only for cisgendered people or heteronormative experiences of sexualized violence. Additionally, staff and support workers should be trained in CPATH (Canadian Professional Association For Transgender Health) to ensure that supports and services are informed and inclusive.

Staff within services and supports that serve LGBTQ populations, explicitly or otherwise, should have people who identify with this group on staff.

"Youth will show up if they see themselves represented"

LGBTQ youth living in rural areas identified the importance of creating discreet or anonymous ways of accessing support, particularly in rural communities. Youth suggested having a helpline as an option.

Finally, helping to find or providing temporary housing or places to stay in cases where their home is unsafe. Youth expressed that there is a need for a service that provides counselling, and support for victims and survivors. Their ideas on an effective approach are detailed later in this report in the "Prevention" section.

Aboriginal and Indigenous Youth

Possessing cultural competency, sensitivity and context around service delivery is a way we can improve services for Aboriginal and Indigenous youth. During conversations with Aboriginal and Indigenous youth it became clear that there is a need for more culturally specific spaces, services and approaches for victims and survivors of sexualized violence.

Reducing barriers to accessing Aboriginal specific supports and services is essential. Youth identified specifically reducing barriers around status and non status people, as well as those living on and off reserve, to ensure that it is easier for all Aboriginal and Indigenous youth to access the support they need.

Cultural sensitivity and competency regarding the context of Aboriginal and Indigenous people includes understanding the continued impacts and history of residential schools, life on a reservation, missing and murdered Aboriginal women and more. Services for this population would include knowledge on Aboriginal specific support services, spiritual supports, elder consultation and traditional healing like sweat lodges, ceremony and smudges. Services, therefore, could either help navigate culturally relevant support should youth want, or incorporate culturally relevant healing and teachings into their own work.

Refugee and Immigrant Youth

Immigrant and refugee youth stress the importance of services and supports that are specifically for them, staffed by people who are culturally sensitive and competent, and specifically reflect their context in experiences of sexual violence.

Youth from these populations articulated cultural differences and sensitivities regarding gender, and therefore importance is placed on service users having the option of selecting the gender of the person providing the service or support.

Newcomer youth face many difficulties accessing services or supports due to challenges inherent in adapting to life in a new place. Youth recommend increased support in navigating what is available for them as immigrant and refugee youth as many of them experienced a lack of knowledge of what currently exists in services and supports.

While language was not brought up as a specific recommendation, it was mentioned as a barrier to accessing services or supports. It is important to think of ways services can address the language or cultural barriers that exist for this population.

African Nova Scotian and Racialized Minorities

African Nova Scotian and racialized minority youth recommended that safer and more inclusive spaces in services can be created by the hiring of staff who identify with this population.

"Would be good to have counsellors that look like us - we can relate to"

"Having youth advisors who are open to the issues we face and know how to deal with us"

Services provided with a cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding of their experience will help youth feel that workers understand how their identity may influence their experience.

Safe and Specialized Supports for Young People Who Exchange Sex for Goods, Money, and Services

The dangers and risks of youth in the sex work industry are connected to sexualized violence. As a preventative measure, new and creative approaches for outreach to sex workers who are underage could be explored. Youth identified safety and protection as a focus point, but also recommended helping youth find alternative ways to earn money and support them in finding work.

More Services for Perpetrators of Sexual Violence

Youth recognized the importance of including perpetrators of sexualized violence as an important part of prevention. Cycles or patterns of sexualized violence are often perpetuated by the same person. Supporting them in a way that will change their behaviour and mind-set may help prevent future acts of sexual violence.

Youth emphasized healing as an important part of both support and prevention. Integrating different forms of therapy like art, music, storytelling and equine therapy were examples of ways of healing. Some youth showed great empathy and understanding for perpetrators, recognizing that histories of abuse, mental illness, and struggles with anger are often involved. Some youth identified deep compassion as a way to support perpetrators in healing. Comments such as *"Show them love."* *"Healing for abusers"* and *"Talk to them"* also demonstrate this perspective.

More Support for People Living in Poverty

While no specific details were given, youth believe we need more supports for those who are living in conditions of poverty.

Support for Residential School Survivors and the Proceeding Generations

Youth acknowledged the legacy of residential schools and indicated that it is important to provide more support for survivors and their proceeding generations.

Awareness and Visibility of Services and What They Offer

Raise Awareness on What Supports are and How Youth Can Access Them

When youth believe their experiences are not “severe enough” to justify reaching out for support, services can play an essential role in unpacking this stigma. Creating a more welcoming invitation for youth seeking support after experiences of sexual violence could be achieved through raising awareness of different scenarios that are often thought of as ‘less severe’ but still require support.

This approach would aide in ensuring that the victim/survivor knows they are indeed eligible and welcomed to seek support from a particular service while validating their experience. Where services only offer support to particular experiences of sexual violence, youth recommend that services recognize that there are many forms of sexual violence and it is important to take everyone’s experience seriously and not to minimize them.

“Realize that sexual violence comes in all shapes and size and no situation is minor”

Transparency About Costs

Youth identified cost as a significant perceived or actual barrier to accessing support and services, though they did not distinguish whether the cost was attributed to transportation, receiving a form of therapy or counselling, or any other costs related to services and support. Regardless, services and supports can use clear and transparent communication about their fees (or lack thereof) to address any false perceptions of inaccessibility and potentially reduce the associated barrier for youth.

More Dialogue

Raising awareness on an issue, idea or service for youth can be done by engaging youth in a conversation rather than providing information in a one-way process where youth must seek out and interpret the information for themselves.

- Teachers can discuss services and supports with their class;
- Presentations in schools can highlight the services;
- Youth can attend events where they learn more about services and supports;
- Youth representatives for services can help spread awareness and visibility of the service

Physical Presence

Posters, social media and other visual representations of information were identified as an effective strategy for raising awareness and visibility of services. When creating visible advertisements for services it is important to consider how to make these most effective for and appealing to youth;

- Location of posters and information is key to ensuring increased visibility to youth. Youth recommended targeting spaces that they normally occupy, and mentioned washrooms, schools and even websites youth access as key places.
- Social media was recommended as tool that youth are comfortable with and use frequently. They specifically recommended Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

While some youth identified using traditional and new media as effective avenues for raising awareness of services and supports, others expressed that in person discussion is more effective. In this regard, it is important for services and supports to use a multiple approaches to ensure that all youth can receive and access information.

Creating Welcoming and Comfortable Environments

Physical Space

The physical environment of a service provider plays a large role in youth's assessment of whether or not a space is welcoming and comfortable. Youth recommended that services be offered in relaxed and less sterile feeling environments. Many of the specific recommendations from youth highlighted ways to create a calm space that feels comfortable and informal. Youth suggested services use more colour to avoid looking like a sterile hospital. They indicated a welcoming sense of comfort could be achieved by including couches, cozy chairs, dim lights, as well as the addition of elements that brighten a room like flowers, textiles and lamps.

