

Two-Spirit people have been documented in over 130 tribes in every region of North America. Two-Spirits often had distinct gender and social roles in their tribes that could include:

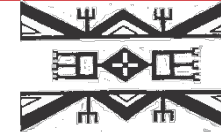
- Healers
- Medicine persons
- Conveyors of oral traditions and songs
- Name givers
- Special role players in Sundance or other ceremonies
- Care givers, and/or would often be a parent to orphaned children

Before European contact, sexual and gender diversity was an everyday aspect of life among indigenous peoples and Two Spirit people were honored and respected members of the community. Since European colonization, the Two-Spirit community has often been denied and alienated from their Native identity. As a result, Two-Spirit individuals are sometimes looked down upon and shamed for their identity.

Two-Spirit people must be able to navigate multiple cultures and communities including family, tribe, LGBTQ/Two-Spirit groups, and larger society.

**It's important to know that not all Native people identify as being Two-Spirited. Some Native people may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.**

*The term Two-Spirit is used currently to reconnect with tribal traditions related to sexuality and gender identity; to transcend the Eurocentric binary categorizations of homosexuals vs. heterosexuals or male vs. female; to signal the fluidity and non-linearity of identity processes; and heterosexism in Native Communities and racism in LGBTQ communities.*

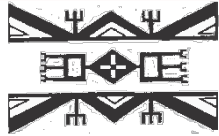


### Issues That May Impact Two-Spirit/ LGBTQ Individuals

- Cultural Identity
- Alienation from family and friends
- The coming out process
- Unreported sexual assaults due to shame and self-blame
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Discrimination
- HIV infection
- Bullying
- Sex Addiction
- Hate Crimes
- Homophobia
- Trauma related mental health issues
- Suicide
- Rejection
- Addiction
- Unemployment

The rate of victimization for American Indian adults is more than 2.5 times that of the overall US population. Studies show that lesbians report higher rates of physical assault compared to heterosexual females.

AI/AN Two-Spirit folks encounter multiple layers of oppression. Often they confront stigma and homophobia regarding their sexual orientation, not only from the wider society but also from other AI/AN's, their families, and their tribal communities. They may face racism from the wider society and from other sexual minorities who are not Native. LGBTQ/Two Spirit women can also face sexism from both Native and LGBTQ communities.



In a recent study of Two-Spirit women, 78% of the women had been physically assaulted and 85% were sexually assaulted. This is 4 times higher than the estimate of lifetime assault among women in the general population. Most experienced abuse by multiple perpetrators, including family members, acquaintances, and strangers.

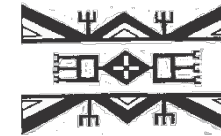
Assimilation into White LGBTQ culture also often placed Two-Spirit people in the position of disconnecting from Native relatives and community in order to be accepted by non-Native LGBTQ folks.

In an urban sample in the United States, gay, bisexual, and Two-Spirit men were more likely than heterosexual counterparts to report being sexually and physically victimized; 45% versus 2% reported sexual abuse or assault by someone other than their spouse/sexual partner.

### How can I be helpful as a friend or partner?

- By believing your friend or partner who has been raped
- By avoiding judgmental comments
- By controlling your own feelings of anger and/or frustration
- By asking how you can be helpful rather than giving unsolicited advice
- By respecting their decisions even when yours might be different
- By being a good listener
- By being honest with yourself if you have trouble handling the aftermath of rape

As Little Thunder, a Lakota Two-Spirit woman activist said, *"The pain of being rejected by one's own people can be the most devastating."*



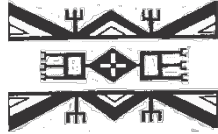
### Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Definitions

"Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" (self-identification as a woman, man, neither, or both) not matching ones assigned sex. (Identification by others as male, female or intersex based on physical/genetic sex). Transgender does not equal Two-Spirit (the term transgender is a modern term, and just because someone is transgender does not mean they will identify as Two Spirit).

"Transgender and gender non-conforming people face injustice at every turn: in childhood homes, in school systems that promise to shelter and educate, in harsh and exclusionary workplaces, at the grocery store, the hotel front desk, in doctor's offices and emergency rooms, before judges, at the hands of landlords, police officers, health care workers, and other service providers."

