

Reconnecting with Native Teachings and Creating Healing Spaces with and for 2S+/LGBTQ+ Victim-Survivors of Domestic Violence



SUMMARY OF CONVERSATIONS WITH THE FIELD



**NATIONAL
INDIGENOUS**
WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER



**NATIONAL
LGBTQ
INSTITUTE
ON IPV**



**National Resource Center
on Domestic Violence**

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This resource was made possible by Grant Numbers 90-EV-0452 and 90-EV-0533 from Administration of Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.





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Background

Since 2019, the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center (NIWRC), the National LGBTQ Institute on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and the Avellaka Program’s Rainbow of Truth Circle of the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians have collaborated on a project examining the unique needs of Native 2-Spirit+ and LGBTQ survivors (2S+/LGBTQ+) of gender-based violence. Very few formal resources exist to support this community, so this project aims to improve the capacity of the best safety net to support Native 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors: family and friends. Acknowledging this gap, our agencies began drafting a toolkit for family and friends to learn how to support and protect Native 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors.

A primary aim of the toolkit is to support family and friends of Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors to reconnect with Indigenous teachings about what it means to be family and value one another. Teachings across Indigenous cultures affirm that all individuals have a place in our families, societies, and nations, and were not abused, feared or excluded because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Colonization challenged these Indigenous teachings, imposing Western norms about gender identities and sexual orientation. The toolkit provides information and strategies to encourage families and friends to reconnect with these teachings and improve their capacity to support their Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ family and friends who may be survivors of domestic violence or sexual violence or abuse. 2S+/LGBTQ+ are individuals who identify as two-spirit, additional gender identities and sexual orientations, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning.

To further develop the toolkit and ensure its cultural relevance, we held two Conversations with the Field (CWTF). The Conversation with the Field (CWTF) is a facilitation tool developed by NIWRC for organizing national dialogue related to the domestic and gender-based violence movement. The CWTF discussion groups (DGs) are utilized to develop the structure of a national platform of current and emerging issues of concern and recommendations to increase the safety of victim-survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. Typically, these DGs begin with an overview, followed by discussion, and then a summary.

Conversations with the Field (CWTF)

We conducted two CWTF: the first session held in December 2020 and the second session held in January 2021. We distributed flyers and information about the events through NIWRC emails, website, and through personal contacts of project team members. Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors and advocates were invited to attend. We held both CTWF remotely through a video chat platform, and the sessions lasted between 1.5 – 2 hours.

Over 100 people registered for each CWTF session, with 49 people attending the first session and 55 people attending the second session, respectively. When participants registered, they received a link to a brief online survey to provide written responses to the questions discussed

during each CWTF. This created an additional avenue to hear from people who prefer to share written feedback rather than verbal feedback. Given the large number of attendees at each CWTF session, it also ensured that everyone could participate since we could not guarantee there would be sufficient time for everyone to share all of their thoughts during the CWTF sessions. We gathered written feedback from 16 people.

Our main goal of the CWTF was to inform the development and refinement of the family and friends toolkit. We wanted to learn more about what families and friends need to support Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. Specifically, we wanted to learn about what families and friends need so they can take an active role to reduce isolation, assist with safety planning, provide survivors with validation, encouragement and long-term support, and avoid victim-blaming.

Both CWTF sessions began with an overview of the history and impact of colonization on the challenges that many Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors face. We also described the current collaboration and our goal to reconnect to Indigenous teachings to increase the capacity of families and friends to support their Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ loved ones. To facilitate conversation and engagement with CWTF participants, both sessions utilized a question-and-answer format for the majority of the session. We posed the following questions to the group and encouraged open dialogue:

- How do you say “family” and “relatives” in your respective language? What do those words mean?
- How can families and friends help victim-survivors:
 - Provide love, protection, encouragement, and long-term support?
 - Create healing spaces for victim-survivors?
 - Safety plan, such as practical aid like a safe place to stay, childcare, or a ride to work?
 - Validate that the violence they experienced was not their fault?
- How can families and friends help reduce isolation facing Native 2S/LGBTQ victim-survivors of domestic violence? What do families and friends need to do this?
- What resources are you aware of to help Native 2S/LGBTQ victim-survivors of domestic violence?
- What would be the best way(s) to share the toolkit with family and friends?

What We Heard

On the following pages is a summary of the written and verbal responses from participants at both CWTF sessions. Because answers overlapped across several of the questions, we provide the key themes related to how families and friends can support Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors and available resources for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors.





How Can Families and Friends Help 2S+/LGBTQ+ Victim-Survivors?

Theme: Culture as a Protective Factor, Reconnect with Indigenous Teachings

A central theme of both CWTF sessions was understanding Indigenous cultures as a protective factor against domestic and gender-based violence and limiting further harm from lack of support, especially given the few, if any resources available. Native culture is rich and maintained balance, order and protection for its citizens as reflected in Indigenous languages, cultural teachings and the laws of each specific nation. Indigenous peoples are resilient, innovative and creative. Indigenous teachings, including those related to 2S+/LGBTQ+ people are essential to affirming respect for 2S+/LGBTQ+ people and the importance of love and support of family and friends, especially in response to victimization. We see Indigenous peoples re-building their nations by reconnecting with their traditions, including creating new traditions. Participants provided many examples of the ongoing harms that stem from colonization. These include the demonization of Native religions and spiritual practices and teachings about sexuality and the ability to embody both male and female spirit. This demonization has led to feelings of shame for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors and to family rejection of and discomfort with 2S+/LGBTQ+ relatives and friends.

