

# Gender-Based Violence Against Two Spirit Indigenous Peoples

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Gender-based violence (GBV) and the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls remain serious issues in Canada, with devastating consequences. Despite increased awareness and efforts to address these issues, the voices and experiences of two spirit\* individuals have largely been excluded.

**This Backgrounder centers two spirit Indigenous Peoples and their understandings and experiences of GBV. It also identifies and offers solutions to address the multiple intersecting barriers that hinder two spirit inclusion in the GBV sector.**

Two spirit people face high rates of violence. According to a survey of two spirit, transgender, and gender-diverse Indigenous individuals conducted by Trans PULSE in 2019 (results released 2021):<sup>1</sup>

- 79% had experienced verbal harassment
- 54% had experienced sexual harassment
- 52% had experienced physical intimidation and threats
- 76% avoided 3 or more types of public spaces for fear of harassment or outing in the past five years

\*The term "two spirit" can also be spelled as "two-spirit," "two spirited," or abbreviated as "2S."

Two spirit individuals can be of any sex, gender, or sexuality and are of Indigenous identity. Two spirit is an open and broad term, similar to how queer and trans/non-binary can be used in Western (i.e. North American or Western European) contexts.

For some people, the term carries a spiritual aspect as well, as many "gender non-conforming" members of First Nations historically had important roles within their communities, and still do.

Two spirits individuals may also identify as trans, cis, non-binary, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or any other term that falls within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella.

It's always best practice to follow the individual's expressed preference.

For this Backgrounder, all identities will be included when "two spirit" is used.

## About this Backgrounder:

This Backgrounder is guest authored by Imriel Bissnette and designed (including graphics and visuals) by Owen Petit from [2 Spirits in Motion Society \(2SiMS\)](#). 2SiMS is a national organization for and by two spirit people across Turtle Island. They aim to express themselves through cultural ways of knowing and being around gender and sexuality, as well as to succeed and be empowered in all areas that are grounded in the medicines that two spirit people carry from coast to coast to coast.

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# Understanding the Terms: Two Spirit and Indigqueer/Indigiqueer



The term “two spirit” came out of the 1990 Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference in Winnipeg.<sup>2</sup> The term replaced the pejorative “berdache” that had previously been in use amongst English speakers, coming from the colonizers. The term two spirit does not come from any Indigenous language and no expressions in use from Indigenous languages translate to the term or a similar one.

Some individuals reject the idea of two spirit, being uncomfortable with the binary concept of a masculine/male and feminine/female spirit within them as the term may be defined. These individuals may use Indigqueer/Indigiqueer to discuss their gender or sexuality in relationship to their Indigenous identity. Others may simply use Western LGBTQIA+ terms in broader mainstream culture without any other term explicit to Indigenous nations. Some will also use terms specific to their mother tongue or tribe such as Lakota *wíŋkte* (winkte) or Anishinaabe *ininiikaazo/ikwekaazo*.

## Recognizing Historical and Ongoing Violence Against Two Spirit People

Violence towards two spirit individuals can be traced back to the 19th century. Early travel accounts of colonizers and missionaries used the term “berdache” to refer to Indigenous individuals who did not fit into their conception of man or woman. The term berdache is derived from Arabic *bardaj* meaning a “slave” or “kept boy”, moving through Spanish to become “bardaxa/bardaje,” ending in French “berdache.”<sup>3</sup> This term was used derogatorily towards individuals who did not fit European standards, especially those who would be considered men. A dialogue between Indigenous peoples and academics that happened during the 92nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association resulted in the replacement of the word berdache with two spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Modern North American society is highly based in colonial Western gender norms that denies the existence of two spirit individuals, a form of violence itself which interconnects with further forms of violence. For instance, heteronormativity and cisnormativity assume:

