

Mothers' Stories/Voices

- Collectively the mothers' narratives about their experiences with the child welfare and legal profession revealed six predominant themes. These included:
 - a. How Aboriginal mothers came into contact with child welfare;
 - b. Understanding the background context of Aboriginal mothers lives;
 - c. Treatment by staff within the child welfare system (i.e. treatment by child welfare staff and supervisors, racism, visitation, etc.);
 - d. The mothers' insight into their experiences (acknowledging their own mistakes, emotions, coping, etc.);
 - e. Aboriginal mothers' experiences with lawyers; and
 - f. Aboriginal mothers' knowledge of alternative dispute resolutions used in the child welfare context.

Mothers' Stories/Voices Cont'd...

- For many of these mothers, involvement with the child welfare system began when they were children or youth and then again when they grew into adulthood and had children of their own. The majority of the women we interviewed were in the 41-50 year old age range and were single mothers. Some of the mothers' stories relate to experiences they had many years ago so the details of their experiences were a bit hazy while for other mothers the experience with child welfare was still very fresh for them. Their stories reflect collective and common perceptions about how the child welfare system functions and operates against Aboriginal mothers who, because of their poverty and substance misuse, need assistance accessing services to support them in their roles as parents.

Mothers' Stories/Voices Cont'd...

- The mothers involved in this study reported child welfare contact through one of three means:
 - (1) through self-referrals,
 - (2) through reports made by others, and
 - (3) through other system referrals.

Contact through Self-Referrals

I volunteered myself to get help. It was the first time in my life that I really wanted to become straight and not be a dysfunctional person on drugs. Which was hard for me to do coming from a dysfunctional family where drugs were sold and used in the family, only marijuana at that point in time. So, I heard that CFS would do certain things to help out a person like that. Get you into a program and pay for it and help you get your kids to preschool or give them free passes to go swimming things that I couldn't afford ... So, I went to Social Services and asked for help through CFS. My councilor [social worker] was telling me that, she was a very nice person, but it was her supervisor was more like the "Attila the Hun" kind of...stereotype...like they came in and took the kids out right away. Ya and when they were telling me what was going to happen they didn't tell me that that was going to happen? ...

Contact – Reports made by others

I have a cousin that I met through my birth family and she ... was a real partier. I was never a partier after my kids were born. But she ... um ... she got into bad relations with this lady who lives in a different complex but across from the street from the school. And I think she took her boyfriend ... I don't know ... just the drama between them. I had nothing to do with. ... She's drunk most of the time. She's crude. She's speeding around all of the time in her car and she came to my house a couple of times banging at my door looking for my cousin. I said I don't know where she is ... just leave me alone, I got nothing to do with it. And then she said to me, she said straight to my face, that she was gonna call CFS on me. So I said, Ok, well, they can't do nothing. What are they gonna do? It's just a crazy lady calling. So, the worker came in one day and ... she goes, we got a call last night, after hours ... we got a call. I guess, when you're already involved with CFS, if a call comes through after hours, it just gets put through to the worker. I think that is how it works because after hours never came to my house and she said "you went out last night to the bar and you've smoked crack and you left your kids home alone." And I said, you're serious? And she says, yah. I went, this is ridiculous and I knew exactly who and I told her the story about my cousin. And then right there an then I says, is there any way that you can put on my file or ... after hours, if you guys get another call that I'm out or I'm partying, send after hours to my house. I'm proving this is wrong. I said this woman is nuts and she's gonna keep doing it. What had happened the next week is she got ... after hours got three calls? And the same thing – [the social worker] would come the next day ... I said why isn't after hours coming out so they were basically taking their word whatever call. Now I can call after hours and I can start ratting on someone, one person even if they are not doing anything wrong. And they listen and this is what makes me so angry... So, I was really upset about that ... so anyways that's what started ... a supervisory order on me.

Contact through other system referrals

And then when I did go ... I had cesarean cause they didn't know ... how ... HIV is transmitted to the baby. I didn't go on medication but I didn't take ... that's why it's amazing that she's okay. But then I had a worker come to me, maybe about a month before I was going to have my baby and she told me they were going to be taking her away. I wasn't angry but I knew it was probably the right thing because I wasn't doing anything right for myself. ... I never talked to anybody about this for a long time. Only thing now is that back then I was really messed. I think that's why I was so numbed out. And now that I've been through treatment and I went through all these problems and I've seen how a mother can be, I think I gave up on parenting was because of what I have (HIV positive) ... I felt that CFS was using that against me too ... now that I'm not going to be there like forever. But it's just like the treatments and everything I've learnt and ... to my nurses and my doctors and look at how long I've had this since the very first time I had sex, I was 12 years old. I first found out in the Knowledges Centre. And my doctor even told me "geez" he goes "I don't understand why you're still kicking" cause usually people go after about 10 years ... and the way I was living ... it was a big amazing thing for me. Now it just gives me more hope that I can be around for at least another 10 more years at least to see her grow and tell her that I was around ... cause I really don't like where she is right now. And that bothers me.

