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OVERVIEW

Chapter 3
BATTERING AND THE INDIAN WOMAN
(8/80)

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INTRODUCTION

Native people, known collectively as Indians, have inhabited North, South and Central America for as long as 35,000 years. Within the area of land that is now the United States of America, over 300 separate tribal groups lived with cultures that were unique. The culture of each group prior to the European contact was constantly changing with dramatic change occurring upon contact with a tribe or nation not of the same geographical area. There definitely was diversity among groups. The language, diet, political institutions, physical appearance and family systems were different for many of the groups. There also were many similarities. Tribal groups were communal economic structures dependent upon each other with values such as cooperativeness and sharing. The religious practices differed from tribe to tribe, but the belief that humans and nature were interdependent was common throughout the western hemisphere. The role of women within the different culture groups was as diverse as the groups themselves, however, one common belief again is reflected in the religious or spiritual aspect of North American Indians and sharply contrasts with European beliefs. That is, North American Indians believed (and this is reflected in their creation legends) that women and men were created simultaneously, whereas Europeans believed that women were created following man and indeed were created from man's extra rib. Before we can know about Indian women today, we first need to know about their past.

Historical Overview of American Indian Families and Women's Roles Within Family Units

American Indian women were the adhesive force strengthening families, clans, bands and tribes. In many of their social systems, status is ascribed at birth. Many tribal societies were matriarchal, matrilineal and matrilocal meaning family decisions, geographical location and blood lines were determined through the women. Through the ages, Indian women held positions of honor and leadership. They were integral members of their societies and their advice and decisions were often sought for religious, economic and political aspects of tribal life. They were a constant source of information. In some tribes it was the women who decided whether or not the tribe would go to war. It is important to recognize that Indian women did hold positions of power and influence within their tribal groups. This ability to provide leadership was derived directly from her family systems. Indian children, male and female, learned at an early age the importance of contributing to their families. A small child was held and cuddled, given a tremendous amount of attention made possible by the large extended family system.

Some tribes believed and practiced birth control, that each child needed much love and affection, and that parents should only have a child every seven years in order to provide for the child. As soon as a child was old enough to remember and understand what was being said to her, her elders would begin to teach her firmly, yet gently what was expected of her. There were no special educational complexes-the whole village and tribal territory were her school. She began to learn economic pursuits such as crafts, housework, wild food gathering and agriculture and also the customs, social obligations and folklore of her tribe. Her teachers included her mother, grandmother and aunts as well as other women of the tribe.

As the child grew older, the amount of responsibilities was increased. A child learned quickly that a task well done or initiated by herself was rewarded with lavish praise by her elders. Children were taught the values and history of the tribe by their parents

and elders. Because the history was an oral one and decisions were made by consensus, the art of speaking the language clearly as well as persuasively was an important part of their education. As you can see, a child's early leadership abilities were reinforced by her family members and every child was supported.

The status of Indian women was very different from European women when comparing family systems, economic roles and political activity. The Iroquois Confederacy, which inhabited an area of land now called New York, was a matriarchal and matrilineal society. They had developed distinct clan systems, each presided over by the matriarch chosen for her age and ability. Within the Iroquois Tribes, women did not have direct vote on the governing council, but they did select each member on the council and had the power to remove them. Other tribes including the Hopi, the Zuni and Eastern Pueblos were also matrilineal, with the Hopi and Zuni matrilineal. When a man and woman became married, he moved to her house and was responsible for all the harvesting.

The Navajo Nation is matriarchal and matrilineal. Women owned all livestock and were responsible for their care, while the men were responsible for hunting. Navajo women also controlled a large share of the political and religious life of the people. One of the most important religious ceremonies is the female puberty rite. The Navajo believe in the concept of Earth Mother, who they call "Changing Woman". Her birth, maturity and works are recounted encompassing the entire history of their ancestors during the celebration of the puberty ceremony.

In other Indian tribes, women were in direct leadership positions. Some of the tribes of the southeastern states were governed by females. In some tribes, they inherited the role, while in others they were chosen for their ability to lead. The Cherokees elected a matriarch who was called the "Beloved Woman" to preside over a woman's council. This council consisted of elected delegates from each Cherokee village. This "Beloved Woman" and her council did not hesitate to challenge the authority of the men if the welfare of the tribe demanded it. Tribes from the western part of the country also had women in governing positions. Among a Salish tribe in Washington, women, who were related to male chiefs, were elected leaders of their bands with authority varying from band to band.

