**Ending Violence Against Native Women:**

**Working Within Our Nations**

Excerpt from Domestic Violence Awareness: Actions for Social Change – 2005, National Resource Center on DV

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**Introduction**

This chapter speaks to Native women who are advocates working within tribal nations. These pages offer a basic framework for developing an ongoing educational campaign in your own tribal community. However, all readers are strongly encouraged to read the entire manual. The unique voices, perspectives and expertise of the many women who contributed to this initiative are invaluable in creating a comprehensive, effective campaign that engages and establishes working relationships with all groups within and around your nation.

As Native women, we have similar but unique cultures and histories as indigenous peoples. Importantly, we share, unlike other groups of women, a special status as tribal nations. Those realities define and impact our struggles, strengths and strategies. We can wrap ourselves in a quilt made by and of the spirits of generations of our relatives, our indigenous cultures, natural worldview and the knowledge of the awesome spirit of women.

Awareness and educational campaigns are tools of social change. Social change requires a vision of what we want our nations to become. The blessing for Native women is that our vision for the future is based on our past. We have the memories of societies that honored the sovereign status of women and their children, where battering, rape and disrespect were rare. Our task is to reclaim that vision and make real the communities where women can safely walk free.

The challenge of this work is the harsh reality that as Native advocates we are attempting to save the lives of Sisters, Aunts, Mothers and Grandmothers while wrapped in a blanket of intense poverty, multi-level political and jurisdictional chaos, geographic and cultural isolation, numerous epidemics and all the various forms of oppression and internalized oppression. The goal of this chapter is to challenge and assist advocates to connect the threads of that blanket and create an educational campaign that inspires social change to end violence against Native women.

The best fry bread, gabobo bread, flat bread and other Native foods have no written recipes. Some women bake all the time, some rarely, some buy it. No matter how it turns out, something good comes from it. Sometimes, as in this advocate’s experience, we try new things. Like attempting to make “healthy” fry bread with whole wheat. They turned out to be healthy hockey pucks. Still, there were two good outcomes: laughter and knowing whom her friends really were. The effort is appreciated and relationships are made. And this work is the same way.

New parents often start out with grand, detailed visions of their children’s future – and the conviction that as parents they could make it happen. Later they realized that was pretty delusional, they have control over very little and children have their own paths and spirits. What mattered most was the children’s ability to be healthy and happy – and that was all about relationships, starting from themselves. And this work is the same way.

**The blessing for Native women is that our vision for the future is based on our past.**

**Native Women’s Sovereignty**

All Native Women have a right to:

1. Their bodies and paths in Life, the possession and control of which is unquestioned and honored by others. To exist without fear, but with freedom.
2. Self-governance, or the ability and authority to make decisions regarding all matters concerning themselves, without others’ approval or agreement. This includes the ways and methods of decision-making in social, political and other areas of life.
3. An economic base and resources, or the control, use and development of resources, businesses or industries that Native women choose, to support chosen life ways, including the practice of spiritual ways.
4. A distinct identity, history and culture. Each Native woman defines and describes her history, including the impact of colonization, racism and sexism, tribal women’s culture, worldview and traditions.

(Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women, 2001)

**Goals of an Educational Campaign**

The overall goal of an advocate is to end violence against women. Prioritizing the safety and integrity of women, and the accountability of offenders, systems and of community members are integral to that goal.

The goals of an educational campaign are to:

1)  help women who are battered and/or raped find you

2)  create a credible, consistent presence as advocates and social change agents

3)  lay the foundation for social change by providing culturally based, accurate information

4)  inspire critical thinking

5)  make respectful relationships

6)  create strategies and forums aimed at mobilizing communities

“...Indian tribes must act like Indians. That’s the only justification for preserving internal sovereignty...So if we’re going to have internal sovereignty, we’re going to have to bring back the majority of social traditions...if we don’t bring those traditions back, then the problems those traditions solved are going to continue to grow. Then we’ll have to get funding to set up programs to deal with those issues...When you set up programs, you are exercising your internal sovereignty, but the funding sources determine how the program is going to operate and then the funding source defines internal sovereignty.” (Deloria, 1995)

**Making Respectful Relationships**

**WORKING WITHIN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES**

Educational campaigns begin with a mirror. Taking the time to reflect on who we are as individual women, our own internalized oppression and where we are spiritually matters greatly. This work is personal and political and they are not opposites; they are parts of each other. Traditionally Native people know everything is

spiritual. But because of oppression and internalized oppression, we often separate the spiritual from our work lives and we don’t always believe as women that we are spiritually powerful. Social change begins when we bring that consciousness about ourselves as women to our work. Learning to hear and trust our instincts and spirits is key. It’s a necessity if the words about believing women are experts on their own lives are more than rhetoric.