Background Context of Aboriginal mothers' lives

- Early parenthood is a common experience reported by the mothers and grandmothers in this study. Many mothers raised their children alone or through the help of their own mothers. Due to the history of alcohol addiction, family violence, poverty, and becoming mothers at an early age, many mothers reported having very little parenting skills to draw upon to help them in their roles as mothers. The onset of motherhood at such an early age meant mothers felt unprepared to parent and for some, early motherhood meant child welfare involvement. In fact many of the mothers stated that they lacked the skills to parent and although many grew up caring for other siblings when they were young, the mothers indicated that they still lacked the skills to parent their own children. Some mothers noted that their lack of parenting skills was as a result of their own parents' involvement with residential schools. One mother in particular noted that her parents' experience in residential school impacted the way her parents showed affection and ultimately how that was carried over to her family:

Background Context Cont'd...

- The mothers' narratives reveal a history of child welfare involvement because of family dysfunctions brought on by alcohol and drugs addictions. Mothers interviewed for this study indicated that exposure to alcohol and drugs often started in their childhood through their parents. Some mothers indicated that leaving their First Nations communities to live in Winnipeg often precipitated addictions because of the racism and culture shock they experienced in the new environment. Some of the mothers in this study stated they started drinking as early as 12 years of age. Grandmothers indicated that they are still involved with the child welfare system. Because of their adult children's addictions they've had to step in and take over parenting their grandchildren.

Background Context Cont'd...

- Mothers explained that they were often neglected as young children. They stated that their parents' alcoholism exposed them to other risks when they were young. Some mothers candidly reported being sexually abused and/or raped when they were young. These experiences in some instances precipitated early onset of addiction to alcohol.
 - *I did some really intense therapy, dealing with all kinds of issues that I had from growing up like being raped when I was 12; being gang raped when I was about 15; being in all these abusive relationships; and being treated, you know, from your own mother, like somebody, like she didn't love you – like all this abuse that I had endured, you know. I had to deal with it. That's the opportunity that I had when I really opened up and decided to be honest about things and start talking to people about it.*

Experiences with the Child Welfare (CW) System

Fear of child welfare intervention

- Afraid to seek treatment for fear of losing children:
 - *... I was scared to ask for help because I knew if I asked for help, they'd take my kids away and they did. They did!*
 - *I was even scared to go for treatment because I figured ... if I'm gonna go for treatment then it means I got a problem and they're gonna find a reason to take my kids away and that's what happened, right. I ... tried to do that anyway and then they wound up taking my kids away so ... so either way, I just kinda ... had this feeling that ... I had to stop what I was doing but I didn't know how and I didn't know where to go. I didn't know who to trust cause I was alone.*

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

Jumping through hoops:

- Mothers reported feeling that they had to “play the game to satisfy child welfare”, whether that meant taking more programming or just satisfying the whim of social workers to prove they were doing what needed to be done in order to get their children returned or to ensure visits with children currently in care.
- This was a comment made so often by the mothers interviewed that it became the central title of the report:

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

- *You're a person whose trying to live your life and then you're going to try and jump through hoops...this jumping through hoops business was getting me mad.*
- *He wanted me to jump through hoops and I didn't like... You have to try and prove to them that you're trying to get her back and you're trying to do everything they want you to do. In order to do that you've got to ... I felt like I was always kissing their ass...*
- *I have never, ever once had a good experience with Child and Family, never with anything. If the kids are taken it takes so much to even try to get to see them and put it this way ... you've got to jump through hoops to even try and get a visit with your kids.*
- *It's just one frustration after another. It's like you have to jump through hoops ... they don't tell you exactly what it is that they want...*

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

- Being left out of the loop (perception there was no communication):
 - *...when they took my children away, they should have had a sit down with me, whether it be by myself or with a support worker or a family member and say “these are our concerns but we’re willing to work with you but we need you to do this and then we’ll have a meeting and then ... a plan.” That was never been given to me.*

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

- The number of social workers that mothers had to deal with was also discussed by the mothers as being a source of frustration:
 - *Did I maintain any relationships, No! I had 8 social workers during the course of my involvement before we got transferred to an Aboriginal agency.*
 - *The social workers always change and they don't keep up with the files or whatever and they don't contact me until the kids contact them and say, "I want to see my mom." And then they contact me, you know what I mean? But they can't be bothered, it's just the reality, eh, that's just the way it is.*

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

- Treated like children or as if they were simple minded by the child welfare social workers:
 - *They treat me like I'm some stupid young girl.*
 - *She made me feel like I was so stupid.*

Experiences with CW Cont'd...

