

Unveiling Truths:

# 2SLGBTQQIA+ EXPERIENCES

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### Unpacking the Acronym

**2S** refers to Two-Spirit;

**L** refers to Lesbian;

**G** refers to Gay;

**B** refers to Bisexual;


**T** refers to Transgender;

**Q** refers to Queer;

**Q** refers to Questioning;

**I** refers to Intersex; and

**A** refers to Asexual.



# A Brief History

Prior to settler contact, Indigenous Peoples had diverse interpretations of gender and sexuality across communities.<sup>1</sup> However, there was a shared understanding that individuals could hold “multiple expressions and dimensions of gender,” which involved “variables of sex, gender, sexuality and spirituality.”<sup>2</sup> The intersection of these variables was expressed through a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, and spirituality (e.g., “the ability to carry masculine and feminine spirit”).<sup>3,4</sup>

As Meyer-Cook and Labelle (2004) note, “what was different and unique about Two-Spirited people historically was often embraced, as their qualities were seen to add value and contribute to life within the communities.”<sup>5,6</sup> Contributions from gender-diverse individuals varied, but were often imperative to community well-being.<sup>7</sup>



Typically, an individual's roles and responsibilities in a community were informed by their gender, rather than their sex.<sup>8,9</sup> For gender-diverse individuals, these roles often held "specific spiritual" significance.<sup>10</sup> Responsibilities associated with being "teachers, knowledge-keepers, healers, herbalists, child minders, spiritual leaders, interpreters, mediators and artists" were often held by gender-diverse individuals.<sup>11</sup> These roles and the people who performed them were vital and worked alongside the community's men and women to ensure the success of their community.<sup>12</sup>

Historically, the different terms for these individuals were "based on a person's inclination toward certain roles, responsibilities and behaviours seen as traditionally male or female."<sup>13</sup> For example, the "Ktunaxa (Kootenay) term *titqattek* described females who took on roles traditionally characterized as masculine, including healing, hunting and warfare."<sup>14</sup> The Cree term *napêw iskwêwisêhot* refers to men who dress like women and *iskwêw ka napêwayat* refers to women who dress like men.<sup>15</sup> The "Mi'kmaq phrase *Geenumu Gessalagee*" means 'he loves men'.<sup>16</sup> These examples provide only a small glimpse into the wide array of terms for gender-diverse individuals across Indigenous communities.

Despite their strengths and significant contributions to their communities, Europeans "were shocked, frightened and disgusted" by gender non-conforming individuals and judged them harshly.<sup>17</sup> From their perspective, those who did not follow their ideas of gender were considered deviants.<sup>18</sup> Europeans reacted to this deviance by enforcing heteronormative practices on Indigenous Peoples.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, those with multiple genders were labelled as the "berdache," an anthropological term meaning those "who did not fit neatly into European American gender and sex role categories."<sup>20</sup> The establishment of this category, specifically for the "gendered and sexual 'other'" affirmed the 'abnormality' of these individuals.<sup>21</sup>

