

# Protecting Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit+ people

## 1870's In Sikóóhkotok | City of Lethbridge



1876

1877

1884

1885

1880's  
throughout  
the early  
1900's

1928 – 1972

1974

# Niitsitapiiaakiiks | Blackfoot Women

In Niitsitapii | Real People (Blackfoot) society women are loved, honoured and respected within families and communities.

Before the impacts of colonization, niitsitapiiaakiiks held great power. As a life-giver she was considered to be the closest to the Creator and she was the centre of the family. The stand-up head dress was given to a woman with the highest regard as recognition of the spiritual and physical life she led.

An opitaama | wife was the niitóyis | tipi owner and she decided who lived in the lodge. She had autonomy and could choose to stay, or leave a marriage. As an opitaama, her value was demonstrated by the gifts, often many horses, given to her family by onaapimma | her husband. If a niitsitapiiaakii or opitaama was stolen in a raid, her male relatives would go to battle to get her back.

Oksísstsiiksi | mothers were the first teachers of language and shared ways of knowing and being for children. For her the children were the

centre of everything. If she left a marriage the children went with her.

Ceremony was a part of our daily lives. The Ookáán | Sundance, our most sacred ceremony, can only be started by a woman from the Máoto'kiiksi | Buffalo Women's Society.

*"In everything the woman is the centre of our way of life. The ceremonies will not happen without her."*

– Elder Roger Prairie Chicken

Gender roles were not rigid and niitsitapiiaakiiks were able to become warriors and fight alongside their male counterparts during battles. Whisky traders in the late 1800's recollect watching niitsitapiiaakiiks take-down attackers during the Battle of Belly River – which took place in present day Sikóóhkotok | Lethbridge.

Violence against niitsitapiiaakiiks was seen as counterproductive to survival, as they were central to the family and clans' ability to thrive.

Sikóóhkotok, also known as the City of Lethbridge, is located within Siksikaitsitapi kitao'ahsinnooni | Blackfoot Confederacy territory.

1 **Káínai**  
(Blood Tribe)

12,800 members

2 **Aapátóhsipikáni**  
(Piikani Nation)

3,600 members

3 **Siksiká**  
(Siksika Nation)

7,800 members

4 **Aamsskáápipikani**  
(Blackfoot Tribe/USA)

17,321 members

Siksikaitsitapiipooyiiks-aakiiks | Blackfoot Confederacy women come from each of the four Blackfoot Nations: Káínai (Blood Tribe), Aapátóhsipikáni (Piikani Nation) Siksiká (Siksika Nation) and Aamsskáápipikani (Blackfoot Tribe / USA).

The Siksikaitsitapi | Blackfoot Confederacy brings together four Blackfoot First Nations from both sides of the Medicine Line (US/CA border) who have lived on these lands since time immemorial.

Káínai and Aapátóhsipikáni are the closest neighbouring Nations to the City of Lethbridge.





## Saipá'tapiiaakiiks | Outsider Indigenous Women

The term saipá'tapiiaakiiks is used by niitsitapii to identify other Indigenous women, including Métis, who have come into Siksikaitstapi kitao'ahsinnooni | Blackfoot Confederacy territory. Since the signing of Treaty 7 and the westward expansion of the fur trade, saipá'tapiiaakiiks have migrated to the area around Sikóóhкоток, and now call this place home. Many have come from matriarchal societies, and the intergenerational impacts of colonization have similarly affected their families.

In addition to their role as the primary caretakers and sacred givers of life, saipá'tapiiaakiiks were also integral contributors to their family's financial security. Their diligent hands produced goods for trade with neighbouring nations and at trading posts.

Since the 1960's and the removal of the pass system to leave the reserves, saipá'tapiiaakiiks and their families have come to settle in Sikóóhкоток for a variety of reasons; sometimes these women were fleeing domestic violence as a result of poverty and addictions in their home communities.

With the increased migration of saipá'tapiiaakiiks, intermarriages and adoptions into niitsitapii families have created strong connections within the Siksikaitstapi community.

