

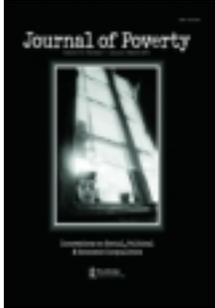
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### Domestic Violence Among the Navajo

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# Domestic Violence Among the Navajo: A Legacy of Colonization

Diane McEachern  
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**SUMMARY.** Domestic violence is the leading cause of injuries to women ages 15 to 44. Navajo women have increasingly been plagued by domestic violence and in response, in 1993 the Navajo Nation enacted the Domestic Abuse Prevention Act. Years of colonization have left their mark on members of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation exists within a climate of institutionalized violence, where some of their traditional values of equality and harmony have been broken down. This has led to an increase in family violence. Poverty and a lack of infrastructure and social services exacerbate the problems that Navajo women face when trying to leave violence in their homes. Using information gathered through experience as social workers and ethnographic interviews, this paper explores domestic violence among the Navajo in Northeastern Arizona, with a particular focus on the effects of colonization. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com)]

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**KEYWORDS.** Domestic violence, Native American, American Indian, Navajo, reservation, colonization, rural

## INTRODUCTION

The history of colonization has dramatically shaped the experience of many Native People with regards to gender relationships. Among one native community in the Philippines, the Ibaloi, when women are asked what makes a good husband, three areas are mentioned frequently. Women say a good husband is a man who does not drink, does not hit his wife, and is someone who works hard in the field. According to these same women, this set of standards is not “traditional” because there was a time when alcohol consumption and family violence were not part of village life. Alcohol abuse and domestic violence are, to them, part of the “price you have to pay” and “a woman’s cross to bear” since the advent of economic and religious colonization. These two statements refer to economic and religious influences that stem from the colonization of the Philippines by both Spain and later the United States.

One forum for the discussion of these and other issues pertinent to Native peoples was the 1987 International Indigenous Peoples Conference sponsored by the Philippine National movement. A Native American delegate from a U.S. reservation commented on his profound experience in one of the remote mountain villages he had visited while in the Philippines. He told the participants that although he was from half way around the world, he felt more at home in the village with tribal Bontoc people than he did in the nearby “border” town near his reservation home in the United States. While he did not speak the Bontoc language, the culture of the people and the manner in which he, as a visitor, was treated overwhelmed him with a sensation of home. The conference contained and generated a rich energy as Indigenous Group delegates from all over the world assessed the “price” they were all paying for the subjugation of their communities to Western, and more specifically, the United States global power.

As do native women in the Philippines, Native American women from a variety of tribes within the United States also bear the brunt of colliding cultures and government colonial policies. This paper

presents an exploratory analysis of domestic violence among Navajo Indians of the Southwest United States, with a focus on the Western Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Specific attention is paid to the effects of colonization, the clash between Native American and mainstream American culture, and the effects of living in an isolated rural area.

Information for the paper was gathered through the authors' experiences as social work practitioners working in the area of domestic violence and working with Native Peoples, and through ethnographic research conducted among Navajo men and women in Northeastern Arizona. The authors interviewed community leaders, social service providers, and women who had experienced domestic violence. The latter were contacted through the authors' personal networks and the network of service providers. Interviews were conducted by one of the authors who is a member of the Navajo community. This fluid research methodology is essential, given the cultural-based reluctance to discuss domestic violence that is common among the Navajo, as well as the Navajo community's discomfort with outsiders.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Although women have been beaten within the confines and privacy of their intimate relationships throughout historical record it wasn't until the late 1980s that the Surgeon General of the United States identified domestic violence as the number one public health problem for women. It remains the leading cause of injuries to women ages 15-44. These injuries are more common than muggings, auto accidents, and cancer deaths combined (Dwyer, Smokowski, Bricout, & Wodarski, 1995). The historical context within which battering has developed is that of male domination within and outside the family unit. Throughout most of Western European history, the patriarchal family was directly supported by the laws and practices of the larger society. That historical legacy was brought to the United States and continues to influence the dominant social structure. The patriarchal family predates capitalist society, and so does violence against women within it.

Patriarchal authority is based on male control over woman's productive capacity, and over her person. This control existed before the development of capitalist commodity production. It belonged to a society in which the persons of human beings were owned by others. (Rowbotham, 1973, p. 83)

Pre-capitalist and early capitalist patriarchal authority was based on the father's control of "his" household, which was the focus of daily life and productive activity for everyone. In Western Europe, marriage laws explicitly recognized the family as the domain of the husband, forced women to conform to the man's will, and punished men and women unequally for infractions of marriage vows (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

In their historical overview of wife beating, Dobash and Dobash (1979) note that, "through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, there was little objection within the community to a man's using force against his wife as long as he did not exceed certain tacit limits" (p. 42). It is this historical reality that is relevant to exploring the development of domestic violence among Native Americans in general, and within the Navajo Nation, more specifically.

