



COALITION to STOP
VIOLENCE AGAINST
NATIVE WOMEN

2023 Domestic Violence in Tribal Communities Focus Group Findings

Question 1: Did you report your domestic violence experience to law enforcement? Did this happen during the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020-2022?

Notes from CSVANW Staff: Every focus group participant was an Indigenous survivor of domestic and intimate partner violence at the hands of a male perpetrator. Two of the women had also experienced DV/IPV with a female partner. About half of participants experienced domestic violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020-2022 and half had experienced domestic violence before COVID-19.

- “I never had an experience where law enforcement was helpful.”*
- “Cops never asked what was going on, took us both to jail.”*
- “They criminalize the victim.”*
- “Because the cops used pepper spray, I have batter of a peace officer [charge].”
Survivor wonders if they would look more suspect if they got charges removed from their record.*
- The time period was 2011-2012 – “He never put his hands on me before.”*
- He [perpetrator] ended up going home after he ended up hitting me, I [the survivor] tried getting out this the car but they passed many jurisdictions on the way and ended up stopping at his grandmas in San Juan. Survivor ran to the neighbor’s house who called law enforcement, law enforcement did not interfere or do anything, they dropped her off at the nearest casino instead of helping her. She stayed the night at the casino.*
- Survivor at the time did not want to press charges. Her uncle called her and told her if she didn’t press charges against him [perpetrator] that her uncle was going to.*
- Survivor felt like Law Enforcement could have done better even if she didn’t want to press charges.*
- Because they had passed so many jurisdictions, the BIA had to get involved.*
- Survivor had to relive the situation many times to explain the situation to the BIA.*
- The BIA said the survivor would hear back but she never did. To this day, which has been over a decade later, she has never heard from the BIA regarding her case.*
- Survivor felt like cops treated her like she stupid and felt discrimination by law enforcement.*
- Domestic Violence Shelters were triggering for survivor and felt that everything that she was taught at the shelter, she already knew about.*
- Investigators harassed survivor via text.*
- Perpetrators got attorneys but victims do not unless it’s out of their own pocket.*
- Cops threw survivor in jail instead of their perpetrator, and they were the one on probation. It is still on their record.*



- Survivors says that they were abused and defending themselves in this situation, but the cops did not listen.*

Question 2: Navigating other parts of the system, attorneys, domestic violence shelters, etc. how did that go?

- “My experience was different; I was so unaware that I was trauma-bonded [with my perpetrator] and everyone I worked with already knew. Everyone around me was pushing me to press charges. I put myself down and it was 15 years of physical and sexual abuse, I was so lost and stupid. ‘Maybe the more love I give to him, maybe it will stop. But unfortunately, the only reason it stopped was because he was passed away.’”*
- Hard to go to the hospital and talk to medical stuff and answer all the questions.*
- Calling and doing what you need to do.*
- “Slap on the wrist [for my perpetrator] I did not feel protected. I would rather carry a gun. I can’t trust anybody. I am the head of the household and I need and want to protect my kids.”*
- Survivor almost got killed via a gun one time [by their perpetrator] and the cops didn’t do anything.*
- Survivor feel that the cop’s victim-blame.*
- The only good experience survivor had was with an EMT.*
- Survivor attempted suicide, ex beat them badly and they were intoxicated, and the EMT didn’t believe their story of “I fell in the kitchen” to explain how they had gotten broken ribs. EMT encouraged the survivor to report.*
- Every other time survivor reached out to the system, they regretted it.*
- Regarding domestic violence shelters, survivor had the experience of being advocated for and got housing through the shelter.*
- Survivor felt that they did not have the tools that they needed to heal their trauma and break cycles*
- Different men same story – violence got worse with each story; they kept inviting the same men into their life.*
- Hard for survivor to get records from doctor and to prove that they were the one being abused.*
- Survivor finally got fed up and if “no was going to come to my aid, I was going to rise to the occasion.”*
- “It’s sad when you go to therapy and the therapist needs therapy. We live in the real world, we need tools.”*
- “The system is broken and corrupt.”*
- “I was banned from my home domestic violence shelter because of new employees.”*
- Survivor said there were nepotism and cliques within the domestic violence shelters.*



