

**The Status of Native American Women:
A Study of the Lakota Sioux**

By

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A traditional Cheyenne saying still holds true for many Native Americans today: “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground.”¹ While Native American women have taken a beating—literally and figuratively—since the European conquest of Native America, the women’s hearts are still beating.

Although Native American tribes and nations vary historically and contemporarily, traditional Native American women’s perspectives can be generalized to an extent. Native American women typically value being mothers, caretakers, and social transmitters of cultural knowledge. A Native American woman’s identity is generally rooted in her spirituality, extended family, and tribe.²

The history of Native women and their status prior to European domination must be considered when looking at where Native women stand today. Little is known about Native American women—particularly Plains women—in early Native societies. Most of what is known comes from European men’s observations of the Native American women they encountered in their survey of Native America. For this reason, it is difficult to fully detail the status and roles Plains women held prior to European domination. But, by focusing on the Lakota (Sioux) tribe primarily, it is possible to paint a picture of the lives of Plains women.

Historically, the Teton Lakota (Sioux) were a male dominant warrior society, yet Lakota women maintained high status, particularly because the feminine “culture hero”

¹ Roger D. Herring and Tarrell Awe Agahe Portman, “Debunking the Pocahontas Paradox: The Need for a Humanistic Perspective.” *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Educating & Development* (Fall 2001): 188.

² Herring and Portman, 185.

was so important to Lakota belief systems.³ In the Lakota Sioux religion, the Sun (the universal Father) and the Earth (the universal Mother) were the parental symbols of all organic life and the main elements in the Great Spirit's creation.⁴ In many Native American cultures, women were viewed as extensions of the Spirit Mother, and therefore vital to the continuation of their people.⁵

According to their oral tradition, the Teton Lakota received seven sacred rites—including the Sacred Pipe—from the White Buffalo Calf Woman. When White Buffalo Calf Woman was finished giving the sacred rites, she told the Lakota women the work of their hands and the fruit of their wombs would keep the tribe alive. The choice of a woman, rather than a man, as a key sacred figure indicates the Sioux reverence for feminine qualities.⁶

Many Native American societies, such as the Iroquois, were matrilineal and matrifocal, meaning the societies focused on women but were not entirely ruled by women. In addition, some societies were considered gynocentric.⁷ Plains Indian tribes were more male-dominated, yet pre-reservation Plains tribes still had respect for and honored their females, and the women were often central to their tribes' cultures.⁸ Though not gynocentric, the Plains tribes did have “powerful female deities and female-centered social and spiritual structures.”⁹ The Plains Indian women were, however,

³ Beatrice Medicine, *Learning to Be an Anthropologist & Remaining “Native.”* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001: 155.

⁴ Marie Annette Jaimes, “Towards a new image of American Indian women.” *Journal of American Indian Education* (October 1982) <<http://jaie.asu.edu/v22/V22S1tow.html>> (6 October 2002).

⁵ Herring and Portman, 185.

⁶ Medicine, 141.

⁷ Herring and Portman, 188.

⁸ Medicine, 95.

⁹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The sacred hoop: recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1986: 96.

considered to be more passive and dependent than women of the Iroquois and other matrifocal tribes.

Perhaps Plains women were characterized as such for the same reasons they were sometimes seen as “beasts of burden,” because of the nature of their work within their tribes. The Teton Lakota were a mobile, hunting, and warring society that depended on buffalo for food, clothing, and even shelter. The band-type social organization of the tribe emphasized *tiospaye* (the extended family), and while kinship was typically shared between both parents, most often the families lived patrilocally.¹⁰

Division of labor between the sexes was typically a cooperative—and usually not oppressive—arrangement, where each sex engaged in the work they believed they were most capable of doing. Gender differences were vital for the division of labor and other activities, but such roles were not set in stone. Women’s work included tanning hides, carrying wood, and “on occasion bearing burdens that in no way inferred low status.”¹¹

From childhood, Plains boys and girls were indoctrinated in specific role expectations. A boy’s first real plaything—which he received as early as four years old—was often a miniature bow the boy’s father crafted for him. Meanwhile, mothers would make dresses and dolls for their daughters to play with. Play and storytelling among children was important, and children of both sexes played together until about age seven, when they began learning skills tailored to their specific gender roles.¹²

For Plains men, the fundamental virtues taught were bravery, fortitude, generosity, and wisdom. The highest virtues for women were industry, hospitality, kindness, with chastity valued for unmarried women, and fidelity and fertility for married

¹⁰ Allen, 96.