### ***DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG NATIVE AMERICANS***

Working with Native Americans requires the ability to collapse the past and present into a current reality. Time often takes on a different meaning, with the past feeling like a part of the present. Given this cultural reality, it is impossible to explore a present situation without exploring its historical context. While Native American women come from a diversity of tribal and cultural backgrounds, they share similar experiences and legacies of rapid social change. Much of this change can be directly linked to European colonization, disease decimation from European contact, Christian missionizing, and relocations to "less desirable" geographic areas and/or boarding schools. Although domestic violence is an issue which dates back throughout history among European populations, most scholars of Native American cultures believe that domestic violence is a relatively recent phenomenon which coincides with

the advent of colonial rule and the subjugation of Native Americans. As one Navajo woman put it, "A lot of women are having trouble with their husbands. The only model the men have is the macho white man. They try to copy him and Navajo women object" (Shepardson, 1982, p. 101).

There seems to be relatively little information about Native cultures regarding violence against women prior to European contact. What is known is that in most Native American societies men's and women's roles were delineated in such a way that violence against women among their own groups did not seem to be a common and regular practice (Allen, 1986; Neithammer, 1977; Wagner, 1988). For example, among Iroquois women, there was recognition that, ". . . As an Indian woman I was free. I owned my own home, my person, the work of my own hands. I was better as an Indian woman than under white law" (Fletcher, 1888, p. 2). Traditionally, within Navajo culture, women shared equal rights with men, and sometimes enjoyed superior authority and importance. Navajo common law reflected these values through women's property ownership and control, the mother's determinative role in tracing ancestry, and married couples' practice of residing with the wife's family. Some cultures treat women as property, or their culture's law retains vestiges of the notion that women are property. Navajo common law used property and ownership concepts in a different way: "In marriage, . . . a man becomes property of a woman, a woman property of a man" (Zion & Zion, 1993, p. 35). In this way, Navajo common law conceived the reciprocal relations of a man and woman as an interdependent bond. Women's equal status and dignity are reinforced by Navajo literature, which details Navajo women's important work and essential role in society. Their greatest deity, Changing Woman, who is also Mother Earth, symbolizes women's social importance.

In their study of rape and Navajo traditional response to it, Zion and White (1986) could not locate sources which clearly defined early Navajo rape customs. They concluded that rape was relatively absent from early Navajo society. Similarly, they found that the available literature seems to indicate that domestic violence and child abuse were known but were an aberration. Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen (1986) contends that the crime of domes-

tic violence is caused by economic dislocation, the destruction of traditional institutions, and the introduction of individualism and the individualistic norms of paternalism and patriarchal rule. These new concepts were mandated and forced upon the Native American community in a variety of ways, some of which are described below.

Prior to 1883, marriage practices, divorce, and inheritance were strongholds of women's power within the tribe. Divorce could be enacted by women simply by removing the husband's belongings from the home. Wealth such as animals, the home, and possessions in the family passed through the mother to her daughters. In 1883, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs introduced the Court of Indian Offenses for Indian reservations, where some of the "new" crimes included traditional marriage practices, traditional divorce, and traditional inheritance (Zion & Zion, 1993). The resulting regulations changed the power balance between men and women. The federal government also thought that the best way to "civilize" Indians was to turn them into farmers with exclusive rights to a fixed area of land. The federal government, through the Dawes Act of 1886, required the allotment of Indian lands. These allotments were made to men and not women, further eroding Native American women's power. One of the theories behind the Dawes Act was that individual land ownership would "restore" manhood to Indian men (Deutsch, 1991). The allotment system "was intended to transform Indians who lived under varied kin systems into male-headed, monogamous nuclear families," either ignoring or attacking Indian concepts of family (Scharff, 1991, p. 64).

Another destructive innovation was the adoption of the strong, male leader—"the head man." U.S. government leaders insisted that the Navajos select male leaders (Underhill, 1956). Navajo women had enjoyed a strong role in the public decisions of Navajo clan groups. They lost their ability to participate in decisions made by male leaders given absolute power. Thus, alien law and government destroyed traditional relationships and concentrated power in the hands of male leaders. Without the institutionalized protection of Navajo common law, Navajo women suffered. In this way, non-Indian paternalism and patriarchy were introduced to Navajos. Nava-

jo men learned several Anglo "traditions" including robbing women of economic and political power and wife-beating.