(National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 2011)

*"Colonizers have long tried to crush the spirit of the Indian peoples and blunt their will to resist colonization. One of the most devastating weapons of conquest has been sexual violence."*



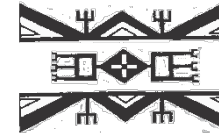
A study done by the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force in 2011 with 6404 total participants, 75 of whom identified as Two-Spirited, found that:

- 56% Two-Spirit transgender participants attempted suicide
- 46% reported being rejected by family
- 45% reported family violence
- 74% reported losing friendships due to being Two-Spirited
- 19% of the participants reported having been refused a home or apartment
- 11% reported being evicted because of their gender identity/expression
- 19% reported experiencing homelessness at some point in their lives because of being transgender
- 55% reported being harassed by shelter staff when at a shelter, 29% were turned away altogether
- 22% were sexually assaulted by residents or staff

Abuse by police and in prison:

- 22% of respondents who have interacted with police reported harassment by police, with much higher rates reported by people of color and indigenous people
- Almost half of the respondents 46% reported being uncomfortable seeking police assistance. Physical and sexual assault in jail and prison is a serious problem: 16% reported being physically assaulted, 15% reported being sexually assaulted

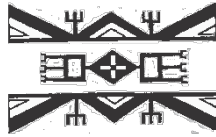
(National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, 2011)



Did You Know...

- Being molested or raped by a same-sex perpetrator does not make you Two-Spirited or LGBTQ
- When an individual identifies as Two-Spirited/LGBTQ it does not mean that they are attracted to everyone of the same sex
- LGBTQ/Two Spirit people cannot be identified by certain mannerisms or physical characteristics. Two Spirit/LGBTQ people come in as many different shapes, colors, and sizes as do people who are heterosexual
- The majority of child molesters are heterosexual men, not lesbian, gay or bisexual people. Almost all studies show that over 90% of child molestation is committed by heterosexual men
- Sexual orientation and gender identity are not the same thing. Just because someone is transgender does not mean they will also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer
- Being LGBTQ/Two Spirit is not a type of mental illness and cannot be “cured” by therapy
- Psychiatric and psychological attempts to “cure” Two Spirit/LGBTQ people have historically failed to change the sexual orientation of the patient. These “treatments” instead create emotional trauma for the people forced to undergo them

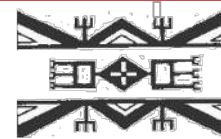
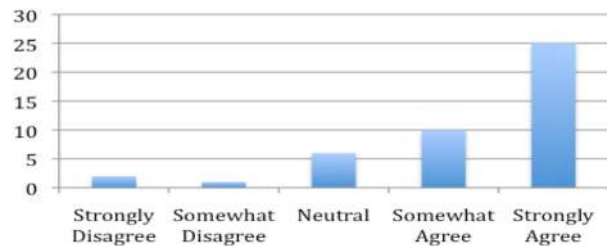
*“Our elders tell us that Two-Spirit individuals were gifted because they carried both male and female spirit.”*



### **Tips for Effective and Respectful Interactions**

- Don't assume you can tell if someone is LGBTQ/Two Spirit
- Respect the need for confidentiality
- Understand the differences between coming out as lesbian, bisexual, or gay and coming out as transgender
- Do not tolerate anti-LGBTQ/Two Spirit remarks or attempted humor in public spaces
- If you don't know what gender pronouns to use, ask
- Be patient with a person who is questioning their gender identity
- Don't tell a person what category or identity they fit in to
- Don't ask a transgender person what their "real name" is
- Don't ask about a transgender person's genitals or surgical status
- Don't ask an LGBTQ/Two Spirit person how they have sex
- Know your own limits as an ally

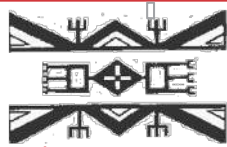
**A Better Understanding of Two Spirit (GLBT) Issues is Needed in my own First Nations Community**