- “When I was wanting to get help, I didn’t want to go to the same places to seek services where my perpetrator would be. I am worried victims may run into their perpetrators.”*
- “Victims always have to think a step ahead.”*
- Survivor had a positive experience with attorney, Attorney Hernandez in Bernalillo. They were young and at a party and there was a girl in attendance that did not like them and fought the survivor. The cops came and the girl told the cops that she was being rowdy and that she was out of control. The cops wouldn’t let survivor talk and when they went to deliberate, the girl jumped survivor again, and her partner at the time grabbed the girl to get her off survivor. The girl’s partner told the cops that the survivor’s partner was trying attack the girl. In the midst of the chaos, the cops thought that the survivor was trying to hit him, and the cop grabbed the survivor and face planted them to the ground. They knocked the survivor on the ground, knocking them out and breaking their nose. They dropped them off at the hospital after and charged them with assault on a police officer.*
- The survivor was not intoxicated during this interaction.*
- Attorney Hernandez talked to the officer before court and the officer brought the charge down to “attempt” and the survivor felt like it was a break and the attorney was looking out for them.*

Question 3: Every participant here has at least one child, have you seen impacts on your children?

- “I had been praying for a child and my daughter, who is my non-biological child, had been praying for a mom. I stayed in the relationship so there would not be a custody battle for the child. I would act as a buffer he [perpetrator] would not abuse the child.”*
- Survivor grew up in the court system, felt that they were criminalized. Has now seen a shift in the legal system, specifically with judges who are more trauma-informed and listening to Youth. Listening to ICWA.*
- Judge corrected survivor’s use of their child’s pronouns.*
- Centering Youth in the process of custody battles.*
- Survivor feels that this is the product of the work that they have put in to trying to change the system.*
- “I didn’t empower my child, I just had to create a safe enough container to bring it out.”*
- “Thankful my daughters can say their yeses and no’s. That wasn’t instilled in me when I was younger. They’re cycle breakers too.”*
- “I learned from my mom who was in a domestic violence relationship not to talk about it, but with my girls, we talk about things. We broke the cycle right there.”*
- “With my boys, they saw so much violence growing up, they dislike it so much. They will step in if they see it now. They tell me ‘Mom, you’re so resilient.’ They know that’s not how you treat women. I believe that they broke the cycle. They will stand up for others, even if it is a stranger. One of them is in law enforcement and one of them is a teacher.”*



- *“I have three children, 1 son and two daughters. I got pregnant at 22 with my daughter and at that time, I was already in an abusive relationship. I was raised by my grandma; my mom is still addicted to drugs. My grandma passed when I was young, and I had my son. I was trauma bonded with my girl’s father. We were bonded with the trauma from our tribal communities. I was forced to have my youngest daughter, even though she is now my everything. I had to leave their father when she was 6 months old. We had to share custody and it was so scary. I was threatened by him, and he would taunt me that they [CPS] would take my girls away and that I was a bad mom. My girls would taunt me, when they would come home from his house and they would have attitudes, at such young ages. We would be at Feast Day and my girls wouldn’t talk to me if they were with him. Then, in 2018, he went missing for three days and even though he put me through hell, I searched for him. They found him in a ditch and the investigation didn’t go anywhere. The BIA said he grown in barely an inch of water, but they didn’t investigate further. When we buried him, I cried. Even though, it’s been years I still miss him.”*
- *“I was sexually assaulted as a girl, and I would say it’s because of not having a dad in my life to protect me and I worry for my girls now.*
- *“I was looking at my son when I was being strangled and I thought who is going to take care of my son. That’s when I fought back.”*
- *“When he was murdered, I remember crying and I wrote him a letter and told him I forgive him for everything.”*
- *“I want my kids to see that mom isn’t that person from the past anymore.”*
- *Survivors’ stepdaughter thinks that their dad is the best person in the world. Felt that they would stick around for their stepdaughter and that whenever the dad and survivor got in disputes, survivor would tell him “Not here” and go into the other room and blast the speaker. It was draining for them, and they felt that they could not hide it from her stepdaughter anymore.*
- *“Now that I’m a mom, maybe I should have been honest with my stepdaughter’s mom that her dad was a terrible person. He did drugs, he would drink, and he was abusive.”*
- *Survivor recalled one time that her partner napped at her and felt guilty that she should have handled it differently, but she got angry and started hitting him. He told her that she was crazy and that she needed drugs.*
- *He took his daughter [survivor stepdaughter] and survivor wanted to call the cops, but everyone thought he was the good guy.*
- *The next day, survivor tried to apologize to her stepdaughter, and she said “it’s okay, my mom just cries in the shower. Go in there.”*
- *Survivor notices that her stepdaughter doesn’t know how to handle things now that she is older, she doesn’t know how to address things. She is worried people are going to snap and loud rooms make her panic.”*
- *“Even if you think you’re hiding it, domestic violence still impacts your kids. They know it.”*
- *“When my kid says no to me now, I try not to get mad. Because I wish I knew when I was younger it was okay to say no.”*