*“I wish for safety for my granddaughter, but I can't trust anyone because [men] target us because maybe they don't value us as much as the rest of society. I don't know how many generations it will take to come out of this. It is frustrating. But for me, connecting to the land, walking in the coulees, attending ceremony with the Blackfoot families that have adopted me – that is how I am healing.”*

**– Saulteaux mother and grandmother living in Sikóóhкоток –  
3<sup>rd</sup> generation survivor of violence**

Saipá'tapiiaakiiks have their own story to tell, but they have long struggled alongside niitsitapiiaakiiks through systems of colonial oppression and their lived experience similarly includes increased violence, exploitation, and ineffectual police investigations of missing and murdered relatives.

## Two-Spirit and diverse gender identities in Blackfoot culture

The spirit is sacred in Niitsitapiisinni | Our way of life. Traditionally, gender roles were non-binary, nor were they based solely on physical characteristics. Gender diverse people were respected and contributing members of the family and community. They often held positions as healers, ceremonial leaders and warriors.

Through the oppression of their spirits, these sacred people have suffered greatly from the rigid binary western religious ideology that came with the settlers. Colonization sought to erase gender diversity from our collective memory. Niitsitapii two-spirit+ people are continuing to find their voices and as they do, we all have a responsibility to listen as they reclaim their truth.

### **Two-Spirit, Two-Spirit+, 2S, 2S+**

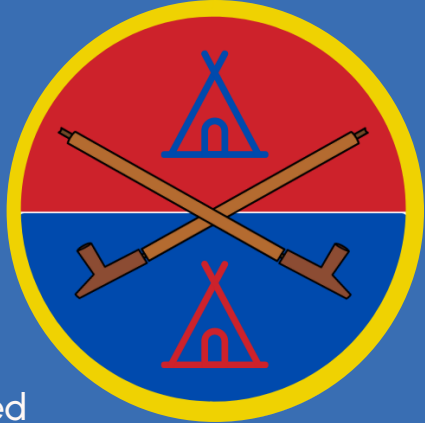
are terms used to identify the gender diversity of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. The term was collaboratively developed in the early 1990's during an Indigenous gathering of gender diverse peoples.





# The story of gendered colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples

Several acronyms will be used in the following content for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit+ people which is indicative of the evolving scope of the tragedy facing Indigenous communities over time: MMIW, MMIWG, MMIWG2S+



Mid-1700's	Traders and European men come to Siksikaitsitapi kitao'ahsinnooni   Blackfoot Confederacy territory. Some marry niitsitapiiaakiiks and have families. European settler notions of gender and racesaw Indigenous women as being less valuable, often leading to their abuse and exploitation (including through sex trafficking). These unfamiliar behaviours contrasted sharply with Niitsitapii expectations and value of niitsitapiiaakiiks. Many of the European male settlers would eventually leave and return to their wives and families in Europe or eastern Canada.
1870's	Influx of whisky traders and alcohol addiction leads to increased sex trafficking and exploitation of Indigenous women.
1876	<a href="#">Indian Act</a> created and implemented. Indigenous self-governance is extinguished. Only Indigenous men are counted as Indians. Women are absent from the law.
1877	<a href="#">The Blackfoot Treaty</a> (Treaty 7) is signed by male members only of the Siksikaitsitapi Nations. Blackfoot women as head of the household were not considered or included during negotiations due to the prevalent European patriarchal view of women. Gender diverse people, while respected within traditional communities, are similarly not considered.
1884	Residential Schools become mandatory. Indigenous mothers have their children torn from their arms and loaded into wagons and trains to be taken to residential schools. Children are indoctrinated primarily in Catholicism in Southern Alberta, a religion that is based in patriarchal binary ideology. Religious leaders saw Indigenous people as sub-human savages, and actively removed the power and reverence traditionally held by women and attempted to erase gender diversity.

