

We Killed Them First: How the Robert Pickton Investigation Revealed Systemic and Intersectional Discrimination within Canada

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ABSTRACT Robert Pickton is often considered to be Canada's most notorious serial killer. By his own estimation, he murdered 49 women over at least 5 years (Craig, 3). The Pickton case brought attention to fundamental issues within the Canadian justice system and highlighted systemic inequities. From the outset, the police failed to take the issue of missing and murdered women seriously because the women were considered expendable. As members of several marginalized communities at the intersection of race, low socioeconomic status, and stigmatized labour, the loss of these women was considered acceptable. I argue that the intersection of these characteristics that were "accepted" as defining Pickton's victims demonstrates that the assumptions and biases of those who enforce the law (police and judges) can seriously impair the system's ability to create equitable outcomes. Utilizing media analysis, this paper looks at the language commonly found in articles about Pickton and his victims to demonstrate the role intersectional characteristics played in crafting certain narratives to the public.

KEYWORDS intersectionality; Downtown Eastside; anti-Indigenous racism; violence against women; sex-work; prejudice; discrimination



(Simpson, 2001, p. 278)

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When Sandra Gail got into Robert Pickton's car one ordinary night in 1997, she did not expect to end the night in hospital flat-lining. Gail was a sex worker and Pickton was much like any client frequenting the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Pickton brought Sandra home with him where, after "plying her with drugs, he refused payment and began to apply handcuffs to her wrists" (Dusome, 2020b, p. 6). Pickton managed to get a handcuff on one wrist before Sandra broke free. Fearing for her life, she grabbed a knife and fought back. Pickton's throat was slashed, and Sandra was stabbed several times (Dusome, 2020b, p. 6). Sandra was able to run, naked, to the road where she was taken to the hospital by a passerby. Sandra died from her injuries when she reached the hospital, however doctors were able to revive her (Dusome, 2020b, p. 6). Pickton took himself to the same hospital for his injuries – with the key to Sandra's handcuffs, still hanging on her wrist, secure in his pocket.

One would think that this incident would have been the end of this tragic tale culminating in Pickton's arrest for violent assault. Justice could have been done right then. After all, the evidence of his crime was in his very pocket, just a few rooms from Gail. Pickton could have gone to prison. Yet despite the overwhelming evidence against Pickton, "the charges were... dropped because the witness was deemed an unreliable witness due to her regular drug use and 'junkie' status" (Dusome, 2020b, p. 6). Pickton continued to murder innocent women for another five years.

Pickton is considered by many to be Canada's most notorious serial killer. By his own estimation, he murdered 49 women (Craig, 2014, p. 3). The Pickton case brought attention to fundamental issues within the Canadian justice system because it highlighted systemic inequities. From the outset, the police failed to take the issue of missing and murdered women seriously because the women were considered expendable. Many witnesses pointed to Pickton as a murderer, but tips were ignored and discredited by the police (Fernandez, 2022, p. 212). As members of several marginalized communities at the intersection of race, low socioeconomic status, and stigmatized labour, the loss of Sarah Jean and Georgina,¹ and all Pickton's victims, was considered acceptable. This article argues that the intersection of these characteristics that ostensibly define Pickton's victims, demonstrates that the assumptions and biases of those who make and enforce the law can seriously impair the system's ability to create equitable outcomes. This article draws upon a random sample of 55 newspaper articles about the case to demonstrate how the language of marginalization, endemic in society, including by law enforcement and reproduced in the media, created the context for a serial killer like Pickton. This is a small case study of a story that was sensationalized and broadcast widely. The articles were chosen as a snapshot of the general socio-legal and socio-cultural impact of this story

¹ In order to remain true to the intention of this paper, I have not used the term "these women" unless absolutely necessary. Instead, I have opted to select two names from his list of victims. I use these names as representative of all the women he horrifically and callously murdered. Sarah Jean and Georgina were not his only victims and were not represented in the court case against him. Their names were chosen at random.

on Canadian consciousness. The range of papers were chosen without specific criteria to reflect the fact that a variety of people get their news from a variety of places. These stories were selected from periods of time when the Pickton case was being widely discussed (his arrest, his trial, and his parole appeal) as a way of understanding which parts of the case were highlighted and who was left out of the narrative. These articles were selected at random, with a variety of lengths, authors, and where they appeared within the paper, to begin a media analysis of Sarah Jean and Georgina's representation within global consciousness. These articles were also chosen from a variety of broadsheet and tabloid papers with different ideological leanings.