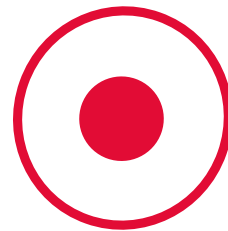


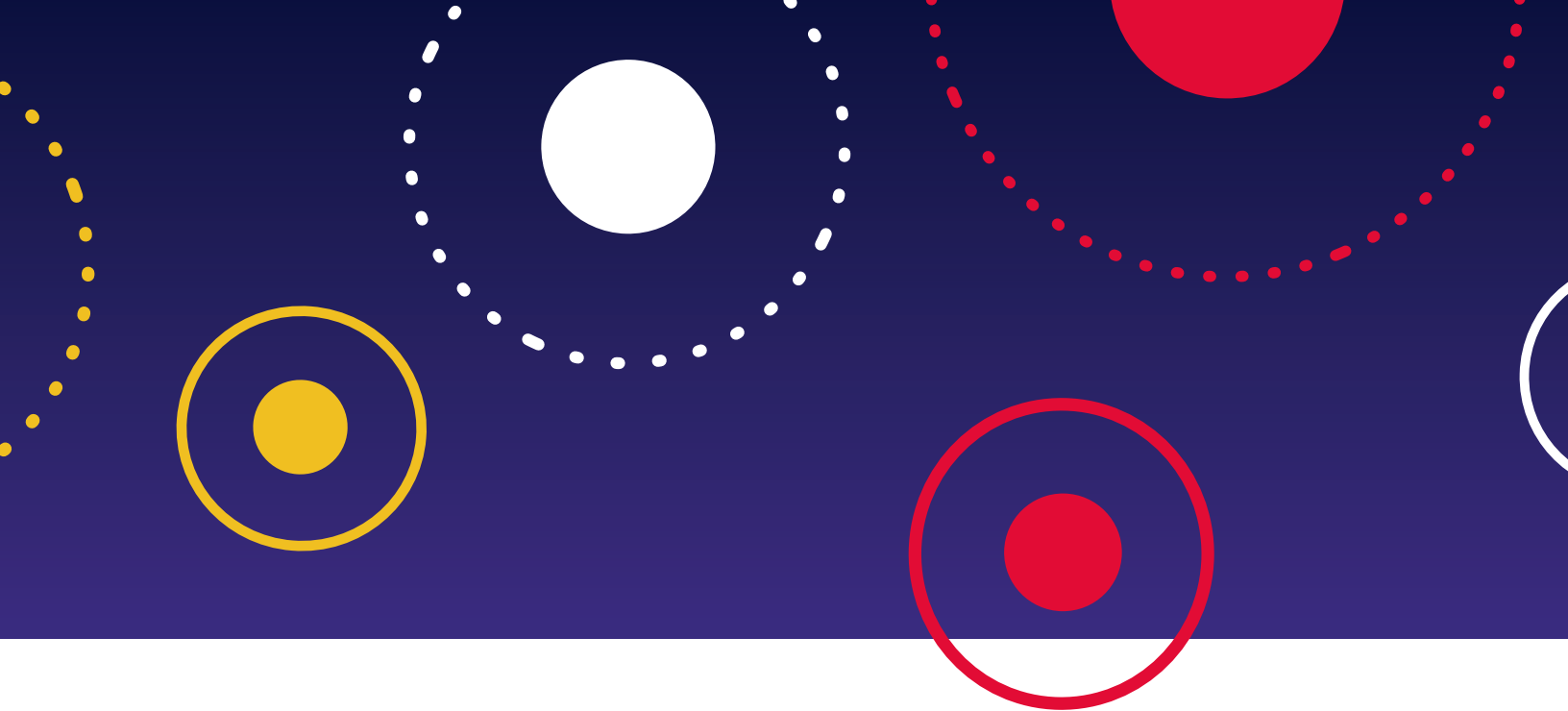
After many years, Indigenous people challenged the use of this derogatory label. A term that spoke to both Indigenous identity and traditional interpretations of gender and sexuality was desired.

At an official gathering of gay and lesbian Indigenous people in 1990, the term “Two-Spirit” was selected.<sup>22 23</sup> This term is interpreted in numerous ways across Indigenous communities, but the indication that an individual holds masculine and feminine spirits remains fairly constant. Two-Spirit is intended to be used as an umbrella term that does not point to a single form of sexuality or gender; “it is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous and fluid.”<sup>24 25</sup>

It can also be interpreted as a stand “against heterosexism in Indigenous communities and racism in LGBTQ communities.”<sup>26</sup>

It is essential to note that the term Two-Spirit is not universally accepted, as there is caution about oversimplifying these individuals’ diversity across different Indigenous communities.<sup>27</sup> However, for this paper, Two-Spirit refers to any Indigenous gender non-conforming individuals.





## Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides an opportunity to understand why Two-Spirited Indigenous individuals face extreme marginalization. Intersectionality is defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.”<sup>28</sup> Two-Spirit individuals face numerous intersecting biases such as racism, gender biases, homophobia and transphobia. In analyzing the violence experienced by Two-Spirited individuals, it is critical to account for all aspects of their identity.

Historical violence faced by Indigenous Peoples laid the groundwork for intersectional layers of trauma for Two-Spirited individuals. Indian Residential Schools sought to conform to culture, in addition to gender and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> Hunt (2016) notes that “[a]t the same moment as native children became ‘Indians’ through their institutionalization at residential schools, they were simultaneously gendered as boys and girls.”<sup>30</sup> Another significant impact of the Residential Schools was the homophobia imprinted on the students that is “now rampant in most Aboriginal communities in Canada.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, as the Sixties Scoop placed Indigenous children in non-Indigenous homes, they were taught and often internalized European notions of gender.

The intersections of identity for Two-Spirit individuals can make it challenging to find safe and supportive spaces. In one study, participants noted that they have “struggles with gaining acceptance for the different parts of their identities.”<sup>32</sup> In Indigenous spaces, it can be difficult to access “Two-Spirit friendly’ Elders, role models, healthy lifestyle alternatives and inclusive cultural spaces.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in ‘dominant’ society, social workers and other front-line workers often have insufficient knowledge about the identity, history and significance of identifying as Two-Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

Even events that are “seemingly progressive and inclusive” (e.g., Pride in Toronto) “erases Indigenous activism.”<sup>35</sup> For example, in 2019, Pride Toronto’s land acknowledgement completely omitted Indigenous communities, and Two-Spirit was not mentioned beyond the LGBTQ2+ acronym in the ‘Pride Guide’ for 2019.<sup>36 37</sup> If one of North America’s largest Pride events does not include Two-Spirit people, there is likely limited recognition of this identity in the general public. A lack of understanding can mean a lack of adequate supports, which can result in these individuals “fall[ing] through the cracks’ and end[ing] up on city streets, living in poverty with poorer health and with greater risk of becoming lost and in pain.”<sup>38</sup>



# Connections to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) . . . . .

Very little research exists on the specific experiences of Two-Spirit individuals, yet available data clarifies that they are disproportionately victims of violence. According to Statistics Canada, in 2017, there was an “increase in crimes motivated by hatred of sexual orientation.”<sup>39</sup> This report also notes that crimes motivated by hatred of gender expression or identity “were more often violent.”<sup>40</sup>

A study found that 73 percent of gender-diverse and Two-Spirit Indigenous people “had experienced some form of violence due to transphobia, including 43 per cent... who reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence.”<sup>41</sup> In another study, 58 percent of Indigenous gender-diverse participants had experienced “the use of sexual force before age 16,”<sup>42</sup> undoubtedly affecting their mental and physical development and well-being. These acts of violence fuelled by homophobia, transphobia and racism contributes to Two-Spirit youth being “statistically at the highest risk for homelessness, suicide, abuse and violence.”<sup>43</sup>

The systemic discrimination faced by Indigenous women and girls is also felt by Two-Spirit people, through their intersectional lens. Two-Spirit individuals have unique interactions and relationships with the systemic contributors to MMIWG outlined through this project. Ultimately, research implies that the gender-based violence experienced by all Indigenous peoples is rooted in colonialism, as it is a manifestation of animosity towards those who do not fit into European ideals of gender and sexuality.<sup>44</sup> As Ristock et al. (2017) note, “living at the intersections of indigeneity, class, gender, sexuality, forced mobility and migration can create vulnerabilities such as lack of social and formal supports, isolation, disconnection, and lack of options for staying safe.”<sup>45</sup>

