

WOMEN'S INITIATIVES NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2026



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WOMEN'S INITIATIVES

The Chiefs of Ontario Women's Initiatives Sector is pleased to share the winter 2026 edition of our Newsletter.

Inside you will find updates and information pertaining to the Chiefs of Ontario Women's Initiatives Sector which promotes the safety, wellbeing and empowerment of First Nations women, girls, Two Spirit and gender diverse people, and First Nations communities.

Any questions, comments or inquiries may be sent to Rebecca Timms, Director of Women's Initiatives, at:
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MMIWG LOGO

Charlene Hemlock is Cayuga, wolf clan from Six Nations of the Grand River. She is a mother, wife, visual artist and advocate of indigenous language preservation. After graduating high school, she attended Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, British Columbia. Charlene's belief in healing our people through language, culture and overall wellness comes through in her artist expressions and creates pieces that relate to traditional stories and teachings.

The piece entitled *"Etinghkwa"* (a Cayuga word meaning "We all love her"), is a thoughtful representation of MMIWG and their families. The woman stands in strength and love while her family and loved ones remember her. The elements, which are represented in the water, the earth, and the wind in her hair, are symbolic of the universal energy that flows through all of us. She is encircled by berries, as the women traditionally hold the responsibility of gathering and berry picking. This piece is emblematic of the symbiotic relationship we have with all of creation and a reminder that our loved ones who have been taken from us will never be gone, as they live all around us and within us.

INTRODUCTION

The Women's Initiatives Sector continues to advance the priorities of the First Nations Women's Council, working alongside leadership, community partners, and survivors to support the safety, wellbeing, and empowerment of First Nations women, girls, 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ people, and marginalized community members across Ontario. Guided by the Calls for Justice and the direction of Chiefs-in-Assembly, the Sector's focus remains grounded in supporting community-driven solutions, led by and for First Nations, that respond to the root causes of gender-based violence and promote self-determination and wellbeing.

Over the past year, the Sector and Women's Council have continued to be informed by the living experiences and expertise of families, survivors, and leaders who push for systems change and accountability at every level. The Sector is grateful to support this collective effort, whether it be building partnerships with ministries, advocating for change to government bodies like the Standing Committee on Justice Policy, and ensuring that First Nations voices are heard at every stage of policy development and implementation. The Sector continues to sit on Ontario's Indigenous Women's Advisory Council, along with many members of the Women's Council.

As we look ahead, the Sector remains committed to ensuring realities of safety, wellbeing, and empowerment are felt and experienced in every First Nation. Through ongoing collaboration with the Women's Council, the Keepers of the Circle – 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ Council, and connection with the Women Chiefs Network, the Sector will continue to advocate for sustainable, long-term, and non-competitive funding frameworks, coordinated political engagement, and community-led advocacy that honours the strength and leadership of First Nations women and Two Spirit+ people across the province.

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN'S COUNCIL

The Women's Council continues to provide strong leadership and clear direction on advancing safety, wellbeing, and empowerment for First Nations women, girls, and all marginalized relatives across Ontario First Nations, especially those who experience violence. The Council meets regularly to shape policy positions, review emerging areas of need, and ensure that community realities remain at the heart of advocacy efforts. Council members come to the table as Chiefs and leaders in their nations, bring expertise and critical perspectives on issues of gender-based violence, human trafficking, community safety, policing, and effects of resource extraction. These issues are the priority areas of the Council.

Looking ahead, the Council remains committed to advocating for reforming status quo funding models into equitable, non-competitive, and community-based models; contributing to policy, decision making, and implementation at all levels; and ensuring that provincial and federal partners honour their responsibilities outlined in the National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice.

KEEPERS OF THE CIRCLE – 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ COUNCIL

Following the unanimous passing of Resolution #24/37S at the Fall Chiefs Assembly 2024, the Sector has been supporting the new Ontario First Nations 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ Council, known as the Keepers of the Circle. Members gathered in person at the Annual Chiefs Assembly in the summer to share space, reflect on the Council's purpose, and identify collective priorities for advocacy and action. The group has chosen the name "Keepers of the Circle" to reflect the traditional roles and responsibilities that Two Spirit+ people held in community spaces.