This article will look at how drug addiction and participation in the sex trade impacted the police investigation; how the racialized status of some of the women led to police indifference; how this case reflects Canadian colonial attitudes; and how the construction of Sarah Jean and Georgina as deviants, rather than victims, led to their inevitable, violent end. What transpired at Pickton's home before and after that night at the hospital is a symptom of a larger legal and cultural system that places marginalized women in positions where their lives could be violently ripped away without recourse. The lack of protections, the systemic biases, and the views of who is expendable made Sarah Jean and Georgina the perfect victims: Canadian society killed them long before they were taken to Pickton's farm.

The Theory: Intersectionality, the “Lesser Dead” and “the Legally Abandoned”

The thesis of this paper is built upon the methodology of intersectionality, and the subsequent theories of legal abandonment and the lesser dead. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, identified the need for legal language which encompassed a dual claim of discrimination. This approach would be relevant in cases in which characteristics such as gender or race on their own are not sufficient to prove discrimination, but the combination of two (or more) characteristics creates that specific inequitable outcome. That is to say, while discrimination based on one characteristic was possible, and perhaps even more common, institutions also needed a frame through which to understand overlapping, or intersecting, oppression. In an interview, Crenshaw stated:

If someone is trying to think about how to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women, just because the employer did hire blacks who were men and women who were white... that's what the tool was designed to do. (Columbia Law School, 2017)

The courts were reluctant to allow both types of claims to exist in tandem: “[intersectional] arguments were repudiated based on the questionable assertion that Congress had not intended for Black women to combine race and

gender claims. The particular risks of being subject to both dynamics were marginalized by courts” (Bello & Mancini, 2016, p. 12). Thus, the theory of intersectionality broadened the understanding of discrimination and how a person’s whole identity, in its totality, could create certain inequitable outcomes. In the book *Intersectionality*, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) argue that reducing people to a single descriptor ignores the many different influences that work to maintain biased social ordering. They state:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor... When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (2016, p. 2)

An intersectional approach is required in this paper as the creation of Sarah Jean and Georgina by the police, media, and society was built upon systemic bias which was expressly intersectional. Sarah Jean and Georgina were placed on the margins of Canadian society and as such their deaths were ignored and the system that allowed for such violence was perpetuated.

Intersectionality is not without its critics. It has evoked many academic roundtables and discussions which always emerge when a radical methodology is introduced. It requires time and study to gain legitimacy and influence best practices in public policy. The “intersectionality wars” that have arisen do more to develop and shape the concept than to undermine its applications. Jennifer Nash argues this point in her article, “A Love Letter from a Critic, or Notes on the Intersectionality Wars” (2019). Nash draws attention to the ways in which critique can be a radical protective act, placing intersectionality within Black feminist thought which was using the idea long before it was termed, and long before white feminist scholars canonized it (Nash, 2019). She states:

The labor of reiterating and emphasizing intersectionality’s rootedness in black feminist thought is a critical response to women’s studies and its imagined “appropriation”... of black feminist scholarship. It is also a practice of black feminist holding on, a corrective claim that retells intersectionality’s history in an ostensibly accurate way, one that honors the analytic’s location in black feminism and its intimate connection to black women’s intellectual labor. (Nash, 2019)

To understand and honour intersectionality is to understand critique within Black feminist circles while honouring its origin in the very same circles.

I chose this methodology not because it is inseparable from racialization, or because it belongs synonymously with women’s studies, but because in articulating intersectionality, Crenshaw was able to create a socio-legal framework that honoured identity precisely in the in-between. This is an evolving methodology and any time that an author critically engages with the

theoretic framework they must also understand the limitations. Intersectionality is not perfect, it is not complete, and it is rooted in a rich racial feminist history that is often overlooked. However, this methodology allows for a broader understanding of how social disinterest in race, womanhood, the sex trade, and poverty created bodies of power which were exercised over those pushed to the margins.

