



# YAKAMA NATION AWTNI SHIXWITPAMA 3<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL MMIP SYMPOSIUM "WE HEAL TOGETHER"

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
MAY 5, 2025

## **"Reclaiming Our Voices: Healing, Sovereignty, and the Fight Against Silence"**

Good morning.

Before we begin, I want to take a moment — a real moment — to ground ourselves in the weight and purpose of why we're here.

The stories we carry — as individuals, as communities, as survivors — are not just ours. They are shaped by those who came before us.

Shaped by generations of women who survived, resisted, and held their families and Nations together through unthinkable pain.

We carry their strength. We carry their grief. And we carry their hope.

So let this space be one of truth.

Of courage.

Of reclamation.

Because our voices matter.

And the act of speaking out loud — here, together — is a form of healing that no system can take from us.

And today, we add our own story to that sacred collection.

I stand before you today not simply as a speaker, not as a consultant or an advocate or an educator — but as a survivor.

I am a survivor of narcissistic abuse — in my personal life, where the walls of my own home became a battlefield I couldn't escape, and in my professional journey, where systems that should have supported truth instead protected power and silenced the vulnerable.

There was a time I thought my pain was an isolated experience — a personal failing, something to hide.

But healing revealed the truth:

My story is not an exception.

It is part of a pattern.

**A pattern that Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous women, have lived with for over 500 years.**

Since the first violent contact between colonizers and Indigenous Nations, Native women have been targeted — not just for the land we come from, but for the very bodies and voices we carry.

The weaponization of violence against Native women — through rape, abduction, trafficking, murder, and legal erasure — has been a deliberate tool of colonization.

It was not random. It was not incidental.

It was strategic.

And it continues today.

When we speak about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Relatives, when we speak about the MMIP crisis, we are not speaking about isolated cases.

We are speaking about the modern face of a very old war — a war on Native existence, Native sovereignty, Native womanhood.

Today, the statistics reveal the truth our communities have always known:

- **More than 4 in 5 Native women — 84.3 percent — have experienced violence in their lifetime.**
- **Over half of us have experienced sexual violence or violence by an intimate partner.**
- **Our murder rates are more than 10 times the national average.**

This violence did not begin yesterday.

It is the legacy of policies, laws, and attitudes that sought — and still seek — to erase us.

Silencing survivors — whether through fear, confusion, bureaucracy, or violence — has always been a central tactic in this larger pattern of domination.

But today, I am not here to tell you a story of defeat.

Today, I am here to tell you a story of reclamation.

Because healing — real healing — is not passive.

It is not about making peace with oppression.

It is not about "moving on" without justice.

Healing is an act of resistance.

Healing is a return to truth.

Healing is a radical reclamation of voice, of safety, of power.

Today, I will share with you how surviving narcissistic abuse — both personally and professionally — gave me the lens to understand how deeply exploitation runs in our systems, and how courageously we must fight to reclaim what was taken.

We will talk about how survivors, especially Native women, can begin to:

- Reclaim our voices,
- Restore our sense of safety,
- And rebuild power — individually and collectively.

We will talk about why **healing is sovereignty**,

Why **truth-telling is activism**,

And why **believing survivors is a revolutionary act**.

Because healing ourselves is not separate from protecting our Nations.

It is the foundation.

**We protect our people when we believe their stories.**

**We defend our sovereignty when we reclaim our voices.**

**And we heal our future when we refuse to be silenced ever again.**

Healing is not easy.

It is not linear.

It is not without cost.

But it is necessary.

And it is ours.

We do this work not just for ourselves, but for every generation that will come after us. Because they deserve a world where their voices are honored, where their bodies are safe, and where their lives are celebrated.

And we, together, are the ones who will build it.

**PAUSE**

## **I. My Story: Survival in the Shadows (10 minutes)**

For a long time, survival for me meant navigating spaces that were anything but safe.

In my personal life, I endured years of narcissistic and emotional abuse that left invisible scars — scars that no one could see, but that nearly broke me from the inside out.