Policies and Staff Attitudes

While physical space is important in fostering a sense of comfort for youth, so too are the policies, rules and attitudes of staff.

"Don't give people titles - use first names"

"Make it so friends can come"

Youth need to feel that support staff actually care and are invested in helping them; they want people who are passionate about their job, and demonstrate care for and understanding of today's youth. Ideally, staff show respect for youth by speaking with them (not at them), making them feel heard, unrushed, and that they are taken seriously.

Youth believe services can develop relationships of trust prior to a youth accessing their services by having support/service providers spend time in youth centres or schools, so that youth can become more familiar with them and the opportunities they provide. This would help reduce barriers when a young person is seeking out help.

Duty to Report

Not understanding the professional duty to report is a source of stress for many young people. They suggested immediately and clearly communicating transparency regarding what does and does not need to be shared beyond the person to whom they are directly speaking, as well as clarity regarding when it will have to be shared with others.

Additional Supports and Services

Youth Specific Services to Address Sexualized Violence

Youth explain that they feel much more comfortable accessing programs that are specifically for youth. Youth advocated strongly to increase the funding available for youth specific programming such as the following:

- More teen centers that include supports and services for health, relationships and sexual violence;
- More spaces and services for younger youth to seek support and help.
- Designated person within the school, trained and qualified to specialize in sexual violence issues for youth, available in the school at all times.
- Creation of specific services and supports, with cultural competency for the population being served
- Services and support for youth who exchange sex for goods, services, or money.
- Programs (rehabilitation) for perpetrators of sexualized violence
- Services and programs for youth on reservations
- More supports and services for youth living with addiction.

Increased Support for Families

Youth want parents to be educated on all the impacts of technology and media so they can better engage in conversation with young people. This would allow more families to be better equipped to support youth by providing safe spaces to discuss such a topic, as well as enhance their capacity to respond should a young person need support.

“There should be courses on how to talk to children”

More Online Services and Supports

As youth often access resources via the internet, an increase in online services and supports was expressed. Where these already exist, youth suggest increasing their visibility so that more youth can access them, as well as ensuring that they provide accurate and real information.

Access to Anonymous and Confidential Services and Support

To address lack of anonymity and confidentiality when reporting, youth recommend the following:

- Services and supports be provided in neutral places that do not indicate youth are accessing it to address an occurrence of sexual violence. This is particularly important in small communities and would help diminish the barriers that come with social stigma and shame of being identified as a victim of sexual violence.
- Easily accessible services so that youth can get to and from the location without having to disclose to people on whom they depend for access to transportation.
- More private communication within schools when youth need to access the guidance counsellor. For example: not having coloured slips of paper that are given to the teacher if a student has been at guidance, or being called down to the office over the announcements.
- Spaces that are not exclusively accessed for support around sexualized violence. Youth Health Centers do this well - hosting drop-ins that don't indicate that a youth is seeking help. Providing more services in places youth already access for other things provides the option of discretion.
- It is important for youth to have discreet ways of setting up meetings or appointments, and they recommended email as an effective option for this.

Create Safe Homes

Youth recommended having safe homes they could access if they are in trouble or need somewhere to go immediately. This would be a home that is approved and certified as a safe place for youth, a “block parent” like system.

Youth Engagement

Engaging Youth in the Topic of Sexual Violence

When teaching, leading discussions, or engaging in other ways to spark constructive dialogue about sexual violence, youth give a series of requirements in order for those conversations to be most impactful for youth.

- Keep content updated by youth
- Use a conversational, active, and interactive engagement approach as opposed to lecture style teaching
- Incorporate more time for open participation and group discussions
- Be comfortable, casual and make sure everyone feels included
- Inquire about and respect gender pronouns
- Facilitate the space in a manner that encourages people to take the topic seriously
 - Constructively address those who make light of the situation or use inappropriate humor
- Discussions should be “fun” and “memorable”!
- When specifically marketing programs and services to youth, it is important to use language that youth will clearly understand regarding what is being offered and how to access it: “*Break down information, take out big words*”

Youth Engagement Within Organizations

There are many ways to engage youth and ensure their voice and participation is reflected within services or supports, while at the same time addressing the specific needs and contexts of individual organizations. It is important to see the ideas noted above as initial suggestions from youth to help services begin a conversation about how they can provide opportunities for youth involvement in a way that will make their services more accessible for everyone, including youth.

Youth recommended creating leadership opportunities within services for youth or ways for youth to inform decisions about them. Creation of these opportunities would help incorporate youth perspective, experience, and participation; may help to build relationships between services and youth; and even indirectly increase the visibility or awareness of services. Some of the specific ideas regarding youth engagement were:

- **Youth Representatives for Services**
 - Create a different and possibly more comfortable way for youth to learn about a particular service
 - Create an entry point to a service through interactions with someone closer to their age
 - Help address barriers for youth initially seeking or knowing how to seek support from a particular service.
- **Create opportunities for youth to be involved in decisions that are about or impact youth:** developing and/or using processes or structures that allow youth to

be part of decisions that impact or are about them is an important way to engage youth. Examples of this could include:

- **A Youth Board for Services-** a board made up of youth for an organization, service or program can ensure there is a process by which decisions are informed by youth in an official capacity or be designated specific areas of influence in decisions.
- **Create Peer Mentorship Opportunities** - Youth recommended investing in mentorship or peer led groups that can offer younger youth role models within programs. This was particularly mentioned as a way to celebrate and support Indigenous youth, but also referred to
 - The need for strong female role models for women and girls,
 - Athletes who need coaches to be better role models

Physical Accessibility to Services and Supports

Transportation

Youth recommended transportation to services for sexual violence be either provided by the service itself or supported through coordination of transportation. This is particularly recommended within rural communities and for Aboriginal and Indigenous youth to access traditional healing ceremonies held at a distance.

Hours of Operation

- Extend hours to ensure accessibility after school, taking into account the time of transportation.
- Ensure services are available year round - many services for youth are in schools and are closed during the summer months.
- Having someone on call 24/7 - like a crisis line
- Increase appointment times so that youth do not feel rushed.
- Provide Student Support Workers.

Ongoing and Flexible Support

Youth want to be able to meet with a service provider in out-of-office environments, access at-home services, and other personalized supports that aren't provided in an office.

Immediate Services and Support

- Availability of drop-ins or ability of those without a scheduled appointment to receive immediate supports or services
- Shorter wait times
- When wait times are necessary, ensure youth are provided with some form of in-person support.

More Collaboration "Stop Working in Silos"

Youth understand the need and express the desire for the province to work collaboratively and end the approach of working in silos on the issue of sexual violence. This means within the community of service providers but also the community itself.

SECTION 3 | TRAINING AND CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

It is clear that youth need to connect with people comfortable navigating the topic of sexual violence and who have accurate information on the realities and complexities of sexual violence. The youth we spoke to have identified that deeper and more relevant training for those working with victims/survivors will reduce and prevent victim blaming, validate a victim's experiences rather than minimize them, and offer more appropriate care. Young people also feel that increasing training opportunities on best practices in responding to sexual violence may lead to creating safe and inclusive spaces for young people needing this kind of support.

Ideally, youth want to see an increase in the availability of specialists trained on responding to sexual violence. However, given the understanding that many communities do not have services that exclusively exist to respond to sexual violence, or offer youth specific services, young people are asking that the services they actually go to be offered training on how to respond to sexual violence as well. In many communities, these may be teachers, doctors, family and friends. Youth are driving home the point that support positions in *various* fields should be offered this training.

Given the knowledge that youth often turn to informal supports within their communities such as family and friends, they suggest that sexual violence crisis response training, facilitated by a qualified professional, be available for community members to support their capacity to respond when youth turn to them as primary supports. This training should include learning about local resources to support them in directing youth to other community supports and services.

A trauma informed approach was particularly named and youth feel that implementing this approach would lessen the trauma experienced in seeking support for a sexually violent situation, ensure an increased understanding of the complexities of sexual violence, offer a much less re-traumatizing pathway to support, and give support workers greater capacity to appropriately support disclosures. Understanding the psychological and physiological weight of sexual violence is so powerful that youth state staff who do not operate with a trauma informed approach actually act as barrier to them accessing the care they need.

Another recommendation is to make culturally relevant supports more accessible for Aboriginal and Indigenous youth, newcomers to the country, and young people who live within other cultural traditions. Some youth see the need for Aboriginal and Indigenous healers to be seen as more legitimate in western society. As stated before, young people benefit from culturally relevant supports, and they feel more comfortable when they see their identities reflected within support staff and program delivery.

Also recommended is that Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health (CPATH) training be made available to service providers to increase the capacity and sensitivity of supports for transgender youth.

SECTION 4 | THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

What the Justice System Means to Youth

Throughout these conversations, it became clear that youth had a very strong belief in what they *think* the justice system should offer. When using the term justice system, youth were referring to police officers, lawyers, judges, and everyone and all processes involved in the legal action process. Youth believe the process of taking legal action against sexual violence begins with making a formal report to the police and doesn't end until after long lasting court procedures.

To some youth, the justice system is a support they feel they could turn to for safety, protection, and legal action. In addition to the expectations of accessibility that youth hold all formal services to, young people state that they especially rely on the justice system to respond to illegal activity, as well as to tap into the system's power and authority to take legal action for sexual violence beyond their means. The justice system and law enforcement officers are their primary source for support in these situations.

Mistrust in the Justice System

However, there is a disparity between what youth expect from the justice system and what it is mandated to address and what actual capacity it has. As a result a lack of trust and respect follows. The perception the majority of the youth spoken with held was that within the context of sexual violence the justice system is either non-existent or failing. There is little belief amongst young people that they would be supported, or even believed if they pursued legal action. Youth specifically perceive the justice system as offering inadequate support for victims, protecting predators and lacking in healing-oriented care.

Although young people *want* to be able to rely on the justice system to address the sexual violence in their lives, they understand proving an assault to be a largely traumatic experience, likely to be followed by disappointment in insufficient repercussions for the offender. Youth describe feeling "afraid to face [the] attacker in court", that "perpetrators do not get enough time" and that "it won't change anything". Youth also used single words such as court, corruption, bureaucracy, paperwork, and institutional distrust when describing their understanding and reaction to the legal process of the justice system. It is important to note that when discussing the context of sexual violence, youth mentioned an ineffective and inadequate justice system both as *being* and contributing to sexual violence. Some youth believe that the justice system actually contributes to the perpetuation of sexual violence by encouraging offenders to feel invincible, knowing that it is unlikely that their victim will seek legal action due to the perceived ineffectiveness and traumatization of the justice system. In simpler words, youth believe a significant reason offenders commit sexually violent acts is because they think they can get away with it.

Barriers to Initial Contact

Youth perceive police as an entry point to accessing the justice system, usually in the form of formally reporting sexual violence. Youth have stated that fear and prejudices are the two main barriers they face in reaching out to police for support. In addition to stigma and not being believed or understood (two significant barriers for youth to access any service), the initial fear in reporting sexual violence to the police is the concern that police officers may take legal action to a level higher than the youth is comfortable with.

Young people have also experienced prejudices such as racism and sexism within the police force that leads to a definitive lack of trust in individuals working within the justice system. Youth elaborate on this when discussing increased equity and sensitivity practices.

The relation between underage drinking and its connection to sexualized violence is also a barrier for youth when accessing police. Many young people, both victims and bystanders, are reluctant to report sexual violence if there is a chance that they may be caught drinking underage. It is essential to ensure that young people *know* that can come forward if they have been sexually assaulted, without being penalized for drinking alcohol.

Safer Reporting

Since initial contact with the justice system is often through law enforcement, and often consists of reporting sexual violence, young people explain the many barriers that must be addressed in order for them to feel safe to disclose.

Often, youth may disclose to a community-based support, or even police, without wanting to take legal action. Part of their fear of making a formal report is that legal action will be taken to a level they are not comfortable with or do not consent to. Youth have also consistently mentioned the contrary barrier as fear that they will either not be believed, or not be taken seriously. Youth state that they need police to better understand where victims/survivors are coming from and to take every report seriously. Other times, they may be worried about being “considered a rat” in their community.

Youth also suggested because of the traumatic nature of sexual violence, it is important to minimize the times an individual must recount their story. Youth overwhelmingly responded that whether formally or informally, the person supporting a youth must be available to listen, be open to understanding their perspective, and offer wisdom in a caring and nonjudgmental way. Most importantly, youth want victims to feel as supported and as comfortable as possible during this time because without support, young people will not turn to services for help.

Safer Space

Upholding the personal agency of victims/survivors seeking support and services is of utmost importance in creating a safer space for them. In 2.2 What Makes Services Accessible to Youth, youth describe exactly what safe space within a service means to them. Youth offer specific elements of safe space as they relate to interacting with various arms of the justice system.

Youth often mentioned wanting more “control” when accessing services. Reaching out for support can leave youth feeling extremely vulnerable and when power imbalances in supportive relationships are overt, youth can feel a significant loss of control within the whole process. One way of preserving autonomy could be to offer options within services, as well as empowering youth to make informed decisions based on their own assessment of what would be most comfortable or useful for them. Youth identified the following examples for potential options within services:

- Provide, without pressure, various options for next steps within a service. Include the option to decline a process or examination. If services currently do this, it is important to ensure that all options are communicated clearly to service users.

- Ensure youth have decision-making power regarding who they share information with. When possible, youth want to be in control of who they share their information with and they need total transparency around where their information will go after they disclose.
- Provide the option to appear in court, or not. Unless it is mandatory, young people want the option to not appear in court if they do not feel safe to do so.