The use of boarding schools is another powerful instituted practice that is repeatedly mentioned when talking with Native Americans about the issues facing them today. Between 1850 and 1950, the federal government practiced widespread systematic removal of Indian children from their families and communities and placed them into state- and church-run boarding schools. This was to become known as "the boarding school era." The boarding school was an important component of the efforts to destroy tribal cultures. For many people these schools were a traumatic experience that included physical, sexual and emotional abuse. The Federal government implemented coordinated efforts to eradicate each tribe's religion, identity, language, and social organization. The effects of these destructive efforts still reverberate at many levels including the family. Away from their families, prohibited from speaking their languages and practicing their traditions, generations of Indian children grew up in institutions that widely used corporal punishment as a means of "socialization" (Brown, 1971). The Federal government's decision to remove native children from their communities and place them in church-run boarding schools is described by Native American writer Eileen Hudson (1995) as:

. . . a heinous act designed to destroy the emotional and spiritual heart of those communities. This process tore away at the notions of tribal continuity, inheritance, native intellectual knowledge, and sustainable infrastructures for native society. It left a people stunned from the seemingly silent and invisible atrocities created when a nation's future is sequestered away.  
(p. 76)

Interviews conducted by the authors often included mention of the boarding schools. One Navajo man, a Traditional Counselor, was asked to give his view of domestic violence. He began recounting an incident that happened to him when he was going to a boarding school. He spoke of the harsh treatment he and other children received. He told of priests who sexually abused boys and how cruel some of the teachers were. He then went further back in history and talked about why hogans are constructed in the shape

they are. He said that a hogan represents the center of the family and community and it is round to replicate the body of a pregnant woman. The logs used in construction represent her hands clasped around her belly. He explained that "home is wherever woman is." At first we tried to ask about domestic violence in other ways to try and get him to say something about the present situation but each time he would refer back to boarding school times. To this man, domestic violence was not defined merely in terms of abuse occurring within the home, but more broadly as that which was done to Native Americans through the use of boarding schools.

### ***DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG THE NAVAJO***

The Navajo Nation is the largest and most populous American Indian Nation with over 250,000 members. Spanning Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, the Navajo Nation encompasses 17.5 million acres—and is larger than the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts and Rhode Island combined. The 1990 Census reports that the percentage of Navajos living below the poverty level was approximately 56 percent as compared to approximately 13 percent for the United States. The average annual per capita income of the Navajo people was \$4,106 compared to the U.S. average of \$19,082 in 1990. Navajo unemployment ranges from 36 percent to over 50 percent seasonally. Navajo Nation President Albert A. Hale (1996) further describes conditions on the Reservation:

. . . many of these conditions can be attributed to a lack of infrastructure which itself is directly related to the failure of the Federal government to live up to its trust and treaty responsibilities. For example, the Navajo reservation has 2,000 miles of paved roads while West Virginia, which is roughly equivalent in size, has over 18,000 miles. Similarly, the vast majority of Navajo homes lack electricity, running water and telephones, or all of the above. (p. 4)

Domestic violence is a growing problem on the Navajo reservation, and it is particularly difficult in Western Navajo. Western

Navajo has a varied topography, generally mountainous with deep canyon lands. For every dirt road there is a corresponding footpath and many families live miles from other families. The largest town in the area is Tuba City with a population of 8,000. Although Western Navajo has the second highest population and covers one-third of the total Reservation land area, it has the fewest services for women and children victims of domestic violence. Without a phone, money, and transportation, and with miles between houses, a Navajo woman faces a formidable challenge in attempting to leave a violent partner. People on the reservation live in geographically rural areas with long distances between services. This further complicates the issue of family violence. Rural populations are generally not large enough to support specialized services, and transportation is a perennial problem. There is a high lack of awareness of services, or knowledge as to whether a battered woman's shelter could, in fact, provide emergency transport. There is no phone service to many households. Specific to reservation life, if a woman wants to leave her abusive partner, she may need to leave the reservation. This means leaving her family network. Often, she will not be able to find work in the nearby border towns and returning to the reservation and the perpetrator becomes the lesser of two evils, especially when her children are involved.

