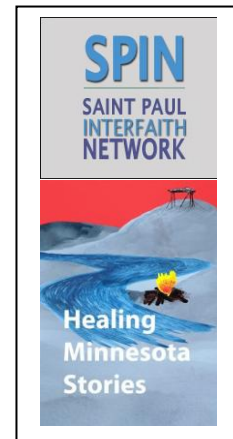


Native American Women Are Vulnerable to Abuse and Murder

Native American women have suffered great trauma under the Doctrine of Discovery and the cultural domination brought by white European nations. Native women have lost standing in their own communities because of influences of western-style patriarchy. They have been brutally violated by involuntarily sterilization. They continue to be victims of sexual violence at much higher rates than other women. Here is short history.

Women's Role in the Community Diminished: Gender roles differed between Native nations, but Native women had more influence in village life than their white contemporaries. For instance, for many plains Indians, the women owned the teepee and its contents, according to [The Encyclopeida of the Great Plains](#).



Tribal governments and communities protected a wide range of personal freedoms and democratic principles, including women's suffrage, according to a [2015 article by Robert Miller](#) (Eastern Shawnee), law professo at Arizona State University. "Iroquois women played very important roles in their government, and women were heavily involved in the governance of most, if not all, tribes," he writes.

Miller examined how the U.S. Constitution shaped tribal governance, not always for the better. In the 1800s, some tribes began adopting U.S.-style constitutions, motivated in part by wanting to fend off further land encroachment by showing they could adapt to American ways. In one case of self-imposed assimilation, the Stockbridge-Munsee Band tried to protect its sovereignty by adopting a constitution in 1837 – in English – requiring elected leaders to be Christians, and preventing women from voting.

Forced Sterilization: The United States has a long history of eugenics, which [PBS describes](#) as: "a commonly accepted means of protecting society from the offspring ... of those individuals deemed inferior or dangerous – the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, criminals, and people of color." It was one form of genocide used against Native Americans. From 1973-1976, the Indian Health Services conducted 3,406 sterilizations, according to a General Accounting Office report. Those numbers are likely the tip of the iceberg. "Independent research estimated that as many as 25-50% of Native American women were sterilized between 1970 and 1976," according to the [Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity](#). "Healthcare professionals' coercive tactics included the threat of withdrawing future healthcare provisions or custody of Native American children already born—if consent for sterilization was withheld."

Other research "indicated that the Indian Health Service had 'singled out full-blooded Indian women for sterilization procedures,'" according to the [Native Voices website](#). The practice had a noticeable impact on birth rates, [according to Wikipedia](#). In the 1970s, the average birth rate of Native American women was 3.79 children, but by 1980 the birth rate had fallen by more than half to 1.8 children.

Indigenous Women Face Higher Levels of Sexual Violence: Sexual violence against Native women is one of the many results of historic trauma, according to a 2017 presentation on “Sex Trafficking in Native Communities” by Bonnie Clairmont of the Tribal Law & Policy Institute. It’s the legacy of boarding schools and boarding school rapes, the removal of native nations from their homelands and the breakdown of Native families through boarding schools, foster care and adoption policies.

There is overwhelming data on the ongoing trauma suffered by Native women and girls. A Minnesota Women’s Foundation study of sex trafficking of minors in Minneapolis in 2013 found that 75 percent of the cases involved Native American juveniles. Looking more broadly, a [2013 policy brief](#) by the National Congress of American Indians says more than one third of Native women will be raped in their lifetimes. (American Indian women and girls are at least twice as likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes compared to all other races.)

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: Because Native women face higher levels of sexual violence, they also are more likely to be murdered or go missing. It has become a crisis in Canada. In 2016, it established the [National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#). According to its [2017 Interim report](#), while homicide rates for non-Indigenous women have been going down, they have been increasing for indigenous women. In 2015, indigenous women accounted for 24 percent of all homicides. (Indigenous women and girls are about 2 percent of Canada’s total population.)

The United States has a similar crisis. According to [information posted by U.S. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp](#) (D-ND), “56% of Native women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, and 38% were unable to receive any type of victim services. ... Access to telephones, transportation, emergency services, law enforcement officers and confidential victim services all act as barriers to getting the help they desperately need.” When there is no intervention, the abuse will continue and escalate.

On some reservations, Native women are killed at more than 10 times the rate of the national average, Heitkamp’s webpage says. This October, Heitkamp introduced legislation that would help combat the crisis of murdered and missing Native women and girls.