With the Western Apache, women evolved into their position through displaying qualities such as courage, wisdom, strength, and generosity. Because she was industrious and accumulated wealth, she, as well as her male counterparts, was expected to share this excess with those who were less fortunate. In many tribes, women were free to practice medicine separately, not only as assistants to men. North American Indians believed in two kinds of illness, therefore practiced two kinds of medicine. Physical illness required a medicine derived from herbs, roots, plants, etc. and psychological disorders required a supernatural cure or today what many psychologists call an early form of psychodrama. In tribes where women did practice medicine, they were educated from an early age in treating both types of illness.

Indian societies, similar to non-Indian cultures, exhibited male and female roles. Within tribal groups whose economies were based on hunting and gathering, men were obviously the hunters, with women staying close to home. However, these roles evolved not because women were perceived to be inferior to men, but because women nursing children could not stay away from home for days at a time as a hunter must.

Even within those tribes that were patriarchal, women were afforded much more equality in comparison to European cultures. Within the Ojibway Tribe, a woman was

free to excel in traditional male roles if she chose. For example, if a woman chose not to marry or became separated or widowed, she was free to hunt and provide for her family without any social stigmas.

"Native women increased in value in the estimation of their society as they grew older. Their cumulative wisdom was considered one of society's most valuable resources." Native women regardless of tribe or lifestyle were treated with respect as were all living things.

Socialization of Indian Women Today

Upon reading the first section of this article, one of the questions you, the reader, may have is "If Indian women were respected, integral members of their tribes, why then do they need to be included in a training manual on battered women?" We will try to answer that question within this section on the socialization of Indian women. The obvious reason for the inclusion is because it is necessary, because Indian women are involved in violent relationships. There currently are no exact statistics, however we are aware of the number who use the existing shelter homes. At the shelter in Northern Minnesota, the percentage of Indian women served is higher than other women even though the total population is smaller. We also believe that many Indian women do not report incidents of violence against themselves or their children because of fears involving racism and the authorities.

Perhaps the most overt reason for American Indian women not reporting family violence is what we refer to as "the protection factor". This critical situation involves family members protecting not only the batterer but the victim as well. This takes place in the urban area as well as the reservation area. The Indian community is a closely knit community and the cultural aspect of extended family life is prevalent. Not only does the woman fear being reprimanded by the authorities but, even more, she fears being reprimanded (perhaps, violently again) by other family members of the batterer. Far too many cases go unreported because of this "protection factor". Although we are aware this problem has existed for many generations the solutions will not be easy. We feel the public must be made aware of this also. The non-Indian community must understand the extended family life situation. We urge and encourage everyone to consider this as REAL and to work in this area so someday we can break through that barrier. Indian women must practice their value systems, continue being assertive and supportive and to be open for suggestions in dealing with violence.

The second part of the answer to the question involves differences in cultures and the cultural adaptations that Indian people have made. As previously described, Indian women enjoyed personal freedom and status, they were a strengthening force within their families. However, in more recent times, their traditional roles have been threatened by the acculturation process. This process, beginning soon after the immigration of European people, has been detrimental for Indian people as a whole. The most difficult cultural adaptation that Indian people have had to make has been the migration and removal that occurred as some tribes migrated west to avoid European contact and the forced removal of the tribes that resisted removal from their ancestral homes. This removal caused great hardships and was the catalyst for numerous other changes. It meant changing the lifestyles and means of livelihood for entire peoples often living in a geographical area under guard for a period of time. These changes affected all members of the tribe, but, during the early period of isolation, the changes for the men were extreme. They were unable to provide for their families in traditional ways and at times were unable to provide for them at all. This forced them to rely on

the government because the land was not fertile enough to farm and they were not permitted to leave the reservation to fish or hunt. For Indian women, the changes were slower. Small children still required care and homes were still intact. The impact of Europeans on the lifestyles of women was not as visible immediately nor has it been recorded by historians and anthropologists. However, the fact still remains, American Indian women have been and continue to be the victims of racism and sexism.

