
The Invisible Victims of Human Trafficking in Indian Country

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Few hear the silent screams of the disproportionate numbers of Native American women and children being trafficked within the United States. Indigenous children and women are brokered like chattel and relegated to nothing more than objects for sexual gratification, a sustained practice since the colonization of America. Estimates of human trafficking have focused almost exclusively on international victims. Only recent estimates of minors at risk for sexual exploitation come close to estimating human trafficking in the United States. Data specific to certain populations such as Native American victims of trafficking are sparse indeed.

For hundreds of years, American Indians have been subjected to war, forced colonization, slaughter, rape, and other atrocities. Even today, military domination, Indian boarding schools, and forced urban relocation are not commonly regarded as forms of human trafficking (Deer, 2010). However, they are indissoluble aspects of the devastation of tribal culture—culture being the keystone of once great nations. Powerful, strong tribes became fragmented to the point where they could no longer provide safety and protection of their women and children from abduction, deculturalization, and sexual servitude.

In the late 1800s, pious, self-appointed saviors of savages regarded boarding schools as benevolent and necessary to educate and save souls. But to Native Americans, boarding schools were nothing more than interment facilities for the subjugation and deculturalization of themselves as a people. Often during the Boarding School era, children were taken from their homes and families and transported at times hundreds of miles across the country. Those who resisted were threatened with starvation and jail (Morgan, 1973).

The forced “relocation” of Native Americans was not instituted for their benefit. The removal was a remedy to the conflicts between Indians as well as the expansion and domination of the West. The U.S. Army conducted a famous forced migration called the “Trail of Tears.” It traced a march of Southeastern Indians in the 1830s, where many perished along the way (Thornton, 1984). During frequent military escorted relocations of the time, the sexual assault perpetrated against a Native American woman or girl would meet the elements of sex trafficking as promulgated by the federal government. Even when we are confronted with

stories handed down by survivors, we cannot escape the tremendous travesty of justice and mockery of human rights that has evolved like a virus for centuries. Cloaked in self-righteous rhetoric, along with romanticized notions of salvation and deliverance, the objectification of Native women and young girls has been either accepted by the dominant society or ignored. This stigmatism is a source of vexation on multiple fronts to Native Americans, as it should be for all Americans.

The sexual use and abuse of Native women and children has, over the past several hundred years, evolved into a lucrative commercial enterprise. Carnal predators, purveyors of flesh, capitalize on the homeless, desperate, vulnerable, and the poverty stricken in major cities and remote reservations and Alaskan communities. Native women and children have been identified as “among the most economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised groups in the United States” (Poupart, 2003, p. 91). Research conducted by the U. S. Department of Justice found that in some counties murder rates of American and Alaska Native women are more than 10 times the national average (Perry, 2004). Lack of published material, subjects’ geographic isolation, and limited population-based research make calculating an accurate accounting of the number of Native women and young adults difficult. The pervasiveness of human trafficking can at best be estimated. Moreover, the overwhelming amount of research and documentation of human trafficking has concentrated almost exclusively on international trafficking victims. Most research on violence against Native women in the United States does not include prostitution and sex trafficking as forms of sexual violence. Neither a 2007 report by Amnesty International about sexual assault perpetrated against Native American women in the United States, nor a 2010 report on sexual violence against Native American women addressed prostitution and sex trafficking (Deer, 2010).

Between 244,000 and 325,000 American youth are considered at risk for sexual exploitation, and an estimated 199,000 incidents of sexual exploitation of minors occur each year in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Laczko & Gozdziaik, 2005). Rates of violent victimization of American Indians are more than twice as high as the national average (Manson, Beals, Klein, & Croy, 2005; Bachman, Zaykowski, Lanier, Poteyeva, &

Kallmyer, 2010). Comprehensive data on violence against women under tribal jurisdiction do not exist because neither a federal or Indian agency nor any other organization systematically collects the information. Victims often remain veiled in secrecy, shame, and feelings of hopelessness. They are vigilant to the authority of police and the possibility of arrest, reprisal from punitive traffickers, and untrusting of public servants wallowing in corruption, ineptitude, unconcern, and complicity with nefarious individuals. Therefore, it is common for Native American victims not to report crimes because of the belief that nothing will be done.

