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Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Roles in the 21st Century

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Keywords: Native, identity, Native women, traditional, anti-colonial, invasion, colonial consequences, healing

Terminology

In this article, the term *Indigenous* and *Native* (with a capital "N") will be used interchangeably to describe the original inhabitants of an area. The term *invasion* will describe the invasion of Indigenous land by Europeans. *Self-Identity* or *Identity* will be used to describe the traditional idea of oneself pre-invasion. The phrase *White World* is not to be described as a different space or world, it will be used to describe those who believe that all ideas and life should fit into a Western worldview, or come from it, and that those who function in it are superior.

Decision making and leadership roles for Native women have shifted disproportionately because of circumstances that stem directly from colonization. Although Native women have been resourceful in how they have actively worked to rebalance themselves as leaders in traditional matrilineal societies and reclaim their respective statuses in their communities, one way in particular that Native women have reclaimed their identity as knowledge holders and leaders is by navigating the academy successfully and returning home to their nations, or doing work that has a direct impact on their nations to help create change. A shift in balance in contemporary Native nations has caused Native women to be oppressed and marginalized from both Native communities and outside communities as a direct result of colonization. Traditional Native societies once held the women at very high standards and recognized that although their roles in their community differ from a man's role, they were still held

in equal value to the man: everyone understood their roles and they all mattered in the community (Green). Invasion of the land by settlers began a darkness that has haunted, and still does, Native people since contact and has birthed many past and present issues that affect their communities today. Historical and intergenerational trauma, brought on by assimilation, ethnocide, forced removal, and on-going oppression, have been the root of this shift. Colonization has forced trauma and lateral oppression on current Native communities, making it difficult to strive, along with forcing cultural loss and self-identity issues to take place (Garza). These losses have reinforced the shift in balance regarding roles and respect for Native women. In addition, colonization has created many trickle effects of social, emotional, and spiritual grief. However, despite the long history of colonization and systemic, ongoing oppression, Native women have worked endlessly to break down barriers, reclaim

their identity and traditional knowledge, and define their success on their own terms through academia, in order to break generational curses to revitalize and heal their nations.

To understand the effects of colonization, or “the formal and informal methods, (i.e., behaviors, ideologies, institutions, policies, and economies) that maintain the subjugation or exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, lands, and resources (Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005)” (Garza, 2015), on Native women and gender roles, it is important to understand that colonization has plagued Native nations since the invasion of settlers and has yet to be extinguished. It has stripped people of their humanity and lives with its willful force to kill and remove anything in its way. It has destroyed Native families, cultures, traditions, and land throughout the 527 years post-invasion. U.S. Colonization is still present and works to keep Native populations oppressed and the policies and laws implemented by the U.S. have played a major role in colonization. Natives were subjected to reservations in the late 19th century, which forcibly removed Native nations to confined territories in which they were to stay bound to (“The Reservation System | Native Americans”). This made it difficult for Native people to steward the land and continue their traditional lifestyle of worship, hunting, and living freely. The first official off-reservation boarding school began in 1879 and was known as the Carlisle Indian School (“History and Culture”). The boarding school system was designed to assimilate Native children into the “white world” and Christianity, which included white language and culture and was a contribution to the loss of Native identity and ethnocide (“History and Culture”). At these boarding schools, children who were stripped from their families and forced to go were almost always beaten, raped, or starved if they were caught practicing their traditional way of life and/or language (“History and Culture”). The experiences that came with the attendance of boarding schools were almost always violent, and, naturally, the violence was internalized by the attendees and unintentionally passed down through generations. The Dawes Act of 1887 authorized the U.S. government to break up land into checkerboard land assignments and allowed individual lots to be

parceled out (“Dawes Act”, 1887). This act weakened the kinship and force of Native nations by dismantling them through isolation, reinforcing their “divide and conquer” systems (“Dawes Act”, 1887). In 1956, the Indian Relocation Act was a part of the Indian termination policy that encouraged Native people to leave reservations and assimilate into the “white” world (Library). All of these policies caused emotional and spiritual grievances for Native people broadly, and Native women specifically, because they influenced major cultural loss. Many times, if not always, Native people were backed into a wall to comply with these policies because their families or survival was threatened. Because of these policies, Native nations who unintentionally internalized the trauma began to adopt Western worldviews as a means of survival and with that internalization and adoption arose accepted violence. Through ethnocide, forced assimilation, and the internalization of Native people’s experiences passed down intergenerationally, a loss of cultural identity occurred that has led to contemporary social problems and the shift of balance in gender roles in Native society.