The public exposure required in doing educational campaigns may make whether or not you’re a non-tribal member an issue. And it may actually be a benefit if you are not because it decreases chances of family politics interfering. If status as a non-tribal member is raised, it’s usually to distract from the real issues. We don’t have to join in that dance. However, it is a teachable moment: focus on the fact that it’s about violence to Native women.

There also is an ethical aspect to non-tribal members working in another tribal nation. Though non-tribal members are often adopted formally or informally into the tribe they work and live with, our role in that situation is to support the sovereignty of that tribe, and especially the women of that tribe, by actively working to “replace ourselves” at some point with a tribal member. It is a matter of living the messages we send about Native women’s rights to resources and to speak and do for themselves.

***As Women***

Conversations with other advocates and other women who are battered and/or raped is the beginning and end point of all parts of our work to end violence against women, including the educational campaigns developed. Women often do their best work around a kitchen table, having coffee and visiting with each other. We don’t do case management, analyze, or judge – we visit, enjoy each other’s company and look for the best and become wise this way. It’s awesome, natural and traditional as Native people and as women. Why don’t we bring that to what we call work? We don’t bring that style of relating to our work because of internalized oppression. Helping each other become aware of and undo our internalized oppression without shame is part of education and social change.

Consider the existing groups of women in your community. Women’s groups are about consciousness-raising, support, brainstorming and organizing. All tribes have some types of women’s societies. Revitalizing those groups so they understand their connection and role in helping stop violence against Native women in itself achieves a level of social change. The work is about women who are battered and/or raped. It’s our “agenda,” our lives that will be impacted. This is a sovereignty issue.

Women know the resources, needs and ways of their community. Though there may only be a few women initially, that group has the potential to act as the catalyst for educational campaigns and other organizing. Acting as a collective increases the chances of being heard, being innovative, and enhances continuity and consistency – all important elements in an educational campaign. And every woman in that society becomes a social change agent, and ensures that ending violence against Native women is an ingrained part of the society itself. It’s a great example of how reclaiming tribal culture and sovereignty is directly connected to reclaiming Native women’s culture and sovereignty.

Reclaiming the sovereignty of women who have been battered necessitates promoting the leadership, expertise and voices of Native women who have been battered and/or raped as often and in as many places as possible. Whether through quotes, poetry, stories, speak-outs or other forums, women deserve and need to be heard. Make the credibility of those words real by supporting Native women who have been battered in decision-making positions whenever possible.

***Communities Within Communities***

Each nation must tailor its own tools and path to suit their tribe; that’s business as usual in Indian Country. Native women struggle with the fact that colonization and internalized oppression mean tribal identity is usually based on the tribal men’s culture. Validating and promoting Native women’s culture is integral to our agenda. However, there are layers of additional cultures and identities that often get ignored either because of our own lack of awareness, lack of resources and/or internalized oppression.

The status of women cannot be raised, nor our sovereignty honored, if the fact that some of us are differently-abled, have a different sexual/gender orientation, interpret our experiences and identity differently, or are different from mainstream society in any way, is ignored or discounted. The irony is that these “differences” are traditionally interpreted as signs of a special spiritual role necessary for the well being of the entire society.

Our ancestors understood connections and relationships, letting individuals’ spirits be and speak for themselves.

That’s all pretty abstract. And maybe a bit frustrating. One source of guidance comes from our own personal experience. When do we feel most respected and validated and powerful? When we are heard and believed, given resources, supported in making our own decisions, acknowledged without judgement, when we are trusted to know what we need. When we are safe on every level. It’s another way of saying sovereignty. Those elements are integral to a social change-based educational campaign, and advocacy as a whole. Create the large vision of where we want to go, then work in the small, powerful steps of relationships. That brings the work full circle.