From the limited amount of research available, four key points are worthy of discussion:

1. Sex trafficking of female Native youth within the United States exists.
2. Native females are trafficked at disproportionate levels due to risk factors correlated with prostitution.
3. In some regions, limited resources on the reservation and jurisdictional complexities create a favorable environment for traffickers to prey upon young Native females.



4. Traffickers prey upon a constellation of female Native youth vulnerabilities, such as cultural disassociation, lack of opportunity, and profound poverty.

The legal definition of *human trafficking* for the purpose of this article is as set forth in the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (2000), which defines severe trafficking in persons as the following:

- (a) Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age, or
- (b) The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Many Native Americans hold strong to cultural tenets of relation, harmony, balance, spirituality, and wellness as part of valuing the long-held tradition that those beliefs are interrelated and maintained in equilibrium. The traditional culture of a people, and their regard for the care and development of their children, provides clear insight into their society. Without question, the guidance received by a child during the first years of life will affect his or her intellectual, social, and emotional development throughout life. Too often in modern Native American communities, however, adult self-gratification, drug and alcohol dependency, isolation, severe poverty levels, and internalized oppression trump fundamental developmental needs of their precious babies.

Today, many Native American Indians suffer from intergenerational pain: grief, anxiety, and stress. The suffering was initiated hundreds of years ago with the onset of manifest destiny, the belief that American settlers were destined to expand across the continent. What began was the end of freedom for Native peoples—the end of the right to speak their languages, sing their songs, and educate themselves through elders, nature, and their community. Pan-generational mental anguish and trauma over time has resulted in present day disharmony, low self-esteem, shame, and loss of spirit, language, traditions, and identity. The ensuing pain manifested in a lack of extended family and community bonding. As a result, statistics are staggering among Native people for domestic violence, child and elder abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

During the latter portion of the 20th century, a little-known government program created the largest movement of Indians in American history. The final scope and meaning of the massive social experiment are still impacting Native peoples today. It was the intent of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 (also known as Public Law 959 or the Adult Vocational Training Program) to

encourage Native Americans in the United States again to leave reservations, acquire vocational skills, and assimilate into mainstream America (Bertolet, 2011).

Urban relocation was the next inevitable chapter in the long history of Native peoples being taken far from their homes by an insensitive, hostile foreign power. Razack (2000) postulated that the urbanization process of Native Americans is one in which “slum administration replaces colonial administration.” The intent of the relocation process was to force Native Americans to abandon generations of culture and traditions, to assimilate into mainstream society, and to embrace completely foreign paradigms as evidenced over decades of government initiatives.

For example, in 1940, 7.2% of Native people resided in urban communities (Metcalf, 1982). In 1943, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) initiated a relocation of Native Americans from reservations to urban communities. A subsequent initiative, the Voluntary Relocation Program, was implemented in 1952 (Ablon, 1965). After nearly 50 years of relocating American Indians off the reservations, where they originally had been placed, the U.S. Census reported in 1990 that approximately 60% of Native Americans reside in urban communities (Sandefur et al., 1996).

As a result of modernization and urbanization, Native Americans live in extremely adverse social and physical environments that place them at high risk of exposure to traumatic experiences. Sexual exploitation and violence against Native women do not occur only on reservations but also in urban areas. A study of Native women in New York City found that over 65% had experienced some form of interpersonal violence, including rape (48%), domestic violence (40%), and childhood physical abuse (28%). Forty percent of the Native women in the study had suffered multiple forms of interpersonal violence (Evans-Campbell, Lindhorst, Huang, & Walters, 2006).

There is a prominent over-representation of Native Americans in the homeless population in the United States as well. The *2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report* found that Native Americans comprise slightly less than 1% of the general population, but they account for 8% of the country’s homeless population, and 46% of Native American households in reservation communities are overcrowded (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2010).

Homelessness is a derivative of poverty, and homelessness is also a primary risk factor for prostitution, which is linked to sex trafficking (Farley & Barkan, 1998). In a Minnesota study, Suzanne Koeplinger reported that 24% of women on probation for prostitution in North Minneapolis are Native American, which is 10 times the proportion of their population of Minneapolis (2.2%, Koeplinger, 2008). When the government and nonprofit agencies are unable to provide adequate shelter for women and children, pimps respond to the need and provide housing via



prostitution. When asked what they need, first on the lists of women in prostitution is housing (Farley & Barkan, 1998).

