In December 2020, Minnesota's Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) Task Force released a report confirming that Indigenous and Native American women and girls are the most at-risk population in Minnesota to be murdered or go missing. Although Native and Indigenous women and girls make up just one percent of the state's population, each month they account for 15 percent of new reports of missing persons. While this critical safety issue has been elevated by Native American and Indigenous women, girls, and communities for years, the issue is finally drawing public attention.

To improve safety and well-being for Minnesota's Native and Indigenous women, girls, and families, we are listening, learning, and taking action together. For this listening session, we partnered with Nicole Matthews, a member of the MMIW Taskforce and Executive Director of the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, and Native American women and girls to honor those who have been taken from their communities, hear how this issue has impacted them, and to understand the role philanthropy and policy can play to support community-led responses and solutions.
LISTENING TO
Minnesota’s Women & Girls

At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (WFMN), we know that to improve the lives of all Minnesotans, we need strong grantmaking and policy agendas that are grounded in both qualitative and quantitative data. WFMN conducts research to listen, learn, and drive action with communities to create a state of gender and racial equity. We believe that women and girls in communities across Minnesota are the experts our state needs to shape real, lasting solutions.

Through nine Listening Sessions in WFMN’s Road to Transformation Listening Series in March 2021, we deepened our understanding of real, lived experiences of the issues faced by women and girls in our state so that we can continue to strategically eliminate the challenges, barriers, and obstacles faced by women and girls because of inequities and injustice in our systems.

As a statewide community foundation, we convene and listen to center the vision and solutions of communities pushed to the margins and then activate our collective power to drive lasting change. The themes and solutions that surfaced across the Listening Series will inform the Women’s Foundation’s statewide agenda for gender and racial equity, using our levers of grantmaking, policy, strategic partnerships, narrative shifting communications, and future research for years to come.
Indigenous women and girls in the U.S. face extreme rates of murder and disappearance:

The Sovereign Bodies Institute has documented 2,018 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in the United States since 1900—3/4 of these since 2000. Of these victims, 37% are missing and 59% were murdered.¹

Rates of intimate partner violence are disproportionately high in Native communities:

Native American women are 70% more likely than white women to have experienced violence in the past year, and almost 85% of Native American women have experienced violence in their lifetime.²

Across geography, young Indigenous women are at greatest risk:

The average Native American victim of kidnapping and murder is 27 years old, and nearly half (41%) are girls aged 18 or younger. Of the incidents where location has been determined, about half of the kidnappings and/or murders took place in rural and reservation areas, and half in urban areas.³

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On International Women’s Day, this Listening Session brought together powerful Native women who are leaders in their families, communities, and throughout the state to address the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, known as MMIW.

Native women have continued to reignite Indigenous ways of life and find healing while facing incredible grief and opposition from inside as well as outside their communities. In sharing their stories, passing down language and ceremonial traditions to youth, and moving into policymaking positions, Native women refuse to be made invisible by the violence and erasure they face. Participants shared a passionate vision for a future of community healing, compassionate accountability, and unity.

Native women highlighted wisdom and perseverance as they shared stories of personal grief, communal loss, and solutions for deep community healing and prevention of further violence after generations of trauma.

“We say our systems are broken, but they’re not; they’re doing exactly what they were created to do.”

Facilitator: Nicole Matthews, Executive Director, Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition
Grantee-partners: Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition (MIWSAC)
Research Fellow: Amy Dorman, MPP
Listening to a Native mother and advocate on the murder of her daughter

Each Road to Transformation Listening Session began with a woman, girl, or gender-expansive person sharing direct testimony, focusing on their experience with the session topic. For this session, a former domestic and sexual violence advocate, mother, and grandmother shared her story of deep heartache and personal loss.

The storyteller shared how her only daughter was killed by her daughter’s partner and the father of her daughter’s children in what the authorities declared was a “hit and run accident.” The storyteller expressed the grief, anger, and injustice she and family members experienced when her daughter was murdered, and her grandchildren were left without a mother.

Amid her grief at the murder of her daughter who was “loved by everybody,” the storyteller shared how the community came together and united to raise her grandchildren “who are now our children.” Even as the community supported each other, the lasting impacts of this domestic homicide have become part of the fabric of the storyteller’s daily life. She shared the trauma, anxiety, and sadness experienced by her grandchildren at the loss of their mother, and how her own life’s work as an advocate was forever changed on the day she lost her daughter to gender-based violence:

“I used to be an advocate for domestic and sexual violence. After my daughter passed, I can’t see myself helping anymore. I couldn’t even help my own baby.”

The long-term effects of historical and intergenerational trauma impact future generations

The storyteller’s narrative opened the session for participants to discuss the mental health impacts of current and historical trauma upon themselves, their families, and their communities. Many expressed that not one Indigenous person has been spared the grief of losing a woman or girl that they loved to kidnapping or violence, often intimate partner violence.

Several mentioned how this trauma is exacerbated by the inaction of Native police and legal authorities as well as the lack of support from outside the Native community. When cases involving loved ones go unsolved, participants used the word “invisible” to describe the minimizing effects of a system that has rarely supported, uplifted, or provided justice for Native women and their communities. As one participant framed it:

“People I grew up with were murdered or have gone missing. The only ones who were worried about it were the people in the community. When it came to arranging search parties, it was a community-based or family-based initiative. The community has come together to support one another to address this issue. But there are only so many people within our community and resources are really limited.”

Many described the impact of MMIW on children and young people, and how post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and the fear of losing family members is a regular part of growing up for many Indigenous children:

“It was really tough on my grandson because he was just four when this happened. He was traumatized. He had to get on medicine, he had so much anxiety. He still worries about when I leave if I’m going to come back.”