The Colonialists and early pioneers viewed American Indians to be inhuman savages and the policies of the young democracy reflected the attitudes of the governing body, which was then and continues to be dominated by white males. The men of European descent did not include their women in decision making nor were women allowed to vote, own property, etc. These men could not then perceive of including Indian women's input in Indian Affairs, unless, of course, they would be useful as a peace ally in times of conflict. Subsequently, Indian women suffered a loss that had been their traditional right. The effects of this loss are still felt by Indian women today. With increased exposure to non-Indian cultures and the ever present pressure for change, internal relationships and group cohesiveness among Indian women and men have become strained. The traditional groups tend to be apprehensive while the progressive groups are pushing for change. Many Indians refuse to accept non-Indian cultures while many have adopted the culture of the dominant society. More and more Indians are choosing to become bi-cultural and in some cases multi-cultural. For survival purposes, Indian people need to learn and adopt some of the non-Indian cultures. Also for survival purposes, Indian people must retain their tribal identity.

These shifts in values, differences, and knowledge and geographical changes have a tremendous impact on Indian women. Their individual freedom has been lost in a second-place role in the family and, too often, in the tribal setting as well. Due to the displacement, she has faced the stereotypical attitudes of non-Indians which create an additional barrier to overcome when seeking housing, employment and educational services. The media, including television with its repeats of poor westerns, the movies and books, has helped to propagate the image of the personality-less, slavlike "squaw", or the bronze, nubile, naked "princess" such as Pocahontas sacrificing herself for the unrequited love of the white male.

The modern day version of stereotypes are just as painful and demoralizing-the uneducated welfare recipient, the unfit alcoholic mother whose children are in foster homes. If, in fact, and statistics whenever available show this to be true (that her children are in foster homes), could this be because white women no longer give their children up for adoption if illegitimate, and that social workers judge Indian families according to what a healthy white family is and are not aware of cultural differences? Unfortunately, some of these obstacles are too difficult for some women to deal with and the cold hard fact remains-the life expectancy of Indian women is 47 years.

The Effect of Institutional and Intellectual Racism on Women

Women involved in violent relationships generally find many reasons for remaining in those relationships. Fear, guilt, loss of self esteem, and financial problems are a few of the reasons. For Indian women these reasons are further compounded by distrust of professionals and authoritative service personnel. Too often, the human relation training which these helping people have been required to take has been inadequate in the recognition and awareness of cultural differences of other groups and, of course, sexist attitudes further aggravate and hinder communication.

One of the primary resources available to abused women in Minnesota is the shelters. These are at a great distance from reservation areas in Minnesota (see map) and transportation for a frightened woman with children is a very real obstacle.

Racism and the problems of Indian women are discussed in the shelters, but the effect of both institutional and individual racism are felt even by the women working in the shelters. The following has been written by an Indian woman who is employed at a shelter in Minnesota:

There has been a long history of racism in the area in which I live. When a shelter opened in my area, the organization was interested in having an Indian advocate because of the shelter's close proximity to a reservation. Traditionally, when a white dominated organization seeks to hire an Indian, they require a masters degree or some assurance that the person will fit into the organization and not be disruptive. The organization looks to other white people who know the Indian person for assurances that she is a conscientious worker and is trustworthy.

Knowing these things gave me all the more reason to apply for the job, just to see if an Indian woman without a masters degree would be hired. While I lacked a masters degree, I did have letters of recommendation from influential and respected people of the community supporting me. One of these was from my congressman and another was from the county commissioner. Also, at my interview for the advocate position, I made up my mind to be as open in answering their questions as possible. I did this and was hired.