It is important that victims seeking support or services are immediately reminded that their experience is not their fault and the service or support focuses on ensuring that the victim never feels blamed. Because victim blaming was identified as both a contributing factor and barrier to accessing services, alleviating this experience is essential. Youth also identified being intimidated by individuals in the justice system which they explain is not conducive to progress or healing. Instead youth insist that police be sensitive and respectful to all identities by ensuring they are not victim blaming, or perpetuating gender stereotypes and stigmas around sexual violence.

Capacity to Respond to Sexual Violence

Youth across the board advocate for increased training in various fields for people who respond to the needs of youth. Youth state that a trauma informed approach in particular should be applied when dealing with victims and survivors of sexualized violence and that this training should be provided consistently to police and other arms of the justice system. Within a field where it is already difficult to be believed and understood, youth believe that trauma informed training for the police force especially would help remedy the re-traumatized environment in which young people come forward to disclose their experiences.

Increased Sensitivity and Equity Practices

Prevention measures for Aboriginal and Indigenous communities must work towards the reconciliation and rebuilding of relationships that have been and continue to be abused. Some Aboriginal youth see this need as a priority that requires honest alliances to be formed. They say it is essential to support more traditional cultural roles, healing, approaches, rights and services.

In general, youth also suggest that police, lawyers, and officers of the law undergo mental health background checks and better screenings to ensure they do not have racist, sexist, or prejudicial tendencies. They also state the importance of equal treatment under the law regardless of gender identity and the relationship of those involved as these are actions that some youth remark they are not seeing.

Improved Justice, Healing and Support

Youth offered diverse views on how offenders should be either prosecuted or supported after committing sexually violent crimes. Some youth consistently expressed that they want to see more accountability for sexual offenses as well as a mandatory minimum sentence for sex offenders. Others want to see “healing for abusers” and consider this to be a holistic and inclusive part of prevention. Because cycles or patterns of sexualized violence are often perpetuated by the same person, supporting them to understand the impacts of their behaviour, and heal themselves, will help prevent future acts of sexualized violence.

Many of the dangers and risks associated with the sexual exploitation of youth are connected to sexualized violence. However, because exchanging sex for goods, money or

services when underage is illegal, young people cannot disclose their situation without that information being formally reported. As a result, there are no formal supports which exclusively and openly serve youth living in this situation. This means there is nowhere for them to go to seek professional support, access harm reduction provisions, or find a safe space amongst people who understand their specific experiences and are there to support them. As a preventative measure, new and creative approaches for outreach to young people who exchange sex for goods, services, or money are necessary.

New Laws and Approaches for Technology

With continuously growing concerns around technology and sexual violence, youth need a clear and easy way to understand laws around cyber violence. Given the lack of clarity on laws around sexualized violence online or with other technology (including apps such as Snap Chat) youth emphasized the importance of this awareness, creation and education specifically as a preventative measure. Youth perceive the current laws around distribution of nude photos impact potential victims of non-consensual photo sharing for the creation of 'pornography' more so than those who share them without consent. They are asking that new laws help to support victims, and discourage those who share them without consent.

SECTION 5 | SCHOOLS

Youth identified schools as a critical site for prevention and intervention of sexual violence. Schools have the unique positional advantage of connecting with youth on a day-to-day basis while bearing a responsibility to influence their development. Many youth believe schools can be doing much more to address a culture that normalizes sexual violence and that the current efforts, both inside and outside the classroom, are inadequate. This was highlighted when schools were consistently identified as a factor contributing to sexual violence, as well as highlighted as a key location and champion in prevention.

Sex Education in Schools

Youth consistently identified “*Bad Sex Education*” as one of the most common factors contributing to a culture that allows sexual violence to exist. It became clear that the current delivery and content of sex education is not consistent across the province and is often influenced by each teacher’s personal beliefs or comfort level. Youth also believed that relying on guardians to educate them on this topic was ineffective as many parents and guardians won’t engage youth on this subject, are misinformed, or perpetuate their own biases, stereotypes and beliefs. Youth offered thoughtful insight on how to improve the content, approach and delivery and turn it into an effective means of prevention. While increasing youths overall education as a prevention effort, they believe this could also help victims and survivors better understand their experiences as well as have them validated, resulting in more people feeling comfortable and empowered to access supports.

– “*Less anatomy, more sexuality*”

Understanding Consent for all Sexual Activities

“*Schools don’t really go over what consent really is or how important it is - they should*”

Young people want and need clarification on what is and is not consent in *all* aspects of sexual activity and not just [heterosexual, penile-vaginal intercourse] there isn’t consistent understanding across the province on the complexities of this issue. Education should cover all aspects of consent and address when someone cannot give consent; including the influence of substance use, power dynamics and legal age of consent details for those under the age of 18. Youth feel it is important to adopt an enthusiastic consent approach in place of a “no means no approach” to re-enforce that in the absence of a “no” there is still a need for a clear “yes.” This should also emphasize that navigating consent is an ongoing process where consent can be retracted at any point. Furthermore, they believe that conversations about consent should be taught early, even if it is not immediately taught in reference to sexual activity.

Sexual Violence and a Deeper Understanding of What It Is

“*Don’t teach how not to get raped - teach not to rape*”

Youth were clear that they want to be more informed about the complexities of sexual violence and have opportunities in schools to discuss and learn about it. Youth want there to be more awareness on everything that is considered to be sexual violence as they believe many of these actions are sometimes seen as acceptable or normalized behaviour. Some specifically asked to learn more about rape culture and how it manifests and enables sexual violence to exist. There were multiple, specific asks from youth that schools approach sexual violence in a way that does not promote victim blaming or re-enforce stereotypes of

sexual violence. Specifically, they wanted to re-enforce the facts that anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence, help reduce the stigma around male identified victims, and eliminate the assumption it is only a heteronormative experience. Youth ask for there not to be gendered attention to language when discussing sexual violence, as it typically stereotypes female identified people as victims. They also want to be more informed around laws and legal aspects of sexual violence, as they believe they are not widely known by youth and feel this is a great need.

LGBTQ Experiences

Sex education needs to include exploration and clarification of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Youth emphasized the importance of ensuring LGBTQ+ experiences of sexuality and sexual violence are not erased through omission or language use.

Healthy Relationships, Dealing with Pressure and Communication

Youth identified that there should be open discussions about the components of healthy and unhealthy relations, as well as how to navigate them.

Peer Pressure

Youth identified that sexual activity can often become a competition amongst peers where terms like “kill count” are used to describe the number of people someone has been sexually active with. They believe it’s important to eliminate this competitive attitude and the extremely problematic language in reference to sexual partners. With this pressure comes the concept of ‘virgin shame’, where youth are stigmatized for not engaging in sexual activity. They ask for more discussion around the significance of a person’s first time to be when they are comfortable and ready and not to be something pressured or shamed into. Youth want an increased awareness around respecting all choices of sexual intimacy or not, and reduce the glorification of sex as paramount.

