



Creating Medicines for the Love of Our People: Conversation with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network

October 2, 2014

What does October 4th mean to you?

“October 4th to me, means many things. It means acknowledging and thanking our ancestors for passing on the knowledge we need, to continue to take care of our families. It means continuing to build each other, our Nations and ourselves up. It's about acknowledging the many medicines, people, and memories in my bundle, but I think most of all October 4th is a reminder that we do what we need to and what we can, and we do it for the love of our people.” - *Alexa Lesperance, Youth Facilitator, Native Youth Sexual Health Network*

“October 4th is the culmination of radical political interventions that continue to restore spaces for a queer, Indigenous feminist praxis that unapologetically re-centers female- and Two Spirit-identified Indigenous folks to disrupt the ongoing violence of heteropatriarchal settler colonialism.” - *Billy-Ray Belcourt, Youth Facilitator, Native Youth Sexual Health Network*

How does the NYSHN address violence against Indigenous women and girls?

Responses to violence look different from nation to nation, and we recognize that this range depends on where communities are at, and that there is strength in many approaches.

What we are doing to address colonial gender-based violence and the issues of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

In addition to participating in different national Sisters in Spirit events on October 4th, here are a few example of the ways that we are mobilizing on the ground in communities every single day to address colonial gender-based violence:

- Our national Indigenous Young Women's Council is a self-governed council of gender fabulous Indigenous young women under 30, including those who identify as Trans, Two-Spirit, and/or gender non-conforming. We work together to provide peer leadership opportunities, community actions and mobilization, skills and capacity building, events and more. They also develop spaces for celebration, reclamation and cultural resurgence with a vision for future generations. They are continuing to organize around intersecting issues such as media representations of Indigenous women, rites of passage, and more.
- Environmental violence and reproductive justice: Violence on the land is violence on our bodies. Violence resulting from the ongoing presence of industry, pipelines and environmental exploitation in and near Indigenous communities is a pressing issue intimately connected to violence against Indigenous bodies. Responding to sexual violence from industry workers, the disappearances and murders of women in areas around male camps and mining sites is an issue that we are currently collecting community testimonies on and responding to at the community level.
- Empowering Ourselves: Indigenous Youth Understanding Structural Violence Using Media Arts Justice - We worked with young people in Edmonton to look at how different forms of structural violence impact the lives of Indigenous youth. We used arts and media to challenge mainstream narratives about us as being "at risk", while telling strength-based narratives among peers. Our responses to structural violence were simultaneously Indigenous-led, outside the legal system, and invested in the transformation of our communities to a place of resistance and resurgence.

We are also continuing to work on strengthening different cultural supports within our communities so Elders and knowledge keepers are better informed to support Two-Spirit and LGTBTTQQA-identified youth and community members. Homophobia and transphobia often drive young people away from their families and communities. Working to decolonize and reclaim values of acceptance and love can prevent violence in the long term, while also increasing the visibility of informal support networks and existing Two-Spirit mentors, aunties, uncles, grandparents and Elders. In Toronto we will soon be launching an Two Spirit and Indigenous LGBTQ Elders and Mentors Circle.

We are also mobilizing with other Indigenous peoples and communities across the United States and Canada:

- Youth Resurgence through [Walking With Our Sisters](#) - The meaningful engagement of Indigenous youth in this art installation and ceremonial project to honor and remember missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two Spirit people has created a space of healing for young people. Listen to some of the community youth testimonies on YouTube as they speak to what solutions they want to see to MMIW.
- ItStartsWithUs website/database, is a partnership between No More Silence, Families of Sisters in Spirit and NYSHN. The purpose of this database is to honour missing Indigenous women and provide family members with a way to

document their loved ones passing while asserting community control of our own record-keeping. The website includes Family Tributes, a space in which families of the missing and murdered can write about their family members. These tributes allow families to share memories of the person they know and love instead of focusing on the details of their death or disappearance.

How do you support Indigenous youth impacted by violence?

In our daily frontline work by and for Indigenous youth we often hear about experiences of violence that directly impact young people. We also listen to and support what they want to see in terms of community-based responses.

Supporting Indigenous youth means not policing the violence we experience or having to validate to others what violence is and how it is experienced. For example, when we are in a community where a young person has recently committed suicide, or when a young person discloses to us that they have experienced sexual violence, or that their mom has been murdered, we affirm that we believe their realities and stories. When hearing these stories we don't shame youth for the feelings that they have or the ways they need to take care of themselves (i.e. drinking, using drugs, cutting). The reality is that we don't have the privilege to experience things in separate boxes. Addressing what is happening regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), doesn't happen without also talking about about land theft and how violence against MMIW is normalized because of ongoing violence to our environment. We can't talk about violence or MMIW without talking about the extreme poverty, lack of housing, racism, and the discrimination we face. This is why we support a range of responses from nation to nation. We work from a place of self-determination, centering the voices of Indigenous youth. Our work is about meeting people where they are at, and that looks different for each person. We have to respond and cope with the tools we have as young people as best as we can. There is no waiting on government funding. In many cases we also hear about how many of the systems that are set up to 'help' youth actually create and sustain such violence.

Addressing the issues now

Confronting the realities of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit and gender non-conforming people also means holding colonial governments accountable for the ways in which they perpetuate violence, in part by not recognizing the immediacy of this issue.

People in our communities every day are disrupting the intergenerational cycles of violence and abuse that stem from the legacy and continuation of colonialism. This includes breaking historical legacies, such as the removal of children from their communities (via residential schools, sixties scoop, foster care), and police violence (i.e. starlight tours and the ongoing physical violence to Indigenous people and elders) as just two examples.

Indigenous youth are not just 'partners' in breaking the cycles of violence. We need to continue to lead and respond to the traumas that have been built into and on our bodies. For us, community safety doesn't mean an increased police presence in our territories or the ongoing policing of our bodies. It comes in the form of addressing the intergenerational cycles of violence that come from colonization, the exploitation of our lands, the disregard for our bodies as Indigenous youth and the desire to 'save us' without actually addressing any systemic forms of violence.

Creating medicines for the future

In the future we would like to see more support for Indigenous youth-led responses to colonial gender-based violence, with a focus on supporting the self-determination of our bodies, territories and nations. But this isn't about being by ourselves either; we need our Elders, grandparents, and cross-generational mobilization to create medicines for the future.

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