### **Reasons why Two-Spirited/ LGBTQ Individuals Do Not Report Sexual Assaults**

- Victims may fear to disclose that they are Two-Spirited/ LGBTQ when reporting to the police for fear of being re-victimized due to their sexual orientation or gender identity
- When assaulted due to their Two Spirit/LGBTQ identity, victims may experience self-hate and blame themselves
- Self-hate and blame can lead to feelings of depression and helplessness, even in individuals who are comfortable with their sexual orientation
- Lesbians, gay men, and transgender people are sometimes targeted for sexual assault by anti-LGBTQ attackers or can be raped "opportunistically" (when the perpetrator of another crime inadvertently discovers that the victim is LGBTQ)
- Many victims/survivors are not out to their family and friends
- Those in the early stages of "coming out" will probably not have the social support and developed LGBTQ identity that can increase their psychological resilience and coping skills
- Those who are out have often already confronted major threats to their self-esteem and safety/wellbeing
- Without cultural sensitivity around LGBTQ/Two-Spirit identities, it is virtually impossible to provide meaningful, supportive services
- Same-sex sexual assault has not received much attention from researchers, support services, or the criminal justice system
- Lack of attention to same-sex rape has left many survivors without culturally competent support and, therefore, with few resources for healing

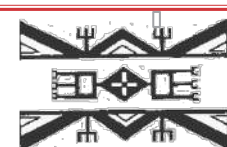




## Common Barriers that LGBTQ Survivors of Sexual Assault Experience:

- Not being taken seriously or having their experience minimized
- Not having their experience labeled as sexual assault or rape
- Having to explain how it happened in more detail than one would ask a survivor of opposite-sex assault
- Having to educate those they reach out to about the queer community
- Having their experience sensationalized
- Increasing people's homophobia or being seen as a traitor in their community if they tell their story to straight people
- Having fewer people to talk to because the Two-Spirit/LGBTQ community can be very small/tightly knit
- Mistakenly seen as a perpetrator due to homophobic or transphobic fears and ignorance
- Not being understood or being blamed for the sexual assault
- Being treated in a homophobic or transphobic manner by the police, the hospital, rape crisis center, and others
- Being "outed" (having ones sexual orientation discussed or revealed without ones consent)

*Living on a reserve that hates gays so much is hard especially when you want to come out, but you can't because you're scared to be beat(en) up or called down and/or murdered."  
Quote from youth participant during Two Spirit Youth Speak Out*



## Terminology

**Ally:** Someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexual and cisgender privilege in themselves and others; a concern for the well-being of Two Spirit, LGBTQ and intersex people; and belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are social justice issues.

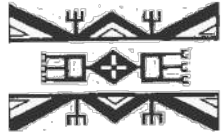
**Bisexual:** A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to both men and women.

**Cisgender:** Someone who identifies with the sex they were designated at birth. For example, if you were born and the doctor looked at you and said "It's a girl!" and you identify as a woman today, this term applies to you.

**Closeted:** Refers to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex person who will not or cannot disclose their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, family, co-workers, or society.

**Coming Out:** May refer to the process by which one accepts one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersex person (to come out to oneself). May also refer to the process by which one shares one's sexuality, gender identity, or intersex status with others. This can be a continual, life long process for LGBTQ/Two Spirit individuals.

**Gay:** A term used mostly in reference to men who have significant sexual and/or romantic attraction and relationships with men. At times gay is used to refer to all LGBTQ/Two Spirit people.



**Gender:** One's expressions of masculinity, femininity, or androgyny in words, physical traits, actions, or other signifiers.

**Homophobia:** The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes.

**Lesbian:** Women-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to women-identified people.

**Oppression:** The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to power which benefits one group over the other. Maintained by social beliefs and practices.

**Queer:** An umbrella term which embraces a variety of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively-heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people, intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and many other non-heterosexual communities.

**Sex:** A term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormones. Usually subdivided into 'male' and 'female' based on visible characteristics (genitals, facial hair, etc)

**Transgender:** A term that may include people who cross-dress, people who are living as a gender different than what is expected based on their anatomy, people who are transitioning from one gender to another (i.e., someone designated male at birth transitioning to live as a woman), and people who do not identify as either male or female. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.

