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Addressing the Suppressed Epidemic: Violence Against Indigenous Women

Amanda R. Young

Oklahoma State University, amandaroseyoung1@gmail.com

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Addressing the Suppressed Epidemic: Violence Against Indigenous Women

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to my community, my family, and my friends for giving me the support, strength and the teachings to stay true to who I am as an Indigenous woman.

Addressing the Suppressed Epidemic: Violence Against Indigenous Women

Amanda R. Young, M.A, MHA Nation, Oklahoma State University

“Violence against Indian women occurs as a gauntlet in the life of Indian women: at one end verbal abuse and at the other murder.”

-Juana Majel, National Congress of American Indians, and Karen Artichoker, Cangleska, Inc.-Sacred Circle.

Modern violence against Indigenous women is enabled and informed by the continued abuse of Indigenous human rights since the formation of the states and providences (Beniuk, 2012). Intergenerational trauma has been a tool utilized with colonization to “put Indians in their place” (Flowers, 2015). An aspect of colonization is the inhumane violent acts perpetrated on Indigenous women.

Violence Against Indigenous Women

Indigenous women are excessively disturbed by all forms of violence (Amnesty International). The U.S Department of Justice indicate Indigenous women in the U.S are more than 2.5 times as likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than any other women in the U.S (Flowers, 2015). Our women and girls are expected to experience sexual violence early in life with fifty-four percent of rapes happening before the age of twelve (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Indigenous women ages twenty-five to forty-four are five times more likely to experiences a violent death, as compared to any other race (Gilchrist, 2010). A more updated statistic highlights the murder rates of Indigenous women are increasing as well as the age of being murdered is lowering. The U.S Department of Justice, 2016, state Indigenous women are killed at ten times the national average. Increasing from five times to ten times more likely to be killed within a course of twenty years. As well as Daines, 2017, stating murder is the third leading cause of death among Indigenous women and girls between the ages of ten and twenty-four years of age.

It was once thought that Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence due to homelessness, poverty, medical problems, and lack of basic services (Farley et al., 2011). Recent events highlight that Indigenous women are targets regardless of class or socioeconomic status. In 2014, Indigenous actress Misty Upham, age thirty-two, was missing for eleven days before she was found deceased in a Washington State ravine with her ribs broken and skull shattered (Young, 2015). Her murder has not been brought to justice, as her perpetrator has not been found. From the literature, it seems Indigenous women and girls have a high chance of experiencing violence regardless of once-perceived predictors other than race. These statistics are not only alarming, they are the unfortunate reality that many Indigenous women are faced with.

Lack of Justice and Awareness

Despite statistics on Indigenous women's prevalence of experiencing sexual violence, police have often failed to provide adequate standard of protection for Indigenous women (Amnesty International; Hilleary, 2015). The Federal Government often declines to prosecute crime on Indigenous land. In 2011 alone, the Justice Department filed charges in only about fifty percent of murder cases and thirty-five percent of sexual assault cases on reservations nationwide (Hillstorm & Webley, 2015). When it comes to sentencing and prosecution, tribal police and tribal courts are often restricted due to state and federal laws (Amnesty International). Offenses committed by an Indigenous person against another Indigenous person will go directly to the tribal police and tribal courts, unless the crime is murder, rape, or sex trafficking, in which case the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and federal prosecutors can step in (Amnesty International). A 1978 U.S Supreme Court ruling found that tribal reservations have no jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Indigenous perpetrators (Hillstorm & Webley, 2015). A crime committed by a non-Indigenous must be turned over to the federal government or state authorities (Amnesty International). This is and can be confusing when tribal members call the police to report rape or murder. With the process of making a report and waiting to see whose jurisdiction the crime falls under; it is apparent how perpetrators tend to go un-arrested and unprosecuted. Such complications may contribute to less reports and may make Indigenous lands a "safe haven" for all kinds of criminals, including perpetrators of sexual violence (Hillstorm & Webley, 2015).

