Native Men’s Gathering: Experiences That Shape Behaviors and Beliefs about Violence Against Women

Summary of Roundtable Discussions
Held August 23-24, 2016
Oneida Nation, Green Bay, Wisconsin

January 2017
Purpose and Goals of the Gathering

On August 23, 2016, the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) invited American Indian and Alaska Native men involved in efforts to end domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking in their communities to the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin to share their perspectives and describe their work.

This was the first convening of its kind, and for most of the participants, it was the first time they had ever shared their experiences with like-minded men. The gathering became a collective opportunity to shed previous feelings of isolation and participate in the national dialogue about violence against women.

The gathering held particular significance to OVW, as men’s voices are critical to ending violence against women, and they are often not a part of the discussion. Their perspectives must be understood in order to fully comprehend how their experiences have impacted violence towards women and girls.

Roundtable gatherings are one mechanism OVW uses to hear and understand the various perspectives and experiences that make up the field of those who are working to end violence against women, and thus roundtables are critical to informing OVW’s decision making. OVW is committed to incorporating men’s involvement and addressing boys and men’s victimization, especially in Indian country where men and women have similar, extremely high victimization rates. Data from the National Institute of Justice’s recent study, Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Men and Women, show that men and women in Indian Country have been victimized at similar rates: 84% for women and 81% for men.¹

The objectives for the Native Men’s roundtable were:

- Learn about the common experiences of Native men.
- Hear the messaging Native men received as boys, youth and young men, and how their experiences influenced their values, beliefs and behaviors towards women.
- Begin to understand how men might use their influence and privilege to impact the safety of women and children around them.

The men who attended the roundtable varied in age from their early 20’s to mid-60’s. They represented tribes from Alaska, Arizona, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Washington, and organizations and community groups who share a commitment to creating safe and healthy communities.

Themes and Outcomes

The participants’ personal experiences were the foundation of the gathering, and the influences of their cultures were interwoven throughout the conversation. From these roots, and through a strong sense of openness, truthfulness, and trust, several themes emerged.

One of these themes was the experiences at different phases of life that shaped many of the men’s relationship to women and violence. The men overwhelmingly recognized and expressed appreciation for their cultural socialization and the values women instill in Native boys and in their communities – the mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and other females who first taught the participants the personal values they carry today. During the earliest stages of life, women were their primary caregivers and the strongest force in their lives. As one participant said: “We didn’t have our fathers. When we did, they were usually bad examples. Our grandmothers were good teachers. Our mothers were teaching us about life.”

In their youth/teenage phase, most of the participants said they experienced a shift toward violence. Much of the questioning and experimentation during this phase challenged the traditional tribal values they learned as children. As one participant explained: “We grew up with tribal ceremonies that celebrate the sacredness of life. But at the same time, we grew up seeing men mistreat women.”

In adulthood, most participants began to feel their heaviest level of community responsibility, and in the elder phase of life, they spoke of having a holistic vision of themselves and their community, and of beginning to reconnect with the positive values of the ancestors.

Another theme was an acknowledgement of the personal nature of their work to end violence against women. Participants agreed that the conversation during the roundtable touched them personally in many ways and on many levels. It brought up deep-rooted, heart-felt emotions related to love, control, and power (or lack of love, control, and power). The conversation also raised their awareness that domestic violence and sexual assault are not just about the victim and the perpetrator. The violence is also about the children, the extended family, and the community.

Acknowledgement of the male-dominated systems that are typically used to address violence against women also emerged as a theme. Whether it was batterer intervention programs or mandatory arrest, the current systems are driven by male-dominated authority (rather than the authority of the tribe or authority of the community), are often difficult to access, are piecemeal rather than holistic, and usually do not reflect the native culture.

During the convening, three short digital stories had a significant impact on the men. The videos, created by Mending the Sacred Hoop, were first-person accounts from women survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The videos are part of the “Faces of Violence” series available at: www.youtube.com/user/MendingSacredHoop/videos.
In sharing their reactions to and perspectives about the videos, participants said the videos were inspiring and enlightening. As one young man said after hearing an older man share this thoughts: “I feel enlightened again. I feel able to step back and reflect upon the generations and the wisdom of the ages.”

**Recommendations for Moving Forward**

The emotions and experiences shared at the gathering spurred a collective desire to participate in another convening soon. The men expressed their sense of isolation and lack of support they experience while working in this field, not only by families and tribal leadership, but also by systems – both tribal and non-tribal. Nearly every man who spoke said that to truly move forward with the knowledge gained at this first-ever, OVW-sponsored roundtable gathering of Native men, it is critical that similar convenings happen at least annually. They were very appreciative for OVW bringing them together for this discussion, but stressed the need to continue to collaborate in order to infuse a fullness and vitality into the movement for engaging other men.

The gathering’s final conversations centered around moving forward – not being complacent, but activating men to engage in vigorous roles that foster non-violence, and to hold other men accountable for change, responsibility, and forgiveness.

Towards this end, the men agreed that tradition and cultural practices are the direction for healing in tribal communities. They discussed promising practices such as traditional rites of passage, camps, and retreats for men that include traditional sweats, and other methods they would like to see practiced on a larger scale to stop the violence. It is these promising practices that they hope to share and build upon during the next men’s gathering.
Testimony of Participants

“It’s okay for us to speak up. And it’s okay to love, and it’s okay to hold each other accountable.”

“But we, as men, also need to be supported. And we also have to be forgiven. Because we do – as warriors – we want to protect our women. We want to live up to those roles.”

“In tribal communities, probably the most effective facilitators of the programs are men who have been raised in that community; people who have been both victims and perpetrators of the kind of life-altering trauma that we’re dealing with in the first place.”

“Batterer’s intervention programs should not be looked at as punishment. It’s an opportunity to restore honor, to return to honor. That, for many of us, that we have done things to dishonor our name. We have done things to dishonor our families, our partners, our children. We have done things to dishonor our community. But we have the opportunity to restore honor, to return to honor."

“It’s hard for me to have these types of conversations. For some reason, it wasn’t hard today.”

“The opportunity to feel safe in this environment, feel safe in this conversation, it’s an honor. It’s a blessing.”

“We can take this conversation to another level where we actually create, you know, worksheets and workbooks and actually develop our own curriculum.”

“I think we’re ready for movement. There’s a lot of small programs and groups that are doing little work like this, but maybe it’s time to move to a grander scale as native men.”

“No matter what it is that’s really troublesome in our communities, substance abuse and everything else, it’s about a lost identity, which is the spiritual connection. We lost that spiritual connection as native people…”

“We seem like we’re standing alone doing this work. But the beauty is that it’s begun.”

“One thing I didn’t hear when we were talking about those last scenarios was the little boy. I heard about the women, and I heard about the men, but I want to give that child a voice in this room. He was beaten. He was hurt. He witnessed violence within, and he witnessed his mother’s inability to help him.”
Images from the Native Men’s Gathering: Experiences that Shape Behaviors and Beliefs about Violence Against Women
A Warrior’s Journey

With deep thanks and appreciation to OVW for sponsoring the roundtable and to the Oneida community for hosting it and providing participants with kindness and care, David Cournoyer, Oglala Lakota, read a poem he created after co-facilitating the roundtable’s two days.

**A Warrior’s Journey:** Reflections from Native American Men Gathered at Oneida Nation of Wisconsin to Discuss Violence Against Women, by David Cournoyer

| It’s a boy!                              | From the Cavalry?                      |
| A baby boy!                             | From Carlisle?                         |
| How big? How much hair?                 | A cask of whiskey?                     |
| What’s his name?                        | Colonization?                          |
|                                        | Or a drunk uncle in the night?         |

| Not his slave name!                      | The pain, the hurt.                    |
| The one that comes from the grandmas,    | The lies, the walls.                   |
| From inside the ground.                  | I’m done. I’m effin’ done.              |
| A name dug up                            | I’m tired.                             |
| From that treasure-culture buried in my own backyard. | Accountability starts with me, but I can’t stand it. |
|                                        | I can’t stand up to him anymore.       |
|                                        | I can’t stand up for them anymore.     |
|                                        | I’m done with this reality show.       |