1885	Canada bans all Indigenous ceremonies. The <a href="#">Ookáán   Sundance</a> is banned, stripping the central role played by women from the most sacred ceremony in Niitsitapii culture.
1880's throughout the early 1900's	Coal mining and railroad development lead to a large influx of male workers to the area now known as Lethbridge. Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people continued to be targeted by sex traffickers and gendered violence.
1928 – 1972	Alberta enacts a <a href="#">Sexual Sterilization Act</a> that forcibly sterilized Indigenous women, girls. Issues of coerced sterilization of Indigenous women continues to the present day.
1974	The <a href="#">Native Women's Association of Canada</a> (NWAC) is formed and consolidates 13 Indigenous women's groups across Canada.
1985	<a href="#">Bill C-31</a> provides conditional reinstatement of status for Indigenous women who were stripped of their government recognized identity if they had previously married a non-Indigenous man or earned a post-secondary degree.
1996	The last residential school closes in Canada, but since the 1960s onwards, high numbers of Indigenous children are stolen from families and placed into foster care or adoption in what is now termed as the <a href="#">Sixties Scoop</a> .
2004	Amnesty International releases <a href="#">No More Stolen Sisters Report</a> .
2005	NWAC <a href="#">Sisters in Spirit initiative</a> launched to investigate violence against Indigenous women in Canada.
2011	During <a href="#">Cindy Gladue's</a> murder trial in Alberta, the deceased's vaginal tissue was brought into the courtroom as evidence, an act that was denounced by many as dehumanizing.
2014	The RCMP release <a href="#">Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview</a> that stated there were nearly 1200 police reported cases of MMIW between 1980 and 2012.

2014	The body of <a href="#">Tina Fontaine</a> , a 15-year-old Indigenous girl, is pulled from the Red River in Winnipeg. Her murder renewed grassroots calls for a national inquiry.
2015	The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's <a href="#">Call to Action #41</a> calls upon the federal government to launch a national inquiry into MMIWG.
2016	The <a href="#">National Inquiry</a> in Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is initiated with 5 commissioners appointed to lead the work.
2019	Alberta ends the practice of <a href="#">Birth Alerts</a> which disproportionately targeted Indigenous women giving birth and which often resulted in traumatic apprehensions of newborns.
2019	The National Inquiry into MMIWG2SLGBTQQIA+ releases its final report and 231 Calls for Justice.

With colonization came oppression, poverty and systemic racism. Colonialism today continues to try and suppress Niitsitapii ways of being and knowing, including traditional understandings of gender roles and identity. Nonetheless, the Niitsitapii continue to thrive in their territory, speak their language and live their culture.



*“Once I understood the history and impacts of colonization and residential schools it helped me to understand why we have the lifestyles and make the life choices that we do. Learning this history, a huge weight was taken off of me. I was able to forgive myself and promote healing in my family from internal racism and intergenerational trauma.”*

– Indigenous MMIWG Focus Group participant

## The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Women and Girls and Two-Spirit+ (MMIWG2S+)

The federal government committed to funding Canada's first [national inquiry](#) on December 8, 2015 to determine the root causes of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+. The National Inquiry into MMIWG began on September 1, 2016 and ended with the Final Report and Calls for Justice submission on June 4, 2019.

Through 15 National Community Hearings, the testimonies, or truths, of 1484 families and survivors were heard. The truth-telling process was an important legal aspect of the National Inquiry. This testimony demonstrated the real shared experience of so many Indigenous people and the tragic loss of loved ones. It was heartbreaking and necessary. The testimony and research laid the foundation for the recommendations in the [Final Report: Reclaiming Power and Place](#), in which the remaining four Commissioners determined that the root cause of MMIWG2S+ was genocide and colonial systems of oppression.

**The National Inquiry identified 231 Calls for Justice, including eight Calls for All Canadians.**

Sikóóhkotok | City of Lethbridge values all niitsitapiiaakiiks, saipáí'tapiiaakiiks and two-spirit+ people who visit or call this place home. Enacting local actions to increase safety and protect Indigenous female and gender diverse people is part of the City's commitment to reconciliation and allyship.