## Child Welfare

Among youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, high percentages of transgender/gender non-binary (70.8 percent) and LGBTQ2S<sup>46</sup> youth (62.8 percent) are likely to report involvement with child protection services, compared to cisgender youth (56.9 percent) and straight youth (55.8 percent).<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, the child welfare system is “often inhospitable for gay/lesbian youth, who turn to the street as an alternative.”<sup>48</sup> This pattern of 2SLGBTQQA+ youth escaping care is highlighted when examining the numbers of homeless youth in Canada. In a study done by Gaetz et al. (2016), 29.5 percent of homeless youth identify as 2SLGBTQQA+. High rates (approximately 80 percent) of 2SLGBTQQA+, transgender, and non-binary youth also experience multiple occurrences of homelessness.<sup>49</sup> Without family support or safety in the child welfare system, many Two-Spirit children and youth turn to the streets, exposing them to a greater risk of experiencing violence and vulnerability.<sup>50</sup>

## Policing

In addition to facing discrimination based on Indigenous identity, Two-Spirit individuals have also reported “negative encounters with the police” because of their gender identity.<sup>51</sup> Roughly 25 percent of transgender people in a research study based in Ontario “report being harassed by police because they are trans.”<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, 2SLGBTQQA+ individuals have also noted that they are not able to rely on police support in the community.<sup>53</sup> For example, in 2017, when Alloura Wells’ father tried to report her missing, Toronto police allegedly “turned him away when they learned she was homeless.”<sup>54</sup> Friends and family added that they believe Alloura’s disappearance was not taken seriously because she was transgender and a sex worker.<sup>55</sup> Toronto police later apologized and put out a missing person report.

Discrimination at the hands of police, such as harassment or delays in investigations, has contributed to a lack of police trust for many Indigenous gender-diverse people. This mistrust can add to existing struggles to find safety and lead to a reluctance to report crimes, such as violent experiences.<sup>56 57 58</sup>

## Justice

For gender-diverse individuals in conflict with the law, research indicates that transgender individuals “are some of the most vulnerable targets in the prison system.”<sup>59</sup> For those who also identify as Indigenous, this vulnerability is exacerbated by racism. Until 2017, transgender people were placed in prisons “based on their pre-operative sex,” which had put these individuals at high risk of experiencing transphobic violence.<sup>60</sup> However, there are still many gaps in implementing this change.<sup>61</sup> For example, in 2018, Moka Dawkins, a transgender woman “was told if [she] went to a women’s institution [she] would be kept in segregation, because [she hadn’t] fully transitioned to a woman yet”; so wanting to avoid segregation, she chose to go to a men’s jail.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, in two different men’s jails, inmates insulted her daily, and she “endured more than a dozen physical attacks.”<sup>63</sup> Moka added that in prison, “being trans makes you a target.”<sup>64</sup>

Conversely, when Indigenous 2SLGBTQQA individuals are involved in the justice system as victims, “formal court systems can often do more harm than good in perpetuating racist and sexist stereotypes about how and why Indigenous peoples come to experience harms.”<sup>65</sup> When gender-diverse Indigenous individuals are victims of sexual assault cases in particular, “justice is very rarely accessed through the justice system.”<sup>66</sup> Insignificant responses from the justice system when these individuals experience violence puts them at risk, as it conveys to perpetrators, they can escape accountability for their crimes.<sup>67 68</sup>

## Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking

Discrimination faced by 2SLGBTQQA individuals and rejection from families often leads to “highly mobile lives.”<sup>69</sup> This can lead to living in a street-based environment, such as homelessness and involvement in the sex trade.<sup>70</sup> Some gender-diverse Indigenous individuals have noted experiencing barriers in the job market due to racism or transphobia.<sup>71</sup> As a result, some may rely on the sex trade as one of their most feasible economic opportunities.<sup>72</sup> Once involved in the sex trade, 2SLGBTQQA individuals have a high likelihood of experiencing transphobic violence, particularly when clients realize their identity (referred to as gender identity discovery).<sup>73</sup> In fact, “trans women sex workers have been found to experience significantly higher rates of physical and sexual violence by clients than cisgender workers.”<sup>74</sup>

One worker from a study conducted by Lyons et al. (2017) shares her experience working in the sex trade compared to cisgender sex workers:

**“It’s different in the way you have to be careful because a lot of people wanna try [sex with a trans sex worker]. And after they’ve tried it, they get the guilt and they can’t deal with it...they can’t deal with their emotions. And that’s when it becomes rage.”<sup>75</sup>**

As noted in the ‘Policing’ section, an unfortunate reality is that crimes against gender-diverse Indigenous individuals, particularly those involved in the sex trade are met with police apathy.<sup>76 77</sup>

## Media

Media coverage of violence against 2SLGBTQQA individuals is scarce. Even campaigns for preventing violence against Indigenous women and reports on MMIWG often don’t include Two-Spirit individuals, or they are incorporated superficially.<sup>78</sup> During our own research process, very few and sometimes inconsistent details were found on the deaths or disappearances of several 2SLGBTQQA people in Canada.

For example, the murder of Faye Paquette, an Indigenous trans woman was covered by the Prince George Free Press in two separate articles with contradicting use of gender pronouns. The first article discussing the initial stages of the court case only referred to Faye as a man even though she identified as a woman and was halfway through gender confirmation surgery.<sup>79</sup> The second article took a very different tone, referring to Faye as Ms. Paquette.<sup>80</sup> These inconsistencies within the same news source illustrates how media can undermine an individual’s identity if they don’t fit with gender norms.<sup>81</sup>

Additionally, neither article provided any personal details about Faye and focused heavily on forensic and legal details of the case. Family and community members are not included in the articles, but in another report they are noted as being very concerned that “the murder is not being prosecuted as a hate crime” since the assault she endured is “consistent with that of other hate-motivated murders of trans people.”<sup>82</sup> The absence of personal details and emphasis on the case conveys to audiences that details of the crime are more important than Faye’s life itself.



# Recommendations . . . . .

It's important to note that while systemic racism may be present and a root cause of violence experienced by gender non-conforming Indigenous individuals, this is not to undermine or disregard positive relationships or allies that have historically or currently exist. A first step to build on these positive relationships is for Canadians to educate themselves on the colonial past and learn about how it influences our society. To move forward in reconciliation, it is essential to understand how colonialism has worked to erase Indigenous Peoples and how it perpetuates racism, homophobia, transphobia and violence.<sup>83</sup>

For each systemic contributor discussed in this paper, there must be supports in place specifically for 2SLGBTQQIA Indigenous Peoples. It is necessary to account for the unique experiences and positioning within society that the intersecting identities of Two-Spirit people hold in order to provide effective support services and resources.

For other recommendations to protect Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA individuals, see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the MMIWG National Inquiry Calls for Justice.

The murders and disappearances of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA individuals can no longer be ignored. It is time that all Canadians stood with Indigenous Peoples and work to dismantle the structures that contribute to MMIWG and violence against 2SLGBTQQIA individuals.