Sarah Jean and Georgina were reduced to characteristics of their existence (such as race, drug addict, or female) without honouring the intersections of identity which paint the true stories of systemic marginalization and colonialism. As a result of reductionism, they were denied the powers and protections of citizenship. The police, government, and social bias reduced the victims to what authors call, “the less dead” (see Cui, 2021; Fernandez, 2022; Russell, 2019). Katie Russell (2019) defines the “less dead” by saying the term “is used to define the people whom society has deemed less important. These are the marginalized groups – the people who attract less attention and whose faces networks decide are not worthy of broadcast.” The death of Sarah Jean and Georgina is considered of lesser note, as a kind of afterthought, because of their marginalized status and the biases held against them. In this context, Elaine Craig (2014) suggests that people are “legally abandoned” as they are “rendered to the mere life of bodies, material substance necessary to the constitution of power hierarchies, yet denied all of the qualifications and attributes of the lives of citizens” (p. 36). Sarah Jean and Georgina represent how marginalized people, especially those whose marginalization is created on the basis of contempt and the idea of a moral failing, are legally abandoned by police, lawmakers, and governments. Pickton may have carried out the crimes but the idea that Sarah Jean and Georgina were already “half dead” and legally abandoned was the measure of a much larger systemic problem.

The Methodology

To demonstrate the claim that there existed a much larger systemic problem, this paper will apply intersectionality to a textual analysis of this story to better understand how Sarah Jean and Georgina were socially defined and how that definition created the context in which the repeated pleas for help to find these missing women could go ignored. Going beyond the trial record itself, it is possible to discover that the ways the victims were described in the media demonstrates how intersectional variables framed the view that they were in some way responsible for their own fate. Using intersectional research methodology this article sought to discover reoccurring terms and themes in the chosen newspaper articles that covered the events of the Pickton murders (see Appendix 1).² This research was meant to contribute to the scholarship by

² The number of sources chosen provided an overall view of the descriptors used by the press and the families of the victims.

showing how intersectional terms are weaponised to perpetuate narratives of the lesser dead and the legally abandoned.³ A document was created that contained each article, as well as their titles, and the document was searched for the relevant search terms as described below. The articles were mined for specific details related to the hypothesis of the article: that the victims were described with specific weaponised language which marginalized their place in society, playing into social bias and indirectly reaffirming both societal and police apathy. Collins and Blige (2016, p. 15) state:

Using intersectionality as an analytic tool can foster a better understanding of growing global inequality... Rather than seeing people as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, positions people differently in the world, especially in relation to global social inequality.

There is no account of what exactly the police officers believed at the time of the investigation, however, scholars have identified biases that ran through the case. In looking at how the news discussed these issues highlighted by scholars we can see how these ideas were present within social consciousness.

Race, gender, citizenship, and "other" became the search term categories for the data set. For race, the terms *Indigenous, Native, First Nations, Indian, and Aboriginal* were selected. For gender, the terms *women, female, and mother*. The term "*citizenship*" was used broadly to consider life within a community group: *rough/mean streets/seedy/squalid, neighbourhood, Downtown Eastside*. Another category was profession or labour practice: *sex worker, prostitute, sex trade, hooker/hooking*. Finally, a category was created for "other" terms which were vital but were not as clearly categorized: *impoverished/poverty, drugs, drug addicted/drug addict, daughter/sister/cousin/aunt, alcohol, heroin, crack, ignoring/throwing away, lifestyle*. The term "*mother*" was connected to gender when it was specifically used to refer to the motherhood of the victims. This choice was made because motherhood ties these women to their bodies and their gender, as well as noting the stigmatized bias this term has when related to drugs and prostitution. Terms such as *daughter/sister/cousin/aunt* were not tied to gender as these terms were often contextually used to make the victims more human, rather than as an expression of their gender identity. By demonstrating the intersectional use of these descriptors in the newspaper articles this paper shows that there was a clear bias in the way that the victims were characterized.

³ Articles that were repeated by the Associated Press or the Canadian Press and appeared as the same copy in more than one newspaper, and those that repeated the issue of Pickton's financial woes in hiring a lawyer, were removed from the sample. The article dates range from 2002 – 2023.