Nitákkaawa | Allyship is a lifelong process of decolonizing, dismantling systems of oppression and creating safe spaces for Indigenous people in our communities.

There are many steps on the journey to becoming an ally. Each identified action lists several ways that you can start, continue and commit to this new way of life: **First Steps**, **Walk the Path** and **Lifelong Journey**.

The National Inquiry's [Calls for Justice for All Canadians](#) and others will be referenced with each action for you to further make important connections.

- 1 Institutional Hearing / 1 Community Hearing in Alberta
- According to [NWAC](#), Alberta has the 2nd highest number of MMIWG cases in Canada
- 84% of the cases are murder cases in Alberta
- Rural areas are significant to the issue in Alberta
- Higher percentage of stranger or acquaintance murders
- Indigenous women are 7x more likely to be murdered by a serial killer

**1**

## Actions for Residents, Visitors, Businesses and Journalists

### Learn more about the on-going tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people (NI 15.3, 15.7)

**First Steps:** Read the National Inquiry's Final Report, Executive Summary and Calls for Justice.

**Walk the Path:** Watch the recorded [Community Hearings](#). Watch films, documentaries and short series about MMIWG2S+, such as those listed by [Kairos Canada](#), with friends and family members. Organize community viewing events and engage in respectful dialogue.

**Lifelong Journey:** Volunteer, fundraise and donate financial resources to organizations that support Indigenous women experiencing violence in Sikóóhkotok, such as the Kainai Women's Wellness Lodge. Organize free self-defense classes for female and gender diverse people.

### Stand with Indigenous people and speak out against violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people (NI 15.1)

**First Steps:** Commit to participating in the annual [Sisters in Spirit \(SIS\) Vigil](#) on October 4 and other Indigenous-led marches and events, especially those focused on the MMIWG2S+ tragedy.

**Walk the Path:** Amplify awareness of MMIWG2S+ by talking to family, friends and co-workers. Invite them to attend the SIS Vigil with you.

**Lifelong Journey:** Learn more about Gender Based Analysis+ through the Government of Canada's free online [course](#) as one step in a commitment to challenge assumptions and learn about how local systems and policies can unequally affect Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people.

### Hold safe space for Indigenous women and two-spirit+ peoples' voices (NI 15.4, 15.6 and 15.7)

**First Steps:** Learn more about unconscious bias and how it affects your interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people and their voices.

**Walk the Path:** Commit to attend Indigenous-led workshops, courses and speaker events, e.g., authors, filmmakers, musicians and academics. Take it one step further and bring a friend with you – especially those that may not have the same awareness of Indigenous peoples and the importance of being nitákkaawa | an ally.

# MMIWG2S+



**Lifelong Journey:** Invite and support Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people to run for positions on municipal and non-government organization boards. Commit to including Indigenous representation on issues and decisions affecting Indigenous people and places, including through the voices of Indigenous people.

### Support the economic empowerment of Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people (NI 6.1 iv., 15.4 and 15.6)

**First Steps:** Stop the damage caused by cultural appropriation, misrepresentation and the objectification of Indigenous women by "voting with your dollars". Do not purchase items like headdresses or Halloween costumes that devalue Indigenous culture and perpetuate the hyper-sexualization of Indigenous women and girls.

**Walk the Path:** Support and hire Indigenous women and two-spirit+ owned businesses, e.g., artists, photographers, event planners, designers, caterers, etc. Purchase authentic arts and crafts from Indigenous women and two spirit+ creators, including those featured by the [Blackfoot Women's Empowerment Project](#).

**Lifelong Journey:** Volunteer with education, skills-training or wellness programs for Indigenous women. Recommend Indigenous women and two-spirit+ owned businesses with your network and promote on social media platforms.