Partner Pressure

Youth mentioned a need for increased discussions on how to navigate pressures around sexual activity within relationships, such as how to check in with partners to avoid assumptions around consent. Youth want to learn how to build trust through communication and promote relationships as places where it is alright to say no and feel respected.

The Impacts and Laws Around Technology

“Educate youth about sexting/nudes and what to do if someone tries to force you to do one..”

Given the proliferation of sexual violence through the use of technology amongst youth, it is urgent that schools use sex education classes to directly address sexting, distribution of nude photos, harassment and the pressures around sexual activity online. This should include information on the laws around distribution of underage photos as this was not always known amongst the youth we spoke with.

Navigating a Porn Culture

Many youth acknowledged that they are exposed to pornography and some say they are aware of the negative messages. Youth believe a sex education class is the place for more discussion of the impacts of pornography and its unrealistic depictions of sex. While youth

had diverse opinions on the topic of pornography, the prevalence of its negative impacts on youth are undeniable.

The Influence of Media

Youth want there to be more discussions and awareness of the power and influence of media to help increase their media literacy particularly around topics of hypersexualization, unrealistic expectations and sexual violence. Teachers should ensure to include music videos, lyrics in popular songs, and various forms of journalism.

Substance Use

"Make it understandable that just because someone buys you a drink it doesn't mean you have to engage in sexual activity"

Youth want more education on the effects of substance use, particularly negative side effects. Youth also recommended touching on the impacts of using steroids as well. In particular youth want more understanding around substance use as it relates to consent for sexual activity.

Oppression and Discrimination of Identities and Populations

Youth want schools to bring attention to how sexism, transphobia, homophobia and racism are interconnected and affected by sexual violence. They want to learn more about how oppression and discrimination impact the context of sexual violence.

How to Identify Abuse and What to Do

Youth identify increased overall awareness of what constitutes abuse and how to get out of these situations as a preventative measure of sexual violence.

Delivery

Youth recommend consistency of the delivery of sex education so that it does not differ drastically between schools. The approach should be sex positive to create a safer and more informative environment. Teachers should use a gender inclusive approach, avoiding the use of gendered language around sexual violence, and the application of gender stereotypes that perpetuate unhealthy expectations and social norms. Youth question the necessity of segregating genders in class as this practice can be unsafe for transgender youth. Sex education should be engaging and promote dialogue amongst peers and teachers.

Educators

"Take students seriously - if they ask a question about sex they are looking for an answer; educate them", If they try to discuss a topic don't brush it off"

Based on their own reflections, youth note that they know when teachers are uncomfortable with the subject matter of sexual violence and suggest teachers need more support and information to be effective. They also suggest that teachers may be paired with guest speakers/qualified professionals on the subject. It is essential that only qualified teachers teach sexual education, healthy living or a potential new course on sexual violence. There needs to be specific education around sexual violence for teachers before they can begin dialogue with students around this topic. Those leading sex education need to be comfortable with the conversation and hold no judgments.

Process

"Don't talk at us - engage us in the conversation"

Sex education should include many opportunities for youth to engage in open discussions as it is as more effective way of youth engaging on the subject. There should be guest speakers from various community organizations or experts in the field to come do workshops with the class. Youth recommended using interactive formats such as drama, art, discussions and workshops to engage youth. Classes should be led by people from across the gender spectrum, and especially someone who is from the LGBTQ community should teach content related to that community.

Sex education should begin at an earlier age and continue until graduation. A sexual violence unit with specific non-negotiable curriculum components should be a requirement for high school graduation. This course curriculum would be a provincial standard and expectation so as to not shift from school to school.

Improvements to the School Environment

"Actually take action in schools against bullying/verbal harassment in schools."

Youth acknowledged the importance of addressing not only curriculum changes but also the larger school environment as elements of it were identified as a contributing factor to sexual violence. This was often addressed as being exposed to forms of sexual violence and a lack of consequences that can indirectly perpetuate the culture of sexual violence.

- "Lack of prevention within schools - abusers are not taught that this is wrong from the beginning,"
- "Not enough in class protection"
- "Kids get away with things at schools"
- "Schools don't have enough pressure NOT to do stuff"

Youth believe content and conversations in classrooms should also be supported and reinforced outside of the classroom through policies, action, campaigns, events, awareness and education. Youth had the following feedback for schools:

Supervision: Youth mentioned that sometimes there are areas in the school that don't always feel as supervised. They encourage schools to take more active approaches to ensure all areas are properly supervised.

Staff: Youth want to encourage teachers and staff to take a more active role in helping to support a safer environment within schools. Youth want teachers and staff to hold stricter punishments for sexual harassment within the school as many youth across the province feel that not enough is being done. Some suggestions are for teachers to:

- Ask students to work together to combat stereotypes that help encourage a culture of sexual violence.
- Have teachers set-aside time to check in with their students to see if they are being bullied or harassed.
- Take action when sexual violence is seen in and outside of the classroom within the schools.

School Policies: Schools need to reflect on how their policies can re-enforce a culture of sexual violence and ensure that every aspect of their school environment is discouraging this type of culture.

- Dress Codes: While youth had polarized views regarding what should be done around clothing, they did highlight how dress codes that target predominantly female identified youth, are directly connected to hypersexualization and victim blaming. Schools need to be aware of the larger message of what their policies on dress codes are telling youth.
- Transportation Policy: Youth specifically gave the example of the transportation policy in the Northern Region as problematic as it re-enforces the idea that sexual violence is only a heteronormative experience and does not take into account the safety or security of those who are transgender.
- Youth ask schools to re-evaluate their policies to ensure that it is contributing to a school environment that does not reinforce these ideas.

Addressing the Negative Impacts of Sports Culture

"It's a privilege to be on the team."

Youth recommended schools as a place to help address the negative impact of sports culture on the issue of sexual violence. Youth believe that sports culture can have a role in promoting, supporting and pressuring youth around sexualized violence. Youth ask schools to find ways to address the culture of locker room talk that often places pressure on teammates to do and act in potentially negative manners, or share nude photos. They believe there is opportunity to engage athletes in creating this change by including them in a process of education on the legal implications of sharing nude photography. Youth also believe schools should hold more responsibility on coaches for the behaviour of their team. Should a coach not take action on a particular youth if they were involved in sexualized violence, then there would be repercussions on the coach. This would help provide motivation for coaches to take more active roles in shifting the culture of their team and holding them more accountable.

Improved Services and Supports

Youth acknowledged there are many supports they seek that are not specifically focused on sexual violence. It was clear that the ability to build relationships and trust within schools with various adults was a big strength. While the earlier section: Services and Supports covered many of the barriers and improvements stated by youth around services within schools (Please refer to section 2) they also suggested a designated person to provide support and services for sexualized violence in schools. This would be someone who is professionally trained and qualified that would be available in the school at all times. This would ensure youth would know where they could access adequate and qualified support.