- Being heterosexual and cisgender is the default and that others need to make the effort to acknowledge themselves as otherwise (i.e., it's not straight cis people who “come out” to others)
- Sexuality is not fluid
- There are only two genders that align with the sex assigned at birth (i.e., men are males and women are females, things that are assigned almost solely based on the way one's genitals look at birth)
- There is a set version of “men” and “women” (i.e., men have short hair, women have long; trans women cannot be women athletes)



For decades, Indigenous Peoples have been persistent activists, advocating and demanding justice for their missing and murdered family members, while often being ignored and met with blatant disregard. In fact, many Canadians remained largely unaware of this reality of Indigenous Peoples until the 2002 arrest and investigation of Robert Pickton in British Columbia became visible nationally. Indigenous activists drew attention to the girls and women who had gone missing, many of whom were members of the Downtown Eastside community of Vancouver, a population that has a higher Indigenous demographic than the rest of Canada.

Following the Pickton trial, British Columbia commissioned [Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry Executive Summary](#). This report outlined the many ways in which Indigenous women had been failed by the justice system, but it did not mention two spirit Indigenous people.

The government of Canada also commissioned the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) beginning in December 2015. The initial mandate of the NIMMIWG was aimed at reporting on women and girls but shifted to recognize diverse Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality that existed prior to and after European contact and colonization.

The [Final Report](#) was released in June 2019, and a specific report from the 2SLGBTQQIA+ Sub-Working Group was released April 2021, which included a section titled [“Alignment of MMIWG2SLGBTQQIA+ - Specific Calls for Justice with 2SLGBTQQIA+ Sub-Working Group Recommendations”](#). There are 32 Calls for Justice outlined in this report with recommendations on implementation reflecting the specific realities, needs, and forms of violence towards 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals including:

- Missing persons reports that misgender the person.
- Police/judicial incarceration according to assumed gender.
- Using given (or dead) names instead of the chosen name of the individual.

Not included in the Calls for Justice, but also relevant and important to note is that those who are two spirit women, or perceived as women, are five times more likely to experience physical intimate partner violence from non-Indigenous partners than non-Hispanic White-only victims.<sup>5</sup> This violence can include physical aggression while trying to practice one’s Indigenous beliefs, as well as damage to culturally significant items such as medicine or drums.

Learn more: Gender-Based Violence Against Two Spirit/Indigiqueer People

In [this Webinar recording](#), Dr. Percy Lezard shares findings and recommendations for a reimagined future from the MMIWG2SLGBTQQIA+ National Action Plan which they co-authored including calls for inclusion to service providers and implications for violence prevention programs.

# Intersectional Barriers to Two Spirit Inclusion in GBV Prevention and Intervention

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to discuss the overlap of two or more areas where someone's identity or circumstances may be oppressed. This is what happens with two spirit individuals as their gender or sexual identity interacts with their racial identity. Either their identity as two spirit is misunderstood, or perhaps, while they may use a term that fits in with Western understanding of LGBTQQIA+, they may experience racism or cultural incompetency from organizations.

Organizations who state they support 2SLGBTQQIA+ communities often do not prioritize two spirit individuals in their programming or resources. In a recent survey conducted by the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance, out of 8 Atlantic region organizations that provide housing to 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals who responded, 5 organizations said they do not collect any data on two spirit people while two did not know if that was something they did.<sup>6</sup>

*If organizations use 2SLGBTQQIA+ and do not provide specific programming that is culturally competent for two spirit individuals, this is a form of violence towards two spirit people.*

When adding “2S” to the beginning of LGTBQQIA+, an organization needs to understand that this is a culturally specific identity that has its own unique needs, the same as bisexual is different from gay men, or from transgender identities. Ignoring the specifics of the two spirit identity and equating it to queer or trans identity is erasing the cultural connection that people hold. Colonial beliefs flatten the multiplicity held within this identity to an outline that all people must fit into if they identify with this.

The following section shares the barriers to service provision, recognition, and healing for two spirit people.

