



LEAF

WOMEN'S LEGAL
EDUCATION &
ACTION FUND

**Advancing the Law
Through Social Justice:
Post-Conference Report**



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LEAF is a national, charitable, non-profit organization founded in 1985. LEAF works to advance the substantive equality rights of women, girls, trans, and non-binary people in Canada through litigation, law reform, and public education.

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Executive Summary

The *Advancing Social Justice Through Law Conference*, hosted by the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) on November 7, 2025, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, brought together family members, community advocates, frontline workers, legal professionals, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and scholars to explore the intersections of law, social justice, and lived experience in addressing violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S+). Grounded on Treaty 1 Territory, the conference emphasized reconciliation, Indigenous-led leadership, and systemic accountability.

Keynote presentations highlighted both the ongoing harms of colonial systems and the resilience of survivors. Brandi Morin (Michel First Nation) framed survival and truth-telling as acts of resistance, connecting personal experience to systemic failures, while MP Leah Gazan critiqued federal inaction on the Calls for Justice, linked resource extraction to increased risks for MMIWG2S+, and called for permanent funding of community-led initiatives such as the Red Dress Alert.

Panels examined the complementary work of the TRC and the National Inquiry, the role of rights-based frameworks in compelling accountability, the importance of Indigenous

worldviews and relational accountability in law reform, and the impact of community-led programs in addressing gaps left by government systems.

Survey responses reflect increased participant knowledge, recognition of systemic barriers including colonialism, racism, underfunding, and emerging risks from climate displacement, extractive industries, and technology, and a strong commitment to advocacy, cross-sector collaboration, and support for Indigenous-led initiatives.¹

Recommendations emphasized action-oriented programming, Indigenous-centered leadership, broader engagement across sectors, focused attention on emerging risks, trauma-informed legal and advocacy training, and ongoing monitoring and accountability to advance the Calls for Justice.

The conference concluded with a reaffirmation that justice and reconciliation are ongoing, relational practices rooted in care, collective responsibility, and the reclamation of survival and joy as acts of resistance. LEAF will continue to draw on the insights and recommendations shared to guide legal reform, policy development, and community engagement toward a more equitable, accountable, and culturally grounded justice system.

Introduction

The *Advancing Social Justice Through Law Conference* was created as a space for reflection, dialogue, and forward-looking conversations about how law, social justice, and lived experience intersect in the context of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S+). Held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on Treaty 1 Territory, the conference centered the responsibilities of reconciliation in all areas of legal and community work. LEAF brought together a multidisciplinary group of advocates, relatives, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, community members, scholars, and lawyers, whose collective expertise highlighted the ways law and policy can both harm and heal, depending on whose voices are at the forefront.

Over the course of the day, participants engaged with presentations, keynotes, and panels on reconciliation, resource extraction, colonialism, gender-based violence, data sovereignty, and Indigenous governance. These discussions reaffirmed that advancing social justice requires systemic change and the centering of those most affected by colonial and patriarchal systems. Throughout the event, conversations were grounded in respect, accountability, and a shared understanding that meaningful justice must be relational, community-informed, and responsive.

¹Survey included as “Appendix A”.

Opening Ceremonies and Welcoming Remarks

Ruth Goba, LEAF's Executive Director, opened the conference by acknowledging the Land and the communities whose histories and sovereignties shape today's legal landscape.² She thanked the Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and participants for coming together in a spirit of shared learning, and reaffirmed LEAF's commitment to embedding reconciliation within feminist legal work and ensuring its advocacy remains fully intersectional.

Elder Allan Sutherland (White-Spotted Horse) then offered the opening prayer and address, reminding attendees that reconciliation is not an abstract legal concept but a lived and spiritual practice. He spoke of the historical trading and gathering grounds around Winnipeg, which have been places of connection for over 9,000 years. His remarks on tobacco protocol, ceremony, and sacred reciprocity encouraged participants to view the conference as a site of mutual learning and respect. By situating the law within a broader context of Land, Spirit, and relationship, Elder Sutherland challenged attendees to reflect on their own obligations as practitioners of justice.

Keynote: Brandi Morin

Journalist and author Brandi Morin (Michel First Nation) delivered a keynote address that powerfully intertwined personal narrative with systemic critique. Reading from her memoir, *Our Voice of Fire*, Morin situated the story of Tina Fontaine within her own experiences as a survivor of foster care and violence.³ Her storytelling underscored the deep and continuing trauma created by state systems that dispossess Indigenous families while criminalizing their survival.