It began the way so many abusive relationships do:  
with charm, with promises, with dreams of building a life together.

I met my ex at work. I was finishing my master's degree in Indigenous Nations Studies.

I had dreams. I had goals.

And I thought I had found someone who would honor those dreams with me.

But the cracks showed early — signs of abuse I didn't yet recognize because they were not physical.

Small betrayals. Lies that didn't make sense.

Moments where I was left abandoned, confused, isolated.

And over time, those small cracks widened into craters of control and cruelty:

- I became financially trapped — having to monitor my own bank account just to survive impulsive spending that risked eviction or going without basic necessities.
- I became emotionally isolated — arguments escalating until I found myself curled up on the floor, sobbing, walking on eggshells in my own home.
- I became physically trapped — locked in hotel rooms on vacation and in foreign counties, left without phones, left without transportation, left without safety.

The verbal abuse was relentless:  
I was told everything was my fault.

That I was crazy, ungrateful, selfish.

I began to feel that if I just tried harder, loved more, gave more, endured more — things would get better.

They didn't.

Even major milestones — our engagement, our wedding, the births of our children — became battlegrounds.

There was no safety, even on days that should have been filled with love.

I was yelled at, berated, ignored through days long silent treatments.

My pain was dismissed — even when I was pregnant, even when I was injured, even when I was terrified for the safety of my children.

When I needed medical care, I was accused of faking or exaggerating.

When I gave birth to our children, I did so largely without him — navigating postpartum depression, new motherhood, and the crushing reality that the man who was supposed to protect us was often our greatest danger.

And it wasn't just emotional abuse.

I was also sexually coerced — pressured, guilted, manipulated into intimacy at times when I was exhausted, in pain, or simply said no.

I was made to feel that my body was no longer mine — that marriage was a license for access, regardless of consent.

I learned, far too late, that what I endured was not just a broken marriage.  
It was sexual abuse.

And through it all, I tried to survive — for my children.

I tried to maintain the illusion of normalcy, even when we were fleeing from state to state, hiding with family, desperately trying to secure basic safety.

When I finally made the decision to leave for good, it was after years of fear, financial control, emotional terrorism, and spiritual exhaustion.

The day I left, I sent my son off to preschool in a normal routine to not rouse suspicion— not knowing if I would ever see him again — because I had no idea what retaliation might follow...something I will never forgive myself for doing.

I drove for hours, praying for protection, to file for divorce on tribal land, believing it would protect me and my children.

It didn't.

During that time my ex sabotaged court proceedings by hacking into tribal court communications.

It was realizing that even the legal system was unprepared to protect victims like me from psychological warfare.

But I survived anyway.

I survived the smear campaigns.

I survived the stalking.

I survived the threats.

I survived the fear that every knock at the door and every strange car could unravel the fragile safety I had finally begun to build.

I survived not because I had all the resources.

Not because I had all the answers.

But because I finally understood something critical:

**Survival was no longer enough.**

**I was meant to reclaim my life.**

Today, I stand before you not just as a survivor —

but as a mother who broke the cycle for her children.

As a Native woman who chose truth over fear.

As a warrior who refused to allow silence to be the end of her story.

Because the tactics I survived —

the gaslighting, the financial control, the isolation, the smear campaigns —  
are not unique to me.

They are the same tactics used against Indigenous women, families, and Nations every single day.

The abuse of power is personal.

The abuse of power is political.

And healing — real healing — demands that we name it, challenge it, and reclaim everything it tried to steal from us.

That is the journey I'm still on.

That is the journey we are all on.

And we are never walking it alone.

## II. The Parallel: Abuse and the MMIP Crisis (10 minutes)

When I finally stepped back and began to see my own survival in the bigger picture, it became painfully clear:

The patterns that almost destroyed me personally are the same patterns that have been used against Indigenous women for centuries.

Silencing.  
Blaming.  
Isolating.  
Erasing.  
Retaliating against truth-tellers.

These are not isolated acts of cruelty.

They are strategies.  
Strategies rooted in a system built to dehumanize Native women — to make us vulnerable to violence, to silence our voices, and to steal our futures.

