

# RECLAIMING A VOICE

By Sarah B. Hood

**Three  
Indigenous  
women speak  
out about their  
experience  
with sexual  
violence in an  
effort to help  
others –  
and themselves**



**S**ilence and secrecy are an abuser's best friends, but people who have experienced sexual violence are often reluctant – for many reasons – to speak out about it. Three remarkable Indigenous women, however, have courageously raised their voices to speak publicly about their own experiences, resolving not to stay silent in the hope of helping others.

Award-winning Inuit singer-songwriter Susan Aglukark is famous for her beautiful voice, which has rung out in concerts and recordings since the 1990s. What fans of her early albums did not know about her, however, was her experience of childhood abuse.

In Nunavut, at the age of seven, Aglukark was a victim of a sexual assault. “[It was] by a known pedophile who himself claims he was a victim of the residential schools,” says Aglukark. The story remained untold for about 13 years, until Aglukark found out that her abuser was still active in the early 1990s.

“I knew I had to join the case against him,” she says. “We won the case, but it’s still a fly-in system, where the judges fly in every six months, so our case took a good 18 months to resolve.” Having spoken out and received a degree of closure, Aglukark moved on, first with her job as a translator in Ottawa, and then, increasingly, with her blossoming music career. But she would later be called upon to speak out again.

In the winter of 2018, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women came to Nunavut. At that time, says Aglukark, she had moved on. “I had left it behind me, so I wasn’t ready and couldn’t decide whether to contribute,” she remembers. “There are many cases that are more violent than mine. I felt like somebody else needed that space and I didn’t.”

But when the singer happened to arrive in Nunavut at the same time as the inquiry, her two sisters told her the abuser has been charged again. “I knew then that I had to go public,” she says. “I said ‘You have to let me name him publicly. We have to make the

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**Susan Aglukark**  
Arctic Rose Foundation

community safe again.’ That day and for the next few days, I must have gotten 200 to 300 Facebook comments. Many were from his other victims.”

Aglukark, who is working on a new recording, also founded the Arctic Rose Foundation to help change the narrative for young Northerners. “If they can experience emotional and physical safety and know they have access to it every day, they will change,” she says. “We’re slowly investing in changing the community’s way of addressing abuse. These are incredible, beautiful places, and we have to take the fear out.”

#### SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

Kathy Absolon brings a different perspective to the discussion around finding healing through the court system. She is Anishinaabekwe from the Flying Post First Nation and an associate professor in the Indigenous field of study in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener, Ontario. She is also the director of the Centre for Indigegogy there. “My current critique of the justice system is that it is set up for perpetrators and people who are convicted, versus the victims,” says Absolon on her decision to speak out.

In 2007, in Regina, Absolon filed a police report to document the violence she had been subjected to in a relationship. The perpetrator, however, left the province, and the police could not execute the charge. Absolon subsequently moved on to a new job in Ontario and tried to put the experience behind her.

But in 2014, the incident resurfaced in a disturbing new way when she was subpoenaed as a victim-witness against her former attacker. This time, she learned that photographs of herself and others had been manipulated into pornographic images. The process of viewing them was traumatizing, she says. In fact, she even

questions whether viewing the photographs was necessary.

Furthermore, because court procedure only allows witnesses to give short, ‘yes or no’ answers, Absolon felt censored. “I don’t really feel I had a voice,” she says. “That was frustrating. I don’t think there’s anything healing about the justice system for women. I think the justice system has a lot of work to do.”

As a social worker, Absolon has often encountered women who are unwilling to press charges against their abusers. She says her own experience helps her understand where they are coming from. “I used to be so frustrated,” she says. “It wasn’t until I experienced it that I understood how your confidence in yourself gets chipped away. You start to doubt and mistrust yourself. I talked about it because I wanted other women – and not only women – to know that when you’re stuck in that situation, it’s not your fault.”

In discussing her own case, Absolon feels she can regain her own voice about her experience. “That’s where I feel I can have a voice, and maybe that’s on behalf of all of those who don’t have a voice,” she says. “The law doesn’t always protect us. I want to say on behalf of all the victims that we



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can break the silences and put people on notice that this is not OK. And if systems were set up for victims in a better way, then people would feel safer in the systems that are set up to protect them.”

**DISOWNING SHAME**

Fay Blaney is a retired educator who has worked at the University of British Columbia and Langara College. A Xwémalhkwu woman of the Coast Salish Nation, Blaney is also a founding member of the Aboriginal Women’s Action

Speaking out is only part of the healing process, says Blaney. “It’s a much bigger and deeper struggle than people who haven’t been impacted by sexual violence realize,” she points out. Helping others is an important motivator, because there is still much stigma toward survivors of sexual abuse. “When I do speak, I still feel that people think less of me. Amongst my feminist allies that I work with, I think that they think I’m emotionally wounded and not thinking so-called objectively or clearly. [So] each time I do speak out, I find it empowers other Indigenous women to say, ‘Me too.’”

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**Fay Blaney**  
Aboriginal Women’s Action Network (AWAN)

Network (AWAN), which has worked with Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre and other organizations, especially on behalf of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). She is also an abuse survivor. “I’ve been speaking out for a decade about what I experienced, which was childhood incest,” she says.

Encouragement to speak out came partly through courses Blaney took in women’s studies and from hearing the stories of other women, especially during an occupation of the B.C. regional office of what was then known as the federal Department of Indian Affairs. As with Susan Aglukark, an urgent impetus to speak out came from “knowing full well that this was still going on with other girls in not only my community but most other Native communities,” Blaney says. “I went home in the early 2000s, and it really broke me when I came home.”

Blaney says she’s heard “many, many times” from women who say she has helped them by opening up about her own past. “I do believe that speaking out is a very important way of disowning the shame,” she explains. “We spend a lifetime blaming ourselves.”

Blaney also points to generations of sexism embedded in non-Indigenous views of Indigenous women, and even sexism enshrined in legislation, assigning and perpetuating a low status and a stereotype of sexual availability.

In this context, Blaney feels that speaking out about sexual violence takes on even greater importance. “It’s a revolutionary act when Indigenous women speak out against all of that and speak out about the forces that oppress us,” she says. “I think that speaking out is an act of decolonization.” ●