



# “We’re going to start healing”:

## Themes from focus groups conducted by Peaceful Means (Summer 2023)

Peaceful Means staff interviewed 84 Indigenous relatives using focus groups (group discussions) in July 2023. The eight focus groups included 6 upper elementary school youth, 31 middle school youth, 26 high school youth and 21 adults. We heard from boys/men, girls/women and LGBTQ Two Spirit+ relatives. The themes that emerged from these group discussions are below.

### WHAT WE FOUND

#### Causes of Sexual Violence

*“We were colonized and assimilated and the thing that always gets me is, assimilation is working. The federal policy’s working. They spent a lot of the army and millions to kill us, and now we’re killing each other.” (Adult)*

*“I call them helicopter agencies, they fly in, come down, spread the money, spread the research, do this, and they fly out. Sometimes it lasts two years, sometimes it lasts three years. And then... they’re gone.” (Adult)*

Adults talked about the origins of sexual violence in Indigenous communities including Pine Ridge. Relatives noted the role of colonization and multiple historical traumas (e.g., cultural genocide) in the emergence of sexual violence as a crisis in Indian country. Other relatives talked about programs that have come and gone and exacerbates the problems on Pine Ridge including sexual violence. Some relatives noted that there was a lack of care among some leaders that exacerbated problems like sexual violence, bullying, and suicide.

#### Contexts of Sexual Violence

*“It’s not talked about much in schools, not very many people teaching how to prevent sexual assault other than programs like this.” (High School Boy)*

*“They would probably be like, ‘well, what were you wearing?’ Or they’ll ask, ‘what were you doing to get yourself in that situation?’” (Middle School Girl)*

*“Because they’re scared to speak out.” (High School Girl)*

Most relatives believed that sexual violence is a serious problem on Pine Ridge. At the same time, relatives noted that there was a lack of education about sexual violence including silence around sexual violence in schools and at home. Youth indicated that perpetrators were people survivors knew and that sexual violence can happen anywhere and is especially prevalent at home and at parties where substance use is prevalent. Youth also described the lack of support for survivors, such as not believing survivors and victim-blaming. This lack of support leads to fear of speaking out / reporting sexual violence. Middle and high school girls describe the restrictions placed on them (e.g., early curfews) due to concerns for safety.

#### Prevention of Sexual Violence

*“I would say how to defend yourself against someone like that, and how to get away from that stuff.” (High School Two Spirit Youth)*

*“Respect, courage, strength, generosity, wisdom. Have respect for one another. Have the courage and strength to come out if something’s happened to you.” (High School Boy)*

*“Education is key, but you need to make sure that they understand it at their level. I want [my nephew] to be educated about what you guys are trying to do here because he’s young. He’s a young man, and I don’t want him to do it to somebody else.” (Adult)*

Older youth and adults wanted more information about sexual violence, self-defense training, and skills to get away from dangerous situations. High school girls asked for resources and safe spaces to obtain support for sexual violence. Adults and high school boys emphasized the importance of reviving Lakota values of protecting and respecting everyone. Specifically, high school boys mentioned courage and bravery in standing up for others.

### WHAT CAN WE DO

Sexual violence prevention initiatives are wanted and needed on Pine Ridge. IMpower—the empowerment-based, culturally grounded programming offered by Peaceful Means—aligns with the asks and needs of community members. An adult said *“I really, really hope something sticks and that you do get some roots and you stick around because we need help. Everybody needs help. And our children, most of all.”* These findings from the focus groups will support us in moving forward in implementing and evaluating IMpower in a good way here on Pine Ridge. We anticipate this work will lead to dramatic reductions in sexual violence. *Wopila Tanka to the relatives who shared their voices and to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln for funding this work.*



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