

## Open Letter to Indigenous Peoples on the Intersections of Sexual Exploitation, MMIWG2, and COVID-19

Due to the current pandemic we are finding ourselves more powerless than ever. Most of us are doing our best to abide by the shelter in place directives, however our relatives who are targeted for violence have been left in very difficult situations. Right now, children, victims of domestic violence, victims of sex trafficking, and people who engage in survival sex work are at a higher risk of experiencing violence, with less resources available to them.

Sovereign Bodies Institute has gathered a Survivors' Leadership Council, made up of Indigenous survivors of trafficking and survival sex work from across North America. This council was put together to advocate for victims and survivors, provide peer support to movement leaders who are survivors, and create a platform for survivor voices, so that the world can learn directly from us. Our Council would like to share some information about sexual exploitation, violence against Indigenous women and two spirit people, and the impacts of COVID-19, and correct the assumptions that the violence has lessened due to shelter in place directives. We share this in a good way to honor the victims who need support, the service providers who are working tirelessly and without additional resources to provide it, and the responsibility we have as survivor-leaders to share what we can to protect our people.

Heightened Risk Factors: We understand that people are assuming that trafficking isn't happening right now. The reality is trafficking and sexual exploitation stops for no one, and many are more vulnerable than usual due to income and housing insecurity. We have included here a few points of information on these risk factors:

- Social Media Use: We cannot control everything, but what we can control is who has access to information we are sharing on social media. We are prayerful people--it's okay to ask for prayers, but do it in a safe way and be conscious about what you post (don't share online that your child is in a bad way and needs help, it lets people know your child is vulnerable). Snapchat, Instagram, & TikTok are breeding grounds for trafficking and exploitation now that so many older people are seeing how many kids are on it. Please make sure to check your privacy settings on all social media accounts, and check in with your kids to make sure they have appropriate privacy settings in place too.

- Online Relationships: When people are in a vulnerable state, it is natural to look for comfort and safety. Social media has been a great way to connect the masses during this time, and find human connection under challenging circumstances. A lot of times we will find this illusion of safety by connecting online and meeting new people. Although some of these connections may be positive and beneficial, it is important to be cautious right now. Exploiters have access to victims and families by their online behaviors. Many of us willingly accept followers on Instagram, Facebook, or connect through gaming or online dating. Be cautious of suspicious behaviors, like anyone trying to start a relationship or offering too much. Do not limit this caution to men--it is common for traffickers to utilize women to recruit other women. We are all in a vulnerable emotional state right now, especially survivors; traffickers and abusers prey on that vulnerability by offering things to us that make us feel safe.
- Housing and Income Insecurity: Many of us are on furlough, have lost our jobs, or have taken pay cuts during this time, including those that were doing survival sex work in strip clubs. Many people are worried about covering their basic costs of living, including rent, food, and hygiene supplies. Even access to affordable groceries or service providers with resources is limited. We are concerned these are the conditions that lead some to engage in more dangerous forms of survival sex work. We can try to mitigate this by making more resources available by contributing to mutual aid projects, and we can try to make it safer for people who do engage in this work by supporting initiatives that make contraceptives and sexual health care readily available. Mutual aid packages absolutely must have contraceptives and sanitary napkins/tampons available.

Resources for Victims: We are concerned that trafficking shelters, which are already few and far between, are not getting additional resources in the wake of the pandemic. While domestic violence shelters are absolutely essential, life-saving resources, they are not necessarily equipped to address the needs of trafficking victims, especially those who are Indigenous. Trafficking shelters and sexual health providers must be given additional resources in any future COVID-19 funding package. Moreover, measures to protect Indigenous youth, who are overrepresented nationally in the foster care system and among cases of runaway and exploited youth, must be taken in light of this crisis.

