

Imagine a world where all indigenous women are treated with the utmost respect. In the past, Native American women were highly revered due to their ability to give birth. The ability to give life insures the continuance of a Tribe or family and its cultural values. In fact, in many Native tribes, only women can own land, as they are considered the key to future generations. However, this has changed.

American Indian women are more than 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than women in the U.S. in general (Amnesty International, 2007). Homicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for Native women. Furthermore, Native women will lose their children in instances of physical and sexual abuse. (ICADV Legal Information).

I believe alcohol and drug use are the largest contributing factors in abuse, especially in sexual attacks. Over two-thirds (68%) of Native women who were assaulted believe their attackers had been drinking and/or taking drugs before the offense. Native Americans have a rate of alcoholism that is much higher than the rest of the population. Drug use is common in younger ages and is considered "cool." Alcohol and drug use are common and normal to use in earlier ages. I believe this early use is the result of our youths searching for their identity. Our youth who do not have strong traditional values, parental guidance or high educational goals often struggle to find their identity in our society. Often these youths engage in behaviors that run counter to the norms of the "white" culture. These behaviors often include gang affiliations, graffiti, and alcohol and drug use. Research shows the younger a person starts drinking, the more likely it is that they will become an alcoholic. This youthful rebellion results in a lifetime of alcohol abuse and addiction

The preservation of Native women is essential to the survival of the tribes. But today, one in three Native women will be raped in her lifetime, and six in ten will be physically assaulted. On some reservations, the murder rate for Native women is ten times the national average

(Violence against Women Act). These statistics are so terrifying and many of these incidents are underreported.

A victim's desire to hide or deny the abuse out of feelings of shame will lead to the continuation of sexual or domestic violence. Many women go back to their abusers knowing they will be abused again, but go back because they fear of being alone. There are even documented cases of women who knew their daughters were being molested, but did nothing to stop the abuse. They did nothing out of fear of losing their partner, the abuser. These women are giving in to temptation and giving up their power to someone who does not regard them as high as they deserve. This teaches our young girls that they have no value and abuse is an accepted part of life. We're told to never settle for less than we deserve. So why do they do it? We need to protect our daughters. We need to teach young women to value themselves. Domestic violence and sexual abuse are not acceptable, and must be stopped. Our feelings or emotional attachments should never take priority over our children's welfare and wellbeing. We may not be able to control how we feel, but we do have control over how we allow others to treat us.

Domestic violence is a learned behavior. Many young women observe this from other people, including family and friends. They observe this from an early age and think it's normal. Young women on the reservation live their lives in anticipation of being raped because it's normal. They talk about how they will survive their rape rather than taking action and notifying someone they trust. We need to empower young women to take a stand if this happens.

Many of our women do not graduate high school and are unable to support themselves. This leads to them being dependent on others and feeling helpless to leave. We must create an educational network which not only supports high school graduation, but which also provides higher educational or vocational trade opportunities for our women.

To create change, we as a community need to increase awareness of domestic violence by creating community education and prevention campaigns. As a tribe, we need to enhance the victim's safety and develop strategies to prevent abuse from taking event. We need to strengthen the tribal criminal justice system, developing and enforcing mandatory strong punishments for

the abuser. We need to give more power to tribal authorities in cases of abuse and violence against Native American women.

We need to create a future without violence. If we do not find a way to change this epidemic, we will have done what the bullets, the treaties, and boarding schools did not. We will have succeeded in eliminating native culture in a meaningful way.

Resources:

Department of Justice, T. (2014, September 5). Tribal Communities. Retrieved March 25, 2015, from <http://www.justice.gov/ovw/tribal-communities>

Graef, C. (2014, August 25). Native American Women Finally Seeing Protections They Need. Retrieved March 24, 2015, from <http://www.mintpressnews.com/native-american-women-finally-seeing-protections-need/195740/>