

## Indigenous Women and the Legacy of Oppression

By Victoria Ybanez

Native American women live interned on their own land in the middle of war every day of their lives. When we think about war, often times we think it has to be declared by the President of the United States to be real, indigenous women live with the continued Nation to Nation conflict that began with the onset of colonization. Indigenous women have been the victims of war for centuries that continues today. The current day status of indigenous women is the product of an historical legacy brought forth by colonization and genocide. Repeatedly, non-Native people say that “it is time for indigenous people to move on,” “let go of the past in order to finally heal,” and such. Unfortunately, they are mistaken in thinking that this war has ended. Today we no longer have to defend ourselves and families from the killing brought about by battles and massacres yet Indian women are still raped, battered and killed. For indigenous women, the solution is in the looking back. Remembering the genocide that transpired and the place indigenous people come from to help create vision for the continued survival and resilience of our indigenous communities is an important part of restoring balance. Our past is part of who we are, it is carried in our ancestral memories and we must always honor who they are and what they continue to teach us.

Originally, indigenous women come from a place of strength and beauty that is the very essence of what it means to be a Native woman. Reclaiming women’s natural place in society, we will be the center of change in our society that will help our communities restore their balance and harmony.

The land now known as the Americas once was occupied by a large number of indigenous societies. Depending on who you talk to, it can be estimated that somewhere between 20 million to as many as 120 million native people occupied this land prior to the onset of colonization. On *Turtle Island*,<sup>i</sup> indigenous societies believed in the interconnection of all things. Everything was connected to everything else, like the threads of a spider web, in its fragility, when one part of the web was damaged it hurt the strength of the rest of the web. Connectedness. Women, children and men all had value in pre-colonized communities, each with their own responsibilities to the people as a whole, to the four-leggeds, the winged, the land, the water... The value of women was central to existence of pre-contact indigenous societies, and in our looking back, we can recognize that women are central to the existence of indigenous societies today.

There is an indigenous proverb commonly known among Native people, “*if the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of the women is intact, so too is that of the family, community and society.*” While women were valued as sacred, indigenous societies would remain intact. Indigenous societies prior to the onset of colonization had natural values about the sacredness of women. Widespread across Tribes, women were seen as having the ability to create life. In many indigenous creation stories, by giving birth to a child, women gave life to *the People*. Women were the caretakers and the heart of their families; their voices were pivotal to the survival and success of their families and their communities. They were valued for their wisdom as a whole and were involved in the governance of their tribes in many ways. Most tribes saw the strongest, most active, articulate tribal women as closely paralleling the traditional female holy beings. Indian women were accorded great status for their achievements in agriculture, hunting, and hide and meat preparation. Indian people felt that such abilities were divinely sanctioned, hence of the utmost respect.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Historical framework for violence against Native women**

*“I can forgive but there are certain aspects of my history, whether it’s solely as a Cheyenne or as an Indian person, that I cannot forget because Native Americans never want to go back and relive the horror.”<sup>iii</sup> ~ Henrietta Mann, Cheyenne ~*

Colonization brought about a change that would forever change indigenous societies and cannot be talked about without exploring *acts of genocide*. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, *genocide* is the systematic and planned extermination of an entire national, racial, political, or ethnic group. Further, genocide is defined by Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as “*any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*”

Whether the colonizers of *Turtle Island* perpetrated genocide against indigenous people can be controversial. Most Native people find little difficulty accepting this fact, however, many non-Natives find it difficult to believe that the European settlers and explorers, as well as the citizens and leaders of the United States could willfully commit such horrendous and calculated acts of violence. The stories of what transpired in Native America reflect extensive coordinated actions intended to bring about the demise of Native people. As we take a closer

look at Article 2 of the UN Convention on Genocide, it illuminates a startling reality of indigenous history and we can see how indigenous women were targeted to bring about the submission and collapse of Native societies. It frames the magnitude of violence that transformed *Turtle Island*.

From the time of first contact to the late 1800's and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indigenous populations were killed at the highest rate of any population on this soil in the history of the United States. Looking across the land, we can find numerous accounts of massacres where women and children were killed, often unarmed and defenseless such as the Kern River Valley massacre in 1863, the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapahoe at Sand Creek in 1864, and the massacre of Lakota at Wounded Knee in 1890 to name but a few.

According to Andrea Smith, when a Native woman suffers abuse, it is an attack on her identity as a woman and her identity as a Native. The issues of colonial, race and gender oppression cannot be separated.<sup>iv</sup> Tactics of violence and control targeted Native women specifically. Beyond the actual killing of women, there are numerous accounts of women having their genitals removed, tobacco pouches made from their breasts, strips of flesh being tanned to make regins, decapitation, and repeated rapes and torture. Indigenous women's bodies were defined as dirty and vile by the colonizers, available for sexual exploitation and disposable.

Native people have a century long experience with boarding schools that promoted forced assimilation and were designed to remove culture and tradition from the Tribes. This practice lasted from the mid-1800's to the mid-1900's. Children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in boarding schools that continued the abuse. Some elders talk about having their children pried from their arms and taken to boarding schools, their hair cut and bodies scrubbed as if to scrub off their skin color. Mothers were removed from being able to raise their children, being able to give them guidance, teach them what it means to be female and what it means to be part of a family and community. Instead of the love and support of a caring mother, caring family, institutions raised many Native children during this time.

Additionally, we have to consider how eugenics was enlisted in the continued genocide. No one even today knows exactly how many Native American women were sterilized during the 1970's. Some estimate around 40% of Native women of childbearing age. This can only have an enormous impact on the continued survival of Native people.

### **Current day status of women**

*"I would be glad to go back and live in the areas where my great-grandfather*

*Cochie lived. I would do anything to live that way again, the way my people lived years ago when there was no fighting and they were free in the land they loved so much.” ~ Elbys Naiche Huger, Chiricahua Apache*

In our society today, women and girls are victimized and murdered at alarming rates. Shockingly, it is of little concern to the public. Not only are we not doing enough to counter this wholesale destruction of the lives of so many women and girls, we're not even paying close attention.<sup>vi</sup> Native women are ignored in public research and violently victimized at alarming rates compared to the mainstream population.

As an advocate, I was personally tormented when my own journey brought me to working with Nona<sup>vii</sup>, a woman who struggles every day with trying to figure out where she belongs in this world. When she was an infant, a white family adopted her. She grew up with no connection to her tribe, no connection to her birth family, and no connection to her culture. Her dark skin always kept her on the outside. She never fit in the predominantly white community she grew up in and was subjected to taunting by her classmates that later became physical and sexual abuse as she grew in years. Her adopted brothers raped her and her adopted parents refused to believe her. Nona's life reminds me of my own struggle with identity. My deep sense of loss of my own identity, my own struggles to know who I am, my own struggles with abuse and racism, and my challenge to find that place where I feel completely connected. Unfortunately, Nona's life reflects the legacy of genocide carried by so many Native women today.

Another woman who I will always carry close to my heart is Carla.<sup>viii</sup> She is a woman who carries a burden brought about by our oppression. She was raped! Not once, not twice, more than she wants to remember. Sexually molested as a young child, raped and gang raped as a young adult. She now drinks to kill the pain. When she was old enough, she started having babies and by the time she was in her early 20's, she had five children. I believed having those babies was her way of having somebody love her. Carla has been in a series of relationships with men who have been abusive to her. Social services became involved with her life removing her children from time to time because of her drinking and her difficulty with providing the kind of home the workers thought she should have. Carla is someone who has struggles with few to no economic resources and with no options for moving out of poverty. She is controlled by a social service system that places expectations that are not remedied without additional financial resources. She is caught up in mire brought about by colonization and genocide that remains intact today.

