



War on Indigenous Women: A Short Guide for Journalists Reporting on MMIWG

Findings from the December 6 panel discussion 'Crimes of Power: Reporting on Femicide,' hosted by the Center for Women's Global Leadership's Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence in collaboration with the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center. Panellists Brandi Morin, Suzette Brewer, Mallory Adamski, Jane Gerster, Chantal Flores, Diana Washington Valdez, Alice Driver, and Rana Hussein contributed to this fact sheet.

What is MMIWG?

The crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is part of the broader global crisis of Femicide.ⁱ In the U.S. and Canada every year, thousands of Indigenous women and girls are reported missing, but cases often go unreported or unsolved because of legal obstacles, historic and present day discrimination, and a lack of national and international attention.ⁱⁱ The total number of MMIWG in the U.S. is unknown, because federal databases do not contain comprehensive national data from Tribal, state and local law enforcement entities.ⁱⁱⁱ Good reporting cannot alone solve the crisis, but it can bring attention to ongoing injustices, educate the public, and hold authorities accountable.

Indigenous women are disproportionately victimized by gender-based violence, and these high rates are contributing to the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. In the U.S. overall, four out of five Indigenous women—or 80 percent—of all Native women have been victimized by violence in their lifetime.^{iv} Half of Indigenous women have been sexually abused, assaulted, or raped in their lifetime.^v Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls found that the violence "amounts to a race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people."^{vi}

Who are the offenders?

The majority of Indigenous women are targeted and harmed by non-Indian, non-Indigenous perpetrators. According to a U.S. National Institute of Justice-funded report, 96 percent of Native female victims were harmed by interracial perpetrators.^{vii}

How should journalists report on MMIWG?

Do your research and use historically accurate contextual information, with an awareness of the ongoing effects of systems of colonization.

Report on MMIWG as part of the spectrum of violence happening to Native women. Contextualize the crisis as

part of the problem of colonization and its lasting impacts like systemic discrimination and poor policies against Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canadian justice systems. A lack of criminal prosecutions of violence against Indigenous people around the world is allowing the crisis of Femicide to turn into the crisis of MMIWG.

"It is ongoing and these cases are going underreported, underinvestigated and unresolved. These families deserve justice," said Director of Communications and Advancement at the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, Mallory Adamski (*Diné*).

Highlight issues of justice and accountability. In the U.S., Tribal governments are sovereign; however a Supreme Court decision in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* in 1978 decided Tribal Nations do not have jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Indians in Indian Country.^{viii} The lasting impacts of this ruling continue to put Native women and their families at risk.

Focus on federal and local authorities' accountability and culpability. Hold powers and authorities to account. The ongoing failure to respond, investigate, and prosecute offenders in cases of Indigenous women because of biases, stereotypes or discrimination reflects a pattern or practice of denial of equal services.^{ix}

Focus on the need for legal reforms; don't just accept the lack of legal structures as they are: question them. Your reporting might be what a legislator needs to realize that they need to introduce a new law to congress or parliament.

Double check your sources, especially if they are in law enforcement. What are their vested interests? Request documents from authorities to further shed light on MMIWG cases but avoid harassing survivors and their families for this information.

Hold authorities accountable for the lack of data collection on violence against Native women and the tracking of cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Use the most recent and accurate data on violence against Native women whenever available.

Harness international organizations to add pressure to local and national institutions.

Investigative journalist and author Diana Washington Valdez told our panel:

“I believe we will see more laws making Femicide a genocide issue as something that occurs outside a war environment, because you and I would probably agree there is a war against women.”

Report on community response efforts. What is being done to bring attention to these crimes and what community solutions are being proposed? Report on potential solutions and ideas for redress that come from survivors, impacted families, and communities.

The Survivor Centered Approach

Families experiencing MMIWG have been extremely traumatized, will be grieving, and feel powerless. It is important to build relationships and humanize them in every way possible.

Build relationships and build trust because historically, the trust between the media and Indigenous communities has been broken through inaccurate, racist, and discriminatory reporting. Investigative journalist Brandi Morin (*French/Cree/Iroquois*) told our panel:

“It is so important that our women and girls are humanized in the media because traditionally our women and girls have been portrayed as prostitutes as drunks and runaways and trash and not valuable, and that perpetuates the violence towards our women because the media plays such a huge role in societal perceptions.”

Report from a human rights perspective; use the framework of international human rights law to describe crimes against Indigenous women. Every woman and girl, like every person, has the right to life. The human rights perspective also means exposing root causes and risk factors to MMIWG.^x

Emphasize the agency of your subjects. Use a survivor centred approach. This means:

- ⇒ Prioritize the needs and interests of survivors
- ⇒ Protect the identity and dignity of survivors
- ⇒ Focus on the purpose of the story
- ⇒ Learn from survivors’ perceptions of journalistic practices
- ⇒ Avoid retraumatizing or disempowering practices
- ⇒ Address survivors’ quest for justice and redress
- ⇒ Avoid raising or reinforcing false expectations
- ⇒ Write/produce and edit positive news stories about changing attitudes and efforts to advocate against acts or patterns of violence

- ⇒ Write/produce and edit follow-up stories that address the long-term impact of gender-based violence on survivors

Refer to the Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence handbook ‘Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-Based Violence.’^{xi}

Understand the nuances of the communities you are covering. Trust building means doing your research and understanding what permission you need. It means understanding local community power structures, codes and customs. Journalist Suzette Brewer (*Cherokee*) explained that non-Indigenous journalists need to report on MMIWG, but must do their research first:

“Try to make contacts with the people in charge the Tribal council, let them know what your objectives are. Go to the tribal council first and get permission. Indian people don’t have a lot of time and if they sense you haven’t done your research they are not going to spoon feed you. If they sense you have no clue about who they are or band they belong to or what linguistic group, they are not going to pay attention.”