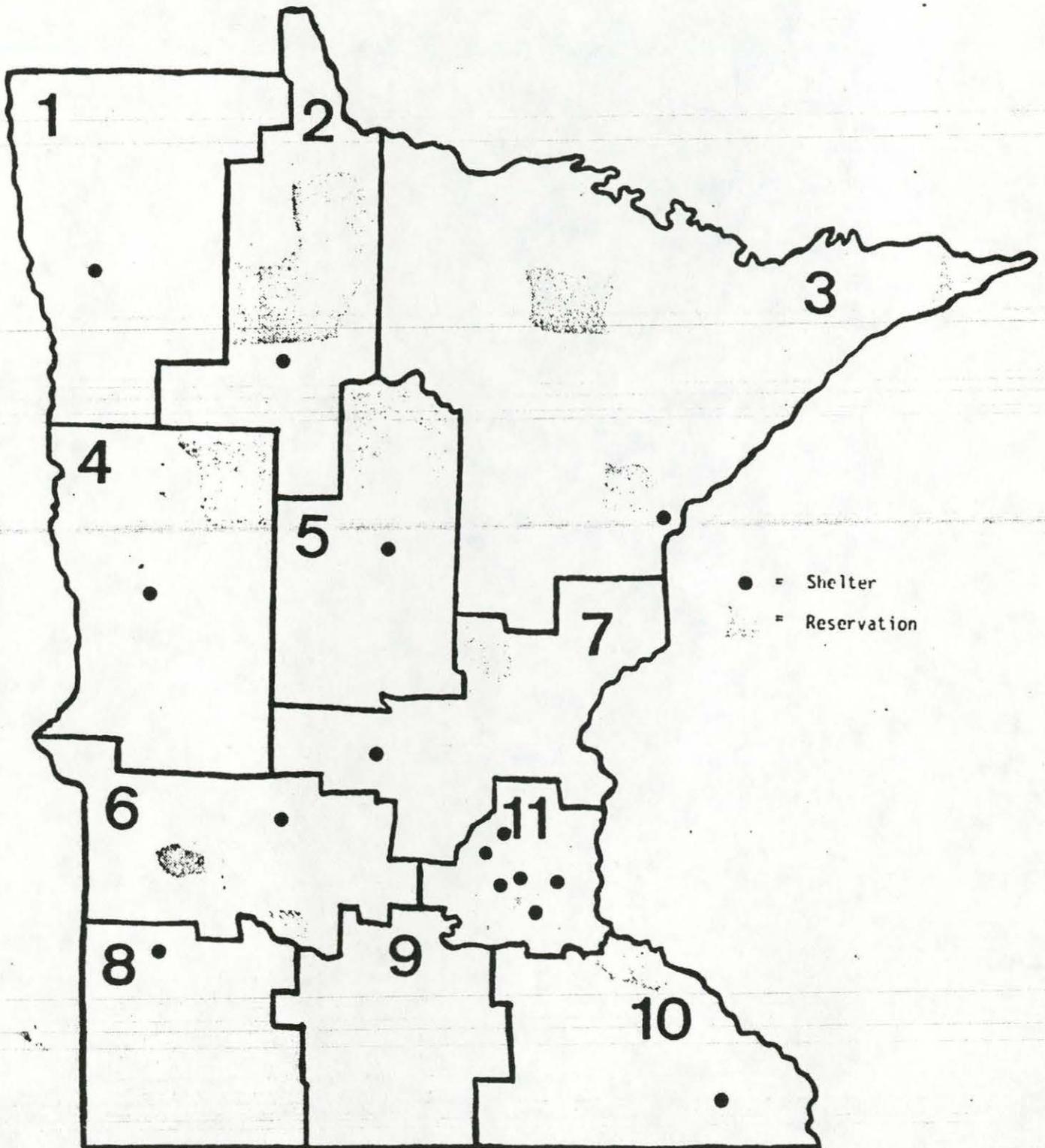
Starting a new shelter requires a tremendous amount of public relations work. We did this by holding workshops on battering and by visiting professionals and service providers in the community. During this time, I did the outline of our staff responsibilities. My responsibilities were employment and law enforcement. I volunteered for employment but was assigned to law enforcement. I felt adequate and equal for my role in working on employment issues and public speaking, but I knew from the beginning that my assignment to law enforcement issues was not one I would do well because of negative past experiences with law enforcement personnel.

I put off telling the director that I felt I could not do the law enforcement task because I feared losing my job. I didn't see that any of the white staff women were experiencing the same insecurities about their responsibilities. They did experience problems with their tasks, however, I was not aware of it. They discussed these problems privately with the director and job responsibilities were switched between persons, but I was unaware that this was happening. I was under the impression that job responsibilities were assigned at staff meetings and that there was no further discussion of these outside the meetings. I didn't know these things could happen so I got frustrated.