One of the Council members, Heidi Whetung, shared this reflection on the name:

"With speaking with Elders, and thinking about the roles and responsibilities we held within our communities, the name fit. Many of our people, not just our younger people, do not identify with terms like Two Spirit nor do they seem themselves under the 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ umbrella. We were seen as keepers of peace within communities and within families. We were seen as those who walk in both worlds, as a group sought after by other communities for assistance. A Two Spirit person sits anywhere within the circle; they conduct ceremony, they are fire keepers, and so much more. This was shared with me by a Grandmother."

The Council is planning to connect with Two Spirit+ kin across the province through "town hall" sessions, fostering a space of dialogue, connection, and networking, and to support momentum building towards making our nations safe for everyone.

The Keepers of the Circle envision a future where Two Spirit and LGBTQQIAPD+ relatives are included and recognized within all spaces of governance, community life, and ceremony. The Council welcomes connections with Chiefs, leadership, and community members.



WOMEN CHIEFS NETWORK MEETING



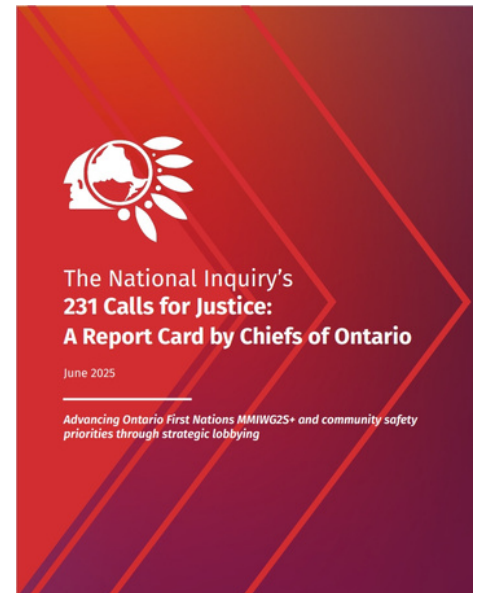
On November 17, ahead of the Fall Chiefs Assembly in Toronto, the Chiefs of Ontario Women's Initiatives Sector hosted a dinner meeting for women Chiefs attending the Assembly, alongside the First Nations Women's Council and Ontario Regional Chief Abram Benedict.

The gathering provided a dedicated space for women Chiefs and the First Nations Women's Council to share perspectives and discuss community priorities related to the safety, wellbeing, and empowerment of First Nations women, girls, and 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ people.

CALLS FOR JUSTICE REPORT CARD

The Sector has published a report card on the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2S/LGBTQIAPD+ People's 231 Calls for Justice. The report aims to serve as a lobbying tool for Ontario First Nations Leadership and technicians to advance the implementation of the Calls for Justice.

In federal and provincial arenas, the report will aid in lobbying and advocacy efforts by highlighting areas where governments must make further progress. The report highlights the historical precedence of many of the Calls for Justice as a way to provide leverage to negotiations and dialogue. The report also maps out the work of the Chiefs of Ontario Secretariat in advancing the Calls for Justice to highlight avenues for First Nations and Political Territorial Organizations to connect with, collaborate, and guide the Chiefs of Ontario Secretariat on shared priorities.



Resolution #29/19 National Inquiry Calls for Justice and Implementation directs the Ontario First Nations Women's Council and the Women's Initiatives Sector to support an Ontario First Nations-based implementation plan to see through the National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice. Following this mandate, this report supports Ontario First Nations in continuing to implement and advocate for progress on the Calls for Justice.

Find the report here: <https://chiefs-of-ontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-National-Inquiry's-231-Calls-for-Justice-A-Report-Card-by-Chiefs-of-Ontario.pdf>

TRI-COUNCIL GOVERNANCE MEETING

The Ontario First Nations Women's Council, Young People's Council, and Knowledge Keepers Council met for a Tri-Council meeting in May to discuss identity integrity, nation building, terminology, and to seek alignment with one another. As governance Councils advising Chiefs-in-Assembly and Leadership, these Councils provide perspectives, guidance, and highlight priority areas that need attention. The inclusion of these Councils in the work of the Secretariat and in advising Leadership is a step towards building, and strengthening, traditional governance systems that are rooted in inclusion, care, respect, and relationality. The group will be meeting again in January 2026, and this time they will be joined by the newly established Keepers of the Circle – 2S/LGBTQIAPD+ Council.