Raise Awareness for Services Available to Youth

Schools need to help raise awareness of the services and supports both within the schools and in the surrounding communities, and what they offer. Schools can help engage students in conversation around services as opposed to a one-way process where youth must seek out and interpret the information themselves. This can be done in classes, presentations or workshops in schools. Youth also suggest organizations with posters on issues or services should use schools as a strategic location to raise awareness.

Schools Role In a Culture Shift

Schools can be a champion in leading a culture shift both inside and outside of the classroom. Youth believe this culture shift should be in all areas of the community, including schools. The areas to address that are listed in the following Section: Culture Shift, applies for efforts schools and their students can be doing both in and outside of the classroom.

SECTION 6 | IDEAS FOR PREVENTION OF SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

6.1 CREATING A CULTURE SHIFT

Recognizing there are many factors contributing to the prevalence of sexual violence, youth repeatedly identified the need for a complete culture shift. This would acknowledge the social norms and understandings that may not directly promote sexual violence but rather normalize and minimize it. By addressing these necessary culture shifts, youth believe that it could have significant impact on the prevention of sexual violence in the future. Youth call for a multifaceted approach to building community awareness, recognizing that various forms, locations, approaches and involvement are necessary to make these effective.

All aspects of increased education and understanding around sexual violence, consent, partner and peer pressure, educating children regarding abuse, sports culture and laws that were identified within Section 5 – Schools (Sex Education in Schools) also applies here to what the larger community also needs. In community however, different methods to raise awareness and education for all ages and populations need to be incorporated.

Substance Use and Addictions

Youth want the larger community to have a better understanding around substance use as it relates to sexual violence and addictions. They believe this increased understanding and awareness is important in eliminating the victim blaming that often is placed on victims who were intoxicated. With this should come an increased understanding of consent when substance use is involved, as well as the laws that guide these decisions. Youth also believe that any awareness or education should also target the role of bystanders in sexual violence as it relates to substance use, as they have a responsibility and role to play in prevention. Youth also felt strongly about creating more education on addictions as well as how to seek services and help when experiencing addiction.

Navigating a Porn Culture

Youth had very conflicting views around how pornography and sexual violence were interconnected and therefore also how to address it. Some youth held an abolishment standpoint, making any form of porn inaccessible and illegal, while other youth wanted the stigma and alienation of watching porn to stop. Regardless of their stance, youth did agree that porn encouraged unrealistic ideas of sex and violence, coupled with a lack of opportunities for peers to learn and discuss how to navigate and understand it. Youth know that porn can impact individual perceptions of healthy sexual relationships and therefore want seek more education and clear conversations to bring awareness on the issue. Youth feel this should not solely be targeted at youth but for the community as a whole. Some youth even recommend that porn have more clear disclaimers that it does not depict real life.

Addressing Stereotypes and Norms

Gender

Youth often said that gender stereotypes perpetuate sexual violence by placing pressure (internal or social) on individuals to live up to problematic expectations. While this is true for all gender identities, youth spoke specifically to pressures on male identified and female identified people.

Male Identified: Youth want there to be an emphasis on removing the stereotypes and pressures around what it means to be 'masculine' as they believe these are often "toxic ideas" that reinforce male entitlement, the belief men need to have sex, what it means to be strong and that men are perpetrators and never victims. Male identified youth spoke specifically about the pressures with their peers to not be "whipped". These negative terms and references reinforce pressures on men around what are and are not healthy relationships with their partners. These ideas around what it means to be 'masculine' make it challenging to seek help or support around sexualized violence out of fear that they may appear weak or perhaps not taken seriously. They also tend to promote unhealthy social norms that could perpetuate a culture of violence.

Female Identified: Youth wanted there to be more efforts to address the victim blaming, slut shaming and issues around clothing and hypersexualization that often is targeted predominantly at female identified people.

Oppression and Discrimination of Identities and Populations

Youth want attention, acknowledgement and mindful approaches brought to the issue of sexualized violence and its connection to systemic and historical oppression. There needs to be more education and awareness to address all forms of oppression and discrimination. Youth in particular references racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

Clothing

Clothing was a rare topic that polarized youth regarding its role within the context of sexualized violence. Some youth believe monitoring clothing choices as a way to prevent sexual violence places blame and responsibility on an individual to protect themselves.

"Instead of making us feel uncomfortable about our clothing choices - just because we are wearing a skirt it doesn't mean you have to look up it."

"Women aren't sexual objects so they shouldn't be treated like one in schools or anywhere"

Others feel clothing, particularly for women, needs stricter regulations as a preventative measure.

"Inform girls to dress more appropriately,"

"More regulations on clothing or lack thereof in the media".

When asked to deeper explain the root of their message, youth more often transformed the concept into their final explanation that people's attire was not at the root of sexual violence. Instead, hypersexualization and how people are portrayed in the media are the issues that need to be dismantled.

Hypersexualization

Youth want to address and stop the hypersexualization of people because of what they are, or are not wearing. This issue was raised by youth across the gender spectrum. While it was referenced mostly in regards to women, youth were able to see it as an issue impacting all people, regardless of genders and backgrounds. Youth believe that any prevention initiatives around hypersexualization need to be inclusive of Aboriginal and Indigenous culture and gay and lesbian relationships.

Eliminate Segregation of Genders and Promote Respect

"Stop teaching the genders to compete with each other; teach them to work together" Youth explained that boys vs girls games create a separation and divide between genders. They believe that it is important to bring people of all genders together more, rather than segregate them. They suggest creating more spaces where people of all genders work together, collaborate and learn mutual respect. Youth believe by focusing more on this, it will re-enforce respect and equality for all. Youth also feel that segregation by gender can also perpetuate a stereotype that sexual violence is only a heteronormative experience.

It is a Community Responsibility

"Teachers-bystanders-everyone needs to start getting more angry about sexual violence no matter how severe and stand up and tell someone who can enforce and give consequences to perpetrators." Youth are calling for communities to recognize that sexual violence is everyone's responsibility, and regardless of the severity of its manifestation, it should not be tolerated. Raising awareness on this will help shift the responsibility of addressing sexual violence from a particular service provider or individual, to a collective community response.

Breaking the Silence

The youth in conversations asked for a focus on breaking the silence around sexualized violence in schools, workplaces and communities particularly in a way that reduces the stigma and blame often placed on victims. They suggest:

- Focus campaigns on being open about this topic
- Include artistic methods such as songs, writing, art - to draw people's attention
- Create more support groups or talking circles

Reduce the Stigma Around Mental Illness

Youth want to reduce the stigma of mental illness in the community. It is important to create a safer community for youth to ask for support in their healing process and to reduce the suffering experienced by individuals as a result of sexual violence.

Religious Spaces

Religion was noted as a barrier when addressing sexualized violence. Youth encourage religious institutions and practitioners to discourage any form of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, etc... within their communities of belief. While trying to encourage acceptance and respect, youth highlighted that religious and cultural spaces will need different approaches to addressing sexualized violence that can align and be based upon their beliefs.