I did some public speaking and was received very well. However, I often had the feeling that the reason women came to hear me give a presentation on battered women was to hear how I talked and to see how I looked. I felt more like a novelty than a public speaker: they came to see an Indian. Remember, some of these people have never communicated with an Indian person.

Later on, after the shelter opened, I had the same experience with many of the residents. A lot of women would say right out, "You're the first Indian I've seen in person," or "Are you a staff person here?" They asked how I got the job, but in actuality I think they wanted to know if I was qualified.

MINNESOTA SHELTERS AND RESERVATIONS
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My first year at the shelter wasn't easy. There were many times that I wanted to quit - not because of the residents, but because of my isolation from the other staff. I thought their expectations were too high. We had staff meetings weekly. At these meetings, we talked business, discussed residents' problems, gave support to one another. At these meetings I became frustrated at what I saw and heard. My co-workers were assertive and aggressive, always volunteering for something. I hardly volunteered for anything because I didn't think I could do as well as others.

In our group support meetings, psychotherapy, Freud and Thoreau were discussed. While I knew a little of those subjects, I always stuck with my Indian values and knowledge of people. Several times I shared with them my knowledge about Indian respect and how it is used.

I did my best in logging activities at the shelter, revealing our residents' thoughts, emotions and intentions. I am a good listener and in my position as counselor/advocate this, I was told, is the most important quality. It appears to me that many white women are more oriented towards administrative tasks than working directly with the residents. This is not true for me.

Women working in shelters usually place a high value on strong assertive behavior. Indian women have traditionally been more passive. Many times I felt overwhelmed by my co-workers' unified assertive behavior. This often kept me from suggesting alternatives because I felt I would be overruled. Because I wasn't verbal, the staff seemed to think I had no ideas or interest. However, my more passive approach with the few professionals I talked with met with much success.

Many residents have told me that they felt they could talk to me because I wasn't too business-like. I have never told a woman what to do, but would listen and let her sort out her thoughts and make her own decisions as I had been instructed during advocate training. I have my own way of counseling by believing and letting our residents know that I care. Listening and caring are the most effective qualities in my work.

I am particular about my appearance, probably due to the "dirty Indian" stereotype. I think that we, as Indian women, have to please the public eye by dressing cleanly and presentably. No matter what shelter activity an Indian woman is performing, she must strive to do the best she can. It is necessary to be respected by others.

I disliked socializing with my co-workers for the simple reason that we did not have anything in common. I finally decided to inform them politely that I would not be attending any more of their functions because I did not enjoy them. Only after I saw a therapist and did a lot of reading and soul searching did I realize that you are at your best when you are yourself. I no longer had the frustrations after I decided to be myself. No longer did I struggle to be like my co-workers. I admire their assertiveness and their knowledge, but I'm not trying to be like them anymore; I have an inner peace.

When providing service to Indian women, it is important to recognize cultural differences. Different does not mean deficient nor does it mean good or bad, simply different. It is not necessary to be an "expert" on Indians. If you have an Indian client, she has the cultural knowledge. What she needs is what any woman needs in a battering situation: time, support, and encouragement along with the basic necessities. Be aware of some of the obstacles she has to face. Whenever possible, deal with racism openly and honestly. Check out your own personal feelings - we all have prejudices, be aware of what yours are so that they will not interfere with the task at hand, providing service to all women.

Many institutions often hire minorities out of soft funds such as C.E.T.A. which sooner or later run out, and then so does the minority representation. A person who has a different cultural background can only add enrichment to any program, providing they are accepted and respected. In the meantime, American Indian women are organizing themselves to recover a status that will enable them to assist and assume leadership for the restoration and maintenance of positive cultural awareness. They are organizing to accommodate themselves to the social, economic, and governmental systems generally prevailing in the rest of the country. Workshops, conferences, seminars, and groups are gathering for much needed positive reinforcement in the areas of education, employment, health care, career identification, legal rights, assertiveness/leadership training, government, alcohol and substance abuse, battering, etc. The list is endless.

We are determined to improve the quality of our lives and the lives of our children. Much work is needed to ensure equity for Indian women in this society. More than ever it is becoming obvious that all these "untapped resources" are coming forth to speak out, to help one another overcome the many barriers that have stood in the way of equal treatment and equal justice.