To anchor these discussions, the Tri-Council developed a set of foundational materials that articulate their shared values, cultural grounding, and expectations for upholding identity integrity within First Nations governance. These resources reaffirm the Councils' commitment to honouring Nation-defined identity, addressing contemporary challenges such as false claims and misrepresentation, and creating a common language that supports healing, belonging, and relational accountability. This body of work will guide further conversations when the Councils reconvene in January 2026 with the addition of the new Keepers of the Circle – 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ Council.

VICTIM SERVICES MEETINGS

At the beginning of 2025, Women's Initiatives identified a knowledge gap around victim services in communities. Specifically, while there is ample reason to believe there are crucial access gaps around victim services for Ontario First Nations, publicly available documentation of this problem appears to be fairly scarce at the time of writing. The sector has been doing research on victim services access for Ontario First Nations. A summary of the key findings thus far follows below.

The research confirmed that majority of Ontario First Nations do not have a victim services organization. It is estimated from the Sector's research that 23/133 or 17.3% have a victim services organization. Of those, several are organizations that are not physically located in the community and may be serving multiples communities, sometimes across a considerable geographic distance. In several communities, there is no victim services organization, but there is either a different organization or an individual worker fulfilling a similar role. Often, this is the band office, the police, the healthcare sector, or the women's shelter. There is virtually no published research at the time of writing that focuses on First Nations people's experiences accessing victim services, but secondary sources suggest that there may be cause for concern. Health conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and HIV/AIDS may be statistically more prevalent in individuals accessing Victim Services and are known to be more prevalent in Indigenous peoples (Palmer et al, 2021; Indigenous Services Canada, 2018). Academic sources reveal that individuals with FASD and HIV have specific needs and experiences that Victim Services workers are not always sufficiently trained on (Fraser & McDonald, 2009). FASD is stigmatized, underdiagnosed, and misunderstood, and it is believed that a significant number of people with it do not know they have it (Fraser & McDonald, 2009). It has a large variety of possible presentations and symptom combinations, which can easily look like another disorder or be misunderstood as a personal fault – for example, it may appear to an observer that an individual with FASD is simply choosing not to pay attention, rather than understanding them as a person with a disability who experiences executive dysfunction and requires support (Fraser & McDonald, 2009). Laws around HIV do not necessarily reflect modern science and can create legally and socially complex situations, such as unfair criminalization of HIV-positive survivors when they report sexual assault (Cross, 2020). A disproportionate number of women (at least 5/19, or 26.3%) prosecuted under these laws in Canada have been Indigenous, though distinctions-based data does not appear to be publicly available at the time of writing (HIV Legal Network, 2023).

RED DRESS ALERT TIMELINE

The Sector, with guidance from the Women's Council, has been advocating for the development of a Red Dress Alert that would provide rapid community notification, mobilization, and response when a First Nations person goes missing. A timeline has been developed which tracks the progress, or lack thereof, of the implementation of an alert system at the federal and provincial levels. The Sector and the Women's Council advocate for the alert system to be gender-inclusive, distinctions-based, opt-in, and community-led, with wraparound supports accessible for affected families and loved ones.

In July 2024, the Sector provided expert testimony to the Ontario Standing Committee on Justice Policy regarding Bill 173, Intimate Partner Violence Epidemic Act. One of the recommendations provided was for Ontario to pilot a Red Dress Alert or equivalent system.

The final report of the Committee was due in early 2025, but due to the government dissolution in advance of the early provincial election, the report was not delivered. On November 5, 2025, MPP Jess Dixon delivered remarks in the Ontario Legislation seeking to refer the final report back to the Committee for review and reporting back to the legislative chamber.

At the Federal/Provincial/Territorial-Indigenous National Roundtable in January 2025, government representatives announced that Manitoba is the first province to receive federal funding to pilot a Red Dress Alert, and that community engagements were ongoing. It has yet to be determined when Ontario will participate in a similar pilot or receive funding for engagements.

RED DRESS ALERT TIMELINE



Chiefs of Ontario
Women's Initiatives Sector



February 2023
Assembly of First Nations hosts a National MMIWG2S+ Family Gathering in Vancouver. First Nations families, survivors and advocates from several regions including Ontario call for the development of a Missing Indigenous Persons Alert to rapidly notify the public ("Red Dress Alert").