“The concept of historical trauma, also called intergenerational trauma... involves exposure of an earlier generation to a traumatic event that continues to affect the subsequent generations” (Cole 2006). These internalized experiences of harm and trauma have been an invisible aspect that contributes a great deal to the shift of balance in gender roles in Native societies. The major historical policies discussed in the previous section have influenced the shift of balance of equality, reaffirmed the dominance of the Eurocentric society, and began the internalization and projection of violence, from both Native and non-Native people, as the societies shifted. Winona LaDuke, an enrolled member of the White Earth Mississippi Band of Ojibwe (Bear Clan) and well-respected environmentalist, economist, and writer, who is most known for her work on tribal land claims & environmental justice, states:

We collectively find that we are often in the role of the prey to a predator society whether through sexual discrimination, exploitation,

sterilization, absence of control over our bodies, or being the subjects of repressive laws and legislation in which we have no voice. This occurs on an individual level, but equally and more significantly on a societal level. It is also critical to point out at this time most matrilineal societies, societies in which governance and decision making are largely controlled by women, have been obliterated from the face of the Earth by colonialism and industrialism. The only matrilineal societies that still exist in the world today are those of indigenous nations. Yet we also face obliteration” (LaDuke, p. 213)

As Winona expresses, colonialism, in its nature, has been destructive to Native nations and, because of the traumatic events from colonization, many societal ills have surfaced that have made success for Indigenous women and restoration of traditional societies extremely hard. The societal ills in Native communities that emerged from colonization are contemporary problems that have influenced a society that citizens of that society attempt to fix. It is, most of the time, a consequence of factors beyond their control. In an article written by Lisa M. Poupart, she states that, “Virtually nonexistent in traditional tribal communities prior to European invasion, contemporary American Indian communities struggle with devastating social ills including alcoholism, family violence, incest, sexual assault, fetal-alcohol syndrome, homicide, and suicide at startling rates similar and sometimes exceeding those of white society” (Poupart, p. 88). Societal ills and statistics, according to the American Psychological Association, include Native people having the highest alcohol consumption on a weekly basis (Cole 2006). A connection has been made between alcohol abuse in Native nations and low self-esteem, loss of cultural identity, lack of positive role models, history of abuse and neglect, self-medication due to feelings of hopelessness, and loss of family and tribal connections (Brown-Rice)—all of which are a direct result of colonization. The problems that are found in contemporary Native nations have been found to be tied to past trauma and oppression that these nations have endured generationally.

Ultimately, birthing children into a destructive cycle with no adequate form or method of healing, unintentionally continues the cycle. The societal ills that are present in contemporary Native nations are contributing factors and a piece of the history that has unintentionally allowed the shift in balance between these societies.

Violence is something that Native people have been historically exposed to through many different avenues and tactics. Through historical trauma, violence was internalized by Native populations as a collective and intergenerationally passed down; contributing to the shift of balance in Native gender roles. Traditional ways of life had begun to shift, balance in Native nations was beginning to wither, and, more times than not, the women of these nations were the most affected. On some reservations, Native women are murdered at ten times the national average (Walker). Colonial consequences have affected the women because it has allowed them to be objectified in a number of ways. Modern society has seen Native women as sex symbols with no regard to real consequences when violence is/has been projected on/towards them. Disney, who used one of the first documented cases of human trafficking on Native women and romanticized it, is a prime example. They made Indigenous women a sexual fantasy by the production of the movie *Pocahontas*. 84% of Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime. Domestic violence and physical assault are estimated to be as much as 50% higher in Native communities than the next most victimized demographic (Formerly Family Violence Prevention Fund) (Rosay). More than 1 in 2 women have experienced sexual assault (Walker). This is a devastating result of the balance shift in Native nations because it has forced the women of these nations to be seen as less than, in both their communities and in the “white” world.