¹¹ Medicine, 98.

women.¹³ Women's roles were often considered supplementary to male pursuits in Plains tribes because theirs was a warring culture. Yet to the Lakota, womanhood was significant, and a woman's ability to produce children was considered a powerful act.¹⁴ "Even among Plains people, long considered the most male-oriented Indians... power was and is gained, accrued, mediated, and dispensed only through the grace and beneficence of female influence."¹⁵

While there were varied socially accepted roles for women, there were also reports of women who pushed aside expected gender roles and became "warrior women." Although women were not allowed to join war parties, many participated in war anyway. Some even led war expeditions and, if they achieved honors, they became *winoxca*, female soldiers.¹⁶

Scholars can only speculate why women would engage in war. For one, counting coups, stealing guns or horses, killing, and scalping were all considered prestigious and glorious. Women who could do such acts were respected and could even achieve independent wealth. For another, Plains women learned to fight for self-defense, both to protect themselves against men who might try to harm them in their own tribes and to protect themselves and their families during war.¹⁷

Even when women did not participate directly in warfare, they were still important to the military activity of the men in their tribes. Sometimes women would pressure their husbands to steal more horses in order to acquire more wealth, and some would even encourage their husbands to capture other women to be co-wives in helping

¹² Medicine, 97.

¹³ Medicine, 96.

¹⁴ Medicine, 141.

¹⁵ Allen, 205.

with domestic duties.¹⁸ Native women realized how important warfare was to their families and their communities, so they were supportive of and even active in it.

To a certain extent, scholars have conjectured about Native women because so little has been published about them beyond male-produced, ethnocentric accounts. These accounts often portrayed Native women as either the “princess” or the “prostitute”—the “unfailingly amiable, beautiful”¹⁹ Indian maiden or the dangerous, highly sexed and lustful woman. In other cases, women were either portrayed as the “dismal drudge” of the Plains warrior societies or the “matriarchal matron” of the Iroquois and other horticultural groups.²⁰

This image of the sullen drudge—one in which the Plains woman lives a powerless, subordinate existence—originated from male historians and missionaries who looked at Native cultures with “white man’s superiority.”²¹ Most of these men failed to see the real power Plains women held in their own cultures.

Prior to contact with Europeans, most Plains cultures emphasized the “dynamic, dyadic interplay of both genders in the ongoing enterprise that allows indigenous societies to exist.”²² Women and men often shared equally in social, economic, and ritual roles. Native American women were pivotal to community survival: They controlled material property and food; held positions of political importance, status, and power;

¹⁶ Medicine, 133.

¹⁷ Medicine, 133.

¹⁸ Medicine, 134.

¹⁹ Herring and Portman, 187.

²⁰ Medicine, 108.

²¹ Jaimes.

²² Medicine, 154.

educated children about traditional ceremonies and practices; and taught family history.²³ The continuation of most Native American tribes' oral traditions relied on female power.

For the most part, Indian women enjoyed more economic, social, and political status than colonial women. They often had final say when the warriors' council disagreed, could stop the tribe from going to war by refusing to provide rations,²⁴ and even made decisions about captives.²⁵ "Among most Plains people, power and cultural knowledge were accumulated by and dispensed through females,"²⁶ which illustrates why it has been said that American Indian societies were only as strong as their women.²⁷

Yet the European conquest of Native lands altered women's roles in Plains tribes. In the 19th century, women were forced to become economically dependent on the men in their tribes who engaged in the fur trade. "Generally, their status declined, and they became more vulnerable to the interests and machinations of men."²⁸ Also around this time, the Sun Dance was prohibited because Europeans considered it a "heathen ritual." In place of their traditional religion, the Natives were supposed to worship a patriarchal male god who allowed for punishment of sins. The loss of the Sun Dance further disturbed the previously equal social and economic roles enjoyed by men and women.²⁹

What had been successful Native social systems were demolished and replaced with a European model for change. The pressure to assimilate led to new sex norms, behaviors, and expectations as part of a global European education policy that failed to account for differences between Native tribes. Children were often placed in boarding

²³ Herring and Portman, 187.

