

Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

Volume 7

Issue 1 *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women - SPECIAL ISSUE*

Article 2

October 2019

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW): Bringing Awareness through the Power of Student Activism

Devon S. Isaacs

Utah State University, devon.isaacs@aggiemail.usu.edu

Amanda R. Young

Oklahoma State University, amandaroseyoung1@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Isaacs, Devon S. and Young, Amanda R. (2019) "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW): Bringing Awareness through the Power of Student Activism," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/5t7q-j016>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol7/iss1/2>

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Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW): Bringing awareness through the power of student activism

Public awareness surrounding violence perpetrated against Native American women and girls- an epidemic known as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)- is beginning to increase in needed ways. However, the numbers are clear there is still much work to be done. The following statistics are based on reported crimes. The National Institute of Justice estimated 84% of Native American women have experienced violence in their lifetime and 56% of Native American women are survivors of sexual assault (Rosay, 2016). For Native American women and girls, sexual violence begins early, with approximately 54% of rapes occurring before the age of twelve (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Upsettingly, 50% of individuals in sex trafficking businesses in the United States are Native women and girls (Rosay, 2016). The U.S Department of Justice estimated Native American women are murdered at ten times the national average rate, more than any other race. Homicide is the third leading cause of death among Native American women and girls between the ages of 10 and 24 (Daines, 2017). Of the women who reported experiencing violence in their lifetime, 96% reported at least one incident of sexual violence perpetrated by a non-Native (Rosay, 2016). Unfortunately, there is not a definitive number of how many women and girls are missing, murdered, or forced into sex trades and/or sex trafficking (Farley et al., 2011). However, by bringing awareness to MMIW, there is hope that the unacceptable numbers of victimized women and girls will begin to decrease.

The majority of awareness-bringing for MMIW comes from within Native American communities, where creating social change becomes a matter of policy work, victim advocacy, and legislative processes that often go under-supported by non-Native entities. For example, policies such as Savanna's Act, and North Dakota House Bill 1311 and 1313 (championed by House Representative Ruth Buffalo), are creating momentum for changing how we track MMIW cases, share missing persons data, and coordinate with federal and state law enforcement outside of tribal jurisdictions. However, these policies often stall out during the legislative process due to limited backing by majority groups. A rising number of advocacy groups such as the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women and the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center provide education, community toolkits, and raise awareness through local events. Yet, these are often grassroots movements with limited funding and people power. These resources are crucial. But there is another resource we can turn to that is often under-utilized.

One of the greatest resources in reducing and eliminating disparities of violence toward Native American Women are Native American students.

Students are often the feet on the ground and the voice for the voiceless during social justice movements. We turn out in great numbers during national marches and public events. We use our positions in professional organizations to create collaborative movement that bridge professional identities and bring people together. We understand the power and privilege of higher education and we utilize our platforms as students and experiences as tribal community members to bring awareness and help contribute to change. The following are the stories of two students who are using their education and membership in professional organizations to help lower the numbers of MMIW.

“I am an enrolled member of MHA Nation and a community member of Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Violence perpetrated against Native American women is a suppressed epidemic in both of my communities. In Fort Berthold (MHA Nation), we experienced an oil boom, calling for oil workers from across the country. This call followed drugs, murder, and violence. Unfortunately, those who were victimized were Native women, taken for sexual exploitation and killed, never to be found or experience justice. In Dunseith/Belcourt (Turtle Mountain), many of my peers were raped and beaten. Those of us who left the reservation also have a high chance of being raped, taken, and murdered. My crippling fear has come from the realization that I, as a Native Woman, can be raped and/or killed just because I am a Native Woman. This fear cannot be explained but Native women know exactly how I feel and what I mean. My future daughter will have to experience the same fear that I, my mother, my grandmother, and so on have experienced. My love for my future child and the next generation is what motivates me to help bring awareness to MMIW. This motivation has sparked many activist projects such as awareness walks, mass prayer, an online social media campaign, countless speaking and presentations, and research with MMIW. The continuation of our many collective, small impacts has helped bring forth MMIW bills to be signed and hopefully passed in North Dakota, as well as the election of many Native Women in government. To bring awareness and change, I have worked on a variety of different projects that could not have been completed without the help of my fellow Native women and men. Together we have worked on a social media awareness project where we had native women, men, children and allies pose with a sign that had an impactful message. These photos have been circulated via social media as well as during various awareness events around the year. We have also worked alongside the community to have a MMIW awareness walk, and together we have kept it going for two years now. Aside from this, we have done many talks on MMIW within the community as well as across the nation. We do these talks to try to reach as many people as we can to help bring change. Finally, we are currently working on how counseling psychologists can utilize their platforms so that therapists may be most effective when working with survivors

and families of MMIW. Hopefully with continued efforts, we will start to see our sisters become less targeted and start to feel safe. I personally, am humbled by students and community members' hard work with these projects and cannot thank them enough." - Amanda R. Young, M.A., Oklahoma State University, MHA Nation & Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa

Amanda Young has been active in supporting MMIW causes since she was an undergraduate at the University of North Dakota. But some of us are just gaining momentum. Devon Isaacs is a student co-representative for the Society of Indian Psychologists (SIP) this year along with Amanda. Although less experienced at promoting awareness of important topics such as these, she is ready to do her part. Like many other students, advocacy work helps Devon develop her identity as a young professional. Sometimes this means finding your voice. Recently she was asked to speak on an issue of importance for Indigenous women at a Women's March in a predominately white town and used the space to promote MMIW awareness. She was also asked to speak on a panel for Utah Public Access radio and is finding ways to address MMIW in the classroom. Devon's positionality as a tribal member and Ford Fellowship recipient helps give her momentum in this very important work.

"When the heart tells you to speak, you listen. And as Native Woman and Student Representative for SIP, I heard the call loud and clear. I am not a public speaker by nature. I prefer to be behind the scenes so when I was asked to produce a speech for a Women's March on MMIW, I could think of a million people more qualified than myself. But my heart was saying "if not me, then who"? And it kept shouting at me until I conceded. I think it sounded like the voices of a hundred ancestors. It actually kept me awake at night. Once I agreed to speak at the march, I turned to several Native women for advice. What should I say? How can I encapsulate the sheer unacceptability of the numbers surrounding MMIW? How can I portray to a predominately White audience the nature of historical trauma and how the epidemic of MMIW is a continuation of that trauma? Their answer was simply to become a voice for the voiceless. Women across the country shared with me their stories of loss and grief and I wove these stories together for my speech. I cried often as I realized the sheer scope of MMIW and violence toward Native women. Some of the stories came from my home community. Although, I had always felt relatively safe in my hometown I had the startling realization that I had been surrounded by the silenced voices of victims since childhood. Their time to be heard was long overdue. After the march I posted pictures on social media of myself with some of the Native undergraduates from Utah State University carrying #MMIW signs. One young woman in particular was especially striking. A non-Native member of the community remarked about how powerful her image was. I thought to myself, yes we are powerful- but we need more opportunities to be seen and heard." - Devon

S. Isaacs, B.A., Utah State University, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma

By sharing these stories, we hope to shed light on what motivates us to embrace student activism. We are just two of the many student activists working to lower the numbers of MMIW and create positive movement. We work to provide education and discussion for potential legal and societal change. We know there are many other students across America who are also working toward bringing justice for victims of MMIW. Take Annita Lucchesi for example. A doctoral student at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, Annita is well aware of the lack of a central database for tracking MMIW cases and has dedicated her research to help bring these numbers to light. As a student, she did not feel limited by her lack of perceived experience and utilized her positionality and education in bringing tangible change. Annita is an inspiration. This database, in combination with the activism of other students, has helped support our cause and provide power to Native leaders and policy makers. To help with this database, please utilize this website to report local injustices within your tribal community- <https://www.sovereign-bodies.org/mmiw-database>.

The power of student activism cannot be undermined or overlooked. We are well equipped to bring about real social change because there is true strength in our numbers. As students, we can leverage our intersectionality and educational and community positionalities. Most importantly we are willing to be mechanisms for change, but we need support from more advanced professionals and from our professional organizations to do so. In Table 1, we have included some key considerations for how you can help us with this cause. In the meantime, we will continue to speak and speak loudly until our voices are heard- until the voices of our MMIW are heard.

Table 1		
<i>How professionals and organizations can support student activism</i>		
Empower...	Connect...	Support...
research/projects that address MMIW, including creative work or community projects.	students to resources for conferences where they can speak on MMIW so their voices can be heard loud and clear.	students in going through proper channels in using organizational logos and/or other endorsement on promotional materials.
engagement in scholarly writing about MMIW topics in professional journals and special issues.	students to travel funding opportunities for conferences and participation in public events supporting MMIW.	the establishment of community forums or talking circles where survivorship and resilience can be discussed safely.
practice of cultural competence in addressing the impact of MMIW with students in both educational and clinical work.	students to teaching opportunities on MMIW topics including guest lecturing in academic courses, symposiums, and other public forums.	student mental health and be aware that students may be directly or indirectly impacted by MMIW on a daily basis.
development of interest in social justice and/or advocacy work in both local, regional, and national settings	students to grant funding and other forms of financial support to encourage MMIW research.	awareness of, and participation in, voting on important MMIW legislature in Native communities.
recognition that awareness-bringing resides in more than purely academic endeavors.	students to professionals, community members, and organizations committed to MMIW work.	students in supporting other students when an MMIW event occurs- as we all know too well about grief and loss of our Native women and girls.

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