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LEARNING NETWORK

# LearningNetwork Brief 22



## Learning from Women with Lived Experience



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*Facilitate. Educate. Collaborate.*

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**Nicole Pietsch** is Coordinator of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres ([OCRCC](#)). The Coalition works toward the prevention and eradication of sexual assault. Its membership includes 25 sexual assault centres from across Ontario, offering counselling, information and support services to survivors of sexual violence, including childhood sexual abuse.

Since 1998, Nicole has assisted women and youth living with violence, including immigrant and refugee women and survivors of sexual violence. In recent years, Nicole has worked with youth and adult survivors of violence who are incarcerated, those living in an institutional setting, and Deaf youth. Nicole has a particular interest in the ways in which social constructs of sex, gender, age and race inform Canadian social policy, including law.

Nicole's written work has appeared in York University's Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, the University of Toronto's Women's Health and Urban Life, and Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme.

In 2013, her fiction *Sideshow of Merit*, addressing traumatic re-enactment and systemic cultural reproduction of sexual violence, was published under New Adult Fiction by [namelos press](#).

In 2014, her intersectional analysis of the "Slutwalk" movement, "*doing something*" about "COMING TOGETHER": *The Surfacing of Intersections of Race, Sex and Sexual Violence in Victim-Blaming in the SlutWalk Movement*, will appear in an edited collection by Demeter Press.

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## Learning from Women with Lived Experience

Sexual violence can be experienced at any age and stage of a woman's life, from her youngest to her oldest years. A common [misconception about sexual assault](#) is that the impact or trauma is worse if the violation resulted in physical injury or involved forced intercourse (rape).

In fact, survivors of sexual violence share that **many contexts – not just the physical details of the violent act itself – shape the impacts of sexual violence, and a victim's attempts to reach support.**

Contexts that challenge or exacerbate a survivor's experiences can include:

- the relationship she had with the offender (for example, if he was a person she had an ongoing, trusting relationship with);
- whether the sexual violation went on for a period of time (for example, as in many cases of childhood sexual abuse or incest);
- if the offender implied that the victim was responsible for the assault (for example, by saying she did something to compel him to assault her, or didn't do enough to stop him);
- or if she was believed when she disclosed what happened to another person.

Other important contexts that impact a survivor's experience of sexual violation include her social location: for example, if she is a young woman (as opposed to an adult), she may experience more complex barriers to confidentiality when she shares her story with others. If she is an Aboriginal woman she may [face or fear systemic biases that impact Aboriginal women's experiences with criminal justice systems](#), and in raising awareness about violence against Aboriginal women as a serious problem in Canada. If she is a woman from a faith-based community, she may face particular stigma associated with faith or community expectations of women and girls' sexuality (which inevitably impact community understandings of sexual violation). These are but a few examples.

Listening to women with lived experience is one way to learn about the ways women are variably impacted by sexual violation. Listening to women with lived experience also helps us to consider the ways that women cope with sexual violation—that is, what supports, activities or comforts helped them to survive the most challenging parts of their experience. For these reasons, The Learning Network worked in collaboration with Carol, Deborah, Janis, Megan and Michelle, who shared their stories as survivors of sexual violence. Janis, Deborah, Michelle, Carol and Megan's stories illuminate how different women experience sexual violence differently—and how their experiences with systems meant to support victims have differed as well.