Perpetrators of domestic violence have a sense of how to maintain control over their victims. They know that phones, money and transportation can be vital links to a woman's ability to escape to safety. Many of the conditions that exist within the Navajo Nation in general, and in the Western Navajo more specifically, exacerbate the problem of domestic violence, and limit a woman's opportunities to leave violent situations. The following anecdotes, with details changed to preserve anonymity, are representative of stories heard often from women on the reservation, and express many of the dilemmas a Navajo woman faces:

May, a Navajo woman, dropped her husband off at the trading post on the Navajo Reservation so he could unload hay. As she drove off she became stuck in mud. As a result, she was late in returning to pick up her husband. In a rage, he hit her repeatedly in front of the children while they were in the trading post parking lot. During the attack, the three young children

screamed for him to stop. Badly beaten, with a serious eye injury, the woman fled and walked for hours in the snow until she came to a home where she was allowed to stay the night. There was no telephone, and with the severe shortage of Navajo police she might not have gotten assistance from them. The next day, she again set off on foot until she came to another house where the family had a car and gas and was able to drive her 50 miles to the hospital so she could have her eye treated.

A Navajo woman was severely beaten by her husband in her home. Her children ran from the house to get help from relatives about a half mile down the road. A relative notified police officers and requested an ambulance. The ambulance arrived first, but the paramedics found that the road to the home was too muddy for the ambulance to get through. The paramedics began to walk through the mud to the house, and were eventually picked up by police officers whose vehicle was able to make it through the mud. The woman was severely hurt, and was taken from her home by the paramedics in the police vehicle, which became stuck in the mud while leaving the house. The vehicle was eventually freed from the mud, and the woman taken to a hospital. Unfortunately, the length of time that it took the police and paramedics to arrive allowed the husband to flee, and the delays meant that a great deal of time passed before the woman was able to get medical attention.

Sometime in 1991, Sara was beaten by her husband, Ned. They are Navajo and live with their two toddlers and baby on the Navajo Reservation. Ned had been drinking when he began hitting and screaming at Sara. Ned kept a gun in the house and had threatened to kill Sara a number of times. She decided to take the beating and hope that he would soon pass out so she could escape with the children. They did not own a phone, there was no cash in the house, and the car was not running.

Ned soon passed out and Sara, experiencing back pain, extensive bruises and a swollen eye, gathered her children and left the house. She carried the baby while the two toddlers walked beside her. It was summer and as the heat began pressing on

the day, Sara and the children walked 2 miles on a dirt path to a main road which was also unpaved. She then hitched a ride 10 miles to the Trading Post, a small store located in most Chapter House areas. No one was around so she walked a mile to the Chapter House office building. There was a phone there but, as is common, it was broken. As luck would have it, a police officer drove by and Sara flagged him down. It was rare good fortune because there are only 5 police officers patrolling the 4,100 square mile area. The officer drove her and her exhausted children 50 miles to a relay point. Another police officer picked her up and took her to the nearest shelter which was 100 miles away. The shelter was full. They found another shelter in a nearby town outside the reservation with space. By that time it was about 8 o'clock at night. Sara and the children eventually returned to Ned.

### ***CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN LAW ENFORCEMENT***

“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the Navajo Nation on account of sex . . . ” so reads the Navajo Nation Bill of Rights. What U.S. women could not get passed before the national government, Navajo women were accorded outright. Yet due to the various conditions outlined previously, it is difficult for law enforcement to be of much assistance to women who are being battered in their homes.

The small town of Kayenta, in Western Navajo, has just five officers patrolling 4,100 square miles. The officers are responsible for 15,270 people. Police in this endless horizon of red rock formations and valleys aren't unlike those in other rural, poor districts around the nation. For Navajo officers, however, the task is compounded by the reservation's horrifying host of social ills: unemployment, alcoholism, suicide and murder rates multiple times the national average. It is particularly challenging for police in this area. In the past nine years, three officers were murdered on the job, one committed suicide and another was jailed for killing his wife (Boorstein, 1997). Navajo police chief Leonard Butler noted the changes for police, saying, “When I started in 1971, a lot of our time was taken up with livestock being shot or windmill disputes.

Now, in one week I've got two fatal accidents, one suicide and five people killed. There are times when you don't want to go to work anymore."

Navajo officers mirror their community. Alcohol and drug abuse, divorce, domestic violence or suicide seem to touch nearly every life. Often they blame the victim in domestic violence disputes, saying she must have done something to bring on the abuse. In this way they conform to the attitude of many law officers in the U.S. For all of these reasons, some Navajo women are concerned that in domestic violence situations, help from law enforcement officers may not be readily available.

### ***DIRECTIONS FOR INTERVENTION***

In July 1993, the Navajo Nation enacted the Domestic Abuse Prevention Act. This Act states that domestic violence is a crime, specifies that protection is to be provided for all populations, outlines services for victims, and specifies penalties for perpetrators.