Many people say it is time to let go of the past and move forward. Thinking about the many women like Nona and Carla, how can we forget the war our Indian women live with day-by-day? I believe that as indigenous women, we do need to move forward but letting go of the past is not possible. It is part of our history and etched in the ancestral and living memories that each of us carries. It explains the levels of multigenerational trauma that we live with, the levels of poverty and the complexity of barriers we are faced with in current day life. The past is carried in the way Native women are battered and beaten in their homes every day, the way systems fail to adequately offer responses that meet the needs of indigenous women and their children without further victimization, the way indigenous women continue to slam into the barriers created by institutional racism.

Overall intimate partner violence against women has been declining since 1993, however, for Native American women, the rates are three times higher than non-Native women. According to the United States Department of Justice, Native women are victims of non-fatal intimate partner violence at rates of 18.2 per 1,000 compared to 6.3 for Caucasian women and 8.2 for women of African descent<sup>ix</sup>. Native American victims of intimate and family violence are more likely than victims of all other races to be severely injured and need hospital care. Medical costs exceeded \$21 million over a 4-year period. As well, according to the Centers for Disease Control, Native American women are twice as likely to be murdered by a family member.

Since 1984, I have worked to end violence against women. My heart and passion is in helping our Indian women find ways to heal from centuries of genocide and oppression while finding connections to their strength and beauty.

### **Current day strength of indigenous women**

*“Look where we are today on this reservation, we’re tired of being considered the poorest county in the United States and we’re tired of what some describe as sub-standard education – we’re just plain tired of living the way we have been for years and we can’t depend on anybody else but ourselves to make sure things get better.”<sup>x</sup> ~ Eileen Iron Cloud, Lakota*

The future of our indigenous communities is dependant on the strength and resilience of Native women. We continue to survive in spite of genocide and oppression. Indigenous women were and continue to be the backbone of indigenous societies.

Native women are our hope and our strength. Indigenous women have been organizing to bring about change. Working to change the layers of oppression that forces so many Native

women to be subjected to violence. Working to change the conditions on their homelands. Working to bring voice to Tribes and Native communities. The power and strength of Native women's leadership can be seen in the actions of so many amazing and courageous women.<sup>xi</sup> Native women have been leading the work to develop shelters for battered women for their own Tribes. They have been developing advocacy programs, tribal coalitions addressing domestic violence and sexual assault. They have been working to raise public awareness in their own communities. Native women organized and brought about changes to the Violence Against Women Act to ensure that the needs of Tribes would be addressed.

Native women are leading and giving voice to our realities!

---

<sup>i</sup> North America was called and is still called Turtle Island by many indigenous people.

<sup>ii</sup> Unequal Sisters, Changing Women: the Crosscurrents of American Indian Feminine Identity. Rebecca Tsosie. 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> We, the People of Earth and Elders, Volume II by Serle L. Chapman. 2001. Mountain Press Publishing Company, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>iv</sup> Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide by Andrea Smith. 2005. South End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>v</sup> We, the People of Earth and Elders, Volume II by Serle L. Chapman. 2001. Mountain Press Publishing Company, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>vi</sup> Punished for Being Female by Bob Herbert. New York Times, Op-Ed column. November 2, 2006

<sup>vii</sup> Stories of women reflected in this essay are compilations of women I have worked with over the more than twenty three years I have been involved in work to end violence against women. I have compiled stories in such a way as to protect the identity and privacy of women. All names are fictitious.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Intimate Partner Violence in the United States by Shannan Catalano, Ph.D. BJS Statistician.

<sup>x</sup> We, the People of Earth and Elders, Volume II by Serle L. Chapman. 2001. Mountain Press Publishing Company, Missoula, Montana.

<sup>xi</sup> I would love to be able to name all of the women who are dedicated to the work to end violence against Native women. There are so many women who are engaged in work with their own Tribal community, in their regions, and across the United States and across multiple Tribal Nations. To name a few: Tilly Blackbear, Karen Artichoker, Tina Olson, Brenda Hill, Eileen Hudon, Peggy Bird, Nicole Mathews, Deb Blossom, Eleanor David, Sandy Davidson, Carma Tucson, Shelly Miller....