How to Create a Culture Shift

Given the variety of audiences and ways in which people hear and learn, youth suggested using multiple approaches for raising awareness. They determined schools, communities, workplaces, and other communal spaces as ideal locations to help increase the level of understanding. Youth believe that it is essential to use multiple approaches and suggested a few they felt would be most effective:

- Youth involvement in designing and implementing awareness and educational campaigns that are targeted at youth. Youth facilitation was highlighted as a key way to engage youth, or youth boards.

- Public speakers from organizations, survivors and role models to speak on the topic brought into schools, communities and other places.
- Use campaigns such as “Hollaback Halifax” to mobilize people on the issue.
- Webinars
- The media and advertisements.
- Conferences or community discussion so more people can engage in dialogue based discussions on the topics. Youth emphasized the particular importance to make these more available in rural areas.
- Media such as Radio, TV, Newspapers, Internet, Magazines.
- Social Media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
- Posters and flyers that are clear and offer the critical information people are lacking. Youth recommend ensuring the posters are in places that people access, such as washrooms.
- Peer to peer support groups that allow people more places to engage in the topic and learn.
- Connect awareness and education campaigns to cultural learnings and teaching to make it more relevant to their context.
 - This was particularly highlighted in Aboriginal and Indigenous groups to connect to sacred teachings.

Schools were highlighted as a key place for prevention initiatives targeted at youth, whether through curriculum, sex education, supports and services or other education and awareness initiatives.

6.2 MEDIA

“Use media to send positive messages to youth instead of shoving garbage down their throats.”

Through the use of music videos, lyrics, TV shows, commercials, movies and magazines, youth see media promoting desensitization towards sexual violence while promoting the hypersexualization of people. They are however, passionate about harnessing its strengths and influence in a way that could create positive change to combat some of the negative influences it so often has.

Media as a Tool

Youth recommend using media to help increase awareness around support and services for victims and survivors to ensure that more people know what is available and where to go. They believe that this increased awareness could also help reduce shame and stigma around victims of sexual violence by increasing the conversation and awareness of the topic.

Youth also believe that media could be used as a tool to address many contributing factors (see those listed in “Raising Awareness and Education Section”) by creating more awareness by having workshops or campaigns in schools.

Youth also felt that there is a need for more positive actions to be promoted in the media as opposed to negative actions. One group recommended creating a new radio station that could highlight what they called “Truth News” which would share the positive things happening in the community and how to get involved. Youth also believe this would be a way to access and engage more youth through media.

Limitations on the Media

"Take rape culture out of media"

Youth believe that there is a need to place restrictions or bans on media that promotes unhealthy relationships, sexism, sexual violence, harassment or body shaming. Some youth went as far to ask for it to be illegal in Nova Scotia for there to be advertisements that promote hypersexualization or dehumanization.

"Portray people less as a sexy slab of meat and start treating them as actual human beings"

Youth also want to see better representation of women in the media:

"More media that passes the Bechtal test - when women are defined by bodies they define themselves by bodies and sexual violence continues."

They also noted that the messages around men were problematic as they portray men as "dominant and emotionless". They wanted these types of imagery to stop or be combated with alternative, more positive messages.

Youth also asked to address the amount of violence often portrayed in the music industry. Youth felt there should be stricter policies to eliminate any promotion of sexual violence in music videos. One youth said it should be "illegal to romanticize hustling a women."

Knowing the challenges around restricting these messages, it is important to at least have more warnings and ratings on videos.

6.3 TECHNOLOGY

The role of technology in modern society is undeniable and therefore there need to be specific approaches around its education, restrictions and its use as a tool for prevention.

Raising Awareness and Education on Technology

With continuously growing concerns around technology and sexual violence, youth need a clear and easy way to understand laws around cyber violence. Given the current lack of clarity on laws around sexualized violence online or with other technology (including apps such as Snap Chat) youth emphasize the importance of the education and preventative awareness for online interactions. There is a need to help increase youths understanding of how technology and sexual violence can be connected, particularly in regards to the exchange of nude photographs for those underage. Youth specifically want to be more informed on how to keep their information private and protected. As technology advances and more platforms, applications and social media outlets are created, prevention initiatives need to begin addressing what is relevant to youth now.

Restrictions on Technology

Youth know that social media is a large factor in harassment and photo sharing. They recommend that Facebook freeze accounts that have been reported for cyber abuse and the government should make more specific boundaries around social media. Technology is also a portal to extremely violent or sexually graphic images and videos. It is important to have an online barrier that is brought up before you play anything that may contain these types of imagery. They state the current warnings are inefficient as they ask if you are above the age of 18, however require no confirmation of proof. Youth want better barriers that would actually limit people under the age of 18 to access these types of websites, videos and media. There should be better ways to trace cyber-stalking and bullying online to ensure that those who continue to do these acts can be traced and held accountable.

Technology as a Tool of Prevention

Technology also has a role in educating and helping people find supports and services. Youth suggest there should be more apps that address the issue of sexual violence and show you all the services available in your area. Although they didn't elaborate you also suggested that apps could also be useful for counselling.

6.4 INCREASED PROGRAMS AND SUPPORTS AS A FORM OF PREVENTION

Supports and Services should be acknowledged for their larger contribution towards prevention. They create spaces where resiliency is fostered; where youth can go to access resources, information, engage in informative dialogue with experienced youth workers who help equip them with the tools they need to interact more positively in their communities.

Increased Funding for Youth Programs and Services

Youth emphasized the importance of increasing support and funding for youth programs, spaces and services that allow youth to discuss issues relating to sexual violence as a direct prevention measure. There was an understanding from youth for the need to create places outside of schools that were youth friendly and inclusive. For communities that do not have any current programs, youth suggest funding to create spaces that would offer a place for guidance, information and support particularly in rural areas. Funding that supports current programs could also help programs that do prevention work to travel across the province and speak about issues related to sexualized violence.

Opportunities for Mentorship Programs/ Positive Role Models

Youth continuously highlighted the importance of having positive role models in youth's lives. They believe that positive role models is an effective way of prevention to model healthy lifestyles while creating a relationship of trust and support. Youth asked for there to be more peer led groups where younger youth could see older youth as role models. While the following were specific asks, this goes for all identities and populations:

- Aboriginal and Indigenous youth asked specifically for this as a way to celebrate their culture and support indigenous youth with having more pride. This was also as a way to combat racism that Aboriginal and Indigenous youth felt could have positive benefits.
- Strong female identified role models for young female identified youth.
- Athletes.

Increased Family and Parental Supports

"There should be courses on how to talk to children"

Many youth identified family as a place they would turn to for support around sexual violence. It is important to provide increased support and education for families around the topic so they can be better equipped to support youth and direct them to more formal services. This education should include the impacts of technology and media so they can better understand its impact and engage in conversation with their youth.