Many of the mothers felt that they were being forced to assimilate and parent in a specific way that was alien to how they were brought up:

- *They want you to adopt a different way of ... I found that the Aboriginal agencies are starting to do that too ... your life has to be done a certain way to their expectations not the way you've lived or how you've grown up ... it's just their perception and that's it. It's their way ... they're forcing you to live the way they want to see you not the way you've been living ... obviously if your kids have been apprehended you're not doing it right, basically ... assimilation isn't that what it's called ... to assimilate me to the perfect parent ... they can't even say that of themselves even the supervisor does not have a perfect kid a perfect family ... if there was then they wouldn't exist ... they shouldn't just jump to the conclusion that because of a situation that happens that there's something that's always going to be wrong.*

The Importance of Culture

The importance of culture in the lives of the women who participated in this study is very evident in the stories they shared with us. Some mother indicated concern that when their children are taken from them and placed in non-Aboriginal homes, their children are not getting enough exposure to culture and that it is difficult for them to convince social workers and foster parents to take their concerns seriously about ensuring their children are exposed to their culture while they are in care. It is not enough for foster parents to take children to cultural events as this mother articulated:

- *Yah. And there's some things they don't allow. They don't allow my children to go to any Pow Wows or anything like that. ... That's what the foster mom told that worker, the worker told her that, the children can't be at any kinds of things like that. Yah. Yah. Because my boys, they know everything about Pow Wows. Like they want their spirit names. I told them I'm going to get their spirit names but I have to go through CFS and everything and ... they will probably say no to that.*

Being Monitored by CW

- subjected to numerous drug and alcohol testing by the child welfare agencies staff:
 - *They were always ... it was like they were trying to catch me and there was no catching to be caught. Yet, I did everything ... they wanted and they still didn't believe me. Then they started going for hair samples to blood and urine ... like how more can you not ... but I was still not believed. I knew already the whole scenario and what to do and [the social worker] was trying to catch me off guard all the time. She'd be reading my drug test and at the end of that session she'd ask me to go and do another one as if she's trying to surprise me. That's what I always felt from her and it really broke down my morale and everything. Not believing me about drug tests even though...my own physician said, "what the hell are these people on, why are they making you go through so many drug tests?" So, was my lawyer ... he couldn't believe it either. He said, S. you don't have to give hair samples, we can fight this.*

Being Watched by CW

- Closely related to drug and alcohol testing was the feeling of being watched by child welfare (perceptions of invasion of privacy):
 - *... and they always managed to get me to the point because they knew I had company, they would get somebody to spy on my home, they knew people were coming in there, they had specific names. They had people watching my home and I'm going to try to make a court case saying that's invasion of my privacy and movement. A bunch of people that are watching my home that are watching what is going on, coming in and out of my house.*

Triggering Anger

Mothers noted that it appeared to them that the social workers deliberately try to make them mad or get them angry. Social workers did everything in their power to trigger the mothers' anger as this mother reflected:

- *They want to set you up. There are key words and there's key things they try to throw at you to make you fly off the handle. I'm not stupid, I know their game.*

CW Expectations and Programs

Many of the mothers shared with us that they attended numerous programs at the request of the child welfare worker and agency. There is a sense that there is no rhyme and reason to the types and/or number of programs that mothers are required to attend. For many of the mothers it seemed that they were over-programmed and the child welfare expectations seemed to change from month to month.