Today, young Native American girls are prime victims for pimps and sexual predators. The situation of Native American people is consistent with human trafficking. In her book *Reconceptualising Female Trafficking*, Alison Cole (2006) explained,

Female trafficking involves powerful persons enforcing the detainment and exploitation of economically marginalized or otherwise vulnerable women for the purposes of forced prostitution. Trafficking for forced prostitution is distinct from its composite crimes such as rape, torture and unlawful detention because it represents the culmination of all these acts through the complete deprivation of personal autonomy. (p. 790)

Some advocates anecdotally opine cultural trauma, and a long history of abuse and exploitation of Native Americans facilitates inroads of traffickers into American Indian communities. Other risk factors, such as high rates of runaway or “throwaway” youth and the normalization of sex to children, are unfortunately acute in some Native American communities. Findings from the *Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children* (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002) offer additional information about the possible prevalence of

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minors trafficked or at risk of being trafficked domestically into the commercial sex industry. For example, in 1999, 1,682,900 youth experienced a period of time in which they could be characterized as a runaway or as a throwaway youth; 71% of these youth were also considered at risk for prostitution (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

Congress articulated in the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 that

Traffickers primarily target women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, the lack of access to education, chronic unemployment, discrimination, and the lack of economic opportunities in countries of origin. Traffickers lure women and girls into their networks through false promises of decent working conditions at relatively good pay as nannies, maids, dancers, factory workers, restaurant workers, sales clerks, or models. Traffickers also buy children from poor families and sell them into prostitution or into various types of forced or bonded labor. (Deer, 2010, p. 669)

Getting young Native girls into the sex trade is not difficult for savvy traffickers. Sex traffickers use a variety of methods to “condition” their victims, such as starvation, confinement, beatings, physical abuse, rape, gang rape, threats of violence to the victim and the victim’s family, and forced drug use. A 2008 report on sex trafficking found that those involved in domestic human trafficking in Minnesota prey upon individuals perceived to be vulnerable due to the following: age, poverty, chemical dependency, history of abuse, lack of resources or support systems, or lack of immigration status (Bortell et al., 2008). Pimps who control the women and girls tend to be of two different types: “guerilla pimps” and “finesse pimps.” Guerilla pimps primarily use violence and intimidation to control prostitutes. Finesse pimps excel in the psychological tactics needed to

deceive juvenile females and to lure them into trusting and servitude. However distinct the types may be, a pimp uses whichever tactic yields the desired control of the trafficked victim and her activity in the sex industry.

Traffickers typically employ one or multiple means to control young Native American girls:

1. Force – Used in guerilla pimping
 - Physical assault (beatings, burning, hitting, assault with a weapon)
 - Sexual assault, gang rape
 - Physical confinement
 - Isolation (physical and mental/emotional)
 - Kidnapping
 - Street abductions
2. Fraud – Used in guerilla pimping and finesse pimping
 - False employment offers
 - Lies, false promises about work conditions
 - Withholding wages
 - False education
 - Mail-order brides; chance at a better life
3. Coercion – Used in guerilla pimping and finesse pimping
 - Threats to life and safety given to family members or others
 - Threats involving immigration status or arrest
 - Debt bondage: escalating or never-ending debt
 - Withholding legal documents
 - Creating a climate of constant fear
4. Similar to description of violent gang and prostitution ring tactics was recruitment by force
 - Using threats
 - Physical violence
 - Intimidation against the girl or against someone she cares about to coerce her into prostitution

Women gang members play multiple roles. They are pimps, recruiters, groomers, watchers who make sure girls get to and from their assigned locations, and wife-in-laws (other women trafficked by the same pimp) living together and supervised by the pimp or the woman closest to him. Gangs are playing an increasingly large role in the sex trafficking of American Indian girls and women both on reservations and in urban communities. It is unfortunate that the myriad of forms of violence against perpetrated Native Women in a nation as great as the United States has become trivialized. Sadly, many of the adult Native American women working as prostitutes were inducted into the sex trade as children (Baran, 2009).



What can we do in response to the rising trade of the flesh of Native American girls? We can re-frame the issue and stop criminalizing the victims. We can increase access to culturally appropriate housing and holistic care for victims. We can build community support through honest dialogue. We can hold perpetrators accountable. We can modify ineffective criminal justice systems to increase penalties for perpetrators and bring resources into victims. We can prioritize the healing within our communities. We can stand for those who are too weak. We can give voice for those who cannot speak. We can plan and make good decisions; we can ensure the decisions today will benefit our children seven generations into the future so there are silent screams no more.

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