



VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS
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Violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls manifests itself in so many ways it is difficult to know where to begin. We are living our lives as Native American women here on the Northern Plains of North America. It is not helpful to compare oppressions in degree or kind with other women who live daily with rape as a weapon of war or genital mutilation or state mandated exclusion from education because of their race and gender around the world. Though often more subtly, our lives are also permeated with unspoken or softly spoken threats to our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Those threats also stifle spirits, silence voices, and are intended to diminish and ultimately extinguish us, making us invisible and thereby relegating us to the dead stereotypes of the past.

As one man, surprised to see the woman he bought for sex was Indigenous, said, “I thought we killed all of you!”

We have chosen to focus this submission on violence threatened against Indigenous women in the public sphere of state policy making, and particularly in our state legislature.

The first Indigenous Democratic woman to serve in the ND legislature was elected in 2018, replacing a representative who was prime sponsor of a Voter ID law that voting rights advocates warned would disenfranchise Native voters. She is highly educated, well-spoken, projects a dignified, confident presence and is firm and straight-forward in her commitment to working hard for her constituents, the people of ND, and her Indigenous relatives. In spite of all that, she continues to face harassment and threats of violence to herself and her family members because of her race, gender, and political positions. The intersection of all of these realities has made her very vulnerable. The threats intensified during her first term, which happened to coincide with the activities of the Water Protectors at Standing Rock. That gathering of Nations precipitated very real physical violence and reverberated in every sphere of life in which Indigenous people were engaged.

The threats against our legislator at one point became so concerning that the Attorney General was asked to provide protections for her physical safety. There was no known response. The impacts, legal and otherwise, continue to this day.

The stresses and exhaustion and weakened her body and contributed to her developing pneumonia and spending a week in the hospital. The threats continued even as she worked to heal, attempting to erode her ability and desire to return to her work. When she did return, eager to champion two priority bills on which she was prime sponsor, one on hate crimes and the other to establish a Healing and Reparations Commission, she was encouraged by her own leadership to pull back from testifying at the hearings lest other colleagues would think “she wasn’t really that sick.”

Threats to many of those in public office are sadly not uncommon these days, and all such threats are detestable and undermine our democracy. Threats to Indigenous women hold a different kind of meaning, however. That meaning has to do with power and powerlessness and the assumptions made about them. For example, our legislator expressed surprise at being overwhelmed emotionally while sitting on a panel on the Equal Rights Amendment recently. It was titled “Threats to Women in Power.” She asked herself why she was even on the panel because she didn’t see herself as having any power. In fact she often felt invisible. How would a panel on “Threats to Women *Without* Power” look and feel different? In that context, threats would wield a whole different impact.

As another example of invisibility, the civics curriculum on “women in power” put forward by the same group contained almost nothing about Indigenous women leaders and how the concept of “leadership” itself might differ for Native women. What is unrecognized cannot be meaningfully supported, and that once again leaves Indigenous women vulnerable to threats of all kinds.

As this legislator pondered her place in the universe of these women – supportive, well-meaning, potential sisters in the role of policy-making – she thought of female colleagues who had recently left political life publicly stating that they did so because of the “divisive incivility” of the legislative workplace. The last Session had been especially rancorous, including a formal censorship of a male legislator for his harassing, sexually intimidating behavior toward women. “What about women like me who can’t step away,” she asks, “Because who will take my place?” Privilege is implicit even in the opportunity to “step away,” even when staying has become life threatening.

What might be some best practices in confronting threats of violence against Indigenous women in policy making positions? We have attempted to identify and put into practice three essential elements: visibility, community, and perseverance.

First, the lived realities of Indigenous women must be acknowledged and integrated into every effort to create safer, more open workspaces for everyone. Invisibility is a weapon of exclusion and makes the invisible one more vulnerable because if she is not even seen, how can anyone be held accountable for threatening or even perpetrating violence against someone who isn’t there? It is everyone’s responsibility to make sure the Indigenous

woman is always visible. New legislative rules on protecting against harassment of all kinds must include input from Indigenous women. Best practices will ensure that it is.

Second, community matters. There is indeed strength in numbers. When the threats to the legislator became more and more intense and vile, a group of Native women gathered to form an escort into the capitol building, illustrating the truth that a threat against one was a threat against all, and there would be witnesses and accountability.

Third, We Are Still Here! It is not true that Indigenous people were exterminated, now reappearing only for photographs in Tribal dress or Powwow dance contests. Observations such as May 5th honor murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. Orange Shirt Day honors the victims of boarding schools and celebrates resilience and perseverance. The road to protect Native women in policy making positions from threats of violence will be long, but by building circles of support that affirm our presence and intention to act, we will persevere.

We have used one example of threats of violence against one Indigenous woman holding public office in this narrative. We know there are many others, right here in our Native Homelands on the prairie. Exploring this subject has encouraged us to reach out to other Indigenous women in elected or appointed positions and ask for their stories. As always, we best learn from each other, and we will all be stronger for it.

Thank you for opening us up to more questions and answers through this opportunity.

Submitted by: First Nations Women's Alliance

First Nations Women's Alliance is North Dakota's recognized Tribal Coalition. Our mission is to "strengthen our tribal communities by creating a forum for leaders to come together to address the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. We are committed to ending all forms of violence by providing culturally relevant services and resources."

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