One participant, in the age range where Native women are most at risk of violence, shared how MMIW has affected the way she navigates life:

“Being 24 years old, I’m at the age where [this violence] impacts women. It’s scary, because I have experienced violence and so it’s always in my mind that I could be next.”
Racism, sexism, and colonialism intersect

The women noted that the current violence experienced by Native women is based in historical trauma at the hands of European colonists who used fear and many forms of violence to strip Native peoples of their homelands, family members, and traditions. Many remarked that the European patriarchy — forced upon Native communities through racism, oppression, and violence — is the ultimate root of male-dominated violence against Native women.

When discussing the lack of accountability in the public safety and legal systems, the wisdom and knowledge of the Native women participants illuminated how the historical intersection of racism, sexism, and colonialism has wounded and divided Native communities:

“The broken system is something we adopted from the European model. They destroyed our traditional governance system that would have held these men accountable. This has allowed our women to be victimized, our children to grow up orphans, and it’s normalized.”

“Using that fear [of punishment for practicing Native traditions] has really impacted and broken down our communities and built them back into the systems that weren’t really meant for us to be successful. And so it becomes internalized.”

“The patriarchy has such a strong hold on our Native communities now. There is a lot of victim-blaming. Why can’t you just be empathetic with me, listen to my story, and validate how I’m feeling?”

“A lot of our police force is Native men, but they are abusers themselves, so they’re corrupt. They embrace European patriarchy in so many ways.”

“...The patriarchy rules everything in this country, and until we can dismantle that patriarchy that many of our Native communities have also embraced and get to the root of: Who were our women? What were our women’s roles? ... until we can embrace that and teach our girls to empower and love themselves, it’s going to be difficult to heal.”
Returning to Native traditions and reestablishing a matriarchy supports community healing

For the participants, the only path to healing and prosperity is to return to Native traditions and ways of being as a community. This involves teaching future generations the Indigenous languages, dress, and ceremonies, and seeking out this knowledge from other tribes as necessary. Native women are leading this restoration, and the participants saw a return to the traditional Native matriarchy as essential to restoring peace and healing to Native people of all genders.

“If we can start to see that the systems in which we live today were intended to limit us and restrict us from living a good life, we can get back to the way we used to live as a people. Youth learning the language, our traditional ceremonies ... if we can start to get back our identity as Indigenous people, then we won’t continue to perpetuate the violence we learned because we had to survive.”

Some stressed how federal law and racist policies continue to impact the ability of Native communities to thrive. Achieving visibility and having access to essential resources was seen as especially challenging for Indigenous people living in urban areas and tribes not recognized by the federal government, like the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Tribal Community. One participant emphasized this particular struggle, while also demonstrating her resilience:

“We’re not a federally recognized tribe, we’re a community. So, nobody listens to us. Nobody cares, nobody listens to the Mendota people. It’s something we’ve had to fight for. Mendota doesn’t feel equal because we don’t have federal recognition. I’m Dakota, I’m a proud Dakota woman, and I’ll fight. I want people to start listening to Mendota and who we are.”

The recent increase of Native women in policymaking positions across the state and nation was seen by participants as a crucial step to dismantling systems and advocating for all Native communities:

“It’s powerful when we have Native women who hold positions like that. The system was built on the patriarchy and white supremacy and so the more we can get Native women and women of color in there and dealing with policy, in our state and federal legislatures, the better off we will be to change those systems.”

Ultimately, participants said that returning to the traditionally powerful and influential roles of women and gender-expansive people as equal partners in Native communities is paramount for future generations to thrive. These women are already sharing their stories, seeking out traditional knowledge from elders, and sharing that wisdom and knowledge with their families and communities. Native women are sparking conversations and transforming attitudes that have divided communities and oppressed Indigenous women for generations.

“As women we create life. War destroys life. So, we need to get back to the matriarchy that brings life. Only we can do that. As women we have to bring that back even if it’s with women of other tribes to reclaim those matriarchal ways of being to empower our girls and our boys to know their roles.”

“You’re never too late to learn, and to fight for our people, our women, our families, everyone.”
Solutions

Listening session participants voiced a shared vision for a future of healing and unity in their communities that is rooted in Indigenous traditions, compassionate accountability, and empowerment for young people. They are already leading solutions for transformational community healing that support and reclaim the sovereignty and well-being of Indigenous communities.

1. **Return to Native roots and teach traditional ways to youth:** Indigenous language, dress, and ceremonies, as well as traditional matriarchal roles that center the power of women as leaders, need to be practiced, taught, and passed down to future generations of girls, boys, and Two-spirit youth. This includes formal education in schools and afterschool programs, as well as informally in homes, families, and communities.

2. **Reduce stigma, have conversations, and hold male community members accountable for lateral violence:** Native women know that both internal and external violence have grave impacts on their communities. By returning to the tradition of being compassionate and holding community members accountable when they participate in lateral violence, Native women are forging a future where women are respected, violence is discussed, and those who use violence are held accountable by the community. Accountability is the path to healing.

3. **Uplift young women and girls as “our life givers,” and support young men, boys, and Two-spirit people who also experience violence:** Senator Mary Kunesh, one of the first Native American members of the Minnesota Legislature, attended this Listening Session. Her words to the other Native women participants embody the role of this powerful community of Native women as we seek solutions to end violence against Indigenous women and girls and move towards transformational healing as a state.

“We have voice in positive change and the time has come for us to speak our truths. Let’s wrap our arms around each other and lift each other up for positive change for the next seven generations! Wopila tanka!”

— Senator Mary Kunesh