



Human Trafficking: Sex Trafficking of Native Americans/Indigenous/First Nations

Awareness

Human trafficking: what is it?

Human trafficking is the illegal buying and selling of human beings for commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor. It is human slavery. Other forms of trafficking include forced and bonded labor, child brides, forced begging, and sale of human organs.

It is the second largest criminal activity globally and generates \$150 billion a year in revenue. An estimated 40 million people (including children) are held in slavery worldwide, despite the fact that slavery is outlawed in every single country.

No country or community is safe. Victims are trafficked in urban areas and rural communities, at casinos and pow-wows, resorts and hunting lodges, truck stops and port cities, and over the internet.

Why are Native women & children being trafficked in epidemic numbers?

“Life in a Native American reservation is among the most hopeless I have ever witnessed as a reporter. The lack of basic necessities, sex trafficking, absence of culture, fetal alcohol syndrome, drunk violence, joblessness, and mere desperation are daunting.”

-Mariane Pearl, Journalist and Managing Editor, CHIME FOR CHANGE

Exploitation of Indigenous/Native Peoples

According to the United Nations, there are more than 370 million indigenous people worldwide. They are often economically and politically marginalized and are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and armed conflict. They may lack citizenship and access to basic services, including education.

In North America, government officials and NGOs alike have identified aboriginal Canadian and American Indian women and girls as particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. In Latin America, members of indigenous communities are often more vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking than other segments of the population.

What is Meant by ‘Indigenous’ Peoples?

The *UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues* lists some key factors to facilitate an international understanding of the term “indigenous:”

- Self-identification of indigenous people at an individual and community level,
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies,
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources,
- Distinct social, economic, or political beliefs,
- Distinct language, culture, and beliefs,
- Membership in non-dominant groups of society,
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and system as distinctive peoples and communities.

Historical Trauma

Native women have not always been the targets of abuse. Before the colonization of the U.S., Native Americans held women in high regard as life bearers and the future of the people. They were often the political, spiritual, and ceremonial leaders. Abuse and domestic violence were rare in tribal communities.

Sex trafficking of Native women today is historically foreshadowed by abuse, slavery, and rape by European colonizers as early as the late 1400s. As America invaded indigenous nations across the continent, Native women were targeted for sexual entertainment. They were bought, sold, traded for alcohol and other trade goods. There were no legal consequences for sexual harassment, rape, or sexual exploitation.

Exploitation has continued in more recent times. In the 1900s, the U.S. government tried to abolish Native and tribal communities by forcing children to attend government and religious boarding schools. Many children were punished for speaking their own language or practicing traditional spiritualities. Then, until the 1960s, the government placed Native children into foster care, predominantly with non-Native families. The goal was to extinguish the children’s culture and assimilate them. These children were often the targets of physical and sexual abuse.

Violence against Native Women

Today, the U.S. Justice Department reports that violence in American Indian/Alaska Native communities is epidemic.





- Eighty four percent of Native women experience violence in their lifetime.
- A third of Native women will be raped in their lifetime.
- More than six in ten will be physically assaulted.
- Native women are stalked at more than twice the rate of other women.
- Native women are murdered at more than ten times the national average. The majority of cases of murdered and/or disappeared Native women are not investigated or resolved.

In 2020 the Presidential Task Force on Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives announced a series of field consultations and listening sessions across the U.S. The task force, designated Operation Lady Justice, was empowered to review Indian Country cold cases, to strengthen law enforcement protocols, and work with tribes to improve investigations, information sharing and a more seamless response to missing persons investigations.

Vulnerabilities and Risk Factors

Sex trafficking is more likely to occur when communities experience:

- Historical trauma and culture loss,
- Significant poverty and/or economic isolation/dependence,
- High rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences in the population,
- High rates of homeless and runaway youth,
- High rates of family surveillance and involvement with child welfare system,
- High rates of exposure to violence (direct and/or indirect, through domestic, intimate partner violence),

- High rates of personal or family /caregiver addiction to substances,
- Low levels of police or law enforcement presence,
- Influx of a transient, cash-rich workforce, i.e., oil fracking and pipeline workers, construction workers, sailors on leave at international shipping ports.

Traffickers

Traffickers can be men or women; they can be relatives or family members who:

- Target young people and women who are vulnerable, isolated, trusting, and desperate,
- Use friends and relatives to help recruit victims; may pose as someone the victim can trust,
- Manipulate victims with alcohol and other drugs,
- Control victims by force - rape, beatings, confinement; Fraud - false offers of caring, marriage, employment, a better life; Coercion - threats to harm the victim or their family and friends, debt-bondage, psychological abuse.

Indicators that someone may be trafficked

- Not free to leave or come and go freely,
- Not allowed to have friends, go to school or contact friends or relatives,
- Embarrassed and ashamed,
- Scarring, cigarette burns, tattooing, branding,
- Alcohol /other drug abuse or addiction,
- Traumatic brain injury, PTSD, anxiety disorder, depression

What is being done?

Identifying and Supporting Victims

The most important task in supporting victims is to identify them, because many do not self-identify as victims. Frequently, they will be arrested and brought into court as criminal offenders. The challenge for law enforcement is to look beyond the crime and see an individual who needs help.

