



MESSAGE FROM THE FNHA'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER AND THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH OFFICER OF BC

First Nations women and girls are the hearts of their communities and Nations. They are the current and future matriarchs, the life givers, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and daughters who help keep First Nations culture alive and communities strong. They are, and have always been, both *sacred and strong*.

Many First Nations women and girls living in BC, including those who are non-binary and identify as Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer, are thriving. At the same time, the legacies of colonialism and systemic racism – including anti-Indigenous racism in the health care system – continue to create barriers for many in their wellness journeys, negatively impacting their lives, health, relationships, and opportunities. As a result, First Nations women are being disproportionately impacted by both the toxic drug crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. First Nations women and girls also tragically continue to go missing from their families and communities. This work is dedicated to those women and girls – and those who have felt the devastating loss of a sacred First Nations woman or girl in their lives. We too feel this pain.

In honour of these women, their families and communities, this work is an effort by the partners to take a different approach to reporting on the health and wellness of First Nations women and girls. While as Indigenous women, we share experiences of oppression, structural racism and colonialism, we acknowledge that our Métis and Inuit sisters have unique and sacred ways of knowing and being. Métis and Inuit women and girls have equally important stories to tell and we encourage readers of this report to seek those out as well. This report, however, is grounded in the distinct First Nations perspectives of wholistic wellness. The work aims to celebrate the many ways that First Nations women and girls living in BC are flourishing. It also seeks to bring light to where systemic barriers continue to negatively impact their health and self-determination.

We are deeply grateful to the First Nations women and girls who have contributed their knowledge, teachings and stories of lived experience. It is an honour to be able to include their words. In our view, these voices are the most valuable component of this work. These stories underscore the urgency of collective action on the outstanding calls and recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the Addressing Racism Review, and *BC's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. They also reverberate the strength and resilience of First Nations women and girls – and the power of matriarchy that will help ensure actions are taken.

We hope that *Sacred and Strong* will serve as benchmark and a potent reminder of the changes, healing and reconciliation that still need to take place. We hope it empowers First Nations women and girls in reclaiming their rightful places and having their voices heard. We also hope it generates discussion about ways to further improve how we report on the health and wellness of First Nations women and girls in BC – and invite others to join with us in re-centering women and girls within our communities and our Nations.

In Wellness,

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Health through wellness

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