Learn more: Building the Table: Discussing Tensions of 2SLGBTQIA+ Structural Inclusion Within the GBV Sector

In this [guest editorial](#), Marlene Ham, Debbie Owusu-Akyeeah, and Jade Byard Peek discuss historical and contemporary tensions, explore how a gender binary or cisgender heteronormative victim-perpetrator archetype frame current practices and GBV prevention, and challenge us to think about “building a new table.”

# ***Limited Safe, Affordable, and Accessible Housing***

Housing barriers refer to systemic policies and practices that exclude certain groups from securing affordable and accessible housing, along with being able to access emergency and transitional housing in instances of GBV.

In a survey conducted by the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance on housing access for two spirit individuals, only 3.54% of the 113 respondents stated that there was a housing policy that considered two spirit people in their home reserve or community, while 77.88% agreed that such a policy was important and should be developed.<sup>7</sup>

When asked about transitional homes, 95% of respondents said having a two spirit specific transitional home “would help address/provide a safe space for 2S people experiencing gender-based violence.”

A second question about a two spirit specific shelter had similar responses, with 97% believing it could cater to their specific needs, and that a shelter built with two spirit individuals in mind can contribute to overall health and wellness of those in need of the services.

## **Consider Melissa’s experience:**

Melissa stayed at a transitional space for women leaving domestic violence when trying to leave a relationship. She was asked not to smudge in her room because clients cannot smoke inside but she did not feel comfortable smudging on the back porch in front of other people.

In her next effort to leave her abusive partner, Melissa found a two spirit shelter which made arrangements for her to be able to smudge in private. Being able to smudge helped Melissa to center her emotions and work through her trauma.

Learn more: [2SLGBTQ+ Youth, Violence, and Homelessness](#)

This Issue describes the violence experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ youth and its links with homelessness, as well as community supports and promising practices for ending 2SLGBTQ+ youth homelessness and violence.



# Lack of Comprehensive and Indigenous-Led Research and Data

While the prevalence of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two spirits is well known through MMWIG2S, it remains underreported. A lack of inclusive and Indigenous-led data and research means there is insufficient evidence regarding the full scope and impacts of violence, as well as information for prevention and intervention. Without this evidence, it is more difficult to secure funding, raise awareness, support survivors, and enact change.

While Statistics Canada does report hate crimes, further enhancements are needed in data collection to understand and assess the experiences of hate and GBV that two spirit Indigenous Peoples face.

In 2022, Statistics Canada reported that hate crimes targeting both a race/ethnicity and those targeting a sexual orientation had increased.<sup>8</sup> In fact, these two categories accounted for the majority of the increase in hate crimes. When broken down to specific race/ethnicity groups, hate crimes against Indigenous populations had dropped both in 2021 and 2022, but the number of hate crimes targeting the Indigenous population was still 138% higher in 2022 than in 2019.

Statistics Canada has hate crimes separated as gay/lesbian, bisexual, and “people of another sexual orientation that is not heterosexual, such as asexual or pansexual.” While Statistics Canada reports statistics by gender, only since October 2021 has the option for any category other than “man,” “woman,” and “other sex/gender” been added. The “other gender” category has been split into “transgender man or woman,” “transgender target not specified,” and “non-binary.” However, this data is still not robust enough to disaggregate without potentially outing the target of the crime, so it is still reported in a lump sum. In this way, it is hard to know what the statistics are for likelihood of being harmed in the same way that MMIWG statistics state the likelihood of violence towards Indigenous women.

Another way that not collecting statistics specific to the two spirit population can cause harm to individuals is that the relationship to the victim of a hate crime is often a known person in the case of sexual orientation or gender identity. In contrast, in hate crime cases related to race or ethnicity, the relationship to the victim is unknown. This leaves two spirit people in a precarious position, facing the possibility of violence from either group.

Also, as the officers who work on the investigations are also the ones who choose to list a report as a hate crime during their investigation, this can also leave mixed race two spirit individuals as potentially being placed in different categories such as “white” or “Black” instead of “Indigenous,” again missing the unique intersection of two spirit identities.