March 2023
Following the inaugural Federal/Provincial/Territorial MMIWG2S+ Roundtable in January, the Federal Budget sets aside \$2.5M over 5 years for the National Roundtable process, with \$1.3M earmarked for the development of Red Dress Alert pilots.



May 2023
The House of Commons calls on the Government of Canada to declare MMIWG2S+ a national emergency and to provide an immediate, substantial investment to create a Red Dress Alert System.



Summer 2023
In initial discussions on an Alert, the First Nations Women's Council suggests an app that the public can choose to download to be notified of missing First Nations individuals (regardless of gender). Chiefs of Ontario produces a discussion paper for the Government of Ontario regarding First Nations priorities for implementing the Calls for Justice, including a First Nations Missing Persons Alert.



October 2023
In a Chiefs of Ontario Leadership Advocacy meeting with the Ontario Government, the First Nations Women's Council requests the province's collaboration in establishing a First Nations Missing Persons Alert and including the alert system in amendments to the Missing Persons Act, 2018. It is noted that for First Nations, the issue of missing and murdered includes men and boys.



December 2023
In regional engagements on a Red Dress Alert hosted by CIRNAC, Chiefs of Ontario/First Nations Women's Council (FNWC) recommend the Alert be opt-in, gender-inclusive and distinctions-based.



February 2024
The second FPT Roundtable on the Red Dress Alert engagements. National Chief Woodhouse Nepinak and AFN Women's Council echo the Chiefs of Ontario/FNWC recommendation for a gender-inclusive, distinctions-based alert.



May 2024
Chiefs of Ontario/FNWC provide brief to the Ontario Standing Committee on Justice Policy urging that Bill 74 to amend the Missing Persons Act, 2018 acknowledge Indigenous people's vulnerability to going missing and being murdered. The development of an Alert is requested within the Bill.



June 2024
Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation (AFNER) makes formal request for federal funding to support Indigenous community engagement on a Red Dress Alert pilot(s) in Ontario.



July 2024
In a brief regarding Bill 173, Intimate Partner Violence Epidemic Act, Chiefs of Ontario and FNWC advise ON Standing Committee on Justice Policy that First Nations require resources for community-based restorative justice and healing given the disproportionate rates of violence against First Nations people. Leadership Council mandates further technical discussions with Standing Committee members related to an Alert.



September 2024
The Standing Committee on the Status of Women recommends that Canada expedite work on an Alert in collaboration with provinces, territories and Indigenous Peoples and in coordination with police, emergency and health services. Members of ON Standing Committee on Justice Policy meet with FNWC and advise that proposed amendments to Ontario's Missing Persons Act, 2018 are unlikely to be passed into legislation; First Nations might have more traction in advocating for development of an alert system through Bill 173 community engagements.



November 2024
Further to Ontario's suggestion that one Indigenous organization lead community consultations on Alert development, members of the Indigenous Women's Advisory Council opt to conduct their own engagements within their respective communities/PTOs/urban organizations, with resources from the province. COO advises it will support Ontario First Nations by coordinating and assisting with roll-up of Ontario First Nations input as requested.



December 2024
ON Standing Committee Study on Intimate Partner Violence (Bill 173) is being cut short due to a possible election call. The status of the Committee's planned visits with survivors and communities across Ontario (including some First Nations) is unknown. First Nations Women's Council publishes a statement expressing disappointment in the decision.



January 2025
The Standing Committee provides final opportunities for witnesses to appear; then advises their draft report on Bill 173 will not be reviewed until after the committee is reconstituted following the February election. PTO/IFN representatives on the FNWC advise that they have not received resources from Ontario to support community engagements on a Red Dress Alert. The third FPT Roundtable on MMIWG2S+ highlights that a Red Dress Alert pilot in Manitoba is conducting engagements within First Nations and other communities; no technical details are shared.