² The following Land acknowledgement was shared: "I'd like to begin by acknowledging the lands we're joining from today, and to recognize the importance of reconciliation in all the work we do. We acknowledge that in Manitoba, we are on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe), Ininiwuk (Cree), Dakota, Anishininew, Denesuline (Dene), and that Manitoba is the homeland of the Red River Métis. In Winnipeg, we are all living on Treaty One land. Treaty One is an 1871 agreement which outlines a relationship between Indigenous peoples and Euro-descendent peoples, and all those who followed. We also acknowledge Shoal Lake First Nation #39 and #40, in Treaty 3 Territory, where our drinking water comes from. Winnipeg has the largest Indigenous population of any major city in Canada. We believe that this situates us to be what we should be, can be, and need to be the center of positive change for Canada."

³ Tina Michelle Fontaine was from Sagkeeng First Nation, Manitoba. At 15-years-old, she went missing in July 2014 and her body was later discovered in the Red River on August 17, 2014. The Winnipeg Police Service charged the accused with second-degree murder. On February 22, 2018, the jury acquitted the accused and Crown prosecutors announced that they would not be appealing.

Morin emphasized that the genocide of MMIWG2S+ is not a historical tragedy but a living manifestation of colonial structures. She traced patterns of violence linked to resource extraction industries, describing how transient work camps increase risks of trafficking and assault against Indigenous women and girls. Her analysis of media complicity highlighted how narratives of Indigenous victimhood are often sensationalized, while systemic accountability remains elusive.

Despite these realities, Morin’s message was one of endurance and responsibility. She called on attendees to harness their privilege, skills, and influence to expose ongoing injustices. Her closing reflections framed truth-telling as a form of resistance stating, “I survived when others didn’t. I survived for a reason.”

Panel 1: Justice and Inquiries

The first panel, facilitated by Breanne Lavallée-Heckert, explored the complementary work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls: *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (the Inquiry). Panellists, including Karine Duhamel, Stacey Soldier, and Sheila North, discussed the legacy of both processes and the ongoing need for public accountability.

Duhamel emphasized that the TRC’s designation of “cultural genocide” and the Inquiry’s identification of “genocide” must be understood as interconnected truths rather than contradictory findings. Soldier reminded participants that the Inquiry itself was born from grassroots activism and that women have long led the movement for justice. The conversation highlighted the limitations of commissions that do not provide enforcement mechanisms, as well as the potential of rights-based frameworks, such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and Section 35, to compel action.⁴

Panelists cautioned, however, that international human rights mechanisms are only as effective as the political will that supports them. North’s remarks about digital surveillance and AI exploitation pointed to new frontiers of colonial violence, emphasizing the need for vigilance in protecting Indigenous communities from emerging technological harms.

⁴ *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, SC 2021, c 14.; *The Constitution Act, 1982*, Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (UK), 1982, c 11, at Part II – Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada.

Keynote: Leah Gazan, MP for Winnipeg Centre

Leah Gazan provided a candid update on the federal government’s progress, or lack thereof, on implementing the 231 Calls for Justice. She criticized recent proposed federal cuts to gender equality initiatives, which would have amounted to an 81% reduction in support, and condemned the passage of Bill C-5 for prioritizing industrial development over Indigenous safety.⁵ Gazan connected the dots between resource extraction projects, violence, and human trafficking amongst Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit Peoples, calling it a “systemic violation of Indigenous women’s human rights.”

Gazan also discussed the Red Dress Alert System, commending advocates Sandra Delaronde and Hilda Anderson-Pyrz for their leadership in designing a community-led response mechanism to identify and protect missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit Peoples in real time.⁶ Gazan urged all Members of Parliament to treat the Red Dress Alert as a non-partisan issue and demanded permanent funding in future budgets. Her concluding message of hope was grounded in collective resistance encouraging attendees to “live out our joy as a revolutionary act.”

Panel 2: Public Policy and Law Reform

Facilitator Allison Fenske spoke with lawyer Victoria Perrie and community advocates Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and Sandra Delaronde. Their conversation examined how public policy and legal reform can advance the Inquiry’s Calls for Justice. The discussion linked colonial legal legacies with modern legislative gaps, noting that laws continue to perpetuate inequality through neglect.