The Downtown Eastside – The Geography of the “Lesser Dead”

An important element of this story is the imposed geography of the Downtown Eastside where Sarah Jean and Georgina lived, and because of their drug use and sex work were crafted into the “lesser dead,” figures who could be sacrificed and ignored. Downtown Vancouver is known as a very poor area of Canada with high rates of sex work and drug use linked to systemic problems of generational trauma, abuse, and the lack of resources to fight addiction. As Jori Dusome (2020b) states in the article, “Lost and Forgotten: Sex Workers on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside,” “the sex worker stroll in Downtown Vancouver is an area that has long been sequestered, intended to act as a catch-all for the deviant ne’er-do-wells of the inner city” (p. 2). In fact, the formation of the Downtown Eastside was deliberately done to force those considered undesirable by Canadian society to the margins. Dusome notes that the creation of this community was undertaken very specifically by Canadian police so that they did not have to police sex work (p. 2). Dusome goes on to explain:

Towards the end of the 20th century, the Downtown Eastside spiral into economic despair... was... compounded by the concentration of society’s most marginalized folks into one distinct geographical area. At the time of the disappearances, the average annual income on the Downtown Eastside was... several points below the national poverty line. (p. 2)

The disappearances referenced were those of the women violently murdered and dismembered by Pickton. Downtown Vancouver was a community created and abandoned by police. This area is meant to be a place where deviant people live away from the eyes of the population, a community quite literally on the margins of Canadian society. It was in this context that Pickton could prey upon women of Downtown Vancouver. It took years for Pickton to be charged with 26 murders and convicted of six (see *R. v. Pickton*, 2010), although to a cell block plant he admitted to murdering 49 women (Reid & Lee, 2018, p. 261). Pickton is thought to have been actively murdering women between 1997 and 2002 (Craig, 2014, p. 3). When Pickton was arrested in 2002 he was already a familiar name to the police. Between 1997 and 2002 the Vancouver police had received several tips indicating Pickton may have been responsible for the murders in downtown Vancouver (Reid & Lee, 2018, p. 260). These were ignored by the police. Police finally searched Pickton’s farm on gun charges in 2002, where they discovered the evidence of the murders. Pickton was arrested.

In articles published upon Pickton’s arrest, 80% of the articles used at least one of the terms rough/mean streets/seedy/squalid, neighbourhood, and Downtown Eastside. These terms were used 85 times across the articles, the most common term being Downtown Eastside. Only 11 did not mention one of these search terms. In the article, “B.C. Farmer ‘A Nice, Caring Man,’” inflammatory language was utilized which preys upon biases against the area in question, as well as the profession and addiction histories of the victims: “the women, most of them prostitutes, vanished over the last decade from the

downtown eastside, a squalid neighbourhood infested with drugs” (Kines & Bolan, 2002). Yet, this conception of the Downtown Eastside was not representative of daily life in this community. Its citizens are very close: “...the women were strongly connected to the community by their addictions, medical issues, and family connections” (LePard et al., 2015, p. 332). This community connection was ignored by the police.

As a result of these connections, the community was not silent as these murders took place. Many of the victims were reported missing within a fairly close time of their disappearance (Dusome, 2020b, p. 5). However, those who reported friends missing were ignored, and the character of the victim was often called into question by investigators. Police did not believe reports of missing women:

Multiple women reported a flat-out refusal by officers to file missing persons reports on their friends... One woman reported begging police to file a report on her friend for days on end, to which they replied: ‘No, go down to the needle exchange and leave her a message there.’ (Dusome, 2020b, p. 5).

Police also mixed up Indigenous women, telling concerned friends that they had seen them when DNA evidence from the Pickton farm proved they were already dead at the time (Dusome, 2020b, p. 5). The “high-risk lifestyle” of Sarah Jean and Georgina was wielded as a shield against accountability for their disappearances. Downtown Vancouver is very close and as such family and friends knew something was wrong long before police investigated: “police managers responsible for the investigation were not intimately familiar with the victims’ culture and lifestyle and mistakenly believed they were transient... Sex trade workers from the Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside are, in fact, generally not transient” (LePard et al., 2015, pp. 332-333). Many of the victims were known to have strong community attachments and were trying to make their home safer for their neighbours.