# Shortage of Inclusive Healthcare and Supports

Two spirit individuals who experience GBV may avoid seeking necessary healthcare due to stigma, racism, and discrimination rooted in historic and ongoing colonization.

In a 2023 paper in the *Journal of Ethnicity and Health*, Min Ju Kim, Kiana Wilkins, and Bridget Gorman compared levels of satisfaction with healthcare between different intersectional groups that took into consideration both race/ethnicity and sexuality. Their research finds that the lowest rates of high satisfaction were reported in both Native American lesbian women and Native American gay men, Native American gay men having both the lowest rating of high satisfaction and the highest rate of low satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Low levels of satisfaction mean that individuals are discouraged from seeking medical help earlier in the progression of illness and could potentially be much sicker when they finally do. Depending on the reason for dissatisfaction, it could also affect mental health to be exposed to the medical personnel while seeking help. Add to this, the possibility of dismissal of traditional medicines and health beliefs, such as ignoring wholistic health and focusing strictly on physical health.

In a report from the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, higher rates of depression and anxiety were reported by two spirit individuals due to homophobia, transphobia, racism, and heteronormativity depending on the individual.<sup>10</sup> An additional compounding variable is either attendance at a residential school, or being raised by someone who was in a residential school through intergenerational trauma. These mental health struggles and trauma without culturally responsive supports can increase the likelihood of alcohol or drug misuse.

Many forms in medical situations do not allow for many gendered options, so for those who identify with two spirit as a gendered sense of self, they are erased as soon as paperwork is being filled out or ID cards are being exchanged. This form of GBV is institutional and manifests in more subtle places such as exclusionary medical forms and documentation practices.

Learn more: Understanding the Realities of Gender Diverse Peoples to Strengthen our Care Systems

In this [Webinar recording](#), Zakary-Georges Gagné discusses the role that organizations or institutions offering care or support have in the creation of welcoming and intersectional spaces for gender diverse peoples.

## Consider Adrian's experience:

Adrian has an appointment with a new doctor today. As they take the forms to fill out, they see that the options are either male or female with no options for gender identity, if one is transgender/two spirit, or pronouns. Adrian knows they are often mistaken for a woman but has to fill the form out as male. Both options are incorrect and neither acknowledges their experiences, or what medical services they may require.

Adrian hands the paperwork back with a feeling of trepidation about how their experience with this office will be impacted. They were already worried if the doctor would be respectful of their choice to use natural medicines from their culture.

Another barrier two spirit people face is geographical and social isolation. Many individuals who live on reserves live in isolated areas without easy access to education, GBV supports and services, and hospitals/clinics.

Many acts of violence or abuse go unreported due to shame, embarrassment, or humiliation as a standard across all demographics, but there is the added impact of living rurally for many Indigenous individuals. It is hard to leave an abusive relationship when the nearest service is hours away, or if one lives in a fly-in community.

Conversely if two spirit individuals do leave their homes and move to bigger cities, it can be hard to find access to ceremony or community. Like many queer and trans individuals, particularly youth, it can be hard to find a safe place to land or learn who is trustworthy when moving and relocating alone. This can result in at least a period of isolation from an Indigenous community. As well, since many individuals leave their community of origin fairly young, they may not be equipped with life skills that are considered fairly basic such as money management, cooking skills, etc.<sup>11</sup>

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# Experiences of Lateral Violence

The results of colonial violence can be seen in the backlash two spirit people sometimes face from within the community when trying to enter ceremonial spaces, a form of lateral violence. As recently as 2022, in British Columbia, the Kamloopa powwow stated that individuals needed to “be in the correct gender for the category.”<sup>12</sup> Many powwow still have gender different dance categories beyond “tiny tot”, such as “women’s shawl” or “men’s fancy.” Those who feel their place is in categories that do not match their assumed gender face ridicule and backlash. Sometimes, even when people do try to enter spaces that match their assumed gender, they still become criticized for not following traditional gender norms such as having short hair in the women’s jingle category.