Be transparent with each community and each family about the aims of your reporting, the sort of story you want to tell and how the final written, photographed, recorded or filmed story will look, where it will be viewable, and who will have access.

Do not ‘doorstep’ or surprise survivors or families unexpectedly. Take the time to get to know members of the community first, get permission and introduce yourself appropriately and ahead of time, giving potential sources time to decide if they want to take part in your story.

Ensure family members understand fully what their participation in your story means and gain consent before conducting interviews. Discuss anonymity and don’t use identifying details that could put your subjects at risk—this includes visual identifying or community identifying details.

Create a safe interview setting and let them decide when, where, and how the interview takes place. Use culturally sensitive interview techniques, and center the survivors when reporting on Femicide and MMIWG.

Pay attention to body language, poses during an interview. Sometimes the body speaks before the subject is ready—you might learn something crucial this way, said Journalist Chantal Flores.

Violent events can be multiple, and subjects will usually have more than just one story to tell.

Avoid asking for violent details that may traumatize subjects, and avoid asking them to tell their stories over

and over again if they are not comfortable with this. Try to collaborate with other reporters instead.

“[Families] essentially have to re-live that experience of having their loved one lost and experience that over and over,” said Mallory Adamski.

Don’t present the survivors as just passive victims, but don’t over glorify them either. Try not to erase crucial parts of your subjects’ identity.

How can media institutions change the way they report on MMIWG?

Challenge media apathy. International, national, and local media attention on the crisis of MMIW and Femicide is important.

Media organizations maybe hesitant to cover MMIWG; this is improving bit by bit but they may need encouragement. Keep pushing newspapers, websites, radio stations, TV channels, and magazines to report accurately and consistently on MMIWG.

Collaborate with like minded journalists. Help other journalists and this will reward you. Editors need to support journalists working on Femicide and MMIWG stories.

“Media needs to hire more Indigenous reporters, period,” said Diana Washington Valdez.

Think about visuals, including visual identification and possible risks this may pose. Ask to work with an Indigenous photographer or woman photographer, said Journalist and handbook contributor Alice Driver.

Check accurate terminology when referencing and reporting on Indigenous communities. Refer to the [Native American Journalists Association media guides](#) on Tribal Nations and First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities.^{xii}

Suzette offered practical tips on beginning stories on MMIWG and related issues:

“Non-Native journalists fear covering these subjects. It is very complex and nuanced. There are a lot of different confluences of jurisdiction and sentencing and guidelines and that is exactly the reason these things should be covered, because what ends up happening is that Native women throughout North America fall through the cracks....

It is vast and complex and that is why we must be focusing our efforts on these things as much as we possibly can because I feel like until we get some traction with our non-Native colleagues we will just continue to spin our wheels.”

Do your research and feel more confident. Embrace the complexity of the story—this is a reason to cover MMIWG, not a reason to avoid the topic, Suzette explained. She added that these stories are so prevalent, and the issue is so huge that non-Native reporters need to report on these stories.

Be objective, but the passion has to be there to carry you through and endure.

Self care is important, even more so if you are Native and/or a woman journalist. Debrief with editors and seek a counsellor or therapist to help manage the impact of trauma if needed. Editors should create supportive spaces for journalists to deal with the impact of their reporting.

“Humanize the people you are writing about, but also remember to humanize yourself because you are still a person,” said Jane Gerster.

ⁱ Femicide is the killing of women because of their gender. It is the most extreme version of intimate partner violence, but it can also take place in public settings. A variety of risk factors make women around the world more vulnerable to Femicide, such as, but not limited to poverty, social marginalization, racism and conflict. Journalists should be aware when working with Indigenous communities that direct translations of certain terms, such as Femicide and domestic violence, into traditional languages may not exist or may be challenging.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nativehope.org/en-us/understanding-the-issue-of-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.niwrc.org/resources/report/gao-report-missing-or-murdered-indigenous-women-new-efforts-are-underway>

^{iv} <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/violence-against-american-indian-and-alaska-native-women-and-men>

^v <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/violence-against-american-indian-and-alaska-native-women-and-men>

^{vi} <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

^{vii} <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/violence-against-american-indian-and-alaska-native-women-and-men>

^{viii} <https://www.ncai.org/tribal-vawa/sdvcj-overview/the-need-for-sdvcj>

^{ix} <https://www.niwrc.org/restoration-magazine/october-2021/failed-response-state-justice-agencies-investigate-and-prosecute>

^x <https://gbvjjournalism.org/book/the-human-rights-approach>

^{xi} <https://gbvjjournalism.org/book/survivor-centered-approach>

^{xii} <https://najanewsroom.com/reporting-guides/>