Indigeneity and Colonial Legacy of Marginalization

Indifference towards these women was not just directed by their professions and their addiction histories, but was also deeply reflected in Canadian apathy towards Indigenous women. The racialization of many of the victims placed them within intersecting categories of police indifference and was a factor in the long period over which these crimes were committed with little to no investigation. Many of the inhabitants of the Downtown Eastside, and a disproportionate number of Pickton’s victims, were Indigenous women. This reflects structural violence and assimilation which has been enacted against Canada’s Indigenous peoples. Dusome (2020b, p. 3) states:

Another critical factor in the marginalization present here is the Indigeneity of many Downtown Eastside residents. It is estimated that anywhere from 50-80% of the

women who work the Low Track are Indigenous, despite comprising only 2% of the population of Vancouver.

The high number of Indigenous people found in this area is not an accident. Canada colonial legacy has created the social circumstances in which Indigenous Canadians have higher levels of substance abuse and lower socioeconomic status due to systemic trauma. As stated in the paper, “Intergenerational Trauma: Convergence of Multiple Processes among First Nations peoples in Canada,” “collective trauma may have profound intergenerational effects that infiltrate beyond easily observed or measured factors” (Bombay, 2009, p. 7). The authors go on to state, “there is reason to believe that [Indigenous communities] suffer from disproportionately high levels of mental health problems, including depression, substance abuse and PTSD” (p. 7). These high levels of mental health problems can be linked back to the traumatic legacy of Residential Schools in Canada (p. 7) which were places of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse with the aim of cultural genocide, the breakdown of the Indigenous family unit, and linguicide. Residential schools were government-funded and were found in communities across Canada. The last school did not close until 1996 (Hanson et al., 2020). This traumatic memory continues to echo through Canadian Indigenous society: “ultimately, anywhere from 33 to 67% of Willie Pickton’s total victims were Indigenous women and comprised four of the six murders for which he was eventually convicted” (Dusome, 2020b, p. 4). Pickton’s victims were specifically picked because they existed in a marginalized community and were made up of a population already systemically lesser dead and legally abandoned within Canada.

The racialization of many of the victims was largely ignored by the media. Across the chosen articles, one of the “race” terms was used 36 times, with Indigenous appearing the least and Native appearing the most; 44 of the articles did not use any of the race terms. This finding is consistent with the scholarship that argues racialization was often ignored because it would lead to larger questions about systemic inequality. It was not insignificant that Pickton’s victims were disproportionately Indigenous, yet that fact was made unimportant in the reporting. The importance of the racial factor is evidenced in the fact that “seven of the 15 alleged murder victims were of aboriginal ancestry, although natives form only four per cent of B.C.’s population” (Fournier, 2002, p. A12). In another article entitled “Serial Killer Ground Prostitutes into Mince and Sold them to Cops Hunting Him,” the author discusses how Pickton was never connected to these women, even though he had strong connections to Indigenous women: “there was nothing about him which made him stand out... He was known locally for using prostitutes and had a perchant [sic] for Indigenous women but when large numbers went missing no one made the connection” (Myall, 2023). The article goes on to state, “it is thought that some women went missing after attending [Pickton’s] parties but no-one alerted the authorities” (Myall, 2023). Even though people knew that women

were disappearing on the Pickton farm, knew that Pickton liked Indigenous women, and knew that Indigenous women were going missing, no one connected Pickton to these crimes.

The data shows that gender was one of the most reproduced intersectional terms: the term women was used 231 times. Race was ignored while gender was highlighted. Yet, racialization is crucial to this story.

Sex Work as Marginalized Labour

Social stigma impacted police willingness to look for the women who had been murdered by Pickton. While racialization and community were a large part of this prejudice, there was also a strong social stigma against sex work. Engaging in the sex trade was often tied into narratives of victimization and sex workers were deliberately kept away from the general populace: “while a variety of objectives appear to be embodied in the different components of Canadian prostitution law, one of its main functions appears to have been prophylactic – to keep the prostitute out of public mind and sight” (Lowman, 1986, p. 1). Sex workers were placed within the confines of Downtown Vancouver and forgotten along with the other “deviant” characters driven there. Further, sex work often takes place in secluded areas due to fear of prosecution. Distrust between police and sex workers, as well as constant fear of arrest, has led to increased vulnerability: “this precarious relationship with the law encourages sex workers to move away from visible, public spaces, isolating themselves and increasing their vulnerability to rape, beatings, robberies, and death in an effort to avoid persecution [sic]” (Dusome, 2020b, p. 4). Many sex workers have also indicated that it would be unlikely they would report violence against them as they would just open themselves up to prosecution (Dusome, 2020b, p. 4). Violence against this community is normalized and is often attributed to their profession rather than the underlying causes of violence. This is not a new phenomenon: “a 1985 Canadian government report on prostitution and pornography... stated that the mortality rate for girls in prostitution was 40 times the national average” (Simpson, 2001, p. 278). Sarah Jean and Georgina had already been abandoned by the state and their deaths were an inevitability as well as a tragedy. Sex workers were particularly vulnerable to Pickton’s violent tendencies.