Statistics have defined the scale of the problem but there is more to be done to convey the epidemic proportions of the issue and the experiences that come with it (“Safe Women, Strong Nations”). The statistics tell a small portion of the story and fail to account for the impacts the survivors have gone through (“Safe Women, Strong Nations”). The Indian Law Resource Center’s statistics show

that Native children who are exposed to violence suffer rates of PTSD three times higher than the rest of the general population in America (“Safe Women, Strong Nations”). These statistics provide us with insight on how violence against Indigenous women has a direct impact on the next generation of Native children, being the portal that children come into this world through. If not addressed and corrected, it will only continue. The Indian Law Resource Center uses their platform as a project that raises awareness to get federal attention and support to end violence against Native women. Violence has been normalized by Native communities and the uncontrollable acceptance of this such behavior has set the tone for the exploitation and abuse of Native women, majorly at the hands of non-Native men, that continues into the 21st century due to patriarchy and white supremacy brought on by the colonizers.

Due to a long history of assimilation, the family dynamics in these nations began to change and the patriarchal systems that European invaders functioned under began to influence Native nations. When speaking on the leadership roles in the Navajo Nation, Jennifer Nez Denetdale, citizen of the Navajo Nation, professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, and the first-ever Dine/Navajo to earn a Ph.D. in history, states, “Although written reports do not mention women as leaders or chiefs, Navajo oral tradition and other accounts make note that it was not unheard of for women to serve as headmen or chiefs. Further, early American accounts have noted Navajo women’s presence in council proceedings between Navajo and American leaders... they influenced the decisions that male leaders made on behalf of the people” (Nez Denetdale, p. 177). Prior to European arrival, women in Native nations had an influence in decision making and were well-respected as leaders. Due to European influence over time, gender roles in Native nations had completely changed. Jennifer Nez Denetdale later mentions in her same chapter, when describing what changed in the gender roles and why, that, “Navajos were subjected to government rule based on Western democratic principles. This model looked to Navajo men to fill leadership roles. As the anthropologist Christine Conte and

the Navajo attorney Genevieve Chato note, this Western form of government is patriarchal and has undermined Navajo women’s traditional rights, including land-use rights, property and livestock rights, and the right to primary care and control of their children... Like white American women, Navajo women were expected to relegate themselves to the domestic realm, which is associated with little political or economic power” (Nez Denetdale, p. 179). This new expectancy of Native women, being similar to American women, was manifested by the ideas that Native communities adopted from Western worldviews. Although the shift of balance from traditional societies to modern (Western) societies has happened, contemporary Native women have been actively working to recognize past and current issues and find ways to heal them appropriately and restore balance in their communities.

Indigenous women have proven that there are many different ways they have successfully been able to resist this shift in balance and have begun working to restore the equality of roles in their communities. Though there are a multitude of ways that Native women have been able to do this, one way is how Native women have navigated through academia successfully and used their knowledge to help re-balance their traditional communities and leadership roles, but even accomplishing this it has been difficult. In academia, white academics have attempted to tell the story of Native people, the issues and ills within their own communities and themselves, which has made it harder for Native women to create their own success within academia. They are told how to co-exist in academia with white scholars from white scholars and that the only way to be successful is to be successful in the eyes of white scholars but, here too, Native women have resisted. They began to define their own success. They were not attending post-secondary institutions with the intent to obtain a high paying job or status in Western eyes; they were doing it as a tool to combat contemporary issues that their communities are suffering from as a direct result of colonization. It is not the degree, the paper, or the standing from Western constructs that give these Native women their identities and power back. It is what they do with their success for their

people, their communities, and the culture that is giving them their power and voices back in both the Indigenous and Eurocentric societies. Native women have opened up doors to address many different issues that have been ongoing in Native nations and have given Native people a voice on a larger platform than ever before. As Vikki Eagle-Bear, Siccangu/Oglala Lakota citizen of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and Doctoral student in Education Administration at the University of South Dakota, states:

Across the world, Indigenous women are mobilizing for our rights to protection and equality, more so, our right to a seat at the table where major decisions are being made that impact our lives. I represent a nation of people who come from a matriarchal society. Unfortunately, as a result of exposures to generational trauma and colonization the Lakota succumbed, culturally, until the past few decades. Those who continued practicing the Lakota ways and those who reclaimed their ways, know that we live on a female planet and all that is created by the female is the most powerful. Armed with this knowledge, I know my role as a Lakota woman at home, in my community, and in the world. In my community, of those who have obtained post-secondary degrees, all are women. At the tribal level, majority of programs are led by women and fifty percent of our Tribal Leadership (Council) is women (V.Eagle-Bear 2019).