²⁴ Jaimes.

²⁵ Herring and Portman, 187.

²⁶ Herring and Portman, 187.

²⁷ Allen, 205.

²⁸ Medicine, 130.

²⁹ Medicine, 143.

schools and subsequently stripped of their cultural identities.³⁰ Formerly strong interpersonal relationships between the sexes were replaced with more divergent roles: blacksmithing and agriculture were taught to men (and male roles of warrior and hunter were discarded) and women were taught to focus simply on housekeeping and rearing children (and lost respect as leaders and decision-makers). As the Europeans emphasized separation between the sexes, a “subtle subordination” was forced upon Lakota women.³¹

The patriarchal model of kinship imposed by the Europeans, the placement of Indians on reservations, the destruction of male roles, and the diminished value of Indian women had lasting effects on Native peoples.³² “The Christian ethic of patriarchy—a male god and a patrilineal kinship model with the imposition of patrilineal family names—virtually eclipsed the autonomy of Native women.”³³

Lakota women’s assimilation to Anglo society led to an “identity crisis” that has weakened their status and roles in their own tribes.³⁴ The destruction of traditional complementary gender roles has led to an increase in Native American male control over the women of their tribes.³⁵ This crisis has been caused in no small part by the status Lakota women now hold in the eyes of the men in their society. The exploitation of feminine wiles, wills, and intelligence that has been portrayed in writing and the media has now materialized in the mindset of Native men.³⁶ Some Lakota Sioux men even admit they are chauvinistic and are not apologetic in the least bit. Such men often criticize professional women as “women’s libbers” and say that female activism is

³⁰ Medicine, 102.

³¹ Medicine, 143.

³² Medicine, 154.

³³ Medicine, 155.

³⁴ Jaimes.

³⁵ Herring and Portman, 195.

³⁶ Medicine, 93.

ridiculous because the men “know best what women need.”³⁷ Unfortunately, there are Native women who allow themselves to be manipulated by such men.

But to say all Native men have conformed to the stereotypical Anglo perspective of women is a grave error. Many Sioux men still respect old traditions and the complementary nature of the sexes. In fact, some are so pro-female that they make a point of pushing their daughters toward leadership roles.³⁸

With the help of such men, and women’s own steps toward empowerment, Lakota women are making gains in reviving their status in their tribes. Most Lakota women still hold traditional roles as housekeepers, child bearers (the Lakota Sioux still do not acknowledge womanhood in some cases until a child is borne from a recognized union),³⁹ and nurturers—and the days of unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision are long behind them.⁴⁰ Yet women’s positions in their own families and communities have improved, and in many cases the importance of their roles in family life eclipse those of the men. According to Beatrice Medicine:

Women have increased their importance in family life and have already emancipated themselves from their former supplementary role. Through organized clubs and guilds, parent-teacher associations, and the community and tribal council, they have accepted active community leadership.⁴¹

Lakota women are increasing their domestic and political authority in tribal situations by occupying more positions as tribal council members, judges, and decisions makers.⁴²

³⁷ Medicine, 145.

³⁸ Medicine, 144.

³⁹ Medicine, 138.

⁴⁰ Allen, 203.

⁴¹ Medicine, 104.

⁴² Herring and Portman, 196.

The number of Native lawyers since the 1970s has increased, and as of 2001 more than 1/3 of the roughly 700 Native lawyers are women.⁴³

Native American women's power now comes not only politically, but also through artistic and educational efforts, welfare and economic projects, and participation in rituals.⁴⁴ Although there is still emphasis on male-oriented belief structures, in the Lakota belief system remnants of women's religious roles are still visible: Lakota maidens still cut the sacred tree, a revered older woman plays the role of Sacred Pipe Woman, and some women even dance in the Sun Dance voluntarily.⁴⁵

Regardless of their advances, however, Lakota women, as well as women from other Native American tribes, face an uphill battle. Demographic data suggests that Native women's health and mental status is much worse than that of non-Native women because Native women live under multiple oppressions: being a woman, often living in poverty, and being a minority. Native women are also faced with a lack of resources to assist them with the mental health issues they are plagued with, including personality disorders, alcoholism, psychoses, drug abuse, and suicide. From the time they are girls, Native women are a vulnerable population—adolescent females are six times more likely to be sexually abused than males, are more likely to suffer from depression and to contemplate suicide, and often become addicted to and abuse alcohol.⁴⁶ And even if treatment resources are available for women, many are not able to afford assistance or

⁴³ Medicine, 160.