- *I had to jump through hoops ... going through parenting programs ... I don't even know how many programs ... I went for treatment. ... I got so many certificates it's unreal. Everything was done here, the four years I lived here, I was always doing this and doing that ...*
- *I've been through so much programs in about, last three months. Sometimes I barely ate. I've even barely slept. I went from 8, 9 o'clock in the morning right to 9:30 at night. Sometimes all day long from 3 programs a day. Then I get up and have to go to another one. But I did it! I'm glad I did it. And I told [my worker] I'm just so programmed out.*

Needing Additional Programs

- Mothers need for additional support services to help prepare them for the return of their children once the temporary order of children ended.
- Mothers felt unprepared for return of their children. There appears to be an abundance of programs for mothers involved with child welfare, but little by way of support services after children return home:
 - *I didn't have enough support services brought into my home. These kids I never parented ever when they were growing up and then all of sudden it's...here's your kids, enjoy have fun, we're out of your life ...*

Visitation Rights

- Problems and difficulties around visitation rights
- Visits appear to be inconsistent and at the whim of social workers:
 - *I still see them but it's like once every 6 months now. It used to be once every month. The social workers always change and they don't keep up with the files or whatever and they don't contact me until the kids contact them and say, "I want to see my mom." And then they contact me, you know what I mean? But they can't be bothered (laughing), it's just the reality, eh, that's just the way it is. They can't be bothered to go out of their way to help me see my kids, you know, they're just another file.*

Harm to Children in Care

- concern over the impact of the removal on their children
- The most frequently cited concern that mothers brought to our attention was the possibility their children may have been or were sexually abused while in care
- Children were threatened by the foster parents not to tell anyone including their mothers about what was happening in the foster home. In some instances; mothers reported that their children were threatened that they would never see their parents again if they told of the abuse:
 - *My son talks about the foster home yelling, swearing at him, telling him to shut up. But then when the social workers come by oh the foster parent “oh he’s lying ...” Phony. And I wonder if that is happening to my twins and to my son S. If they are being abused but when the social workers come around, they’re so scared they won’t want to speak up. And that’s what my daughter, my twin shared with me. She shared that from ... that ... that foster mom that smacked her in the back of the head said “go and tell the social workers – you’ll never see your mom, they’ll never put you back with you mom – they’ll just transfer you to a different foster home. They won’t buy you nice clothes and they won’t give you what I give you.” It’s like manipulating my kids.*

Harm to Children Cont'd...

- Feeling powerless about how to bring their children's concerns to the child welfare agency's attention for fear they will make things worse for their children
 - *At the beginning when my children were first apprehended, they used to complain about being hit in that foster care. When I said that I was going to go in and report it to go and say that my children were being abused in this home. My baby at the time, I think she was only six or seven at the time; she started crying and said no mommy you're going to get us into trouble. She said it'd just make it worse on us. My thirteen year old, at the time a little older than my seven year old, I think she was nine or ten at the time. I was so angry and so frustrated because there was nothing I could do if I reported and said anything that this foster parent was being this way to my children then my children would suffer for it. I was caught in between. I wanted to report, but I didn't want to make it worse for them because there would be no way I could protect them. No, I was too scared to. I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want them to get hurt. They're still in that home. It's improved though since...*
- Mothers say the biggest impact on children as a result of being removed is the loss of the development of deeper relationships with their children as this mother lamented:
 - *My 18 year old son grew up in this child and welfare system. My son ... has a lot of anger and abandonment issues But he always has a safe home to come home to. I still love him and I'll always be here and ah, he has trust issues. He does come home but when he does come home, all he does is he showers, packs clothes and then he leaves. I have not had a relationship with my son and I blame the child welfare system for that.*

Mothers' Emotion

- Reported feeling a range of emotions (positive and negative)
- negative emotions identified included feeling pain, hurt, depressed, stressed, angry, weak, feeling alone, powerless, unheard, unprotected, not believed, isolating themselves, feeling like they should give up, feeling they were judged, low self-esteem, shame and guilt, stigma, fear, lifelong emotional scars and suppressing all emotions and thoughts.
- The positive emotions encapsulated throughout the mothers' narratives included acknowledging their mistakes, feelings of empowerment, finding their voice, empowering others, not feeling sorry for themselves, moving away from dysfunction, acknowledging their accomplishments and understanding how they were coping with intervention. They expressed emotions related to the love for their children and emotions around missing their children while they were away in care.
- The pain is still fresh ...

Mothers' Emotions Cont'd...