Throughout both CWTF sessions, participants described the benefit of reconnecting with Indigenous teachings. For example, in talking about traditional languages, participants explained how the term “relatives” translates to things like “all living things, plant and animal” and “my other body.” Another participant described how across Tribes, the language around the embodiment of the male and female sides was similar, and that this embodiment was seen as a gift. Reconnecting with these traditions and knowledge creates meaningful ways to respect 2S+/LGBTQ+ and their valued and sacred roles in Indigenous communities and families.

While highlighting the importance of reconnecting with traditions, participants also described how challenging this process will be due to the inhumane legacy of colonization. As one participant explained, “we need to call on our tribe and clan leadership to bring out and validate what our traditions and teachings are. They need to unbury them because colonization buried them. It’ll be a full-time job to rediscover and renew our traditions.” Several participants mentioned generational issues and the way that some elders and traditional members in Tribes may need support to unlearn deep-seated colonized beliefs.

“Because of colonization and the church/missions, older generations have forgotten the roles of 2-spirited relatives within our communities. So our way of supporting our LGBTQ relatives is reintroducing those teachings and roles that our grandparents may have forgotten.”

“I really feel as though some of our traditions and teachings have been colonized to the



point that our people, and in particular some people who hold themselves as very traditional members of our communities, are wrapping these very ugly ways up and trying to sell them as our ways or our traditions. I think we have to be real about how much our ways have been colonized so that we can begin the process of decolonizing and getting back to our ways that embrace and honor all of our people.”

Another challenge of reconnecting with traditions that participants identified is that “culture is alive, not static.” Therefore, traditions prior to colonization may have shifted and changed with the times even without the effects of colonization. Thus, reconnecting with traditions may not look like replicating them. As one participant put it, “Native communities did everything we could to ensure our culture is innovative and not stagnant. That’s how we survived.”

Participants offered a wide range of strategies for reconnecting to Indigenous teachings and traditions. Some described the value of providing more inclusive educational opportunities that incorporate discussion of 2S+/LGBTQ+ identities and communities. Additionally, another participant suggested that having more conversations at the dinner table about two-Spirit communities and hearing directly from two-Spirit relatives can also help to normalize and destigmatize 2S+/LGBTQ+ communities. Meal time for most Indigenous people is a time to pass on teachings – nourishing the body, spirit, mind, and emotions. It also serves to reconnect with teachings that all relatives are accepted and respected as a member of their village or nation. Identifying the common threads among Indigenous people is another valuable way to reconnect to traditional teachings and reclaim kinship systems. For example, exploring how everyone wants to thrive and be protected and loved. Finally, emphasizing everyone’s role in ceremonies around death and birth can serve as a helpful entry point for conversations about the respected roles and acceptance of 2S+/LGBTQ+ people.

Theme: Transform Shame

The need for families and friends to help transform the shame experienced by 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors and by families and friends was another major theme that emerged throughout the CWTF, including transforming the shame for 2S+/LGBTQ+ who have gone missing, been murdered or lost their lives in other ways. As described above, much of this shame is tied to the history of colonization and Western norms about gender identities and sexual orientation. Reclaiming and reconnecting to our Indigenous teachings affirmative of respect for 2S+/LGBTQ+ transforms the shame to honor, protection, acceptance, and reconciliation with one's self. Healing from domestic violence requires acknowledging that the cause is colonization. This acknowledgement validates efforts to heal and protect and includes honoring those who have gone missing, been murdered or lost their lives prematurely.



One participant shared about their law enforcement's demeaning comments when responding to domestic violence calls involving 2S+/LGBTQ+ couples. Comments like "when you're done playing house, go get a real relationship" reinforce the idea that 2S+/LGBTQ+ relationships are not protected by laws. Participants explained that in addition to survivors believing that violence was their fault is further compounded by added forms of oppression and isolation experienced by Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. They explained how without support and a place to heal, this kind of shame increases a survivor's vulnerabilities to turn to drugs, alcohol, or suicide in response to victimization.

Participants identified several key ways that families and friends can transform shame and reduce the risk of isolation and the false sense of being alone for 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. The first is validating the feelings of survivors and assuring them that the violence they experienced is not their fault and they are not alone. Participants also identified believing and listening to 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. While straightforward, participants repeatedly emphasized the power of this type of validation and the harm to survivors when they do not receive it. They also described that to do this well, families and friends will need to understand more about 2S+/LGBTQ+ communities, including their history of trauma and teachings about the love and support of families. These teachings are how Tribal nations have adapted, survived and thrived.

