



Advancing Native Organizing

A Guide

This resource intends to highlight the history of organizing through tradition, culture, and community by citizens of Native nations, especially Native women. This information will guide both Native citizens and non-Native allies in their journey towards uplifting, understanding, and strengthening Native movements for change.

Introduction

Let's break down organizing more broadly. Organizing is a method for building power, particularly in communities that have been historically and/or currently excluded from decision making. Often starting at a local level, groups then expand and connect to form broader movements and national networks working towards change. When people think of organizing, many might immediately think of marching or protesting around an issue impacting a community. While this is an example of organizing, it is just scratching the surface. Organizers work to build up leaders, create and advocate for solutions, and change systems. They also build relationships and engage with and advocate for their communities. How you get involved with organizing will depend on your skills, gifts, resources, identities, and capacity.

Some key impacts of organizing include:

- Increased civic engagement
- Policy and law change
- Stronger networks and relationships
- Awareness and visibility
- Leadership development
- Accountability for leaders
- Enforcement and use of treaty rights
- Improved quality of life - safety, economy, public health, etc.

What is Native organizing?

Native organizing empowers Native nations and communities to build relationships, uplift leaders, create solutions, and change systems to advance their sovereignty and self-determination. Rooted in traditions, cultural resilience, and community strength, organizing takes many forms—from mutual aid to policy and long-term movement building. It's essential that organizing create lasting change that respects and supports the sovereignty of Native nations.

Through increased civic engagement, leadership development, and strengthened relationships, organizing improves the quality of life in Native communities (and beyond) while holding systems accountable. Native women have always been central to these efforts, bringing cultural knowledge and strategic vision to address both immediate needs and long-term goals.

“We've seen some things on social media about the resiliency of our ancestors to continue on and endure, you know, there are opportunities, more so now than any other time recently for us to organize and be impactful and to collaborate and come together and that always to remember we're stronger together than separately.”

- Tasha Fridia-Mousseau (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, Kiowa, Caddo, and Hunka Oglala Lakota)

Native nations have a history of being removed from conversations that directly impact their lands, cultures, and communities. This undermines their decision-making power and is a direct threat to the sovereignty of Native nations. Native organizing works to build power across different communities that are affected by oppression and ongoing challenges to sovereignty. While we are seeing more Native nations flexing their sovereignty and leaning into government-to-government relationships at all levels, there are still many challenges they face when working with the United States government. Organizing efforts within Native nations often go beyond a protest or march and are cultivated through relationships and movements, many of which have been ongoing efforts to raise awareness for Native peoples and the discrimination they have faced for many years.

From organizing within our own Native nations to building power through solidarity with other nations and movements, organizing builds and strengthens communities.

What are some examples of Native organizing efforts?

Native nations, their leaders, and citizens have historically organized through peace as opposed to violence or hate. They do so through their cultures, traditions, and through the strength of their ancestors and the land. There are extensive examples of Native organizing efforts throughout time, but here are a few we have chosen to share:

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives Movement

Native women have long been at the forefront of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) movement, working to build awareness, advocate, and heal their communities.

Native women lead national campaigns like the MMIW Red Dress awareness campaign that uses red dresses as a visual representation of the women lost to violence.

Organizations like the Sovereign Bodies Institute and the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center work to provide data, amplify Indigenous voices, and advocate for systemic changes to address violence and erasure.

Women-led groups and leaders have been instrumental in pushing legislation like Savanna's Act and the Not Invisible Act in the United States. These laws aim to improve data collection and collaboration among law enforcement to address the crisis. On a grassroots level, Native women have organized task forces in various states to pressure local governments to implement actionable plans. Native women also organize vigils, awareness walks, and community searches for missing loved ones.

The NoDAPL Movement

The No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) movement, centered at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, was a powerful demonstration of Native-led solidarity. While many know the broader story of NoDAPL, the role of Native women deserves attention. Through ceremony, storytelling, acts of resistance, and acts of care, women were able to uphold their values and advocate for change while facing police brutality and the destruction of the environment.

The *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock* documentary shines a spotlight on the women who played key roles in the movement, showcasing their strength, courage, and unwavering commitment to protecting the land and water.

The women of Standing Rock wove together traditional practices, such as prayer and ceremony, with modern advocacy tools and inspired solidarity not only among Native nations but also among environmentalists, human rights activists, and others worldwide. The NoDAPL movement being led and sustained by Native women, is a testament to the enduring power of Indigenous resilience and collective action. It serves as a reminder that protecting the land and water is deeply tied to cultural preservation and future generations' survival.

The Wabanaki Alliance

In 2020, the four Wabanaki Tribes of Maine (Penobscot Nation, Passamaquoddy Tribe, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, and Mi'kmaq Nation) came together to advance their sovereignty and educate the people of the state.

The drive behind forming the Wabanaki Alliance came from the 1980 Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement Act. The legislation was passed by Congress and agreed upon by the Wabanaki Tribes of Maine, who were under pressure from the federal government to reach an agreement. The tribes ratified the act with the understanding that their relationship with the State of Maine would grow over the years and the document could be adjusted in the future.

Years later, as a result of the 1980 Land Claims, the Wabanaki Tribes of Maine are unable to exercise their sovereignty as the other federally recognized tribes in the United States are able to. The Wabanaki Alliance strives to bring awareness to this discrimination while pushing bills through the state that allow them to fully be recognized as the sovereign nations that they are.

What's the impact of Native women leading movements for change?

Native women have always been leaders - from their households to their larger communities. Native women traditionally have worn many hats, carrying out various roles across different pockets of their communities. When there are decisions to be made, most citizens of Native nations turn to their mother, grandmother, auntie, etc., to look for guidance. You'll often see this taking place in Council meetings as well. They have been the leaders of Indian Country throughout the generations.

“They [women] bring life to the world from the spirit world or at least have the ability to do that, and so as we bring those lives into this world, it is our responsibility to make sure that this world is a safe place for them as a place where they can thrive, and they're empowered to dream, and they can be protected. And so as we go into these spaces those are the drivers for us as Indigenous women.”

- Tasha Fridia-Mousseau (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, Kiowa, Caddo, and Hunka Oglala Lakota)

Prior to colonization many Native nations had matriarchal societies with women holding significant responsibility in roles as leaders, decision makers, culture carriers, and warriors. Even outside of matriarchal societies many Native nations had women carrying forward these roles.

Colonization disrupted these systems through forced assimilation, patriarchal policies, and imposed governance structures which undermined traditional leadership and values. These new systems excluded women from decision making roles and many Native communities today are still dealing with the effects of these imposed structures and systems. Despite this, Native women have continued to lead and today actively reclaim roles and make space for their communities at the table.

What else is impacted by Native women leading movements for change?

Native cultures and traditions are rooted in ensuring the entirety of the community can thrive for generations to come, rather than only focusing on the individual self. This begins with the women, which goes back to the idea of seventh generation thinking. It is Native women who look out for the future of their children, their children's children, and so on.

When we think of Native organizing, this is the drive behind why these movements come to fruition: Providing a better world for the relatives yet to come.

“Native women show up to the table with, like, our communities and children in mind. Even if that's not physical sometimes. Is that we show up with more than just ourselves in mind when we're coming to the table to offer our gifts and our resources and our skills to Native organizing is that we're not just thinking of ourselves we're thinking of all of our people and all of our community when we do come to organize.”

- Brook LaFloe (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa)

When Native women organize, there are amazing impacts. Some we'd like to share include:

- **Seventh Generation Thinking.** Native women lead with a focus on the generations now and those yet to come. Long-term goals are embedded in organizing, creating movements that address immediate needs and seek to ensure lasting change.
- **Reclaiming Roles + Systems.** Often rooted in culture, Native women organizing challenges patriarchal structures imposed by colonization and creates pathways for more inclusive governance and leadership.
- **Building Power.** Native women excel in building strong networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and support. Through relational leadership, they foster trust and collaboration across diverse communities, uniting efforts to address shared challenges leading to solidarity actions across Native and non-Native communities.
- **Collective and Inclusive Decision-Making.** Native women emphasize holistic decision-making processes, centering the voices of the most impacted and ensuring all perspectives are heard. This approach fosters equitable outcomes and greater community buy-in.
- **Strategic Vision.** Drawing from their lived experiences, Native women organizers navigate systemic barriers while creating innovative solutions to challenges like systemic inequities, lack of resources, and threats to sovereignty.
- **Making Space for Future Leaders.** Native women leaders often actively mentor and empower others, particularly youth, other women, and 2spirit relatives, to step into leadership roles. This ensures that movements remain intergenerational and inclusive, cultivate a culture of shared responsibility, and ensure that organizing efforts continue to evolve and grow.

How can allies support Native-led movements while respecting boundaries?

Throughout the generations, Native nations have welcomed allies and supporters who are looking to join Native-led movements and help secure their sovereignty. For those wishing to be effective allies in Native organizing, it is important to understand positionality and boundaries to ensure that Native voices are heard and uplifted.

Here are a few tips to get you started:

- **Center Sovereignty.** Keep in mind that Native organizing no matter the issue or rights behind that effort, always centers on advancing Native sovereignty. Familiarize yourself with the basics and then dive deeper into how you can support to promote, defend, and uplift the sovereignty of Native nations.
- **Do Your Own Research.** While you want to become an ally to Native nations, it is important not to rely on them to provide you with the background and understanding that you need to jump into this work. Find out what nations are in your area, what their current goals are, and any past or ongoing challenges to their sovereignty.
- **Build Your Cultural Competency.** In order to support Native nations, it is important to understand their traditions, cultures, and histories and respect them. Take advantage of community-led training, include Native authors in your reading list, and reflect on how you may be unintentionally appropriating Native cultures.
- **Know Yourself.** Start with self-reflection. What tools do you have to support Native leaders? Consider your positionality and identity how can you best serve the efforts of Native nations given where you come from, what you know, etc..

“Come in with cultural humility, walk alongside or behind your Indigenous relatives. You don't need to be the face, right? And I would say that even sometimes comes back to our own people who are reconnecting with culture.”

- Tasha Fridia-Mousseau (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, Kiowa, Caddo, and Hunka Oglala Lakota)

- **Contribute Resources.** Perhaps in your self-reflection you identify what resources you and/or your organization have access to that can be beneficial to the movement you wish to support. Can you make a recurring donation? Can you spread the word via social media? There are so many ways you can use what you have to uplift Native-led efforts around you!
- **Move slowly and intentionally.** Take baby steps! You may be super excited to start this work, which is great. To best serve Native organizing efforts, however, we encourage you to move at a pace that allows you to give the most effective support. Taking on too much or over-committing may do more harm than good.

“Many people get into organizing, and they only want to do a mutual aid or direct aid, you know, they're not talking about policy or strategies down the line they're not talking about 10 years from now. They want to help people survive from today, so there's a place for those people who want to mobilize in that fashion, direct aid, mutual aid, crisis — and then there's a longer term of strategy, and those who want to contribute to the movement it's really important to know what your interest is.”

- Natalie Stites Means (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe)

How can citizens of Native nations get involved with organizing in their communities?

- **Consider your skills, gifts, and resources.** Do some self reflection and consider how you can support your Native nation, show solidarity for issues impacting your nation and others, and uplift sovereignty more broadly. Can you share your knowledge within your community? Donate your time to a Native-led organization supporting sovereignty?
- **Research.** Figure out more about the issues impacting sovereignty across Turtle Island. While each Native nation faces unique challenges there are also opportunities to learn from and collaborate with other nations to support sovereignty. Also consider what we can learn from Indigenous communities globally to uplift and strengthen sovereignty.

- **Understand your positionality and identity.** How can you best support sovereignty through organizing given where you come from, what you know, etc.?
- **Reach out.** Find people, organizations, or Native nations that are already doing the work and organizing on a topic that interests you. You don't have to do it all alone and we are stronger when we work together. Find out who is already organizing around a topic you're interested in and how you can join their efforts.
- **Lean into gratitude and celebrate small victories.** Organizing work is tough! Even though you may feel a lot of drive or responsibility to organize take it slowly and move at a pace that's sustainable for you. Taking on too much can lead to burnout and we need leaders who are in it for the long haul. Make sure to celebrate victories both big and small along the way and remember what you are grateful for and why sovereignty is important to you.

“My No. 1 rule is to show up. Whether that be practice for the game, showing up for others in your community. Organizing is finding space in your community, and showing up for others and also building your network. So that when it's time that you're organizing something, people are ready to show up for you and if we think of everything as being a circle. If someone's organizing just a crisis emergency, one of those giving campaigns, like, your money going to them is part of that circle, right? And any time the circle is broken is when we're not showing up, right? When we step back, and so just to keep that circle going, and it a little comes back around full circle when we show up for each other.”

- Brook LaFloe (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa)

Additional Resources

- [NGC Resources](#)
- [COUP Council](#)
- [Ninijjaanis One of Ones](#)
- [Friends of the Children](#)
- [Wabanaki Alliance](#)
- [NDN Collective](#)
- [Native Organizers Alliance](#)
- [End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock](#)



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