- “Men that you love and believe in, and then to see them on the other side as abusers. That’s learned behavior. It’s given me compassion for the other side. To see the cycle and how it operates in Native communities.”*
- “Anger is a product of fear and trauma.”*
- “My son went from jumping in, to turning into an adult and being very mean and hurtful towards me. I regret putting him in a place where he saw men abuse and torment me. He didn’t have a good example for men in his life. He was 11 when his dad was murdered.”*
- “If we don’t do it, it will continue to the next gen.”*
- “We can’t just be focused on one side.”*
- “Our lives are so emersed in violence, we can’t really separate victims and abusers.”*
- “No matter which ways we decide to go, we will get victimized in the system or our families. And the cycles of violence continues.”*
- “It’s education, it’s talking about it, it starts in the home. If we’re not talking about it and sharing stories, then who will?”*
- “Our struggles become blessing, the good and the bad.”*
- Just because their actions weren’t pure, doesn’t mean our love was un-pure.”*
- “Domestic violence can happen to anyone.”*
- I don’t want to share things because I feel like I’ll be judged, like ‘oh she had a perfect life but she still experienced domestic violence’”.*
- Survivor opening up about her younger sister, who has been missing for 19 years, “I hold some guilt because I wasn’t there for her. I can’t tell her that I’m sorry because I don’t know where she is. I feel like part of it is my fault. I feel like I wasn’t there for her when she needed me, and I left when I was 16 years old. I feel like part of me is missing still. She was my only blood sister. I have a lot of guilt for that.”*
- “My daughter saw the abuse, but I don’t know if she remembers. Towards the end of the last semester of school, her grades dropped, and I had lot of meetings with her teachers. This [the abuse] had impacted her. She ended up getting in trouble and had to get counseling. If she hadn’t gotten in trouble, I probably wouldn’t have known that she was smoking. We talk about it, and she opened up to me that her friends smoke.”*
- Survivor is separated from her partner, her children’s father, “I’m scared their dad doesn’t want to see them and I don’t want to tell them. She shuts down with me about us leaving her dad. Now we really don’t talk as much, but she really talked with her dad. He just disregards how she feels. She texted her dad about how she is angry and needing to express herself.”*
- “He might not show up tomorrow, it would be easier if he doesn’t want to be there. My son said to me ‘you could have just stayed.’ I had to tell him I didn’t want to go through that anymore.”*
- “I would go back [to the house] but not that relationship.”*

Final Question: What do you as a survivor wish you had more access to?

- Grants to help women startup businesses.*
- Similar to what exists in Jemez – JBR*



- Albuquerque needs to have a resource center where there is resource development with access to all Natives, urban Natives and inter-tribal.*
- Survivor Resources:*
- Childcare for survivors*
- Classes for women who have been out of the workforce.*
- Legal Advocates*
- Attorneys*
- Money*
- Land (to build, to access, for housing, etc.)*
- Self-employment classes and opportunities*
- Parenting classes*
- Classes for self-care*
- Tribal leaders need to be more informed on domestic violence and sexual violence, elder abuse, alcohol, drug, and homelessness within their communities.*
- Tribal Leaders need to: be more informed on tribal issues.*
- Tribal Leaders need to: find resources for community members and share resources with community.*
- Communities talk about our values, but where are our Tribal Leaders this as an action?*
- Homelessness - Why are relatives on the street when they are so close to home?*
- Lack of housing – overcrowding in communities*
- Restate our core values of taking care of each other*
- Law Enforcement – needs to follow through*
- Social Services – needs to follow through*
- Investigations in domestic violence shelters*
- How can we know what shelters are credible and reliable? There is no oversight.*
- Creating oversight for shelters*
- Youth Centers*
- Youth need safe places to go*
- Oversight for CYFD*
- Oversight for State Agencies*
- Services need to be meaningful for the populations they are serving.*
- Cultural competency training for non-Native service providers*
- Address corruption of ALL Tribal Leaders*
- Oversight for Tribal Leaders*
- Corrupt Tribal Leaders trickle down into the system, police officers, services, overall system.*
- Survivors need access to therapy.*
- IHS – Medicaid – Streamlining Process*