Anderson-Pyrz, President of the National Family and Survivors Circle, asserted that the 231 Calls are binding obligations rooted in UN Declarations and Section 15 of the *Charter*. Perrie highlighted how the Bail Reform Bill (C-14) undermines Gladue principles, pushing Indigenous Peoples further into the carceral system. Delaronde shared developments in the Red Dress Alert initiative and underscored that communities cannot wait for incremental change as we are “beyond an emergency - we are living through a genocide.”

The panel closed by reaffirming principles of good law reform: humility, listening, and collaboration. Each speaker emphasized that empathy and Indigenous worldviews, expressed

⁵ *Free Trade and Labour Mobility in Canada Act*, SC 2025, c 2, s 2 – received Royal Assent June 26, 2025.

⁶ Giganawenimaanaanig, “Red Dress Stories”, (2025), online: <https://reddressstoriesmb.ca>.

through ceremony, story, and relational accountability, must inform any sustainable legal transformation.

Panel 3: Community Action and Advocacy

This panel highlighted community-driven approaches to justice and healing. Researcher and facilitator, Erin Okrainec spoke with community advocates Priscilla Robert and Hailey Bird-Matheson. Their shared discussion presented examples of programs that fulfill the Calls for Justice through local action. Despite federal claims of progress, only two Calls have been fully implemented.

Speakers criticized fragmented approaches across jurisdictions, where implementation is measured by activity rather than outcome. Community-led initiatives such as Candace House and Ka Ni Kanichihk were showcased as models of trauma-informed, low-barrier care. Their holistic, culturally grounded practices demonstrate how Indigenous-led organizations are achieving justice where systems have failed our relatives.

Panelists also described systemic barriers, ranging from legal, linguistic, and procedural, that prevent survivors from fully participating in justice processes. They called for recognizing community initiatives as legal actors and for creating accessible systems that honour Indigenous law, relational accountability, and ceremony.

Emerging Themes

Several recurring themes emerged across sessions: the inseparability of reconciliation from justice, the need to decolonize legal education, and the power of community-led responses to violence. Participants reiterated that the Calls for Justice must guide national priorities and that community voices must be central to any policy framework.

A consistent subject throughout was the reclamation of joy and survival as radical acts. Speakers such as Gazan, Morin, and Delaronde reframed healing as political resistance – a challenge to colonial narratives that pathologize Indigenous strength. This ethos resonated throughout the conference, reminding attendees that transformation requires not only advocacy but also imagination. These themes were embodied by Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer, and Indigenous Queer Drag Performers Bannock Babes who concluded the conference.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Discussions, shared both during and following the conference, underscored the need for sustained Indigenous-led leadership, stronger sectoral collaboration, and more concrete, practice-oriented strategies for addressing the ongoing crisis of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples. Outlined below are key areas to address at future conferences and next steps:

Key Areas to Address for Future Programming

Action-Oriented Programming: Increase focus on sessions that offer clear and implementable legal, policy, and community strategies supported by practical toolkits tailored to specific sectors.

Indigenous-Centered Leadership: Ensure Indigenous women, Two-Spirit Peoples, survivors, and families remain central to the speaker roster, including panels explicitly dedicated to community-led advocacy models.

Broader Engagement Across Sectors: Invite greater participation from allies who are men and expand outreach to sectors whose decisions impact MMIWG2S+ safety, including government leadership, oversight bodies, resource-extraction industries, and social-support systems.

Focus on Emerging Areas of Risk: Introduce dedicated sessions addressing newly identified concerns such as resource extraction, AI-enabled exploitation, climate displacement, and trafficking risks during large-scale events.

Strengthening Collaboration Opportunities: Allocate structured time and tools for cross-sector networking through facilitated circles, relationship-building activities, and directories that support post-conference collaboration.

Skill-Based Legal and Advocacy Training: Offer hands-on training on topics such as trauma-informed lawyering, effective use of MMIWG reports in litigation, and integrating Calls for Justice into practice.

Enhanced Visibility for Grassroots Organizations: Create opportunities for smaller Indigenous-led or grassroots groups to share their work through presentations, tabling spaces, or pitch-style sessions.

Improved Accessibility and Cultural Safety: Reduce barriers to attendance through travel supports, child-friendly spaces, and accommodations for Elders and persons with disabilities, while ensuring ongoing cultural supports such as ceremony and access to Indigenous knowledge keepers.

Next Steps: Ongoing Efforts Beyond the Conference

Advocacy and Accountability: Support national mechanisms that enhance safety responses, including the Red Dress Alert, while ensuring continued federal responsibility for implementing the Calls for Justice.