The numbers tell a brutal story:

- **More than four in five Indigenous women — 84.3 percent — have experienced violence in their lifetime.**
- **Over 56 percent have survived sexual violence.**
- **More than half have endured physical violence by an intimate partner.**
- **48.8 percent have experienced stalking.**
- **Murder is the third leading cause of death for Indigenous women and girls.**
- **Our murder rates are more than ten times the national average.**

Ten times.

That is not a failure of a system.

It is the design of a system.

These numbers aren't just statistics.

These are lives — stolen, erased, forgotten by systems designed to ignore them.

And if you hear me repeat these numbers today —  
it's not a mistake.

It's because **the truth deserves to be repeated.**  
**The reality deserves to be repeated.**

Over and over again —  
until those who have the power to change it can no longer pretend they didn't hear us.

Until silence is no longer an option.  
Until justice is no longer denied.

A system that, from first contact over 500 years ago, used violence against Indigenous women as a tool of conquest — to destabilize families, to weaken Nations, to instill fear and submission.

And that system is alive and well today.

In 2016 alone, **over 5,700 cases of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls** were reported —

and yet, only a fraction made it into the Department of Justice's missing persons database.

Most of those cases received little to no media coverage, no federal action, and no meaningful pursuit of justice.

Today, Indigenous victims and families are still forced to navigate a legal maze that makes justice almost impossible:

- Tribal Nations often lack the jurisdiction to prosecute non-Native perpetrators on their lands.
- Federal prosecutors **decline to prosecute** violent crimes in Indian Country at an alarming rate — especially domestic violence and sexual assault cases.
- Many Tribal communities lack basic safety infrastructure:  
There are only **58 shelters** nationwide specifically serving Native survivors.

At every turn, the system tells us — whether through silence, neglect, or outright indifference — that our lives are expendable.

And yet we are expected to survive.  
We are expected to carry the weight of this violence without resources, without justice, and without being believed.

Just like in personal abuse —  
the systems gaslight us:  
"It's not as bad as you say."  
"You're overreacting."  
"You're imagining things."

They retaliate against us when we demand the truth.  
They punish us for speaking out.  
They protect abusers over survivors.



And just like in an abusive relationship, the longer the abuse goes unchallenged, the harder it becomes to untangle the web of lies, fear, and control.

But here's what I know:

**Survivors are the greatest threat to systems of abuse.**

Because when we survive — when we speak — when we tell the truth —  
we expose the tactics used against us.

We rip the mask off the system.  
We show the world what they tried to keep hidden.  
We reclaim power.

This is why our voices matter so much.

Why our stories matter.

Why gathering spaces like this — this very room — are revolutionary acts.

Because every time an Indigenous woman survives, speaks, heals, and rises,  
we strike a blow against the systems built to silence us.

And every time we fight for the missing, the murdered, the stolen,  
we are refusing to let the world forget them.

We are refusing to let violence have the final word.

The MMIP crisis is not just a collection of sad stories.

It is the frontline of a much larger battle for Indigenous survival and sovereignty.

And it is a battle we must continue to fight —  
for those we have lost,  
for those still searching for justice,  
and for the generations who deserve a different story.

Because healing ourselves is inseparable from healing our communities.

Because protecting our voices is inseparable from protecting our Nations.

And because we, together, are the medicine we have been waiting for.

### III. Systemic Enablers: The Maze of Injustice (10 minutes)

When we say these statistics out loud —  
when we refuse to look away —  
we are doing something revolutionary.

We are disrupting the silence that abuse depends on.

We are naming the patterns that too many have been taught to ignore.

And we are holding systems accountable for the realities they have created.

Because the truth is:

**The violence we experience is not random.**

It is not disconnected from history.

It is the direct result of the systems we live under — systems that were designed to fail us.

Systems that, for centuries, have enabled abusers to walk free.

Systems that have made justice feel like a maze with no exit for Native women and families.

If the abuse we experience personally is a mirror of larger societal violence —  
then the legal and political structures around us are the walls that keep that violence thriving.

