



MAMAWE! MEKOWISHWEWIN- MIYOMACHOWIN:

BEING TOGETHER GIVES US SOLACE

A GATHERING FOR FAMILIES OF MMIWG2S+ BY FAMILIES OF MMIWG2S+

NOVEMBER 7 - 10, 2019

REGINA, SK

“Together, we are strong”:

Mamawe! Mekowishwewin-Miyocachowin Report

“We will continue to be the voices of our loved ones. We are family. Each and every one of you is family. There is a lot of hurt and pain in this room. But together, we are strong.”

Introduction

Mamawe! Mekowishwewin Miyomachowin: Being Together Gives Us Solace was a gathering led by and for families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, Plus (MMIWG2S+) held in Regina, Saskatchewan from November 7th-10th, 2019. In total, 274 adults registered at the front desk. A total of 100 participants completed the survey and provided direct feedback about the gathering. There were also 69 children attending the childcare services provided by the gathering on Friday and Saturday: 28 children downtown and 41 children at the Travelodge. On Sunday, there were 8 children in attendance. The gathering was rooted in a “for families; by families” approach that shaped the planning, orchestration, registration, and implementation stages. This fostered a supportive atmosphere and environment where MMIWG2S+ family members felt like they – and the stories of the loved ones they carry – were the priority of the gathering.

Creation of a Safe Space: Significant Factors in the Success of Mamawe Mekowishwewin Miyomachowin Being Together Gives Us Solace

The gathering was perceived as extremely successful by a large majority of the MMIWG2S+ family attendees. It is extremely important to highlight the family-centred approach as the

appropriate framework for enabling the successes of the gathering. A total of 100 participants completed an evaluation survey and provided direct feedback about the gathering. The invaluable feedback and responses highlight a number of factors identified as contributing to the overall success of the gathering as well as suggestions for inclusion in future gatherings. Overall, the MMIWG2S+ families valued the safety of space that was created and upheld by the organizers to honour their loved ones and facilitate inter-generational healing.

Children's Panel

Many respondents reflected on the significance and success of the Children and Youth Panel that occurred on the second day of the gathering. In this panel, youth and children who have a mother or family member affected by the ongoing crisis of MMIWG2S+ were given the opportunity to share their stories. The youth indicated they felt comforted and upheld by sharing alongside others with similar experiences. They drew strength from this sense of community and belonging. Listeners reflected on the panel as powerful, emotionally moving, resilience in action, and as a learning experience that aided in understanding and acknowledging the unique grieving processes of MMIWG2S+ youth and children. Many felt honoured to be present and to listen as the youth shared their stories with them.

For attendees, this was the first time that an event of this kind had included a panel for youth. It was very important in centering the voices, stories, and experiences of Indigenous youths. This was regarded as crucial to the success of the gathering, and suggested as a necessary and integral component of future gatherings. As one attendee acknowledged:

This is the first conference where I heard children share their stories. And it really empowered my heart, and I think we really need to find a place, a gathering place for these young people for them to be able to share their story.

Another added, “the youth are our future and it is important for them to have a safe space(s) to deal with issues such as grief.” As many Indigenous nations and communities – both past and present – rely on kinship and community support, the central inclusion of youth in this event lends itself to the importance of Indigenous-led and MMIWG2S+ family-centered practices of decolonial intergenerational healing.

Indigenization of the Space & Traditional Aspects

One of the most notable success factors was the Indigenous-led nature of the gathering and thereby the Indigenization of the space in which the gathering was held, which contributed to an atmosphere of comfort and healing. This was maintained across the entirety of the gathering and experienced through traditional aspects such as ceremony, Elder support, and foods. In particular, the continuous smudging during each panel arose consistently among the attendee responses as essential to making them feel safe and better throughout the process of listening to and sharing their experiences and stories of their loved ones. Having these Indigenous health supports move throughout the room while offering smudging contributed to the creation of a holistic and healing atmosphere.