The Resolution of the Navajo Nation Council (CJY-52-93) accompanying the Act states:

1. Domestic violence is occurring on the Navajo Nation in epidemic proportions. Many Navajo persons are beaten, harassed, threatened or otherwise subjected to abuse within the domestic setting; and
2. Domestic violence has a lasting detrimental effect on the individuals who directly experience the abuse and on their children, who carry memories of violence with them into their adult lives and may themselves become violent and abusive.

This legislation demonstrates the Navajo Nation's commitment to addressing the issue of domestic violence, and provides a strong foundation on which interventive efforts can be built. Discussions with Navajo women suggest a possible direction for intervention which deserves further attention. Within many Native cultures when a breakup happened as a result of abuse, the woman who left was viewed as honorable for having the respect and dignity to leave a destructive relationship behind. She did not have to fear retali-

ation or terrorism. The husband recognized her right to make her own choices and if he could not respect this, the Tribe intervened to insure her safety and teach him proper behavior (Balzer et al. 1993). Navajo women with whom we spoke no longer feel that they would be respected in that way. One woman described her deep shame and embarrassment when her partner abused her. She was extremely afraid of her partner and tried to keep the problems hidden for as long as she could until he almost killed her.

There are women who have been victims and have been able to leave their abusers and get help. One of those women who was interviewed on the reservation said that she saw a connection between women battering and subjugation in other forms. She described how these acts of violence have the same dynamics as those of the invasion of one country by another, the master over slave, the colonization of native people, and Western men's subjugation of women. This suggests that an interventive approach that might prove effective with Navajo women could be built on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). Freire writes about peasants, and how they can use liberating education to overcome oppression and transform their situations. The descriptions of the oppressed peasants fit victims of domestic violence quite well. He describes the peasants as people who feel that they do not know things, that they do not know how to change things, that distrust themselves, and that are very self-deprecating. "So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness" (p. 45). This leaves them believing that they do not know how and that they are unable to change their current situations.

Freire stresses that to overcome oppression and to leave oppressive situations, reflection is essential. We must reflect on our situation, before we can act to change it. He points out the importance of gaining a critical awareness of oppression through dialogue and what he calls "liberating education." Liberating education means not talking at people, not explaining to people, but dialoguing with them. It means helping them to develop a critical consciousness by having conversations with others who are in a similar situation, or have been in a similar situation. This can be done through dialogue

groups, where women can come together to explore their lives, and to make connections between their situations and the bigger picture. To do this we must first trust that these women are capable of looking critically at their lives, and capable of reason and reflection. We must also trust that they have the answers and must find them through conversation and struggle with others. This means abandoning our efforts to tell Navajo women in battering situations what they must do, and instead supporting them in their development of a critical consciousness gained through dialogue.

Freire's work may also suggest a direction to take with Navajo batterers. Freire stresses that those who are oppressed emulate their oppressor, and become emotionally dependent. This leads them to take out their frustrations on others who are oppressed around them.

The peasant is a dependent. He can't say what he wants. Before he discovers his dependence, he suffers. He lets off steam at home, where he shouts at his children, beats them, and despairs. He complains about his wife and thinks everything is dreadful. He doesn't let off steam with the boss because he thinks the boss is a superior being. Lots of times, the peasant gives vent to his sorrows by drinking. (Freire, 1970, p. 47)

Some of the violence of Navajo men toward their female partners may be a result of their own oppression. These men can be helped to understand how the various forms of oppression are related, and how their oppression by the dominant society is resulting in their taking their frustration out at home. Dialogue groups with the male batterers, that focus on consciousness raising and their experience as Native American men in an Anglo-dominated society, can help them better understand themselves and their actions. Dialogue groups could also help them develop more appropriate options for handling their anger and frustration.

Interventions based on Freire's work on liberating education are culturally relevant for the Navajo given the Navajo's experience of colonization and oppression. Freire's model was developed with South American peasants, many of whom, like the Navajo, were living in rural, generally isolated areas. They had also experienced years of colonization and oppression, and extreme poverty. Use of Freire's model also seems appropriate given that it is an interven-

tion that does not require outsiders to come in and try to “fix” the problem for those living on the reservation, as has been tried by Anglos for many years.

Years of colonization have left their mark on members of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation exists within a climate of institutionalized violence, where some of their traditional values of equality and harmony have been broken down. This has led to an increase in family violence. Poverty and a lack of infrastructure and social services exacerbate the problems that Navajo women face when trying to leave violence in their homes. Future research must continue to document the prevalence and severity of the problem of domestic violence on the Navajo reservation, and culturally relevant interventions must be developed and evaluated.

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