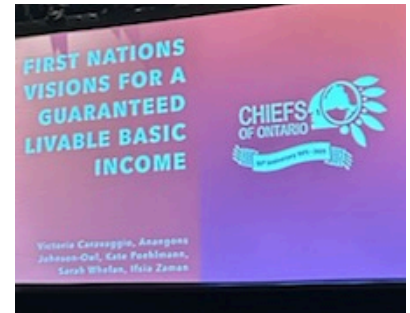
GUARANTEED LIVABLE BASIC INCOME AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In collaboration with the Social Sector, the Women's Initiatives Sector provided a presentation at the First Nations Wellness Conference in August on Guaranteed Livable Basic Income (GLBI) and effects of basic income supplements on wellbeing, especially for women, Two Spirit+ people, children, and those who have lived and living experiences of violence.

GLBI is a framework for every person to have a livable, baseline income subsidized by the government, and is meant to complement, not replace, other funding for things like housing, healthcare, or First Nations-specific supports through Jordan's Principle, for instance. Having access to a basic income supplement can be a supportive pathway for those affected by violence to leave the setting, relationship, or space that they are experiencing violence in.

Economic abuse, or when a person is using money or property to control or exploit another person, is often considered a form of gender-based violence in the context of partnered relationships. Economic empowerment through a basic income supplement can be a preventative factor against experiences of gender-based violence, if it contributes to a person's financial independence—in essence, a person's financial ability to leave a setting, relationship, or space where they are experiencing violence.

Senator Kim Pate has been working to advance a national framework for GLBI through Bill S-206, An Act to develop a national framework for a guaranteed livable basic income. In collaboration with the Social Sector, we will continue monitoring Bill S-206 as it progresses through its consideration by the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance.



FIRST NATIONS INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE TOOLKIT: SAFETY ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Since 2022, the Women's Initiatives Sector has been working on a First Nations Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Safety Assessment and Risk Management (SARM) toolkit. We are proud to announce that it is now complete and in the process of launching. The toolkit was developed in recognition of a critical service gap. While SARM tools are not new or difficult to find, mainstream ones are not designed with a First Nations context in mind. Discussions with experts and service providers confirmed that mainstream SARM tools do not work well for First Nations survivors of IPV. Most communities do not have shelters or victim services, and those that do exist are under-resourced. This means that survivors face long wait times and sometimes the person assisting them is a front-line worker, such as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), who does not specialize in IPV and typically would not receive in-depth training on it. A recurring concern is that mainstream SARM tools do not understand the context of firearm ownership in communities, and this may cause First Nations survivors to be incorrectly labelled as "high-risk," a term for IPV cases that are considered to carry a severe risk of homicide or life-altering injuries, due to the presence of specific "red flags" (traits, circumstances or patterns that are known to be more common in cases where this has been the outcome).

Red flags include but are not limited to strangulation, stalking, sexual coercion, abuse during pregnancy, recent job loss, and excessive jealousy. While firearm ownership can be a red flag, the danger that may be posed by someone who owns a firearm for hunting is very different from the danger posed by someone who displays an unusual fixation with firearms or uses them as an intimidation tactic. Mainstream SARM tools also are not designed to account for systemic issues – they rarely ask about topics such as MMIWG2S+ or intergenerational trauma, and may wrongly assume that not calling the police or not seeking medical attention is a measure of how serious an assault was, without considering lived realities such as systemic racism. The toolkit aims to address all of these gaps.

AFN WOMEN'S COUNCIL MONTHLY MEETING

The Women's Initiatives Sector participates in the monthly meetings of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Women's Council, where national representatives gather to advance shared priorities in women's safety, leadership, and gender justice. The meetings provide an opportunity to strengthen coordination between regional women's bodies, including the First Nations Women's Council (FNWC), and to ensure Ontario's priorities remain visible at the national table.

Key areas of discussion included:

- **MMIWG2S+ Calls for Justice implementation** and the ongoing gap in federal commitments following the 2025 Federal Budget. Representatives emphasized the need for sustained political pressure and consistent tracking mechanisms, aligning with COO's own Report Card approach.
- **Violence prevention and community safety**, including concerns related to coerced debt, human trafficking, and the lack of trauma-informed, culturally grounded supports across jurisdictions.
- **Women's leadership and governance**, with updates on national advocacy efforts aimed at enhancing representation and ensuring First Nations women's voices are central in federal decision-making processes.
- **Intergovernmental engagement**, where the Council reviewed recent federal outreach, areas requiring stronger collaboration, and opportunities for joint advocacy heading into 2026.

