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## Native American Women, Past, Present and Future

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## Abstract

Native American women traditionally belonged to a culture that gave them respect and where they had power, autonomy and equality. Through the last hundred years and due to European colonization they have lost all that they had. Presently Aboriginal women suffer from a high rate of poverty. They also experience racism and sexism from Western cultures and have even lost respect from their own culture. European legislations, reserve life and residential schools have led to a loss of language, culture, family and self-esteem. But Native American women are the hope of the future for their culture. Native women are making visible efforts to renew traditions and to improve education, through self rule and by healing from within the culture itself. They are a strong group who will not quit fighting for their people because they are still the nurturers, counselors, spiritual and medical healers and providers of the First Nations People.

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The First Nations People that cover North America differ in their

languages and their rituals and practices. Particularly they differ in their mode of survival, which is determined by the lands' location and characteristics and the animals that are most bountiful there. Some bands hunt and gather some fish and hunt while some are agricultural. Traditionally though, they are fairly similar in their attitudes toward individuals in their bands. Native societies in the past were not based on a hierarchical system and there were few important divisions between men and women. The work of the two genders often differed but there was no value of one over the other. Native women of the past were respected and valued for their contribution to the survival of their families. Their knowledge of plants, their ability to cure and preserve food and their opinion in political matters was all valued. Native women in the present are experiencing a distinct loss of that respect and value from within their culture and from outside of it. They are experiencing increased abuse at the hands of their husbands. Women are also losing respect for themselves as indicated by their increased addiction to drugs and alcohol and by the disrepair of their families. But there is a strong effort being made by Native Women to improve their futures as well as to improve the futures of their children and spouses. The following information is based on the lives of First Nations women in general and is drawn from the characteristics common to the Iroquois of New York, the Inuit societies in the Arctic, the Tlingit society of the Northwest Coast, Blackfoot societies of the Plains and the Cherokee women of the Southeast to name a few.

Priscilla K. Buffalohead in her 1983 article "Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women", states that until recently it was assumed that traditional Native American women were no better off than slaves (pp.236-44). Klein and Ackerman (1995) believe this is because the first missionaries saw the hard work that the women did and reported that the tribal women were drudges (p.6). Most often Native women were not even mentioned historically because the first traders and missionaries to come in contact with Native tribes did not see them as important (Klein & Ackerman, 1995, p.3). This could have been due to the popular opinion that European women were frail and helpless which made the hard work performed by the Aboriginal women look arduous (Voyageur, 1993, p.85). The invisibility of women in history is beginning to change yet even feminist scholars are guilty of seeing tribal women as valuable only to illuminate the origins of sexism (Buffalohead, 1983, pp.236-244). This opinion, however, is proving to be incorrect. We are now coming to learn that many tribal societies were based on egalitarian cultural traditions, concerned less with the equality of the sexes and more with the dignity of individuals and their inherent right to make their own choices and decisions (Buffalohead, 1983, pp.236-244).

In the Iroquois tribes of New York women had the political right to nominate and recall civil chiefs, they controlled and managed their families, they had the right to divorce and could determine how many children they would raise (Buffalohead, 1983, pp. 236-244). The earliest historians still reported that the women were exploited and mistreated which they used to

justify policies forcing Natives to adopt the religion and life style of Euro-American society (Buffalohead, 1983, pp. 236-244). An elitist attitude prevailed that Indians were savages in need of fixing and Native women were particularly invisible as European men viewed all women as inferior (Voyageur, 1993, p. 85). The attitude that European culture was superior to that of the Native people led to bias in the observers so that they failed to comprehend the full range of women's economic roles or their political and social power within their societies (Voyageur, 1998, p.85).

In Blackfoot society a woman owned the products of her labor including the tipi that her family lived in (Kehoe, 1995, p.114). A woman was judged by the quality of her work and treated with respect in reference to her good work (Kehoe, 1995, p.115). Women were seen as powerful due to their ability to give life (Kehoe, 1995, p.120). She was so powerful that it was she who unwrapped and rewrapped holy bundles because a man would not be able to handle this power directly without her intercession (Kehoe, 1995, p. 116). A woman's superior spiritual power is seen in her ability alone to hold the Sun Dance ceremony (Kehoe, 1995, p.116). Women are Shaman's as often as men are and bring blessings to the people (Kehoe, 1995, p.117). These show that traditionally Blackfoot women had power, freedom and autonomy.

It was understood in most Native cultures that men and women's work is of equal value and is complimentary. Men hunted and women processed the fruit of his hunts. One did not function well without the other. Each person worked for the betterment of the band and power was counted in the possessions one had that they would then give away (Kehoe, 1995, p.114). It was actually through the giving away of gifts that Natives gained prestige and power (Kehoe, 1995, p.115). One more bit of evidence that women had power and respect was that traditionally many societies, including the Iroquois, Cherokee and Navajo were matriarchal and some were matrilocal (Maltz & Archambault, 1995, pp.234-236). Unfortunately European patriarchal ideology has taken over in most contemporary Native societies.