### **Additional resources and more information:**

#### **Two-Spirit Websites:**

- Minnesota Two-Spirit Society- [www.mn2ss.org](http://www.mn2ss.org)
- Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits- [www.baait.org](http://www.baait.org)
- Native OUT, Phoenix, AZ- [www.nativeout.com](http://www.nativeout.com)
- East Coast Two-Spirit Society: [www.ec2ss.net](http://www.ec2ss.net)
- Montana Two Spirit Society: [www.mttwospirit.org](http://www.mttwospirit.org)

#### **Online Resources:**

- Advocates for Youth: [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)
- Center of Excellence for Transgender Health: <http://transhealth.ucsf.edu>
- Gender Spectrum: <http://www.genderspectrum.org>
- National Center for Transgender equality: <http://transequality.org>
- PFLAG: <http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=380>
- Transforming Families: <http://transformingfamiliesmn.org>
- Transgender Law and Policy Institute: <http://www.transgenderlaw.org>
- Love Letter to Two Spirit Survivors of Corrective Rape:  
<http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/letter-native-queer-survivors/>

#### **Crisis Phone Line:**

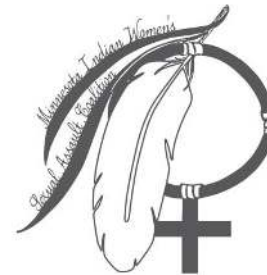
- Trans Lifeline: crisis lifeline staffed by transgender people for transgender people. The toll-free number is (877) 565-8860.
- The Trevor Project: provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention phone service available 24/7 at 1-866-488-7386, as well as help via text, chat, online community, and a support center.

#### **Two-Spirit Suggested Reading List:**

- Brant, Beth, (1991). *A gathering of spirit: Writing and art by North American Indian women*, 2nd ed. Rockland, MD: Sinister Wisdom.
- Chrystos (1989). *Not vanishing*. Vancouver, BC: Press Gang.
- Womack, C. (2001). *Drowning in fire*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Driskill, Q., and Justice, D.H. (2011). *Sovereign erotics: A collection of Two Spirit literature*. Tucson, AZ: University of AZ Press.
- Gould, Janice (1990). *Beneath my heart*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand.
- Morgensen, S.L. (2011). *Spaces between us: Queer settler colonialism and Indigenous decolonization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rifkin, M (2012). *Erotics of sovereignty: Queer Native writing in the era of self-determination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

### References:

1. *Abuse, Mastery, and Health Among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit American Indian and Alaska Native Women*, Keren Lahavot, Karina Walters, and Jane M. Simoni. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 2009, Vol 15, No. 3, 275-284
2. *Culture, Trauma, and Wellness: A comparison of Heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Native Americans*. Kimberly F. Balsam, Bu Huang, Karen C. Fieland, Jane M. Simoni, and Karino Walters. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* Copyright 2004 by the Educational Publishing Foundation, Vol 10, No. 3, 287-301.
3. *My Spirit, My Heart, Identity Experiences and Challenges Among American Indian Two-Spirit Women*, Karina L. Walters, Teresa Evans-Campbell, Jane, M. Simoni, Theresa Ronquillo, and Rupaleem Bhuyan, <http://haworthpress.com/web/JLS>, 2006 by the Haworth Press, Inc.
4. *Victimization, Substance Use, and HIV Risk Behaviors Among Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit Heterosexual American Indian Men in New York City*, Jane M. Simoni, Karina L. Walters, Kimberly F. Balsam and Seth B. Meyers. *American Journal of Public Health*, Dec 2006, Vol. 96, No.12
5. *Two Spirit Youth Speak Out!*, Analysis of the Needs Assessment Tool Urban Native Youth Association, [www.unya.bc.ca](http://www.unya.bc.ca)



Project and Booklet supported by the:

**Minnesota Indian Women's  
Sexual Assault Coalition**

1619 Dayton Avenue, Suite 202  
Saint Paul, MN 55104  
[www.miwsac.org](http://www.miwsac.org)

Phone: 651-646-4800  
Toll Free: 1-877-995-4800  
Fax: 651-646-4798

For more information on the MN Two-Spirit Society, email

[mn2spirit@gmail.com](mailto:mn2spirit@gmail.com)

This project was supported by grant No. 2017-X1672-MN-IW awarded by the office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed during the meeting do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, office on Violence Against Women.