Media is less likely to broadcast messages about this being an issue. What is considered "news worthy" is determined by what will interest those consuming the information: Western, White, heteronormative, middle-class individuals (Gilchrist, 2010). In Canada, their news media featured continued coverage of a whale named Luna who died when she collided with a tugboat propeller, yet silence conceals the brutal murders and disappearances of more than thirty-two indigenous women along a highway in central British Columbia (Stillman, 2007). News treatments of child abductions in the United States of America (USA) show a particular bias in featuring cases of young white attractive females. Between 2000 and 2005, Seventy-six percent of child abductions on a major news outlet were white-attractive-female children, although only fifty-three percent of overall abductees actually identified as white (Gilchrist, 2010). This sensation of biased news coverage of young white women and girls is so common in the USA that observers have coined the phrase "the missing white girl syndrome" (Stillman, 2007). This syndrome may be telling with regard to the lack of awareness surrounding victimized Indigenous women in present and past media.

According to the literature, non-Indigenous individuals tend to hold a negative implicit bias toward people of Indigenous descent (Chaney et al., 2011). Law enforcement and the general public's dismissiveness and systemic normalized mistreatment of Indigenous women may also be due to negative implicit bias (Beniuk, 2012). These implicit biases are fed with negative stereotypes. Particularly with Indigenous women, these women are reduced to "savages, lustful, wild, sexy, and helpless" negative stereotypes (Fleming, 2006). A Canadian researcher, Walia, states, "It is more comfortable to dehumanize and judge the women living in poverty, to rob them of their dignity, to tell ourselves that the violence of poverty and abuse is their fault because "they are all hookers and lazy addicts."'" (Walia, 2011). By dehumanizing Indigenous women, it may help perpetrators and the general public disassociate Indigenous women as human beings with value (Beniuk, 2012). The combination of negative stereotypes and negative implicit bias may explain the lack of conversation and action by non-Indigenous individuals.

Call to Action

As an Indigenous woman, from MHA Nation, I push to have these conversations about violence against Indigenous women. The following advice is given from my perspective as an Indigenous women "activist" utilizing my platform as a student in higher education to advocate for change.

As the general public, we can do a multitude of many social justice action orientated concepts. Here are multiple things we can do to be help fight the cause. We must start by educating ourselves on our communities' and states' prevalence rate for Indigenous women to experience sexual violence. Having an understanding of what is happening within your own community and land maybe motivating. Knowledge can also be increased by reading and listening to the stories of the individuals who have survived sexual violence. As well as learning and reading the experiences of those who are working toward change. This self-education can give the foundation on what an individual can do about promoting change.

It is also important to not only education oneself but also have conversations and speak on the knowledge. One of the many reasons this is a suppressed epidemic is because people are not speaking up and having conversations about it. It may be uncomfortable to speak on, but it needs to be done. Our Indigenous women are experiencing inhumane violence, most where their voices are silenced, and their lives taken. It is important to utilize our voices while we have them. Small conversations with family, co-workers, classmates, community may help make people become aware and acknowledge that not

speaking is a part of the suppression. Having these small conversations may lead to larger conversations and hopefully change.

Utilize social media and the internet. Social media and the internet have revolutionized the way we communicate and get news across to multiple people on multiple platforms. Using these platforms can help make connections with others who are also working towards change and can help build a community. Having a sense of community is needed to push for the safety of Indigenous women and to help be mentally healthy. Social media and the internet are also a great way to advertise future walks, prayer events, public speaking events, volunteer events, to give knowledge to others about violence against Indigenous women.

The final thing is to continue working towards your goal. Pushing for change and the safety of our Indigenous women can be discouraging. This work takes time and patience. I personally encourage you to never stop learning, never quit, and never pass up an opportunity to share your knowledge. It is important that we push through hardship and live our truths as activists and as human beings. Continue to fight for what you know is right and hopefully we will experience change and our sisters will experience justice.

Conclusion

With the information given, it is encouraged for the reader to increase their knowledge in violence against Indigenous women from both Canada and American resources. The advice given on how one can start giving a voice to those who are silenced is based off my personal experience as an Indigenous woman pushing for change. It is also encouraged for the reader to seek out more stories and reports on how to find their own voice from other activists.

Resources

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