Access to daily pipe ceremony each morning, the availability to meet with Elders, traditional, and Reiki healers were also all noted as important to creating a safe space for attendees that contributed to the healing atmosphere. The opportunity to share, see, and listen to songs, drumming – especially the New Dawn Drumming Group – and nightly ceremonial dances with the Jingle Dress across all three days of the gathering helped families feel connected to their cultures and traditions and rooted the gathering in Indigenous knowledges of healing. The ability to participate in a sweat was also noted as an important space for ceremony and healing. Attendees also attributed the successful creation of an Indigenous-centred space to the food and drinks that were provided throughout the gathering. Some suggested an area for improvement would be to centre more of the food around a land-based, Indigenous menu. Others described the hot meals as good “comfort food” and many were grateful for the constant provision of warm drinks like coffee and tea. The availability of fresh bannock throughout each day was specifically appreciated.

The gifting of custom-made ribbon skirts and handmade earrings to each family in attendance at the gathering was also a very significant act of reciprocity reflecting a culture of healing and giving that helped solidify the bond among the MMIWG2S+ family members attending the gathering. The gifting of the ribbon skirts on the second day, specifically in return for and recognition of the stories and experiences that families shared openly during the open mic

sessions of the gathering, was felt to be rooted in Indigenous cultural and traditional practices and methodologies of gift giving. Attendees remarked that they felt extremely honoured and grateful to receive the skirts, and that it was a very special experience that brought together the MMIWG2S+ family organizers and family attendees.

Healing – Being Together & Sharing

The structure of the gathering as an open mic format for families to share their stories and memories of their loved ones was perceived to have worked well in the setting. Sharing in a space where other families were present and listening was regarded as an essential aspect of their healing journeys by many of the attendees who spoke about their experiences of loss, grief, and resilience. This fostered feelings of belonging, togetherness, wholeness, connection, and safety. Families felt supported, empowered, and strengthened by the presence and participation of other families in this environment. Most significantly, attendees expressed that they felt comfort and assurance in learning and knowing that they are *not alone* in their pain and grief. As an attendee notes, “What balances me out – sometimes I get emotionally/mentally drained. But when I’m here I’m calm because I know I’m not alone. We have many voices to speak for our loved ones We continue to have their memories for others. Because we walk our journeys together.”

Many attendees noted that they felt being together with one another had expanded their community and family networks to rely on for support when they feel they need it.

I have gained a lot of support and was able to release and let some pain go and will be able to move forward in a healthier manner and I gained so much family in our Native Traditional Way.

Placing MMIWG2S+ families at the center of the organizing and as the priority in every aspect of the gathering, created a sense of belonging and strength. In the words of one of the attendees, “I’m very glad to be here. With each and every one of you telling your story. We give strength – even the tears running down our faces, is healing.” They left the gathering feeling comforted in knowing they had made connections with people who understood their experiences who would be there for them beyond the weekend of the gathering.

Challenges Identified by Families: Logistics, Structure, and Resourcing

Many of the challenges and areas for improvement expressed by MMIWG2S+ family members attending the gathering were surrounding logistical and structural issues. In suggesting improvements, many attendees expressed their understanding that this was the first gathering of its kind in Saskatchewan. Some consistent suggestions were offered to improve the gatherings for the coming years, especially in order to make it more accessible.

Logistical Issues

Logistically, identified challenges included the scheduling of the day, the travel to and from the venue, and the loss of attendees throughout the day and over the course of the gathering. In terms of scheduling of the day, many attendees had issues with the length of conference. For those attending the morning pipe ceremony, the day went from approximately 7:30am to as late as 8:00pm. Considering the weight of the issues being discussed, many felt supported by the continuous healing opportunities, but also exhausted emotionally, physically, and mentally by the end of the third day. The general consensus seemed to be, “A full day of testimonials seems intense.”

The travel to and from the conference and the scheduling of the day created challenges for some attendees who noted these elements would be improved if the gathering, accommodations, and childcare were in the same building (rather than having to drive everyday). Finally, it seems scheduling and travel, alongside the unpredictable factor of poor weather, contributed to perhaps the most significant problem: by the end of the third day, attendance to the conference had noticeably dwindled. The attendees who remained felt disrespected or disheartened, as they expressed the stories of all families were important, not just those who spoke in the beginning. Some also felt attendees should be reminded to remain in the space while families are sharing the stories of their loved ones out of respect for those sharing their stories and honouring the spirits of the MMIWG2S+.