| What’s his Indian name?                  | I need you to show up and speak up.    |
| His destiny, his ancestry, his legacy,   | Show your heart.                       |
| For his great-grandchildren still to come. | Do the self-work. Do it.              |
| When they reach back to their origin story: | Apply pressure; that’s what I needed. |
| Women giving life, Women sharing power, Families surviving seal to seal. | Full-court pressure: Apply it, gently but firmly. |
|                                        | Press.                                 |
|                                        | Push.                                  |

| What’s his name?                         | Now, shush….I hear a cry.              |
| Will he be a warrior who wars?           | A baby? A little bundle?               |
| A warrior who loves?                     | He’s crying. Pick him up!              |
| Will he find fault, or find love?        | No, wait, that wail is older.           |
| When does he take his first moose?       | It’s louder…wiser.                     |
| What about that first kiss?              | A cry from someone who’s seen the wilderness, cold and alone. |
| Then will he dance and sing in thankful bliss? | That cry came from a vision, an awakening |

| Who will teach him?                      | It’s the cry – the cries and the tears - of a man, a father, a lover, a warrior. |
| Who will hug him?                        |                                        |
| How will be learn living an honorable life? |                                        |
| To be a good relative?                   |                                        |
| To help and please, to provide and protect? |                                        |
| Not perpetrate, prostitute, or possess.  |                                        |
| Where did THAT come from anyway?         |                                        |
Appendix 1: Participants

Facilitators

David Cournoyer, St. Paul, MN
Sarah Curtiss, Duluth, MN

Native Participants

Johon Atkinson, Metlakatla, AK    Raymond Beans, De Pere, WI
Don Chapin, Newport, OR          Jeremy Nevilles-Sorell, Duluth, MN
Greg Grey Cloud, Mission, SD     Craig Ninham, Green Bay, WI
Paul Crane, Emmonak, AK          Sven Paukan, St. Marys, AK
Robert Flores, Tucson, AZ        Kenny Perkins, Akwesasne, NY
Daniel Goombi, Mayetta, KS       Raymond Povijua, Santa Fe, MN
HawKan HaaKanson, Harlem, MT     Monte Randall, Okmulgee, OK
Joshua Hughes, Pendleton, OR     Gene Red Hail, Oneida, WI
Joel Hunt, Emmonak, AK           Hehaka Wambli Red Hail, DePere, WI
Gregory Jacobs, Green Bay, WI    Roy Red Hail, Oneida, WI
Rod Kaskalla, Santa Fe, NM       Aldo Seoane, Rapid City, SD
Peter Lengkeek, Fort Thompson, SD Leonard Stevens, Oneida, WI
Eric Lewis, church Rock, NM      Fidel Talache, Santa Fe, NM
Marlin Mousseau, Seymour, WI     Ralph Tucker, Oneida WI

Federal Participants

Bea Hanson, Principal Deputy Director, OVW
Lorraine Edmo, Deputy Director for Tribal Affairs, OVW
Darla Sims, Tribal Division Team Lead, OVW
Karimah Dosunmu, Program Assistant, OVW
Rebekah Jones, Grant Program Specialist, OVW
Steven Hafner, Research Assistant, National Institute of Justice

Other Participants

Amy Pincolini-Ford, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
Brianne Smith, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
Yolanda Webb, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
Appendix 2: Agenda

Native Men’s Gathering: Experiences That Shape Behaviors and Beliefs about Violence Against Women

Day One

8:30 am Traditional Opening/Welcome
9:45 am Framing Our Discussion
10:45 am BREAK
11:00 am Beliefs vs. Behaviors
12:30 pm LUNCH BREAK (on your own)
2:00 pm Four Directions: Small Group Discussion
3:30 pm BREAK
3:45 pm Wrap up Discussion
5:00 pm Adjourn

Day Two

8:30 am Welcome Back
9:00 am Reflections on Day 1
10:00 am Video:
10:30 am BREAK
10:45 am Discussing Influences and Impacts
12:30 pm LUNCH BREAK (on your own)
2:00 pm Acknowledgement, Forgiveness—the Man in the Mirror
3:15 pm BREAK
3:30 pm Activate a Paradigm Shift
4:15 pm OVW final thoughts/ Wrap-up activity
4:45 pm Wrap up and adjourn (Traveling Song)