⁴⁴ Medicine, 160.

⁴⁵ Medicine, 144.

⁴⁶ Herring and Portman, 191.

choose not to take it because Native women have been “encouraged to be strong and resilient in the face of tragedy.”⁴⁷

In the case of Native American women, as with Native American men, alcohol is a major factor in their suffering and the destruction of their culture. Besides the alcohol abuse that is prevalent with adolescent girls, Native women are prone to excessive consumption of alcohol during pregnancy, which often leads to fetal alcohol syndrome.⁴⁸ However, the most common abusers of alcohol are men. Single-parent households, usually female, are growing in numbers because alcohol-related incarceration rates for men are so high.⁴⁹

Alcohol use that leads to sexual abuse and battery is a common occurrence both on reservations and among urban and rural Native Americans.⁵⁰ “The rage and violence directed toward them [women] by Native American Indian men are generally attributed as manifestations of their anger and pain associated with the loss of their respected male roles.”⁵¹ Due in part to the anger Native American men take out on women, Native American women experience the highest rate of violence of any group in the United States,⁵² and the violence against Native American women is powerful evidence of the decline of women’s status in their tribes since European contact. Such “social ills were virtually unheard of among tribes” in the past, when respect for women was at the center of a culture.⁵³

⁴⁷ Herring and Portman, 192.

⁴⁸ Medicine, 157.

⁴⁹ Medicine, 159.

⁵⁰ Herring and Portman, 191.

⁵¹ Herring and Portman, 195.

⁵² Lisa Bhungalia, *Native American Women and Violence* [online]. Spring 2001. National Organization for Women. <<http://www.now.org/nnt/spring-2001/nativeamerican.html>> (6 October 2002).

⁵³ Allen, 191.

A report by the Department of Justice entitled “American Indians and Crime,” revealed that Native American women are the victims of violent crimes three and a half times more often than the national average—and this number may be much higher than that since 70% of sexual assaults are still not reported.⁵⁴ Native American women often have little recourse or defense against abuse because they receive so little help from law enforcement. Police and the courts often overlook cases of violence involving Native American women because of supposed confusions between federal and tribal jurisdiction.⁵⁵ For example, some counties in South Dakota recognize tribal court orders and others do not, so spousal abuse is often written off as a “domestic issue.”⁵⁶ As sexual offense worker Bonnie Clairmont points out:

One of the crucial things many professionals do not understand, is that Native Americans have a legitimate reason to distrust ‘the system.’ After all, memories—both personal and cultural—of forced sterilization and other violent ‘treatment’ procedures are not so far in the distant past for many Native Americans.⁵⁷

With so little assistance available to women who suffer from abuse, it is no wonder that their only true means for survival is self-empowerment. Native American women have been “screwed over” by the system since they were forced to assimilate to Anglo traditions and roles in the 19th century. After the formation of reservations, Native women lost their status and their aspirations fell to the wayside.

These women are not giving up. Native American women scholars are beginning to speak out, Native American women lawyers are beginning to fight for women’s rights, and awareness is slowly growing about their plight. No longer content to be seen as the “sullen drudge” or the Indian princess, these women are asserting their rights and making

⁵⁴ Bhungalia.

⁵⁵ Bhungalia.

their voices heard in their communities—they are standing up for their physical and cultural survival. Native women are willing to fight, to make sacrifices, to stay faithful and strong, because they know in the end their hearts will stay where they belong ... at the center of their tribes, holding things together.

Paula Gunn Allen captures the spirit of today's Native women—if their spirit can be captured in such a brief paragraph—when she says:

We survive war and conquest; we survive colonization, acculturations, assimilation; we survive beating, rape, starvations, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Medicine, 157.

⁵⁷ Bhungalia.

⁵⁸ Allen, 190.

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