Quotes from the survivors about how domestic violence has impacted their lives:

- Abusers can hold down a job, while survivors are not allowed.*



- “I wasn’t allowed to have a job, to make money, to leave the house, to be with my family.”*
- “He would hold a gun behind his back when my brothers came to the door and said he would end them if I said anything.”*
- “I still feel isolated and alone, because for four years, I was isolated and couldn’t go and do anything. My family doesn’t invite me to things still because I missed four years of celebrations.”*
- “I didn’t tell my family anything that was going on.”*
- “My mom sensed it, but she never mentioned it to me. I think it was because she was also in an abusive relationship.”*
- “As long as I was safe, I could let it happen to me.”*
- “I have this rushing attitude all the time.”*
- “Now that you mentioned it, I rush too.”*
- “Rushing my whole life to get nowhere.”*
- “Rushing, so you don’t have to be alone with your feelings.”*
- “Staying constantly busy is a trauma response.”*
- “I overthink so I can plan everything and make myself safe. It’s been nine years.”*
- “I don’t see myself as stupid now, there was a lot of trauma bonds keeping me there.”*
- “There was so much spiritual and emotional labor that goes into being a full time risk manager.”*
- “I was in a lesbian domestic violence relationship, and it brought a lot of chaos into my life.”*
- “I started to recognize that I wouldn’t start the fights, but I wanted to end them.”*
- “I knew that I needed help, woke up to the violence in my heart, which was the breaking point for me.”*
- “I don’t know how to start dating... even if I wanted to.”*
- “When the breakup happened, I was fine with it. In our ways [traditional ways], your kids’ sense what’s wrong. So, I always try to be fine. Recently, I woke up crying, missing him, I feel upset that I always have to put my kids first and he doesn’t have to. I suppressed who I am in this relationship.”*
- “I went into law enforcement and built so much strength. My daughter knows. I’ve had little conversations with my son, and I’ve suppressed these convos with my kids.*
- Small town issues – “I don’t want help from the Pueblo, because the chief is their brother or uncle.”*
- We have to live with my aunt now because of the abuse and we can’t move freely now. My kids and I feel isolated. We can’t go back because it’s too toxic. I don’t have a home.”*
- “I had my daughter in a carrier, and it was winter and he [perpetrator] kicked us out of the house and wouldn’t let us back in.”*
- “The truth is, he [perpetrator] doesn’t love me. I had to tell myself this over and over again and write it down on paper.”*
- “I stuck by him [perpetrator] regardless.”*



- “My mom taught me to be independent, she does it all. But my parents are in an abusive relationship. I don’t want to be like that.”*
- “There’s the door, I’m not going to put up with that anymore.”*
- “I didn’t think this topic was emotional for me and that it would touch me like it did today. Hearing all of you today, it helped me take breaths that I didn’t know I needed to take.”*
- Survivor experienced childhood sexual assault and so did their mom and they believe that their sisters did as well, even though they are not open about it. Feel like it is passed down through their generations.*
- Survivor’s parents don’t know how to talk about things with each other, and they are trying to unlearn that pattern.*
- Survivor is constantly worried how they are going to please the guy they are with, or their friends. Trying to make everyone happy.*
- Survivor has reached out a few times to their family to listen, but they didn’t give them the space to feel supported.*
- Survivor ran away from their feelings because they didn’t have anywhere to go, and they turned to drugs and alcohol.*
- Survivor feels that everyone around them sees them as a drug addict and alcoholic, even though they are more than that.*
- “You know when you’re doing something but don’t know it.”*
- Survivor had an interaction with a man who attempted to rape them while they were partying with them, and they hit them with a skillet. They could not remember defending themselves. The perpetrator pressed charges against the survivor and said that she was trying to rob them.*
- Survivor disclosed that they had an abusive relationship with an older woman.*
- “The only thing that helped me feel free was drinking and drugs. I couldn’t cry during this time.”*
- “Trying to make it for myself and my daughter. I’ve been sober a year now.”*
- “Can’t save them, just have to save themselves.”*
- “You love them so deeply; you would never think they would hurt you.”*
- “This is a side of myself I don’t let my family see.”*
- “I’m not going to let my daughter stay at my uncles or my grandma’s house, I don’t have that trust. My family doesn’t understand why I’m so protective of her.”*
- “Sometimes we can’t talk to our family, and in Native families, sometimes they don’t know how to talk or listen. Just listen.”*
- “You want your family but a lot of the time it’s hard.”*
- “They [family members] go talk to other people about what we’ve talked about.”*
- Pain will travel through generational lines until someone says not today. And you are that person.”*
- “My mom told me that I introduced the family to sobriety.”*
- “I want to tell my family it’s not because I don’t love you, but I have to create a space for myself and for my kids. I have to close the door for a while to heal.”*