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***Systems and Institutions***

Know the institutions and systems in your community. Learn about their purpose, history, political life, strengths and struggles with barriers and resources. Understanding the institution’s or system’s culture creates rapport and common ground.

There are many ways you can build relationships with people and institutions in your community:

* ***Support each other*** – Find common ground in shared goals, barriers and conflicts. An ally on one issue is easier to convert into an ally for another cause.
* ***Make relationships with individuals*** – The whole police force may not believe in what you are trying to accomplish, but one or two individual officers may share all or part of your vision. Any ally is a start.
* ***Informal conversations*** are mutual educational opportunities, and a non-threatening way to create rapport. The trust built in that relationship will open doors and keep doors open when conflicts arise.
* ***Build on the idea of mutual benefit*** – Many people who resist change might change their minds if you can point out how a change can help them, either personally or to do their jobs better.
* ***Cross-training*** – A lot of conflicts are based on a misunderstanding of what each person’s role is, whether in personal relationships or working relationships. Cross-training can inform each side about how each does his/her job and dispel any misjudgments or misconceptions either side has. Most importantly, it can plant the idea that each side may share certain values, goals, barriers, and concerns.
* ***In-services*** – Providing in-service training or information for agencies and their staff members gets everyone familiar with who you are and what you do. It lets you talk about and discuss with them issues that they might not want to acknowledge, or by which they feel threatened because they have not been informed. And we all know that a lot of people feel threatened by changes especially when they don’t know why the change is needed.
* ***Target allies*** who can further the educational campaign and the work to end violence against women in the other arenas they routinely operate in. We all are aware of certain people in our community that other people look to for advice, or who are on this board or that committee. It could be someone who is just very vocal about commenting publicly about issues and their beliefs. It might be someone who is a “public“ person, who incidentally is the mother, father, or other relative of someone who has been battered or raped. Informing those persons and enlisting their help can get your issues addressed in forums where you might not be able to be heard.
* ***Communicate in their language*** – Certain agencies and professions have their own terminology or terms they use with each other. Using those terms in your conversations with those groups makes you less of an outsider and less threatening. This can come from developing relationships with one member of that group or just listening to how they communicate with each other.

**WORKING WITHIN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES**

***Community Families and Groups***

All tribal communities have formal and informal groups and organizations. Each has its own history, culture and purpose. These groups and organizations are potential allies and resources. Make connections and relationships with them, and share our struggles, goals and work with them. Begin by supporting their work, then engage them in yours. There is really nothing within our communities that is not in some way connected to ending violence against women. Help make that connection.

Our communities have spiritual advisors and leaders with the potential to provide leadership focusing on respect and status of women within the existing ceremonial groups. It is common knowledge that in most Native communities there is a disconnect between the treatment of women and spiritual practices. It is a difficult and little talked about fact resulting from colonization and internalized oppression. Use visits with the leaders in those groups to discuss this reality. These are teachable moments aimed at taking a stand on accountability as relatives and leaders.

Probably the most powerful people in Native communities are the Grandmothers. When they speak, people listen. As with other Elders and entire families in our communities, there exists an awesome potential for recreating/revitalizing the role of elders and families as central to the honoring and protection of women and accountability of offenders.

**Not Everybody Will Be an Ally**

That’s pretty much general knowledge. If people are arguing with us, we have their attention, we are not being ignored and they have to think about the issues. It’s not the goal of advocacy or educational campaigns to get everyone to approve of or like us. That can be a challenge for women socialized to be people pleasers and/or male identified (see the discussion on internalized oppression!).

The priority is that community members see our programs as credible and trustworthy. Programs are modern, non-Native replacements for families, societies and clans. Individual behavior and character are important, but consciously recognizing we are part of a collective, many collectives, gives our roles as program representatives and community members context, power and meaning.

**Get Your Message Out**

The goal is to be respectful and respected by being clear and consistent. As individuals our life way and work need to reflect consistent beliefs, credibility and character. However, as one advocate, who is a Native woman, said, “We are Native people; we do not heal alone.” She was talking about what being related means and the natural, traditional way of acting as a collective.

This section discusses a few key points about getting your message out and gives examples of activities that have worked well in Native communities. This manual contains a chapter listing national organizations, including Native organizations, which have materials and samples for your use. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel.