Do not approach a suspected trafficker or victim – their safety or your own may be at risk. Instead, contact:

- www.tribalcoalitions.org. Access to 18 tribal coalition groups across the US that can help victims and their families.
- National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) 1-888-373-7888 or text HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733). NHTRC is a national, toll-free hotline available to answer calls from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. The NHTRC is operated by a nongovernmental organization funded by the federal government.

- Submit a tip at www.ice.gov/tips. Highly trained specialists take reports on more than 400 laws relating to human trafficking.
- Call 1-866-347-2423 to report suspicious activity to the US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Tip Line. It is accessible outside the US at 802-872-6199.

Tribal Nations can protect their people by hosting community discussions to educate their members about recognizing the signs of trafficking and accessing available resources, and by equipping children and youth to seek help and prevent peer recruitment. They can ensure adequate and safe housing options for homeless, runaway, and pregnant/parenting youth; they can equip tribal police departments to investigate networks of sex buyers and gang-related operations. They can also foster community and school competency in addressing sexual exploitation, and they can develop cross-community, regional, and/or state networks to share information and resources.

Services for Native Victims

Too many times, health care providers do not have the resources to offer effective assistance. Interviewees working on reservations in multiple locations recommended the following:

- Services through Indian Health Services (IHS) to help women with substance abuse problems stay clean,
- Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) available at IHS locations,
- Counselors and victim advocates who are trained to help victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse,
- Survivor-led shelters and transition programs for victims of sex trafficking,
- Use of healing processes and approaches that are culturally relevant and led by tribal members.

“Raised with deep respect for our native heritage, I always wanted to fly like our eagles. Rituals and holding on to all of God’s creation brought me comfort and hope.”

-Jan, Nipmuck/Iroquois

Law Enforcement Issues

“If you are a trafficker looking for the perfect population of people to violate, Native women would be a prime target, . . . You have extreme poverty. You have people who have been traumatized. You have addiction to alcohol and drugs as a result of trauma. And you have a legal system that doesn’t step in to stop it.”

-Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* (U. of Minn. Press, 2015)

Sparse law enforcement in rural areas, gaps in the law, and conflicts over jurisdiction on Indian reservations mean that sex traffickers know they get away with their crimes. For example, non-Native Americans cannot be arrested or prosecuted by tribes because they fall under federal jurisdiction. However, Non-Indians commit 88% of violent crimes against Native women, highlighting this dangerous gap in enforcement.

Actions

- LEARN about human trafficking of Native women and girls – globally, nationally, locally.
- PRAY for victims of trafficking and for an end to this slavery.
- ADVOCATE for tribal, state, and federal legislation that protects victims.
- BECOME involved with an organization assisting Native victims of sex trafficking (see *Resources* for suggestions).
- REPORT suspicious activity: National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

Reflection

Resources from various spiritualities for strength to end the degradation of Native women and children:

An Apache Blessing

May the sun bring you new energy by day.
May the moon softly restore you by night.
May the rain wash away your worries.
May the breeze blow new strength into your being.
May you walk gently through the world and know its beauty
All the days of your life.

Ojibway Healing Prayer

Grandfather, sacred one, teach us love, compassion, and honor.
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other.

Lakota Prayer

Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery,
Teach me how to trust my heart, my mind, my intuition,
My inner knowing, the senses of my body,
The blessings of my spirit.
Teach me to trust these things so that I may enter my Sacred Space
And love beyond fear, and thus walk in balance
With the passing of each glorious sun.

Judeo-Christian Prayer (Isaiah 61:1)

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.

Resources

National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, Inc. (NIWRC). www.NIWRC.org
Dedicated to restoring sovereignty and safeguarding Native Women and children.

Native Women's Society of the Great Plains. www.niwrc.org/content/Native-women's-society-great-plains
Representing rural, isolated tribes in a seven-state area, the Society is committed to reclaiming the sacred status of women.

Native Youth Toolkit on Human Trafficking. Available as a PDF document (www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/otip/native_youth_toolkit_on_human_trafficking.pdf)

Awareness-raising and prevention by education about trafficking, available resources, safety tips, and ways to get involved in their communities.

Pathfinder Center. www.pathfindercenter.org.

Serves women and their children who have been victims of human trafficking.

Reach To End Sex Trafficking In Native American Communities. srteresawolf@gmail.com

Mini-documentary DVD documents the reality of sex trafficking and cultural hope for healing.

Urban Indian Health Institute. www.uihi.org

Accurate data to strengthen the health of Native people. *Our Bodies, Our Stories* details the scope of violence against Native women across the nation.

Additional Websites

Catholic Health Association. www.chausa.org/humantrafficking

Offers posters and many other anti-trafficking resources free of charge -English & Spanish.

Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking. www.castla.org

Nation's largest provider of comprehensive, life-changing services to survivors.

Polaris Project. Polarisproject.org

Works to eradicate all forms of human trafficking and serves victims.

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking. www.sistersagainstrafficking.org

A collaborative, faith-based national network that offers education, supports access to survivor services, and engages in advocacy to eradicate human trafficking. The *Stop Trafficking Newsletter* is located at the USCSAHT website.

Department of Health & Human Services: Rescue and Restore Campaign. www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking