

## PROJECT FACT SHEET

# Understanding how society shapes sexuality and Helping Young First Nations Women at Risk

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*Canada's Aboriginal population remains at higher risk for sexual health problems and diseases than the rest of the Canadian population. Recently, a researcher from Dalhousie's School of Health and Human Performance conducted a study to understand the reality in which contemporary Aboriginal women live.*

Studies indicate that Canada's Aboriginal women are at high risk for sexual health problems and diseases, such as cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual abuse, as compared to non-Aboriginal Canadian women.

To explore these issues, Allison Reeves, a Master's student in the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University, explored women's sexuality in

Aboriginal populations using participatory action research and critical social theory, increasingly popular research models that emphasize the historical and social contexts of a situation and the actions of an entire community.

Ms. Reeves identified a significant negative shift in young Aboriginal women's social construction of sexuality when compared with pre-colonial models. The internalization of Western models of sexuality (including the submission of women, the dominance of men, and turning sexuality into a commodity) has contributed to an increased risk for Aboriginal women.

"Many Aboriginal women," says Ms. Reeves, "are left struggling to find voices and a healthy sexuality in a world where sexuality is at once confusing, shameful — and highly coveted."

"Young Aboriginal women," she adds, "are aware of negative sexual health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections, as well as the risk of pregnancy, but they are not given the tools to understand their own bodies or to fully understand the power of social perceptions of sexuality."

Ms. Reeves's research identified a need for additional counseling services. Non-judgmental staff is needed to work in clinics and play an important role in improving sexual health outcomes for the Aboriginal community.

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