- “It’s a hard path, but you’ll be able to take along other women, taking the bad things that have happened and turning them into good.”*
- “Your grandchildren will tell stories about you.”*
- “Making sure everyone was/is trauma-informed, it took a lot of education for me to understand what I was going through.”*
- “There was a lot of victim-blaming. Saw my sister as a runaway and it made my mom feel like she was a bad mom.”*
- “We need more funding for grassroots organizations – repatriation, allow grandmothers to have the last say.”*
- Sick of organizations who make money of survivors.”*
- “I am tired of fighting. Politicians passing laws off survivors. I don’t trust the Governor! I’m so sick of compromising.”*
- “There has been no change, where is the justice for my aunt?”*
- “Lack of resources for survivors, it has to stop. We are labeled. It took six years for me to finish a two year degree. At HIS, I can’t choose my own therapist. People getting into the [therapy] office with no heart or experience.”*
- “Need scholarships for women! Scholarships for survivors! Mothers to get the skills about finances, how to get a loan. No one has recognized us. It’s exhausting. I don’t feel like a leader. They don’t care.”*
- “Tired of being stereotyped and sick of the government.”*
- “Be curious, don’t assume you know everything.”*
- “Don’t come in with a rose colored lens.”*
- “Need cultural competency.”*
- “Take accountability for what you’ve done.”*
- “Exploitation from organizations, documentary, etc.”*
- “I’ll look into organizations, but I won’t trust them. Lots of organizations want to look good but not actually helping communities.”*

Participants Final Thoughts on Focus Group:

- This was healing for me, I am used to being the odd man out, in a room with people with similar experiences, I don’t have to translate myself. I’m in a safe space, I can heal here. Feel like I am not alone.*
- I was hesitant about coming to the focus group, but this made me take another step. I am healing.*
- Things happen for a reason; I am trying to put perspective in my life again. I was hesitant to come here because this [domestic violence experience] happened a decade ago, even though I left the relationship ten months ago, I don’t regret it. I have my kids. I am trying to focus on my happiness and my kids. I haven’t been able to share this with anyone and this has allowed me to take another step forward in my healing by sharing my story with you all.*



- *Glad that I came, every single one of you here empowered me. The work that I'm doing is keeping me going. It's hard, but all of you are leaders. We are all qualified for these positions to broaden our communities' lives. Women at standing rock made it happen. Women are at the front lines for ourselves, our families, our communities. We are all overcoming a lot of things. We're strong and we made it this far. Bring on the next one. I appreciate the strength I feel in here.*
- *I was hesitant to come at first, I was worried about acting awkward. This was very healing for me and helped me breathe. I have never touched this topic how it touched me today. Starting fresh on my path of healing, taking a bit from each of your stories to help me breath and keep breaking the cycle. I learned new words today.*
- *Continued the healing journey for me. Attended the sexual abuse retreat. My sexual abuse experience pushed me away from my culture, this has helped me find my way back. Gives me strength for the next season of my journey.*
- *Felt good to decompress and let it go. I tend to bottle it up and talk to my partner, but not it is not the same as being in a shared space with those who have been through same things. I don't like the trauma part of it, but good to know others out there who feel how I feel.*

Quotes from licensed trauma-informed provider who led focus group:

- *“One thing I am noticing coming up is that it's a full time job as a survivor to get the help and to call who you need. Lots and lots of work.”*
- *“Your voices are going to be sounding in the highest levels of government. You all made the right choices because you are alive today. What we are talking about today is deadly violence, make no mistake.*