Strengthening Indigenous Partnerships: Deepen collaboration with Indigenous women's and Two-Spirit organizations to reinforce community leadership and support stable, long-term funding models.

Education and Legal Strategy: Expand trauma-informed education and embed Indigenous legal principles in public legal education materials, workshops, and curriculum.

Monitoring Progress: Introduce an annual reporting framework to track developments in feminist and decolonial legal reform.

Professional Development: Provide ongoing training for legal professionals on the intersections of gender-based violence, reconciliation, and Indigenous sovereignty.

Ongoing Evaluation and Transparency: Establish regular public updates reviewing regional developments related to MMIWG2S+, including progress from government and key institutions.

Closing Reflections

The *Advancing Social Justice Through Law Conference* reaffirmed that the pursuit of justice is an evolving, relational process that must engage both law and spirit. Speakers reminded participants that reconciliation is not achieved through reports alone but through daily practice: through acts of care, courage, solidarity, and joy. As LEAF continues its advocacy, the

voices from this conference will inform future strategies to make Canada’s legal and political landscape more equitable, accountable, and humane.

Appendix A: Survey Results

Attendees completing the post-conference survey included family members of MMIWG2S+, community advocates, frontline workers, non-profit employees, and legal professionals, with the latter two groups forming the majority. Survey responses reflected the following insights:

| Knowledge Increase & Overall Satisfaction

Respondents noted increases in their knowledge of MMIWG2S+ abuses following the conference. Most participants rated their overall experience at the highest satisfaction level, reflecting a strong approval of the conference’s content, speakers, and relevance. A large majority reported that the panels and keynotes provided a sufficient understanding of the issues. However, some participants expressed a desire for more clearly defined, actionable pathways for change to support their work moving forward, as are elaborated on in the ‘Recommendations’ section above.

| Systemic Barriers Identified

Participants highlighted a range of recurring barriers that continue to impede progress, including ongoing colonialism and systemic racism, a lack of political will, government inaction, and chronic underfunding of Indigenous-led organizations. Many noted the dual harms of over-policing and under-policing in Indigenous communities, along with housing insecurity, poverty, and punitive social-assistance policies that compound vulnerability. Respondents also emphasized the impact of misinformation, public bias, and a persistent lack of empathy toward Indigenous women and Two-Spirit Peoples, as well as limited engagement from men on the violence and harms against MMIWG2S+. Additional concerns included failures across healthcare, justice systems, and the significant barriers created by administrative burdens which continue to negatively affect individuals when fleeing violence.

| Emerging or Worsening Issues

Participants also identified several new or under-recognized concerns that are contributing to heightened risks for Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit Peoples. This included exploitation associated with large-scale events and entertainment venues, as well as increased vulnerability linked to extractive industries, “man camps,” and resource development projects. Respondents noted that climate-change-related displacement is placing additional pressure on northern community members who must relocate to

unfamiliar environments, while the growing role of AI in generating non-consensual content and facilitating exploitation presents an emerging threat. Several participants further emphasized the ongoing disparity in attention given to MMIWG2S+ cases compared with cases involving non-Indigenous women, underscoring persistent inequities in public and institutional responses.

| *Advocacy Momentum Generated*

Many participants identified clear next steps to advance their advocacy, particularly those in the legal field, planning to incorporate the conference's findings into submissions, cross-examinations, and broader legal strategies. Respondents expressed strong interest in supporting Indigenous-led initiatives such as the Red Dress Alert, community circles, and public legal education, alongside a growing commitment to contacting elected officials to advocate for funding, accountability, and annual reporting on the Calls for Justice. Several attendees also noted intentions to deepen collaboration with frontline or grassroots organizations or to launch new non-profit initiatives. Across sectors, participants emphasized the importance of trauma-informed practice, empathetic engagement, and the intentional use of language within legal and social systems as essential components of meaningful change.

| *Cross-Sector Collaboration and Vision*

Respondents stressed the need for stronger connections between lawyers and frontline workers, as well as the importance of maintaining ongoing relationships with Indigenous-led organizations to ensure that advocacy remains grounded in community expertise. They also called for greater government presence and accountability, emphasizing the necessity of sustainable, long-term funding to support meaningful and lasting change. Participants highlighted the importance of multi-sector engagement, including healthcare, corrections, housing, education, and community safety, to address the complex and intersecting issues surrounding MMIWG2S+. Across the feedback, multiple respondents underscored the centrality of Indigenous women's knowledge and lived experience, emphasizing that their leadership must guide all efforts moving forward.