In the past most Native women were considered equal to men. They had power politically, spiritually, medically and generally in everyday life. What has happened to that equality and power today? Native women in contemporary society sit at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They struggle with sexism and racism and are not generally respected even by their own people. Economically they are more disadvantaged than non- First Nations people and First Nations men (Canada, 1979, p.31). How did this drastic change come about?

It is well documented that the beginning of the decline for all First Nations people began with colonization. The arrival of European settlers and the move of Aboriginal people to reserves was the beginning of a long hard road for Native people. When Native people were put on reserves they lost their ability to be self-sufficient. In the west this move to reserves coincided with the depletion of the buffalo (Plains Indians). This loss of buffalo made it easy for the

Europeans to convince Native people to move to reserves because they were starving and often saw it as their only hope for survival (Plains Indians).

In 1876 the Indian Act was legislated in Canada, which deprived Native women of status if they married a non-Indian man (Voyageur, 1993, p.89). This was a sexually discriminatory piece of legislation that did not apply equally to men (Voyageur, 1993, p. 89). This legislation limited women's political and social rights and put women in a subordinate position to men who actually gained political power (Voyageur, 1993, p.89) In 1951 the Indian Act further damaged women by denying them the right to vote in band elections (Voyageur, 1993, p.89). They were not allowed to hold elected office or participate in public meetings that decided band business (Fisk, 1990, p.122). Further to this loss of power, the Indian Act determined legal status by patrilineal affiliation leaving women no rights and subordinating them to the level of objects owned by their husbands (Voyageur, 1992, p.89). This meant that if a woman's husband enfranchised then automatically she and her children became enfranchised as well. If she married a man from another tribe she became a member of his tribe yet if he died she could not return to her reserve (Voyageur, 1992, p.90). An additional insult was that when her husband died his estate passed to his children and not to his wife (Voyageur, 1993 p. 90). "Under the Indian Act, Indian women lost their independence, were not legal entities unto themselves, and had no legal recourse to remedy the situation"(Voyageur, 1993, p.90).

We can see that over time the power of women was totally eroded. Even within her own culture she had become a possession to her husband with no say in her own life. Where autonomy used to be important to all tribe members the European way had taken over and equality was eroded, individuality became dominant. One more event has contributed to women's loss of status. Traditionally women were nurturers, educators and providers of the children but with the advent of residential schools came the loss of her children. Young Native children were taken to live in Residential schools; against the will of their families, and when the children were taken the mothers lost their role as nurturer and educator. This was a harsh blow to the status and power Native women originally had. Children who grew up in residential schools without the love and guidance of their mothers resulted in the depleted ability of those children to parent and nurture their own children in the next generation (Voyageur, 2000, p87). The children suffered sexual, physical and psychological abuse (Voyageur, 2000, p. 87). This led to loss of health, pride, culture, language and ultimately loss of self (Voyageur, 2000, p.87).

Everything that was taken from Native women by colonization, reserve life, European governments, the Indian Act and residential schools is devastating. But the strength of women, the "wildish woman" that Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1995), speaks of has not died in Native women. Cora Voyageur (2000) says, "Despite the changes endured by indigenous peoples, many aspects of the traditional Native women's roles have remained constant.

Women are still responsible for maintaining culture, stabilizing the community, and caring for future generations. They still play an influential yet unrecognized and unappreciated role in the community (p.82).” Contemporary Native women are slowly getting their power back. When the Bill of Rights was passed in 1960 Aboriginal women saw that they had a foothold, which would gain back the rights they lost to the Indian Act (Voyageur, 2000, p. 88). The Bill of Rights guaranteed equality to all under the law, regardless of race or sex (Voyageur, 2000, p.91). This meant that those women who lost their Indian status when they married non-Native men had been treated unfairly. Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Yvonne Bedard took their cases to the Supreme Court to gain full person status for Native women (Voyageur, 2000, p. 91). Sandra Lovelace also challenged the Indian Act in 1981 (Voyageur, 2000, p.92). In 1982 the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was passed which gave all people equal benefit of the law without discrimination based on sex or race (Voyageur, 2000, p. 92). This gave Native women the final foothold they needed to regain their rights. In 1985 Bill C-31 came into effect, which rectified Native women's forced loss of status and restored Indian status to people who had been enfranchised (Voyageur, 2000, p. 93). Unfortunately this did not mean that their band would accept them. Some bands did not allow them in because it would mean sharing resources with more people from a budget that was already very small (Voyageur, 2000, p.96). Women's fight to regain their rights was a long and hard battle but they never quit trying and that is the attitude that will win back their power in contemporary society.