Law Enforcement and Justice Response: We are concerned that our relatives are being arrested for prostitution and are sitting in jails exposed to higher risk of COVID-19, and waiting longer for hearings due to court closures. Moreover, victims and their families

are struggling to get adequate action or support from law enforcement and the justice system due to court closures and capacity issues. For example, the family of Northern Cheyenne trafficking victim Otissey Gonzalez has been trying to pursue justice for her murder, and has not seen any progress in the case or received any contact from law enforcement. Otissey was killed by an associate of her trafficker over 10 months ago in Billings, Montana, and despite multiple witness testimonies and an official ruling of homicide, the only charges that have been laid are against the family member who tried to help her at the scene. We are deeply concerned that these miscarriages of justice for trafficking victims and missing and murdered Indigenous women and two spirit people will occur at a higher rate due to the pandemic. Tribal, federal, state, and local governments must find meaningful ways to address the impact of COVID-19 on law enforcement capacity and the justice system immediately. Lives are counting on it.

Media Coverage: For many of us, our hearts are hurting because it feels like the movement to protect our people from violence went dormant overnight, due to the pandemic. The MMIWG2 movement was a roaring fire a few months ago, and now it is our job to keep the embers going until we can gather on the streets and in capitol buildings again. The media has an incredible power to help us do this, but instead has stopped covering the issue entirely. We call upon media at all levels to commit to continuing to cover the crisis of MMIWG2 and trafficking of Indigenous people, even throughout the pandemic. The violence hasn't stopped, so the storytelling must not stop either.

Survivor Mental Health: We see messages stating, "You're not stuck at home, you're safe at home" -- not all of us are safe at home! These statements are not helpful because they ignore the violence that is occurring behind closed doors and create an environment that makes it hard for victims to come forward. It also does not recognize how emotionally challenging it can be for survivors, who may be retraumatized by being trapped at home, having difficulty accessing the outside world and critical household items, and living in fear of unexpected hospitalization or death. Many of us as survivors have already lived under those conditions before, and living them again can be very triggering. Please understand that powerlessness is one of the main triggers for survivors of sex trafficking and domestic violence. For many living with abuse, feeling alone and not having a way out is incredibly difficult to handle. We ask that collectively, we work to create an environment where survivors feel safe in sharing these feelings with us. If a friend or family member confides in you that they are struggling in this way and you don't know how to help, there are a number of resources you can refer them to at the end of this letter.

Cultural Impacts: COVID-19 uniquely impacts Indigenous peoples in many ways--we are more likely to contract the virus and to die from it due to the health impacts of ongoing settler colonialism. However, we are also uniquely impacted because culturally speaking, we are people of big families and wide support networks; shelter in place directives and social distancing measures are crucial to our survival, but make it challenging for us to gather and seek support in the ways we are used to. We also know that there are fewer healing opportunities available for Indigenous victims and survivors as it becomes dangerous to engage in ceremony in the accustomed ways. What can you do? We encourage you to check in with your trusted elders and spiritual leaders, create opportunities for extended family communication through group texts or Zoom meetings, and if ceremony absolutely must be done, do your best to think creative about how to incorporate social distancing measures. Dr. James Makokis of Saddle Lake Cree Nation urged our people in a recent CBC article to avoid doing sweats with anyone who is not in your household, pause pipe ceremonies, and remember that our ancestors have survived waves of disease before by implementing distancing measures--what we are doing right now *is* traditional. Lastly, we humbly ask that if you are able to safely and responsibly gather medicines your people use, consider donating some to mutual aid efforts or shelters in your community--victims may not be able to gather it themselves or participate in ceremony at this time, but may find deep healing just in being cared for in that way and being able to use medicines at home.

We can get through this together. We will do that best by creating a safe environment for our people to share with one another, looking out for the safety of our relatives and ourselves, and taking care of one another.

If you are experiencing violence, reach out to a trusted person to create a safety plan. If you need help finding the right person to call, our Support Line can help you. We are available to our relatives in the United States or Canada by phone or by text from 9am to 3pm Pacific time, Monday through Saturday, at 707-335-6263.

We encourage you to reach out as soon as you can. We see you, we hear you, and we believe you!



Signed,

Sovereign Bodies Institute Survivors' Leadership Council

If You Need Help:

Sovereign Bodies Institute Support Line: 707-335-6263

Strong Hearts Native Helpline: 1-844-744-762-8483

National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-787-3224

National Runaway Safeline: 773-880-9860

National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255