- The experience and memory of having had their children apprehended by child welfare was painful. For many mothers, the pain was still as fresh as if it just happened yesterday:
 - *I can't stand to feel this pain ... See I don't know if that ... if the pain will ever go away, that it will ever leave.*
 - *To start this interview ... it was painful at first but at least now I worked my way through it – and all what I can remember, you know, what I've been through.*
 - *I could see like when ... Aboriginal women lose their kids ... like how painful it is ... and what else are they supposed to do? A lot of them just turn right back to the alcohol right? Cause that's all they know and I did that too but then ... I thought, you know what? I got to straighten out because my kids aren't gonna be there forever.*
 - *Like I still go ... to [name of organization removed] and I talk to people, like counselors or whatever ... to get everything out of me so I won't like feel like I need alcohol, weed, to take me away from that pain, you know?*

How Mothers' Coped with Intervention

- Reported a number of healthy and unhealthy strategies and coping methods for dealing with the stress of living without their children.
- Negative:
 - *I guess instead of going to AA meeting...I started to feel sorry for myself and I started to drink*
- Positive:
 - Relying upon aspects of their culture (attending ceremonies and praying);
 - Relied upon Educational pursuits;
 - Keeping themselves busy;
 - Looking forward to the visits with their children;
 - Sharing their stories;
 - Isolating themselves from bad influences/people;
 - Crying.

How Mothers' Coped Cont'd...

- *Just keeping myself busy working. I was working two jobs and enrolled myself in treatment and tried to stay away from everybody. I didn't really have much family support. No, I kept to myself because I didn't have any clean friends ... the friends that I knew were all into something. So, I stayed away from everybody. Everybody that drank booze and everybody that smoked weed, everything, I didn't touch nothing. I isolated myself and I just worked.*
- *I coped by ... uh, by going to ceremonies, being around other women, sharing my story. Uh, knowing that I wasn't going to let them win and that you know I have a voice and that my story needed to be heard.*
- *And I even went to support groups and other support groups. I did a lot of my own personal stuff like Sweats and reading.*
- *Ah, I went to support group ... I spoke to crisis lines. I think um ... I ... for the first time in my life, I actually dealt with a whole lot of loss, like there's just nothing but loss, like minute after minute. And um ... I just allowed myself to heal, I guess crying. That was the only thing I could do was cry and cry and cry and that was it.*

Mothers' Hope and Persistence

The mothers involved in this study exhibited great faith, hope and persistence that one day their children will return home. They want to be ready for when that day arrives, as these mothers expressed in their own way:

- *I don't sit there and feel sorry for myself ... Those are my children and one day they'll come home like my son did. Never mind if it takes them a long time to come home, I know eventually they'll come home. And when they do, I want to be strong and I want to be happier and I want to be educated and I don't want to rely on the welfare system. I don't want to rely on "poor me, I was sexually abused." Well poor me, well I got physically abused in care and yes it has happened to us and to our Elders through the boarding school system. But we have to ... we have to rise up, you know. We just have to ... to look at each day as a new day and to keep going and um ... if you have anger issues like I do, get some counselling. Don't do it for the workers or your kids, do it for yourself. So you know how to use life skills to better cope with life and the everyday little challenges. That's all the advice I can give.*
- *I didn't trust anybody ... while in shelter I was trying to get funding for school, so I was still going, still trying to keep going – yet I was like ... you know? I forced myself to get up and go ... oh, suck it up and go, hi! And put the masks back on that I needed to wear and try to get back on my feet.*

Mothers' Experience with Lawyers

- Lack of knowledge about rights:
 - *Basically, I have no rights they didn't tell me to get a lawyer or anything or what are my rights to get my kids ... we're taking your kids and we have to do an investigation and in the meantime you can't see your kids at all. It was up to them there was no ... nothing legal ... nothing written ...*
 - *Yah your rights ... you don't have any rights when you're dealing with CFS, none! It's everything they say and who cares what you're saying. A sound proof room and that's you in the sound proof room and you could be ... like they are there around you and they just can't hear you. That's how I felt is that you know, they just totally ignore you like you're in a sound proof room, that's what I meant to say.*
- Perception that lawyers colluded with CFS :
 - *I had a lawyer here in The Pas and they made me sign the Permanent forms. They told me it would be a lot easier if I signed the Permanent form and that was the biggest mistake I ever made. I tried to avoid Legal Aid because I found out through someone that's been going through the same thing I am is that Legal Aid is in cahoots with Child and Family Services to get as many children as they possibly can in their care through Legal Aid. That's what I was told and I know that now, but I found out too late.*

Courtroom Experiences

- Not allowed family or advocate supports in the court:
 - *The Advocate...wasn't allowed in the courtroom. Well ... that's what I said, oh, you guys are allowed all your people but I'm not allowed to have mine? I think it is important for these women to have someone there with them because you become emotional, you know, you've got these people bashing you, your character and your parenting. No you need someone there! They need to change that definitely. You should be allowed whoever you want in court with you and maybe you're not allowed 10 people, or 5 people, but at least 2 peoples should be allowed, or 3 even, your lawyer and 2 other people.*