There are two spirit events:

- The International Two Spirit Gathering which is annual and rotates around North America.
- 2 Spirits in Motion Society hosted its first 2 Spirit Powwow on June 21, 2024. This is another event that will occur annually.

As well as these specific two spirit events, more sweat lodges are being opened to members of all genders who need healing or cleansing or are being hosted by two spirit Elders.

## Working Toward Intersectional Solutions

Though there are many barriers listed above, there are also many solutions to most of the barriers that exist. The recommendations below break down into three main areas: funding, data collection, and competency training.

Indigenous-led and targeted projects are needed under all three of these categories. In order to improve the lives of two spirit individuals when it comes to GBV, everyone needs to understand how and where it is happening, education needs to be provided to prevent it, and adequate funding needs to be given in support of these goals.

# ***Sustainable Funding for Two Spirit-Led Organizations***

As of August 2024, there is no two spirit organization in Canada that receives core funding from the Canadian government, nor provincial governments. This means that every two spirit organization is being funded through grants and similar avenues. Often, funding obtained in this manner has a restriction on how much of the funding can be used for things that would fall under “office administration” such as providing office space, phone lines for employees of the organization, or compensation and salary for an administrator or executive director. As such, many organizations are regularly spending hours of labour just to “keep the lights on” which could be better spent with the projects they are overseeing. Core funding from the government is critical to supporting two spirit organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Funding also needs to support access to land-based ceremonies or cultural activities. The International 2 Spirit Gathering moves yearly and strives to provide this for individuals across Turtle Island. Funding from the government for the Gathering can provide sponsorships for the organizers to be able to host those who might not be able to attend otherwise, including helping with travel and accommodations.<sup>14</sup>

## ***Disaggregated Data and Research***

Individuals should be asked their identity and have their identities recorded correctly. Small categories of individuals also need to be considered as an individual category or any uptick or downswing trends in violence towards two spirit individuals will be missed. When “statistically unimportant” groups are not separated from other groups such as 2SGLTBQQIA+, women, or men, what happens is the data is conflated with the overarching groups that end up becoming the label. A ten percent increase in a group that is 2% of the overarching group is significant to the smaller group, but insignificant to the larger category. For example, if the ten percent increase happened to two spirit individuals, but violence against women had dropped twenty percent, then the increase will be nullified if they are only 2% of the reports under the category of “women.” Therefore, the increase in violence against two spirit individuals would be lost in the broader data, showing that the increase would be .2% versus 20% decrease, ending with a statistic of 19.8% decreased.

# ***Indigenous-Led Competency Training for All Sectors***

Services need to be able to provide culturally competent care to two spirit individuals.

Medical professionals need to have required training on the specialties of healthcare related to 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, as well as cultural competency training. This training should be a fundamental requirement to graduate, not just an optional class that only lasts a single semester. A second medical solution is to open a college or university that focuses on traditional two spirit healing methods. Many individuals who have this knowledge are not recognized by institutions such as hospitals and clinics, though some have started to host an Elder-in-residence in positions similar to a chaplain or priest.

Housing also needs to be inclusive. Many shelters are strictly for women due to the prevalence of violence towards women. Shelters need to either be geared towards two spirit individuals as well (such as the case of the one Wabanaki 2 Spirit Alliance is currently working on in Bedford, NS) or include competency training for two spirit individuals. In a recent survey of shelters in major cities across Canada, 6% said they had generic training that covered 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals, 6% were working on adding or developing their own training, and 1 shelter (.5%) stated that they had taken training related to gender, but not sexuality.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, proper sexual education needs to include culturally relevant healthy relationship modeling that would help individuals in unsafe relationships recognize red flags sooner, possibly avoiding unsafe relationships altogether. This education can also come through on the other side, helping individuals recognize that their behaviours are unacceptable and abusive, allowing them to address and break patterns they may have grown up with. Many people repeat patterns of intergenerational trauma. When an unhealthy relationship is your model and you have no other point of education to show a healthy relationship, it is possible to repeat either side of the abuse in future relationships.





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