

Media can play a critical role in getting justice in gender-based Indigenous violence

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Given the differential and disproportionate impacts of gender-based violence and gendered issues on Indigenous women and Two-Spirit folks, it is important to have a specific discussion about the media representation of Indigenous Peoples.

The legacy of residential schools, Canada's child welfare system (including the Sixties Scoop and ongoing practices), gendered discrimination imposed through the Indian Act, and myriad other systemic and structural issues continue to result in trauma and attempts to heal from intergenerational trauma.

Due to these genocidal acts and policies and their multi-generational impacts, Indigenous women and girls face violent and non-violent victimization at higher rates than any other population group in Canada.

In addition to intimate partner violence, which tends to happen out of sight and is often not reported to the police (it should be noted that Indigenous women and Two-Spirit folks have a traumatic history with law enforcement that continues to this day), we know that Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to be murdered or missing than any other women in Canada, and *16 times* more likely than white women. An Ontario study found that 73% of Two-Spirit and gender-diverse Indigenous Peoples had experienced violence in some form due to transphobia. For 43% of Two-Spirit and gender-diverse Indigenous Peoples, that violence was physical and/or sexual.

Several authors have written about the differences in media coverage related to portrayals of Indigenous victims and survivors of violence and non-Indigenous (specifically, white) victims and survivors of violence.

The stories that are told (or not) and how they are told are crucial to examining the real-life consequences of actions taken or behaviour and attitudes that are expressed based on what is being amplified in the news media. The path to justice for Indigenous communities includes how Indigenous victims and survivors are either portrayed in or ignored by the media.

Very often, stories of missing Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit folks are not told by the media or are told in very limited ways with little exposure, e.g., printed on the back page of a newspaper section. At other times, media play a crucial role in influencing police to take Indigenous families seriously and undertaking investigations, as it is only when the case of a missing Indigenous woman gets media coverage that police begin to investigate.

On average, missing or murdered white women receive three times more media coverage than their Indigenous counterparts. It is Indigenous victims and survivors of violence who are most frequently blamed for the violence to which they are subjected or deemed unworthy of media coverage.

In addition to media frames that perpetuate common stereotypes of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people, media coverage tends to frame the male perpetrators as deviant examples of masculinity. This framing of gender-based violence as the aberrant behaviour of individual or independent actors not influenced by the broader societal context of misogyny and patriarchy is common across all story-telling about victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

The circumstances that lead to the higher rates of violence perpetrated against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people are rarely framed in the context of the ramifications of colonialism, racism, or misogyny. Doing so would lead to a greater understanding of the lived experiences of Indigenous women, girls, and gender- and sexually-diverse people.

Through responsible media reporting and building an understanding of the experiences of Indigenous Peoples; the gendered experiences of Indigenous women, girls, and gender- and sexually-diverse folks; and that they go missing and are murdered at much higher rates than any other population group in Canada, we can work toward achieving systemic and institutional change.