

I want to speak about why violence against women continues to be a major problem in Canada's North, in Nunavut, where I am from, as well as in the neighbouring region of Nunavik in Arctic Quebec.

I am going to speak as a journalist who has been covering this violence for nearly 15 years.

Because Nunavut is a territory in Canada, we have some statistics that say something about the nature and level of this violence.

Most crime in Nunavut is interpersonal— that is between people who know each other.

And a StatsCan study says eight per cent of women and seven per cent of men experienced at least one incident of spousal violence between 1994 and 1999.

But the nature of this violence was more severe for women.

Women in violent unions were twice as likely to report having being beaten than men.

Women were five times more likely to be medically treated or hospitalized because of the violence.

My own experience as a journalist and as a woman in Nunavut confirms these statistics, and, in fact, I think the statistics don't tell the whole story: nearly every woman I know in Nunavut or Nunavik has been the victim of violence sometime during her life, often starting in childhood, and often they end up in the hospital or dead.

I want to retell a couple of stories I recently covered for the Nunatsiaq News.

Last month in northern Quebec, a young woman of 20 died after she was fatally stabbed in front of two children, aged 10 and 11.

The two children desperately tried to prevent the woman's assailant from stabbing her repeatedly with a knife, but they were unable to stop the attack.

When police arrived at the residence, the victim, covered in blood, was lying face down under a table.

After being taken to the hospital, the woman was pronounced dead. She had suffered multiple stab wounds to her chest, back, arms and legs.

The woman had been drinking, but, according to police, her attacker was sober.

He had only recently been let out on parole for a previous assault on the woman, and the weekend before she was killed, he had also beaten her.

But the victim had come to the police station on the Tuesday afternoon prior to her death to ask for the most recent set of charges to be dropped.

Two years ago, in this same community, a man argued with his mother and then he assaulted her. The 68-year old died.

The next day, another woman was lying out on the street, the victim of a fatal gunshot to the head. A man had argued with the victim. He left and then went inside to his place and grabbed a rifle and shot her.

The litany of these kinds of incidents is really never-ending: a 13-year old killed in my hometown of Iqaluit, a woman strangled in another Nunavut community.

I don't need to say that it is very painful to cover these events.

Sometimes even our leaders are involved. In one instance, the elected head of of an organization tried to sexually assault an elderly woman. Two members of the first territorial legislature of Nunavut resigned after being convicted of violent crimes on women.

So why does this happen? and continue?

I'll offer a few suggestions.

- Booze and drugs: there's too much alcohol and drugs in the North- it's a dumping ground for contraband from organized crime. As Inuit aren't used to drinking yet, binge-drinking is common. 95 to 99 per cent of crimes are committed under the influence of alcohol;
- No jobs: substance abuse also reflects the high level of unemployment in remote communities, which leads many to pass their time in drinking and drugs;
- Crime without consequence: punishment is usually not harsh. That's because the justice system throughout the North is overburdened, causing long delays. Meanwhile, jails are full to capacity. Many offenders are held only for a short time and released, so they repeat, and a climate of crime encourages more crime and supports violence as a way of life;
- Lack of housing: women who are victims of violence can't escape from their aggressors. Overcrowded housing is stressing for everyone: men and women. Often waiting lists have hundreds of names and it can take several years to get housing. Women's shelters can offer only a temporary relief and women often return to their abusive spouses as a result;
- Low standard of education: many women don't have the education or know-how to live somewhere else, for instance, in the South where there is housing. They may not even know about contraception, either, or that it's harmful to drink and smoke while pregnant.

- Culture: the family used to be the survival unit, based on cooperation, independence and forgiveness. Elders often tell women today, for the sake of the family, to forgive their abusers. Children were also valued in the past, and women still start having children in their mid-teens, long before they can take care of them.
- Colonialism: many strengths of the traditional culture suffered through government policies that encouraged dependence, relocated people and sent children into residential schools, causing a legacy of depression, pain and jealousy.

So what can be done?

Nunavut women surveyed by Nunavut's status of women council recently recommended the following:

- more public recognition of violence against women;
- training for elders who offer support to women in crisis;
- stronger sentences for men accused of violent crimes against women;
- housing for women who leave abusive relationships;
- safe places where women can meet for formal or informal support;
- and childcare to give women time to meet.

I would also add to this list a need for:

- more education;
- encouragement for family planning and more public health initiatives;
- a more effective justice and penal system;
- and better leadership from leaders, many of whom have a history of violence against women and continue to publicly blame shelters for encouraging violence in the communities they represent.

We also need continued awareness, which is why I feel it's important for the media to cover violence against women.