Preconceived biases against certain marginalized identities are reflected in the Pickton investigation. As a result, these communities were forgotten and abandoned in their fear, grief, and insecurity. Even after the investigation, those who had been preyed upon and were desperately seeking help were blamed for the murders. If the police are representatives of the law, then this failure shows the wider negligence of Canadian law to take seriously the security of those on the margins of society. In a statement about police disinterest, one sex worker states:

Police say oh if you're in the trade you take risks and you know what's gonna happen. You're gonna get hurt. There's nothing we can do about it... Where does it say if you're a hooker you're gonna get hurt? You don't get paid to get beat up. You're not a beat-up worker, you know? (Erica, Transgender Indigenous, in Krüsi et al., 2016, p. 1142).

This same sentiment was reflected in police reactions to missing person reports and tips that were willfully ignored and could have led to Pickton much sooner. Another sex worker stated about the police, "I don't think they'll change it back in their heads that we're trash" (Violet, Transgender White, in Krüsi et al., 2016, p. 1142). As long as Sarah Jean and Georgina are treated as systemically disposable by law enforcement they will be treated as disposable by the wider social order, especially the most violent among that order. This investigation, the court's response to it, and the impact of the case, shed light upon pre-existing miscarriages of justice against marginalized claimants in Canadian law. These miscarriages of justice were not just identified by the terrorized sex workers but also by government officials in the aftermath of the investigation. Fernandez's (2022) article includes a powerful quote from Carolyn Bennett, former Canadian Minister for Indigenous and Northern Affairs: "when a missing woman is viewed as inevitable, where the surge of the investigation is not done at the same level as other investigations and women are dying, then we have to do better" (Fernandez, 2022, p. 211). Sarah Jean and Georgina were already half dead, cut off from the community and denied the true life of citizens. Their deaths, in the eyes of law enforcement, did not warrant investigation or compassion. They lived "high-risk lifestyles," and so it was narrativized that they "asked for it" (Goldberg, 2013, p. 40). Jill Goldberg states, "what I have been aching to say is this: the women who have supposedly 'chosen' their high-risk lives and are therefore deemed unworthy of serious and adequate protection and compassion did not choose all of the circumstances of their lives" (Goldberg, 2013, p. 40). Understanding the intersectionality of the victims, and the fact that they were reduced to stagnant parts rather than complex human beings allows for further empathy. Sarah Jean and Georgina did not choose the circumstances of their lives, they were in many ways creations of the state, and they had to find way to survive. Yet, their means of survival was used against them and even as justifications for their murders.

The disinterest and disdain of police was not hidden. Leigh-Anne Cui (2021) states:

Police knew that an unusual number of women were going missing, but were uninterested in their disappearances because they were sex workers. Police do not prioritize searches for missing sex workers, especially if they are Indigenous, simply because their lives are not viewed to be as valuable as those of middle-class white women or men. (p. 30)

Cui goes on to argue:

The Vancouver Police Department (VPD) had a long history of apathy against murder cases involving prostitutes due to the stigma associated with sex work... missing sex workers were often seen as “throwaways” and police made no efforts to investigate... Even when pressured by families of the missing women, Vancouver police often tried to come up with reasons not to investigate. (p. 32)

Vancouver police simply did not care about dead sex workers. If police turn a blind eye, then of course the disappearances become socially permissible.

Descriptions of the victims often played into the biases against the sex trade which are so prevalent. The terms sex worker, prostitute, sex trade, or hooker/hooking were used 94 times. Twenty of the articles did not use any of these terms. Five of the articles mentioned prostitution in the title of the article. Bias against this population and victim-blaming was evident in the language utilized. The article, “Accused Serial Killer’s Hearing May Shed Light on Missing Women Mystery” stated:

Pickton's alleged victims... were mainly prostitutes or drug addicts, and their gradual disappearances did not immediately raise red flags among the local community. The area from which they vanished is Canada's poorest neighbourhood, a place where dealers sell drugs in the open and addicts can be seen self-injecting heroin on the sidewalks and in filthy alleys. (Jones, 2003).