Native women suffer many abuses in contemporary society. They struggle against an epidemic of abuse that is physical, sexual and emotional at the hands of society and from within their own culture and families. Emma LaRocque (1994) believes that the use of the label “squaw” is “grotesque and dehumanizing rendering women and girls vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual violence (p.74). This attitude is further perpetuated in a legal system that does little or nothing about crimes like these (LaRocque, 1994, p.77-78). Teen suicides in the Aboriginal communities are 5 times higher for young males than the national average and 3 times higher for females (Fox & Long, 2000, pp.275). Poverty, lack of education, and joblessness, drug and alcohol abuse and hopelessness are some of the main contributors to these shocking statistics (Fox & Long, 2000, pp.271-287). Fournier and Cray (1998) remark that The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples warned in a special report that “a significant number of Aboriginal people in this country believe they have more reasons to die than to live (p.307)”. This is a truly sad state of affairs.

Native women have initiated many programs throughout the country. There are programs to educate women and men about fetal alcohol syndrome and how to prevent it, AIDS prevention programs, suicide awareness education and domestic violence prevention, dental health, sexual health and nutritional health programs (The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center). Youth wellness and childcare programs are also very important and include breakfast and hot lunch programs as well as emergency childcare.

Battered women's shelters are also more available to Aboriginal women (The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center). Education is another area that Native women are working to improve. There is a high rate of drop out in Native children (Hare & Barman, 2000, p.331-338). Jan Hare and Jean Barman (2000) discuss the fact that Aboriginal groups reject the notion of integrated schools because they fail to address the needs and goals of Aboriginal people. In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood presented an education policy that highlighted parental responsibility, curriculum changes, teachers, facilities and services as areas that need attention and improvement (Hare & Barman, 2000, p.343-355). The main prerequisite is that Indians be allowed to control Indian education (Hare and Barman, 2000, p.351). As you can see that policy was presented thirty-three years ago and only minor changes have been made but Native women keep fighting for a better life.

Many Aboriginal people have moved off of the reserves looking for work and a better life (Peters, 2000, p.237-261). But a lack of education coupled with racism and sexism could result in their finding fewer jobs. There is deep poverty in urban areas but with no jobs to be had on the reserves they usually stay in the cities (Peters, 2000, p. 238-245). Evelyn Peters (2000) states that in order for Aboriginal people to survive in the city they must regain their cultural heritage and until they do they are not whole people and their communities are weak (p.257). Peters (2000) believes that friendship centers are meeting some of the needs of the Aboriginal people for friendship, access to elders, language education and celebrations but they are sorely under funded (pp.257-261). Space is needed for Aboriginal activities and ceremonies and cultural education for children, youth and adults (Peters, 2000, pp.257-261).

Although Native peoples are facing extreme pressure and hardship there is still hope. Angela Chalmers, the first woman to win the 1500-meter and the 3000-meter races in 1990 at the Commonwealth Games, credits her Aboriginal roots for teaching her patience and perseverance (Fournier & Cray, 2000, p.303). It is women like Angela who are the role models for other young women. She talks to young Native women and tells them to "put that anger to good use: in physical exertion, in confidence and in passion" (Fournier & Cray, 2000, p.303)". She also tells them that "because we've been through a lot we're strong people and we have a deep well of strength to draw on (Fournier & Cray, 2000, p.303)." Role models are an essential element in teaching young women that they really can achieve if they never give up. The Native Youth Movement is an organization set up to offer the same things to Aboriginal kids that gangs do – belonging, a sense of family and empowerment (Fournier & Cray, 2000, p.311). This organization sees Aboriginal youth activism as a vital alternative to apathy and violence (Fournier and Cray, 2000,p.311). Wendy Grant-John is an Aboriginal woman who competed for national chief and although she lost that bid she remains passionate about what she sees are important steps toward healing her culture. "We need to empower our youth by providing stronger education and employment options, to overcome with concrete action and goals the growing feeling of hopelessness, the unacceptable levels of suicide,

poverty and other signs of despair (p.314).”

In conclusion it seems apparent that the way to heal a Nation is through the children. Native people begin by giving children a family through parents, grandparents; extended family or even if it is through a Native social service group or club. Help children achieve an education even if it means tailoring the education system to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal children. In saying this we understand that funding needs to be adequately provided. The aid of parents is enlisted toward this goal by teaching them to trust and value education for their children. Providing young people with good role models is imperative. This is achieved by introducing them to educated successful adults in the worlds of sports, medicine, law, television, movies, the arts and business. Young Aboriginal children require adequate food, housing, health care, and parenting as the basic necessities of life but an astonishing number of these children are not getting these needs met and this needs to change. Young Aboriginal people develop a sense of belonging in this world and they do this through teachers like their elders, mothers and fathers who can teach them about their language and their culture and make them proud of whom they are. Provisions must be made so that young people see more reasons to live than to die.

Native women are providing the youth in Native cultures with as much as they can. Many Native women are getting post-secondary education and then in turn teach or help their people and their families. Native women set up groups and associations to help those who cannot help themselves. The grandmothers are wise and willing to teach the youth about their cultures and tell the stories that teach pride in self. It appears that the “wildish woman” is breaking out and fighting back with quiet strength to regain the Aboriginal woman's rightful place in the future. She is the provider, nurturer, mother, counselor and she is the spiritual and medical healer to her people.

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