And so, we must talk about the maze.

We must talk about the systemic enablers of the MMIP crisis.

Because until we dismantle the structures that allow Indigenous women to be erased,  
no amount of healing will ever be enough.

### IV. Healing as Resistance

When we survive abuse — whether personal, systemic, or generational —  
the world often expects us to simply “move on.”

To survive quietly.

To heal invisibly.

To return to normal, as if nothing happened.

But here's the truth:

**Healing is not quiet.**

**Healing is not passive.**

**Healing is resistance.**

Every act of healing —  
every time we tell our stories,  
every time we reclaim our voices,  
every time we protect another Native woman or child from harm —  
we are fighting back against centuries of violence designed to erase us.

Healing, for us, is not just personal.  
It is political.  
It is cultural.  
It is spiritual.

### **Healing is an act of sovereignty.**

Because reclaiming our voices, our bodies, and our futures is inseparable from reclaiming the sovereign power our Nations have always held.

### **How Survivors Heal:**

Healing begins when we tell the truth.  
When we break the silence that abusers, systems, and colonization have depended on for generations.

Healing continues when we restore safety.  
Not just physical safety — but emotional safety.  
Spiritual safety.  
Community safety.

And healing grows stronger when we stand together —  
when we stop expecting survivors to heal in isolation,  
and instead recognize that **healing is collective work.**

### **Ways We Reclaim Ourselves:**

#### **We reclaim our voices.**

By speaking even when our voices shake.  
By writing, singing, testifying, creating.  
By refusing to let shame or fear hold us hostage.

#### **We reclaim our bodies.**

By honoring our boundaries.  
By learning that “no” is a sacred word.  
By loving our bodies not for what they have survived, but for the sacred vessels they are.

#### **We reclaim our stories.**

By naming what was done to us — clearly, without apology.

By rejecting the narratives that blame us for our own abuse.  
By standing in the full truth of what we endured, and what we overcame.

**We reclaim our cultures.**

By returning to our languages, our songs, our ceremonies, our medicines.  
By remembering that our ancestors survived so that we could survive — and that their prayers live in us today.

**Collective Healing is Cultural Healing:**

Our ancestors didn't heal in isolation.  
They healed in circle.  
They healed through ceremony.  
They healed through community.

Today, we are called to do the same.

We heal through talking circles.  
Through community gatherings.  
Through storytelling and song.  
Through organizing, advocating, and demanding change — not just for ourselves, but for all our relations.

Healing is not something we wait for.  
It is something we *build* — together.

**Healing Is Survival. Healing Is Resistance. Healing Is Reclamation.**

Every time a survivor speaks, a lie dies.  
Every time a survivor heals, a system built on their destruction grows weaker.  
Every time a survivor rises, a future that once seemed impossible is born.

Healing is not the absence of pain.  
Healing is carrying the pain differently — with strength, with clarity, with sovereignty.

It is refusing to allow what was done to us to define who we are.  
It is choosing, every day, to live in a way that honors the ancestors who fought for us,  
and the descendants who are yet to come.

**Healing is not where our story ends.  
Healing is where our revolution begins.**

## **V. Reclaiming Our Voices: A Survivor's Blueprint and A Path Forward**

If you are a survivor — of interpersonal violence, systemic violence, or both — this is your invitation to rise up.

Because healing is not the end of our story.  
Healing is the beginning of our revolution.

Here's what that revolution looks like...

### **Truth-Telling**

Truth is our weapon.

Narcissistic abuse depends on confusion, gaslighting, and shame.  
The MMIP crisis depends on invisibility, silence, and erasure.  
Speaking truth disrupts both.

When we name what happened — in our homes, in our communities, in our systems — we become uncontainable.  
Our voices break cycles.  
Our stories reclaim power.  
And every time a survivor speaks, a lie dies.

It looks like...

### **Safety Restoration**

For survivors, reclaiming safety is sacred.

It's not just about locks on doors.  
It's about being heard.  
Being believed.  
Being free from fear in our own homes, our own bodies, our own lands.

