

Behind Closed Doors

The Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in the United States Can Be Prevented

Indigenous women and girls in the United States experience violence up to 10 times higher than the national average.¹ Homicide is their third leading cause of death.²

The data are clear—femicide is happening across the United States, with devastating impacts on all communities.³

The intentional killing of a woman or girl is the most extreme form of gender-based violence, rooted in gender and racial inequality, harmful patriarchal norms, and systemic failures. The crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S+) shows us the urgent nature of femicide in the United States.⁴ Addressing the issue requires both protective policy and prevention strategies that confront its root causes.

What Is Femicide?

Femicide is the intentional killing of women or girls because of their gender.⁵ It is often the final act in an ongoing pattern of abuse, coercion, and control, most frequently perpetrated by intimate partners or known individuals. Femicide is shaped by unequal power dynamics and harmful gender norms that normalize violence against women and girls. This nature makes it both predictable and preventable.

Femicide Is a National Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight

Nearly 90% of women and girls killed by men in the United States in 2023 knew their killer.⁶

The United States has one of the highest rates of femicide among high-income countries, at 2.6 per 100,000 women in 2023.⁷ More than 2,400 women were killed by men in 2023.⁸ In comparison, in the United Kingdom, 122 women were killed by men in 2022.⁹

Yet, femicide is still widely misunderstood as an issue that primarily occurs outside the United States—limiting the community's and policymakers' urgency and investment in prevention.

Indigenous Women and Girls Experience Disproportionate Violence

Femicide affects all communities in the United States, but its impact is uneven across communities because some groups, like Native Americans, have a long history of colonization and systemic oppression.¹⁰ Indigenous women and girls face some of the highest levels of violence in the United States, yet their experiences are often overlooked or misrepresented by reporting systems and the media.¹¹ A 2016 study across 71 cities found

5,712 cases of MMIWG2S+ were reported, but the U.S. Department of Justice recorded only 116 of them.¹²

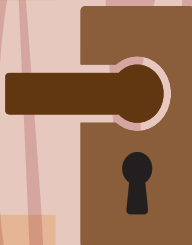
Homicide was the third leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native girls ages 15 to 19 and women ages 20 to 24 in 2023.¹³ Jurisdictional gaps between tribal, state, and federal systems create barriers to accountability that allow violence to persist. This crisis reflects a profound and systematic failure to prioritize Indigenous women's lives in data and policy responses.

Preventing femicide involves more than reactive policies—it needs root causes addressed.¹⁴ Comprehensive, multisectoral approaches like improving data systems, strengthening coordination across jurisdictions, and supporting tribal sovereignty in controlling data and addressing violence are critical to closing persistent gaps.¹⁵ They require combined efforts from policymakers, the media, and community members.

Education Provides a Foundation for Preventing Gender-Based Violence

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a critical, evidence-based tool for gender-based violence prevention.¹⁶ CSE equips young people with the knowledge and skills to understand consent, build healthy relationships, and challenge harmful norms around gender and power.¹⁷

By addressing these issues before young people reach adulthood, CSE can help shift the toxic attitudes that contribute to gender-based violence. Research shows that gender-transformative education can reduce intimate partner violence and promote healthier, more equitable relationships.¹⁸



For Indigenous communities, culturally grounded and community-led CSE can also support healing from systematic oppression, strengthen identity and community, and empower young people to advocate for safety and justice. A safe space for exploring and reclaiming bodily sovereignty and pushing dignity-centered advocacy is key to preventing violence. (See box.)

Indigenous Justice Circle’s Indigenous Adolescent Girls’ Empowerment Network

The Indigenous Adolescent Girls’ Empowerment Network (IMAGEN), a program of the Indigenous Justice Circle (IJC), creates a supporting and empowering space for Native American girls to connect, learn, and grow with mentors.¹⁹ The curriculum focuses on restoring Indigenous matrilineal systems and leadership, community connection, and tribal sovereignty. This culturally responsive framework and curriculum influence healthy dialogue around relationships and reproductive autonomy—key elements in preventing gender-based harm.

End the Crisis for Indigenous Women and Girls—and Femicide—With Sustained, Coordinated Action

Preventing MMIWG2S+—and femicide—requires policymakers, educators, and advocates to:

- **Expand access to comprehensive, culturally responsive education** to advocate for bodily autonomy and foster healthy, equitable relationships.
- **Invest in Indigenous-led solutions**, including but not limited to specifically appropriating resources for local, tribal responses and investing in tribally based victim advocacy services.
- **Improve accountability across systems** to eliminate underreporting, reform federal laws and policies, and focus efforts on violence prevention and justice.

Education and awareness building can have profound impacts on people of all backgrounds and genders. Native women, girls, and Two-Spirit people deserve the power that comes with embracing bodily autonomy through education, dialogue, and community.

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Read more about the violence hidden behind closed doors in our full report, *Behind Closed Doors: Exposing and Addressing Harmful Gender-Based Practices in the United States*.