Aside from the fact that this language paints a picture of deviant practice, removing empathy from the narrative, this is also patently untrue. Many of the victims were reported missing by friends and family as already evidenced. The switch in the narrative places culpability on individuals as opposed to the institutions that ignored this continuing issue.

Drug Addiction as a Stand-In for “It’s Your Own Fault”

Many of these women also had long-standing battles with drug addiction, which rather than evoking compassion was held against them. This narrative of drug addiction was prevalent in the description of the victims and the crime. According to Craig (2014, p. 18), “the Supreme Court of Canada, in its decision upholding Pickton’s conviction, does not name any of the six women. It refers to them only as drug-dependent sex-trade workers.” Sarah Jean and Georgina were reduced to their substance addiction and profession by the courts. Rather than asking why no one helped or protected Sarah Jean and Georgina, the narrative was focused on how Sarah Jean and Georgina steered their own oppression and murder. Craig (2014, p. 20) states:

The figure of the drug-dependent sex-trade worker is a representation of a mismanaged life. Under this schematic, poverty is understood as the result of drug addiction rather than the cause. Involvement in street-level sex trade reveals individual failure to acquire sufficient education or skills and poor decision making regarding the use of drugs. Under this representation, the precarity of life...

becomes a consequence of individual choice. In this sense, moral responsibility is equated with rational action.

Calling Sarah Jean and Georgina “drug-addicted” was a way to blame them for their predicament.

The terms drugs, drug addicted/drug addict, alcohol, heroin, and crack were used a total of 59 times. In the article “It’s Our Duty to Fund Proper Defence for Pickton” it is stated that “words fail this saga. ‘Ghoulis’ cannot begin to describe a downtown neighbourhood rife with zombie-like addicts who sell their bodies to buy drugs to inject on the open street” (Jones, 2002, p. A23). Pickton’s friend tried to defend him by casting doubts on the believability of the victims, using derogatory language to describe one witness. This account was quoted in two articles: “she’s got a great personality, but as soon as she gets a little heroin or a little coke, and she can’t get no more drugs, she goes right off... I’ve been hauled into the serious crime unit umpteen times over this crackhead... when... [Pickton] doesn’t give her money for dope, she phones and says he’s slaughtering the hookers and burying them on the property” (Kines & Bolan, 2002). The narrative of an untrustworthy drug user is being reproduced in this language, and its replication in newspaper articles, especially by journalists who are not doing the work to call out the biases they are reproducing, continues to legitimate discriminatory belief.

There were attempts to counter the pervasive social narrative of personal responsibility for victimization. Many of the families attempted to describe their family members as people, rather than “drug-addicted sex-trade workers.” The terms daughter/sister/cousin/aunt were used 47 times. In the article “‘A Sweetheart’ Trapped by Drugs, Prostitution” one woman who knew Mona Wilson stated, “Mona had wanted to get off drugs but had been unable to get into a treatment centre because there are so few spaces available for women... ‘She was firmly entrenched in the survival sex trade’” (Fong & Kines, 2002, p. A1). This framing allows for a much more nuanced view of the victims and their struggles. Using the term “survival sex trade” brings out the fact that many were engaging in sexual labour to survive, whether it be to access drugs with no safe ways to end their addiction, responsibility for a child, or simply needing to provide food and shelter for themselves. Sarah Jean and Georgina did not choose the circumstances of their lives and did not choose to be abused; they had to find ways to survive (Goldberg, 2013, p. 40). Their survival is what got them killed and was used against them as justification for indifference. Mona’s boyfriend discussed his terror whenever she would engage in sex work, stating that he always tried to protect her, without her feeling that he was dominating her: “there’s 40 girls missing right now, you’d be number 20... And sure enough, she ended up number 50” (Fong & Kines, 2002, p. A1). Mona’s boyfriend was just one man in a system that had already decided they would rather make excuses not to investigate than put resources into finding the victims. Mona’s boyfriend went on to state: “the addiction to the heroin ... overcomes the fear of being murdered – that’s what she told me” (Fong &

Kines, 2002, p. A1). Drugs were part of Mona's survival. Without resources to get clean, her addiction was overwhelming, and she continued to engage in the sex trade to keep herself alive. Sarah Jean and Georgina were not just drug addicts or sex workers. They were loved and cared for, people mourned their deaths and the state failed them.