Women across Indian country, especially those in Vikki's community, are allowing issues to be brought to the forefront and are the force that has been needed in Indian country. They have re-positioned themselves as leaders and decisionmakers in their communities by finding a middle ground between what they know in their community and what they learned in the academy to be successful in their nations. By doing this, they have been able to dismantle Western ideologies of how Native nations should function in the 21st century. Not only are Indigenous women reclaiming their identity as powerful beings, they are changing ideas of Native nations in the white world, forcing the powerful in

the white world to listen, forcing them to acknowledge what they work so hard to forget, and forcing Western education to include Native history from Native worldviews.

Academia has allowed many Native women the platform to help create change through Indigenous research and scholarly work. It has paved the way for those to come next and has pushed Western education to accept and acknowledge Native people's presence on a parallelism. Women like Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Winona LaDuke, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Debra Holland, and Sharice Davis are only a small fraction of successful Indigenous women on the long list of women who have been able to successfully use academia to accomplish their ultimate goals; restoring Native nations. They have created pathways for young scholars to follow and have used their success in academia to highlight issues that stem from colonialism. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has used her platform to protect tribal sovereignty and establish that Native nations within the boundaries of the U.S. have yet to reach a level of postcolonialism because colonialism still has a major influence on Native people. Her success in the academy has allowed her to protect Native cultures and communities by positioning herself on an equal level as non-Natives in academia and to question ideas that come from a Western worldview of Native people. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart has dedicated her work and research on understanding historical trauma, and how it affects Native nations, and has opened the door to endless possibilities of exposing colonialism as a weapon. Winona LaDuke, a long-time environmentalist activist for her community White Earth, has challenged colonial systems in and out of the court room. Debra Holland and Sharice Davis have a voice in congress that allow Native people's issues to be heard, rather than further pushed to the bottom of the list. The work that all of these specific scholars have done, forces Western education to not only acknowledge its wrongs but also acknowledge the outcomes of their wrongs and how it continues to affect Native people. Because it is a process to dismantle colonialism and all of its negative effects in Native nations, persistence is the key to drastically force change in the Western world that will positively benefit Native nations by help-

ing to revitalize traditional societies and restore the balance in these communities. Alexandra Mojado, Cherokee Nation/Pala Band of Mission Indians/Luiseno/Ute/Paiute/Sho-ban and J.D. holder from University of Arizona, James E. Rogers College of Law, states, “In my job, I often look first to Tribal law, cases, and culture when making arguments instead of relying on state or federal law and cases” (A. Mojado, 2019). This style of practice describes how the outcomes of Federal Indian Law and cases can change when ideas stem from Indigenous worldviews. This is important because it allows a decision to be made from an Indigenous perspective to serve an Indigenous individual or community and to provide an Indigenous decision—decolonizing the court system. Having Native lawyers in positions who are capable of separating Western ideas of law from traditional thinking is something that helps maintain not only identity but sovereignty as well, and Alexandra’s success in academia has helped her reclaim her place in a traditional society as a leader. Native women have been actively working, in an effort of resistance, to position themselves to create change and ultimately bring extended knowledge back to their communities to help break traumatic cycles.

Indigenous women are taking a stand and resisting by working to break generational curses. They are revitalizing cultures and strengthening their voices as proud Native people. They are continually forcing the dominant society to be uncomfortable with their demanding presence and recognition of who they are. They are no longer standing in the shadows and fitting the mold that the invaders so greatly forced them to fit in. They are working to beat negative statistics and stereotypes that they are born into and repositioning themselves as the leaders they were always supposed to be. The significance of Native women succeeding in academia and life in general, is that they are almost always giving back to their communities. Success in the Western world does not define them and they do not allow that to be the standing from which they demand respect. What Native women do *with* their success is what is defining who they are and ultimately defining their success. The route in which Native women are taking to not only reclaim their identity but also

change history by doing so, is a reflection of their knowledge of the past, the present, and their visions for the future. With all odds against Native nations broadly, and Native women specifically, perseverance and hope still stands. Resistance has been the foundation that has fueled Native women to work endlessly to help rebalance themselves as leaders in matrilineal societies.

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