The Women's Initiatives Sector provides updates on Ontario-specific initiatives, including FNWC's priorities, progress on Calls for Justice monitoring, and emerging policy issues impacting First Nations women, girls, and 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ people across Ontario. The Women's Initiatives sector will continue to work closely with the AFN Women's Council to ensure alignment, avoid duplication, and support a unified national voice on gender justice issues.

Leadership Council Meetings

LEADERSHIP COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Women's Initiatives Sector continues to keep Leadership Council apprised of strategic movement across our core mandates, including MMIWG2S+ Calls for Justice implementation, community safety and violence prevention, and advancing First Nations women's leadership. This quarter, Women's Initiatives Sector has focused on elevating Calls for Justice accountability, coordinating Tri-Council collaboration, expanding intergovernmental advocacy, and preparing a number of policy, research, and funding deliverables that require Leadership Council oversight or direction. Regular status updates and briefing materials are provided to support informed decision-making, highlight emerging risks or opportunities, and ensure alignment between sector-level action and Leadership Council's mandates. As we navigate a shifting federal and provincial landscape, WI remains committed to proactive communication and strong advocacy on behalf of First Nations women, girls, and 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ communities.

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS REPORT

Pathways to Progress: First Nations Priorities for Federal Policy Reform was developed ahead of the 2025 federal general election to elevate key priorities identified by Ontario First Nations Leadership at a pivotal moment in Canada's political and economic trajectory. The document was directed to all major federal parties to underscore longstanding First Nations concerns and to reinforce the need for First Nations-led policy reform.

Sector input emphasized the urgent need for meaningful and coordinated implementation of the 231 Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ People (MMIWG2S+). Leadership highlighted the ongoing gap between commitments and action, the lack of sustained intergovernmental coordination, and the necessity for First Nations to directly guide the prioritization of implementation efforts at the provincial level.

Leadership further called for sustained federal investment in healing, cultural resurgence, and community-based supports for survivors and families, as well as renewed action to address the disproportionate impacts of human trafficking on First Nations women, girls, and gender-diverse people. This includes prevention-focused, partnership-driven approaches that centre First Nations knowledge and youth leadership.

Strengthening gender-balanced governance remains a core priority, including support for First Nations women's leadership development, the establishment and resourcing of a 2SLGBTQIA+ Council, and restoring the respected roles of women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people within First Nations governance systems.

QUAD COUNCIL MEETING

A Quad Council meeting was held in Ottawa on January 23, bringing together representatives from the Ontario First Nations Young Peoples Council, First Nations Women's Council, 2S/LGBTQIAPD+ Council, and Knowledge Keepers Council for a full day of dialogue and collaboration.

Held on Algonquin Territory, the unceded unsundered Anishinabe territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples, the meeting included policy discussions, cultural humility training, governance updates, and strategic conversations.

Together, councils shared perspectives, strengthened Quad Council coordination, and identified key priority areas to guide collective work moving forward.



CLOSING MESSAGE

As we reflect on the work highlighted in this newsletter, the Women's Initiatives Sector remains grounded in our commitment to supporting the safety, wellbeing, and empowerment of First Nations women, girls, and 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ people across Ontario. Each advancement outlined in these pages—whether through governance tables, policy advocacy, research, or community-led initiatives—has been guided by the strength, expertise, and lived experiences of leaders, families, survivors, and Knowledge Keepers who continue to push for systems that honour dignity, truth, and justice.

We extend our deepest appreciation to the First Nations Women's Council, the Keepers of the Circle – 2S/LGBTQQIAPD+ Council, and the Women Chiefs Network for their leadership and direction. Your voices shape the work of this Sector and ensure that our advocacy reflects the realities, priorities, and aspirations of communities.

As we move into the next cycle of work, the Sector remains steadfast in advancing the MMIWG2S+ Calls for Justice implementation, strengthening governance alignment, and supporting community-defined solutions that address the root causes of violence. We will continue to advocate for non-competitive, sustainable, distinctions-based investments; trauma-informed and culturally grounded systems; and policy frameworks that uphold the inherent rights and leadership of First Nations women and Two Spirit+ relatives.

Miigwetch to all who continue to walk alongside us. Your guidance, partnership, and determination make this work possible, and we look forward to continuing this collective journey toward safety, healing, and self-determination for all First Nations families and communities.