### Get media savvy and challenge biased reporting of MMIWG2S+ (NI 15.6 and 6.1)

**First Steps:** Read news articles about missing and murdered Indigenous female and gender diverse people and critically examine the voice and perspective of the author. Evaluate whether the voice of the victim or survivor is empowered or oppressed, emphasized or marginalized.

**Walk the Path:** Read articles and works of Indigenous female and two spirit+ reporters and journalists, including those who have covered the tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit peoples. Share content with your network and on social media platforms.

**Lifelong Journey:** Subscribe to Indigenous news, podcasts and radio stations, especially those focused on MMIWG2S+, and commit to lifelong listening and learning. For example, [Windspeaker](#) is a media company offering news in a variety of formats from Indigenous perspectives.



## 2

# Additional Actions for Businesses

Promote allyship and dismantling of colonial systems of oppression and racism directed toward Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people (NI 15.3, 15.4 and 15.5)

**First Steps:** Read the National Inquiry's [Final Report and Calls for Justice](#) and incorporate content into employee orientation, teambuilding exercises and training. Consider starting a book club. Ensure safe space for discussion of the content.

**Walk the Path:** Encourage (and pay) staff to take further training on [Indigenous peoples history](#). Provide anti-racism, GBA+, unconscious bias and diversity and inclusion training for all staff.

**Lifelong Journey:** Commit to participating in the Sisters in Spirit Vigil and support staff to participate as well. Contribute to these initiatives with financial donations, or in-kind support, including promotion of the event. Share your business' participation across social media platforms to amplify awareness.

Create safe space for Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people at risk of harm, or being harmed (NI 8.1, 15.1 and 15.6)

**First Steps:** Create posters or large stickers that identify a safe word and actions to take if a matápii | person feels unsafe and wants to discreetly ask for help. Display the posters/stickers alongside information on crisis support lines in restroom stalls and hand-washing areas.

**Walk the Path:** Train staff to recognize the signs of sex trafficking and learn how to safely report these incidences to local authorities. The Native Women's Association of Canada has launched a new initiative with educational resources called [Safe Passage](#).

**Lifelong Journey:** Create a MMIWG2S+ safety plan that outlines protocols and steps for supporting Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people experiencing violence and sex-trafficking. Train staff and revisit regularly.

**Additionally, here are some reconciliation action's that businesses can take to complement their commitment to increasing safety of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people.**

Become a champion of Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people's economic development (NI 4.2 and 15.8)

**First Steps:** Develop a list of local Indigenous women and two-spirit+ entrepreneurs and business owners. Commit to hiring, or procuring goods and services from them.

**Walk the Path:** Encourage and make space for Indigenous business owners and entrepreneurs to join the local chamber of commerce and other B2B organizations. Coordinate education sessions on the importance of Indigenous women and two spirit+ economic empowerment as a way to address the underlying issues that lead to the tragedy of MMIWG2S+.

**Lifelong Journey:** Collaborate with Indigenous entrepreneurs and Indigenous-owned and led businesses – allowing for mentoring. Share your network and encourage others to collaborate on Indigenous-led business ventures.

Demonstrate your businesses' commitment to reconciliation (NI 15.2 and 15.7)

**First Steps:** Greet all customers with the original welcome of this territory, **Oki**. Create a land acknowledgement and place in a visible location in your business and on your digital and social media platforms.

**Walk the Path:** Work with Indigenous artists to incorporate Indigenous language, iconography and models in your print, television, and digital advertising.

**Lifelong Journey:** Contribute to work placements, internship and scholarship opportunities for Indigenous women and two-spirit+ people through local post-secondary institutions, such as Red Crow Community College, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College and Community Futures Treaty 7.





The Reconciliation Lethbridge Advisory Committee identifies several local actions and resources that journalists can access when reporting on MMIWG2S+ in Siksikaitstapi kitao'ahsinnooni | Blackfoot Confederacy Territory.