A second strategy involves family and friends helping survivors "feel welcomed in all family or community events." Participants gave examples like helping survivors connect to healing,



religious, or cultural ceremonies. One participant shared a story that illustrated the power in acknowledging and reclaiming space for 2S+/LGBTQ+ people in traditional and ceremonial roles within the Tribe. The participant recounted how the Bird Singer in a Tribe did not have sons to pass the tradition on to, so instead, he passed it onto his daughter. He made it clear to others in the Tribe that she would lead the songs after he was gone. He passed this respected role onto his daughter, and in doing so, helped to ensure the community respected her as a Bird Singer and reduce the potential for stigma or isolation.

Theme: The Power of “Showing Up and Simply Being Present”

Finally, participants reemphasized the need and power of family and friends in “just being there” for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. Showing up, listening without judgment, making sure basic needs such as food and shelter are met, and maintaining “open minds and hearts” have the potential of creating a significant impact for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. Checking in regularly with survivors and maintaining an “open door policy” for survivors to reach out whenever they need were identified as critical strategies for families and friends to use. Many participants further outlined how family and friends could support survivors’ safety plans by serving as emergency contacts as well as providing financial and material resources (such as supplies for an emergency bag or money for transportation or a hotel room). Participants outlined that to do this well, family and friends need to understand issues like trauma responses, intersectionality, confidentiality, how to create a safe space, respecting boundaries, and being familiar with local resources (including domestic violence, housing, transportation, and childcare). By increasing their understanding, family and friends offer an alternative to the silence that not only sanctions violence but can often further traumatize 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic and gender-based violence. Loving, understanding, respectful, accepting family and friends create the best safety net possible for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors, greatly supplementing a safety net of government funded resources.





Available Resources for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ Victim-Survivors

We received a wide range of responses when we asked participants about available resources for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ victim-survivors. Some described general domestic violence resources like domestic violence advocacy and shelter programs, Department of Justice and Family Violence Prevention and Services Act grants, and local and national hotlines. Others listed general LGBTQ-specific resources like PFLAG (PFLAG is the first and largest organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people, their parents and families, and allies pflag.org/our-story), Trevor Project (The Trevor Project is the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) young people thetrevorproject.org/get-help/), and local pride committees and festivals. Participants mentioned very few resources that looked at the intersections of Indigenous communities, 2S+/LGBTQ+ identities and/or domestic violence survivors, and even fewer were dedicated specifically to Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. Resources that participants listed that provide supports at one or more of these intersections include the following. (Inclusion in this summary is not meant to attest to the quality of the supports for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors.)

Supports for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ People, Including as Survivors of Domestic and Gender-based Violence

- Some Tribes with DV/SA service are expanding resources to include 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors
- The Avellaka Program's Rainbow of Truth Circle
- StrongHearts Native Helpline
- Strong Hearted Native Women's Coalition's Puyaamangay Kiyam, Always Family campaign
- Southwest Indigenous Women's Coalition
- Tate Topa: consulting firm to train organizations to support Native 2S/LGBTQ communities
- Domestic Violence Intervention Services worked with a local LGBTQ agency to create policies and safe spaces for Native 2S/LGBTQ survivors
- Choosing Our Roots: addresses homelessness among Native young people
- 7G Foundation: Idigi-Pride and Native 2-Spirit in sports campaigns





Recommendations and Conclusion

The Conversations with the Field shed important light on the needs, strengths, and contexts of families and friends of Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. Based on the stories shared during the CWTF, we make the following recommendations to improve access to supports and reduce violence and trauma in the lives of Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors:

- Continue meeting with the Advisory Committee to finalize the toolkit, including identifying widest distribution of the toolkit for family and friends.
- Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors and communities need specific programming and resources. Participants could identify almost no resources that focused specifically on Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, which strengthens justification for this toolkit for family and friends. Through the CWTF, participants highlighted the many unique challenges and vulnerabilities that 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors face. More programming and funding for this programming is needed to meet this need. Collaborations between Tribes, agencies focused on domestic violence, and agencies focused on 2S+/LGBTQ+ communities could be particularly fruitful.
- Native domestic violence programs need additional resources to provide more public education and programming for family and friends about domestic violence, trauma, safety planning and challenges facing 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors. Many participants highlighted that family and friends need this type of knowledge to be able to provide the support that 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors need. By expanding the capacity of family and friends to provide direct support to their loved ones, domestic violence agencies would greatly expand access to support for Indigenous 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors who experience multiple layers of oppressions because they're Indigenous and 2S+/LGBTQ+.
- Funding agencies should expand funding for Tribes and Tribal programs to support decolonizing efforts and other initiatives to reconnect to Indigenous specific traditions and teachings. Participants made clear the enormity of the undertaking of reconnecting with traditions, so funding for this effort must match the scope of work required.

Although there remains considerable work ahead, we are encouraged by the strong interest, commitment, and expertise to supporting 2S+/LGBTQ+ survivors that was evident in the discussion during the CWTF sessions. This same dedication was illustrated by the Advisory Committee of participants who joined us for additional discussions beyond the two CWTF sessions. Participants expressed and demonstrated a deep resolve to continuing this work, and we look forward to contributing future resources through our collaboration and partnership.





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