Conclusion

The status of Sarah Jean and Georgina, identified through stigmatized intersectionality, legal abandonment and the lesser dead, created the context for their murders. As Dusome (2020b, p. 2) states:

Pickton was allowed to carry out his violence for years without repercussion, while the news, the police, and the state turned a blind eye, largely because of who the missing women were; drug users, sex workers, the poor, and the Indigenous were deemed unworthy of saving.

The families and friends of Sarah Jean and Georgina begged for their loved ones to be found but the silence of indifference continued to overcome their desperate pleas. Pickton was a part of a larger system that assumed Sarah Jean and Georgina were expendable:

Pickton alone did not do this. Pickton materialized an expulsion already actualized by colonialism, neo-liberalism, racism, sexism and the political, social, and legal infrastructures that support these social relations. That is to say, the process of legal abandonment imposed upon these women... and the countless other women disposed of during the same time period, occurred long before the Vancouver Police Department ignored reports that the disappeared kept disappearing. (Craig, 2014, p. 36)

All of the victims were murdered by law enforcement, they were murdered by the courts, and they were murdered by society. Indifference overcame compassion, colonialism overwrote personhood, and the law cowered in terror of admitting that it had created Pickton as much as it had shielded him. Pickton was an inevitability in these conditions because social and legal biases had stigmatized Sarah Jean and Georgina and turned them into the lesser dead. If this man had not taken advantage of these circumstances someone else probably would have. The issue of murder of the most vulnerable Indigenous women is still prevalent and shockingly common in the Canadian context. The racism from the colonial period in Canada is still systemically built into Canadian governance and policing. The impact of this systemic and culturally accepted violence still impacts the lives of Indigenous people: "violence is an unfortunately common reality for Indigenous women in Canada: Indigenous women aged 25 to 55 are five times more likely to die violently than any other demographic" (Dusome, 2020b, p. 3). Indigenous scholars recognize that the media, knowingly or unknowingly, have been one source of colonial

reproduction and entrenchment. What is clear from the work here is that there was a persistent lack of care taken to ensure that a colonial perspective did not bias the descriptions of Sarah Jean and Georgina. An excellent source for understanding the deep entrenchment and challenge for journalists to discuss Indigenous lives is found in the work of Callison and Young who note that it is the general practice to “privilege some views, perspectives, contexts, and cultural frameworks over others.” (Callison & Young, 2019, p. 10). What was evidenced in this study is the now obvious way in which the presentation of this story reproduced those colonial views of Indigenous lives. Despite the prevalence of violence against this community, little public, governmental, or police attention has been turned toward this issue (McIvor & Day, 2011). Further, media has been complicit in disseminating false colonial narratives that ignore the nuances of race. Curiously, in the media analysis, I did not notice a substantial difference between tabloid and broadsheet, in terms of ideological leaning, nor did I notice a strong difference in the tone of reporting as I have described here.

This paper is not primarily about Robert Pickton. This story is about Sarah Jean and Georgina who were made so expendable and helpless by society’s acceptance of their marginalization that they were killed before they ever had the chance to live. Socio-legal studies requires that researchers look beyond the law to expose how law is socially created and perpetuated. This case revealed discrimination and bias as systemic in law enforcement. Intersectionality is key to understanding how this systemic failure was related to many axes of power that failed to see each person as fully human. This case was not just about one man’s violent predilections. We can see how the police failed the communities they were meant to protect. Intersectionality, in this case, is particularly evident, yet that is precisely what makes it so fundamental for analysis. If there is any denial of intersectional criteria in this case, then how can the nation move forward without constantly recreating the same patterns? Sarah Jean and Georgina did not die simply because they were Indigenous, or female, or drug addicted, or sex workers. Sarah Jean and Georgina died because the intersection of these characteristics left them legally abandoned and beyond the protection owed to all citizens under the law.

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Appendix 1: List of Articles Analysed

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