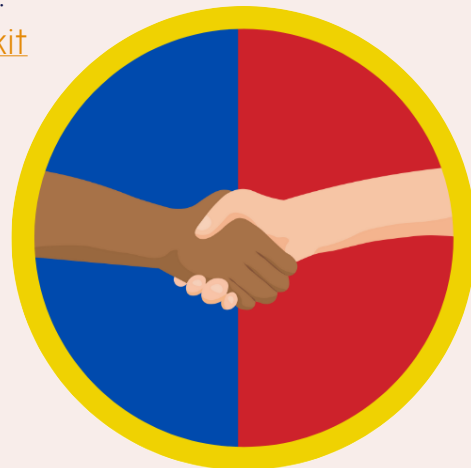
Additionally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization created the [Reporting on violence against women and girls: a handbook for journalists](#) resource that provides in-depth guidance on journalistic practices for covering gender-based violence.

### Language and Vocabulary

**First Steps:** Learn and use Ni'tsi'powahsin | Blackfoot language to describe people, places and things. Using the [Blackfoot Online Dictionary](#) as a starting point combined with input from fluent language speakers will ensure that the vocabulary used is appropriate and respectful.

**Walk the Path:** Include an acknowledgement of the land in your story and across your media outlet's print and digital publications. Sikóóhkotok | City of Lethbridge [Reconciliation Ally Toolkit](#) includes the City's official land acknowledgement.

**Lifelong Journey:** Commit to building real relationships with Indigenous community members and media colleagues and compensating them for their expertise following cultural protocols. Support your media outlet to develop an honorarium, or gift-giving policy to compensate traditional knowledge keepers and fluent language speakers for their integral contribution to stories.

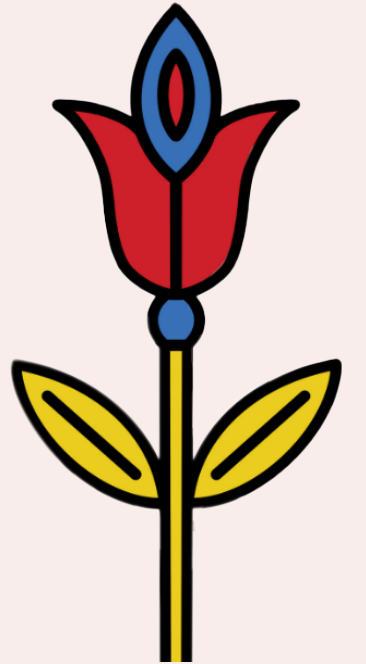


### Lens of Indigenous peoples

**First Steps:** Use sources that are from the community and prioritize the voices of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people living in and around Sikóóhkotok | City of Lethbridge.

**Walk the Path:** Use local data to inform stories. Connect with Siksikaitstapi administrative offices and urban Indigenous organizations for information about Indigenous people and places.

**Lifelong Journey:** Commit to amplifying the stories of MMIWG2S+ in Siksikaitstapi kitao'ahsinnooni from a trauma-informed approach that educates the public on the truth of how Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit+ people are targeted. Balance this coverage with stories of empowering Indigenous issues, events, and celebrations.



Request permission before taking pictures for use in any form of media, even at public events and gatherings. Ask relatives for images that accurately depict and respectfully memorialize lost and stolen loved ones.

*When choosing a photo to accompany an article or film for a report, three questions must always be asked:*

1. *Does the image protect the safety and dignity of the survivor?*
2. *Does it avoid sensationalism, voyeurism and stigmatization?*
3. *If the photo shown is explicit or shocking, is it in the public interest? In other words, does the shocking aspect serve the subject matter? Does it help the public to better understand or feel the situation?*

Source: UNESCO Handbook for Journalists



Blackfoot terminology and references used in this resource were sourced from niksokowaiksi (relatives), RLAC members, print and online resources, including the [Online Blackfoot Dictionary](#). We recognize that the Blackfoot language follows an oral tradition, and so therefore there may be alternate spellings and definitions for these words in English.

**With special thanks to:**

Shaylen Smith / Iniskim Consulting  
Rudy Black Plume (Artist)  
Output Media