We must build relationships, communities, and systems where survivors are centered — not dismissed.  
Where their needs matter more than the reputation of abusers.  
Where protecting our people is the baseline, not the exception.

It looks like...

### **Advocacy and Systems Change**

We cannot heal in the same systems that harmed us.  
So we must change them.

Policies like **Savanna's Act** and the **Not Invisible Act** were hard-won.  
They are steps forward — but they are not enough.

We need real implementation.  
We need enforcement.  
We need funding.  
We need Tribal jurisdiction fully restored — because no Nation is sovereign if it cannot protect its own people.

And we need **Indigenous survivors and leaders** at the helm of Indigenous safety efforts — not as tokens, but as decision-makers.

It looks like...

## **Collective Healing**

Healing is not meant to happen in isolation.

We heal in community.  
In talking circles.  
In ceremony.  
In storytelling.  
In drumbeats and medicine and firelight.

We heal when we bear witness to each other's pain — and each other's joy.  
When we remind each other that surviving was never weakness.  
That rising again is sacred work.

## **And here is what we must demand — together:**

- **Full Restoration of Tribal Sovereignty:**  
Our Nations must have the full legal authority to protect our people, prosecute abusers, and enforce justice on our own lands.
- **Resource Investment:**  
We need more than words.  
We need shelters.  
We need trauma-informed legal aid.  
We need long-term support services for Native survivors that are accessible, culturally rooted, and fully funded.
- **Accountability at All Levels:**  
No more excuses.  
No more case declinations.

No more failures to investigate or prosecute because a victim was Native.  
Indigenous lives are not expendable.

- **Ongoing Awareness:**

May 5th — the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls — must be more than a hashtag.

It must be a daily practice.

A constant commitment.

A sacred vow.

This is not just a path to justice.

It is a blueprint for liberation.

Because reclaiming our voices is only the beginning.

The path forward is built with our stories, our truths, our healing — and our demands.

And we walk it together.

## VI. Conclusion: We Are the Medicine

As we stand together at the end of this journey we've walked today — through survival, truth, resistance, and healing — I want you to remember something:

**We are not broken.**

**We are not powerless.**

**And we are certainly not alone.**

The pain we have endured — individually and collectively — is real.

It is deep.

It is historic.

But it is not the end of our story.

The very fact that we are here — breathing, speaking, refusing to be silenced — is proof that the systems meant to destroy us have failed.

Every Indigenous woman who survives and reclaims her voice is a revolutionary act against erasure.

Every survivor who heals becomes part of the medicine our communities have been praying for across generations.

We are the prayers of our ancestors, walking and breathing.

We are the seeds they planted, rising from ground soaked with both blood and hope.

We are the living proof that even centuries of violence could not extinguish our fire.

And now, it is our sacred task —  
not just to survive —  
but to thrive.

To build something stronger, freer, more sovereign than anything those systems of oppression ever imagined possible.

We do that by telling the truth.  
We do that by believing survivors.  
We do that by dismantling the systems that enable violence.  
We do that by returning to our languages, our ceremonies, our cultures.  
We do that by protecting and uplifting our children, our relatives, our Nations.

We do that by healing —  
loudly, bravely, unapologetically.

Healing is not passive.  
Healing is power.  
Healing is a radical reclamation of everything that was ever taken from us — and everything they never could.

Because in the end, it is not just laws that will save us.  
It is not just policies.  
It is not just courtrooms.

**It is us.**

**We are the medicine.**

Every time we choose truth over silence.  
Every time we choose love over fear.  
Every time we choose community over isolation.

We are the medicine our ancestors prayed for.  
We are the medicine our children are counting on.  
We are the medicine our Nations need to heal.

And together — with our scars, our courage, and our unstoppable love for one another —  
we will heal the circle.  
We will protect our people.  
We will reclaim our future.

Because together, we are the revolution.  
Together, we are the healing.  
Together, we are the light.



And together —  
**we are unstoppable.**

Thank you.

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**[Total Run Time: ~ 60 minutes]**