If you only have time, energy, and resources for a few posters and flyers, it may not be all you want to do, but it’s still valuable. Anything that gets people to think about the issue of violence against women is powerful. And women in the community who are being battered and/or raped will know they are not alone and somebody cares. That’s more powerful.

One way of getting other people to see your agenda is to look for common threads of ideas in their work that correspond to part of what you are trying to accomplish. These themes help create familiarity with specific issues and goals and can bring others’ perspectives into line with yours. Ending violence against Native women is part of a larger social change movement that involves other programs, whether local, tribal, state and/or national. Consider adopting or adapting themes used by those efforts, i.e. “domestic violence is a crime”, “domestic violence is a women’s health issue”, and “community involvement is necessary to end violence against Native women.”

For example, tribal leaders and community members understand that tribal sovereignty is about the status and rights of tribal nations. National Native women’s organizations, such as Sacred Circle, Mending the Sacred Hoop, and Clan Star connect the themes of Native women’s sovereignty and tribal sovereignty to promote an understanding of what ending violence against Native women is about.

Many issues – such as child abuse, housing, welfare, alcoholism, economic development, etc. – are close to the hearts of Native leaders and communities and evoke strong stances and support. Help people involved in these areas see their work in the context of women’s safety and include ending violence against women as part of their initiatives. The idea that “woman abuse is child abuse” is a good example. The key is to start from their perspective and understanding. For example, start from their use of labels, such as “client” or “constituent,” and promote their use of “woman” instead. Start with what they are familiar with, promote critical thinking, and help move them to understand and make your agenda their own.

Reclaiming tribal culture is directly connected to ending violence against Native women. One cannot happen without the other. Tribal oral tradition and history, values, ceremonies, and life ways should be the foundation for creating messages, planning campaigns/events, and having informal conversations that are consistent and powerful.

Use existing community and cultural events and activities as educational forums:

* ✓***Traditional arts*** – Sponsor or co-sponsor traditional women’s arts exhibits including an anti-violence against women theme. Provide materials for an anti-violence display created by youth and/or women.
* ✓***Fish camps*** – Have a man who is either an ally who “gets it” or facilitates batterers’ re- education classes give a short talk and use the camp as an opportunity for “teachable moments” while socializing (and working!).
* ✓***Powwows/wacipi*** – Sponsor women’s dance categories; bring the Silent Witnesses to grand entries; get a little M.C. time and/or educate and ask the M.C. to speak to respect for women.
* ✓***Sponsor a young women’s sports team*** – Provide workshops for the team, promote them as speakers and role models, provide t-shirts, etc., with program logo and messages.
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“Indianize” existing domestic violence awareness events:

✓***Silent Witness exhibits*** – The Silent Witnesses are silhouettes of women and children, sometimes men, who have been murdered by their batterer. They are meant to be a reminder of the lethality of battering, to put a face on the crime, and serve as a remembrance and celebration of loved ones’ lives. Sacred Circle has taken this memorial a few steps further by making the silhouettes look more like Native women by hanging pictures of tribal women (with the families’ permission) on individual silhouettes and wrapping them in shawls.

Recognizing that these memorials call on the spirits of women, they are labeled “Silent Witnesses – Quiet Guides.” Special care is taken of the silhouettes, praying with them, smudging them, etc. (Contact Sacred Circle for more information on creating and setting up these displays.)

✓Sacred Circle, Cangleska, Inc., and the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s Native Women of Sovereign Women’s Task Force made what are called “warrior shawls” of purple with large purple ribbon designs for women to wear during an October Domestic Violence Awareness Month walk.

Possibly the best advice is to think outside the box using your wisdom and intuition (spirit!) as a Native woman in doing this work. That would validate and celebrate Native womanhood.

**Conclusion**

Advocates provide leadership, stand up and speak out. Pre-colonization, that was the role of Native women. Reclaiming tribal and Native women’s sovereignty demands Native women reclaim this role. How we do that varies by woman and tribe. Act with other women, even if there are just two of you. Preparation and timing are important aspects of social change work to be considered.

Standing up makes you a target. Be aware and prepared for that. Know it means people see you as powerful and they are paying attention. Support and allies will come. People will see that our “job” is not a standard 9 to 5; it is a life way. Being as consistent as womanly possible will earn you the respect and credibility necessary for the path-making back to when Native women were treated as the sacred beings we are.

**Works Cited**

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