# Appendix

- <sup>1</sup> Driskill, "Two-Spirit Critiques."
- <sup>2</sup> Anderson, "Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge," 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Anderson, "Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge," 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing."
- <sup>5</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing," 30.
- <sup>6</sup> **While it is important not to romanticize traditional Indigenous culture, it is apparent that "communities prior to colonization, were generally very inclusive and accepting of a range of sexual orientations and gender identities."** (Meyer-Cooke and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing," 31.)
- <sup>7</sup> Hunt, "Health of Two-Spirit People."
- <sup>8</sup> Robinson, "Two-Spirit and Bisexual People."
- <sup>9</sup> Hunt, "Health of Two-Spirit People."
- <sup>10</sup> Wilson, "Two-Spirit People," 305.
- <sup>11</sup> Hunt, "Health of Two-Spirit People," 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Hunt, "Health of Two-Spirit People."
- <sup>13</sup> Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC), "Forgotten Voices," 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Filice, "Two-Spirit."
- <sup>15</sup> Filice, "Two-Spirit."
- <sup>16</sup> Filice, "Two-Spirit."
- <sup>17</sup> Anderson, "Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge," 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Wilson, "Two-Spirit People."
- <sup>19</sup> Robinson, "Two-Spirit and Bisexual People."
- <sup>20</sup> Wilson, "Two-Spirit People," 304.
- <sup>21</sup> Wilson, "Two-Spirit People," 304.
- <sup>22</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing," 31.
- <sup>23</sup> Driskill, "Two-Spirit Critiques."
- <sup>24</sup> Driskill, "Two-Spirit Critiques," 72.
- <sup>25</sup> Anderson, "Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge," 2.
- <sup>26</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing."
- <sup>28</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "Intersectionality."
- <sup>29</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization."
- <sup>30</sup> Hunt, "Roots of Rape Culture," 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 8.
- <sup>33</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing," 40.
- <sup>34</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing."
- <sup>35</sup> Greensmith and Giwa, "Contemporary Queer Politics," 130.
- <sup>36</sup> CBC News, "Pride Toronto Apologizes."
- <sup>37</sup> Pride Toronto, "Pride Guide 2019."
- <sup>38</sup> Meyer-Cook and Labelle, "Two-Spirit Organizing," 40.
- <sup>39</sup> Armstrong, "Hate Crime," 13.
- <sup>40</sup> Armstrong, "Hate Crime," 14.
- <sup>41</sup> Bucik, "Discrimination and Violence," 4.
- <sup>42</sup> Robinson, "Two-Spirit and Bisexual People," 20.
- <sup>43</sup> TASSC, "Forgotten Voices," 4.
- <sup>44</sup> Robinson, "Two-Spirit and Bisexual People."
- <sup>45</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 14.
- <sup>46</sup> **Although this paper discusses 2SLGBTQIA, these were the specific demographics Gaetz et al. focused on for their research.**
- <sup>47</sup> Gaetz et al., "Without a Home."
- <sup>48</sup> Serge et al., "Child Welfare System and Homelessness," ii.
- <sup>49</sup> Gaetz et al., "Without a Home."
- <sup>50</sup> **See the Child Welfare paper for more information.**
- <sup>51</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 12.
- <sup>52</sup> Scheim et al., "Prison Experiences," 1.
- <sup>53</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization."
- <sup>54</sup> Beaumont, "Friends of Missing Transgender Woman."
- <sup>55</sup> CBC News, "No Evidence of Serial Killer."
- <sup>56</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization."
- <sup>57</sup> Palmater, "Addressing Police Racism."
- <sup>58</sup> **See the Policing paper for more information.**
- <sup>59</sup> Boyer et al., "Vulnerable Targets," 411.
- <sup>60</sup> Boyer et al., "Vulnerable Targets," 389.
- <sup>61</sup> Boyer et al., "Vulnerable Targets."
- <sup>62</sup> Lourenco, "Toronto Jail Experience."
- <sup>63</sup> Lourenco, "Toronto Jail Experience."
- <sup>64</sup> Lourenco, "Toronto Jail Experience."
- <sup>65</sup> Barkaskas and Hunt, "Access to Justice," 21.
- <sup>66</sup> Barkaskas and Hunt, "Access to Justice," 16.
- <sup>67</sup> National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Power and Place."
- <sup>68</sup> **See the Justice paper for more information.**
- <sup>69</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization," 8.
- <sup>70</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence."
- <sup>71</sup> Ristock et al., "Impacts of Colonization."
- <sup>72</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence."
- <sup>73</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence."
- <sup>74</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence," 2.
- <sup>75</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence," 6.
- <sup>76</sup> Lyons et al., "Negotiating Violence."
- <sup>77</sup> **See the Sexual Exploitation/Trafficking paper for more information.**
- <sup>78</sup> Hunt, "Health of Two-Spirit People."
- <sup>79</sup> Staff1, "Defence Arguing Self-Defence."
- <sup>80</sup> Staff1, "Sentence in Paquette Killing."
- <sup>81</sup> **See the Media paper for more information.**
- <sup>82</sup> Goldberg, "Trans People," 33.
- <sup>83</sup> Pon, Gosine and Phillips, "Racism in Child Welfare."

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