Support for Residential School Survivors and the Proceeding Generations

Issues of intergenerational trauma from residential school experiences continues to have painful impacts, therefore, prevention initiatives must use an intergenerational approach. Youth highlight the need for support groups for those affected as well as programs that

enable survivors to relearn and pass down their culture to the youth in order to rebuild traditional knowledge and pride.

More Supports and Services for those Living in Poverty

While no specific details were given, youth believe we need more accessible supports for those who are living in conditions of poverty.

6.5 ADDRESSING OPPRESSION

While all forms of oppression need to be addressed, youth specifically highlighted the experiences of Aboriginal and Indigenous populations, transgender or gender-non-conforming people, people who are not heterosexual, people of colour, and women. Focusing on dismantling discrimination and prejudices is a prevention method that prioritizes shifting dominant culture so that all people are viewed equally, better understood and respected. Youth named many forms of oppression and weighted them all significantly, however they offered deep insight into the following categories.

Transphobia

In regards to the experiences of transgender youth, young people have suggested that the creation of education around the experiences of transgender youth was necessary to promote safety and understanding. Part of this awareness would be to educate people on the importance of using the pronouns that people personally identify as appropriate.

Systemic Racism Toward Indigenous and Aboriginal Youth

During the community conversations participants noted that youth of color and Indigenous and Aboriginal youth are at times the targets and recipients of racism and oppression, making them more vulnerable to sexualized violence. Youth reported that they have a lack of trust in the justice system due to their perceived understanding that it often portrays elements of racism and oppression, which in turn, act as a barrier for youth accessing it. Young people also say that they see an overrepresentation of certain populations targeted by police and in prison, and want this addressed. This sentiment was expressed multiple times, but youth did not elaborate on it.

Youth believe there is an important role for government to play in addressing the impact of historic and systemic oppression on Aboriginal and Indigenous youth. Some youth understand the destruction, contamination and theft of land as violence against Aboriginal and Indigenous populations. They perceive government inaction on addressing sexual violence in Aboriginal and Indigenous populations as removing barriers to profit and development presented by their communities' resistance. Some youth perceive this as making them the government's lowest priority when responding to sexual violence, thus the historical and present contexts need to be included in considerations of effective preventative measures.

When youth discussed sexual violence amongst Aboriginal and Indigenous populations, they highlighted the large and alarming rates at which Aboriginal women are going missing or being murdered. For these youth, this is a clear example of the disproportionate experience of sexual violence by Aboriginal and Indigenous youth. Some participants spoke

of the importance of a National Inquiry into this matter and mentioned an existing twitter campaign, “*#nativelivesmatter*”, as one way of highlighting this issue.

Oppression of Women

It is important to acknowledge the historical and present context of women's oppression and its direct impact on sexualized violence. While youth didn't have specific ways they would like to see this addressed, they did emphasize the need to challenge the current distribution of power and deconstruct how women are portrayed in the media and our society. They also wanted more appreciation of women with a focus on empowerment.

6.6 PERCEIVED INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

There were many prevention suggestions put forth by youth that were more statements rather than specific ideas. These were directed towards themselves, peers, bystanders, and offenders. There was an overwhelming number statements of empowerment and resilience; however many were about personal responsibility. Some of the statements placed more personal responsibility back on victims. These were statements that often saw personal protection as a means of prevention. This sheds light onto the reality that many youth feel that prevention is on them as individuals. Many of these suggestions were centred on alcohol and consent.

- “Don't go to parties” “ Know Your Limits”
- *“Have a sober friend with you if you think something might happen”*
- *“Stand by your choice of consent if you said no - try to be strong against pressure even if it's hard”*

However, there was also a broader theme of youth wanting to learn how to use their individual power to build strength, empowerment and resilience amongst young communities. Youth believe this can be promoted through:

- Encouraging peers to stand up against pressures,
- Not being afraid to educate one another,
- Supporting one another
- Respecting each other's feelings and encouraging each other to make better choices.

Youth want more opportunities to continue to build individual and community resiliency and strength to stand up against sexual violence.

“We need more self esteem workshops in schools so our youth can finally stand up to bullies on the internet and in person”

SECTION 7 | THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth Are Ready to Talk!

Young people are the experts of their own experiences and possess the passion, skills, and insight to be powerful community leaders. They are often marginalized in their communities and their voices are rarely reflected in the programs and services that are meant to serve them. For many participants, these conversations were the first opportunity they had to engage in open discussion about sexual violence. These youth focused conversations highlighted the need and desire of young people to speak to this topic: they want to share their perspectives, realities, opinions, and ideas in a conversation-based environment. Specifically, young people told us that they want to be asked about their experiences and opinions when authorities consider changing policies or laws. However, youth engagement cannot end here.

Using an Intergenerational Approach

When creating preventative approaches for youth, youth state that taking an intergenerational approach would have the best effects on their communities. This means that entire communities should be included in education efforts regarding sexual violence. They recommended providing opportunities for youth and adults to learn and work together and from each other. Youth do not function in silos. In addition to encouraging supportive peer-peer relationships, youth recognize that increasing the number of positive mentors in the lives of young people can support strong and resilient communities.

Youth in Leadership Positions

Youth leadership was mentioned in many different capacities within specific prevention ideas as well as improvements to service delivery. Youth want to be involved in supporting other youth in their community, and recognize that younger youth would benefit from engaging with older youth in their community around the topic of sexual violence. Some recommendations for youth leadership were for youth to be in facilitation roles during discussions or lessons about sexuality and sexual violence, allowing youth the opportunity to have their questions answered by other youth who have experience engaging in this kind of dialogue.

SECTION 8 | PROVIDING SPACE FOR UNHEARD VOICES

When we commit to engaging youth in our work to address sexual violence in Nova Scotia, we must also commit to critically examining current practices and processes. Where many have been built without consideration of youth, any work to include them must begin with adjustments to the status quo. This adjustment best begins with input and direction from youth themselves.

This same logic can be applied to our work to engage youth from marginalized communities and backgrounds. This is not simple or easy, but it is crucial work that must be taken on with an appreciation of the richness and value that comes with input from diverse standpoints.

We acknowledge that many identities and voices are not reflected in this report due to the timing, location, and sensitivity of the topic. However there are youth from diverse backgrounds who are prepared to engage and give feedback. We need to provide opportunities for them to share their wisdom and insight, and doing so requires we take the time and effort to bridge barriers and diminish obstacles that currently exist.

Appendix 1

What is Sexual Violence

Abuse Due To a Person's Sex, Gender Identity
or Sexual Orientation
Purposely Giving Someone an STI
Using Authority/ Power to Gain Sex
Double Standards
Missing and Murdered Sisters (Aboriginal)
Kidnapping
Sex for Fun (against cultural norms)
Distributing Child Pornography
Gang Initiation
Victim Blaming
Rape Culture
Online Sexual Harassment