Structural Problems

As for structural issues, perhaps the most significant themes identified were (a) the overwhelming timeline of the gathering, and (b) the problems with/the identification of mental health supports. As discussed above, 12-hour days of sharing became overwhelming. Many cited the sharing of stories as comforting (e.g. the phrase “knowing I’m not alone” and variations thereof were mentioned numerous times in evaluations). There was a great need for mental health supports to support the flood of emotions, triggering and reliving of trauma, as well as inter-generational healing supports necessary over the course of 8-12 hour days where collective trauma is present for all. The primary suggestion for future scheduling of gatherings is to break up the family story sessions with workshops or speakers, in order to give attendees the time and the tools to process as well as additional bonding moments over light-hearted laughter. It was suggested that mealtime speakers bring include comedians or additional musical talents, such as the family dance that was greatly appreciated by many.

The mental health comments were overwhelmingly positive, with recognition of the availability of support (e.g. reiki room; smudging the room while stories were being told, beading and arts and craft space, etc.). However, it was consistently noted that there was difficulty finding the mental health supports, with some attendees indicating they were unaware that there had been such supports in attendance. Recognizable markers beyond nametags were suggested, such as different coloured shirts and ensuring visibility by circling the room and connecting with the families. Passive listening, rather than active supporting, on the part of some of the mental health supports (perceived as voyeurs) was felt to take away from the overall strength of a family-centered gathering, which is ensuring the safety and healing of MMIWG2S+.

Resourcing

In the future, additional resources are necessary to build further mechanisms for families to connect with one another and remain informed about upcoming gatherings and needed supports. In particular, additional support would enable the creation of an MMIWG2S+ Saskatchewan family website and the development of a protected online space for families to continue connecting, healing, and supporting one another between gatherings. Further resources are also needed to ensure families are connected to ongoing advocates as they face often lengthy criminal legal proceedings or continuous searching for loved ones.

Conclusion: Tangible Developments for Action – Next Steps as Identified by MMIWG2S+ Families, for MMIWG2S+ Families

As the first MMIWG2S+ family-led gathering in Saskatchewan, *Mamawe Mekowishwewin Miyomachowin Being Together Gives Us Solace* was highly successful in creating a space of togetherness and trauma-informed healing. To improve future gatherings, many of the attendees suggested breaking up the days with panels or workshops, such as grief strategy workshops (e.g. releasing balloons/prayers); trauma-informed healing and training sessions; educational workshops on colonialism and navigating systemic racism; and sharing circles. Some attendees also suggested holding a grieving ceremony for families. The public breakfast in which Nahanni Fontaine spoke was seen by many attendees as a good way to revive the spirits of attendees and honour the funders of the conference.

The togetherness/sense of unity was a great strength of the gathering – this may be why so many attendees were unhappy with the lack of attendance by the closing of the gathering. To ensure unity not just in feeling, but in practice, many attendees suggested leaving the daily raffles until the end of the day or keeping the ribbon skirts to be given at the end of the conference. Ongoing support and gatherings are essential for continuing this sense of unity, with many attendees suggesting vigils, rounddances, or even providing a way for families to individually connect outside of the conference (e.g. developing a safe online space for MMIWG2S+ families in Saskatchewan; fostering social media connections; a place to leave business cards/contacts).

Support during the gathering was essential. In particular, the role of the YWCA in ensuring the gathering remained led by and centered on the MMIWG2S+ families was deeply commended by many participants. Similar support from non-Indigenous stakeholders, such as the RCMP and FSIN, was noted as absent by attendees and some attendees felt that FSIN should have sent a representative as a show of solidarity. Others felt that those in the justice system should have attended, either to witness the lived experiences of the Indigenous population surrounding MMIWG2S+, or to provide recommendations or assurance of action. Future organizers will need to balance safety of space for attendees to speak openly about their experiences of discrimination with policing services and others, while also considering the desire to hear from such entities.

The greatest recommendation that a majority of the attendees forwarded was in regard to the children's panel. Not only was this seen as one of the most valuable aspects of the conference, but the call for a continuation of the children's stories was immense. Many felt that, as the next generation, it is essential to provide ongoing support and communication with the youth of MMIWG2S+, both reactively and proactively. The need for a conference focused on youth and their experiences was expressed by many attendees.

Report Prepared for the *Mamawe! Mekowishwewin Miyomachowin: Being Together Gives Us Solace* Working Group and Funders

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