



Bawaajigan-Dream by artist Christine Stark

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## Colonization, Homelessness, and the Prostitution and Sex Trafficking of Native Women

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## Introduction

The social, political, and cultural instability during the colonial era and American Revolution involved ongoing warfare, shifting allegiances among Indigenous and European nations, enslavement, and relocation of Indigenous people. Indigenous women and girls were particularly impacted “...as females during wartime, colonial expansion, and slavery... [are] especially vulnerable to the sexual violence that so often accompanied conquest...” (Miles, 2008).

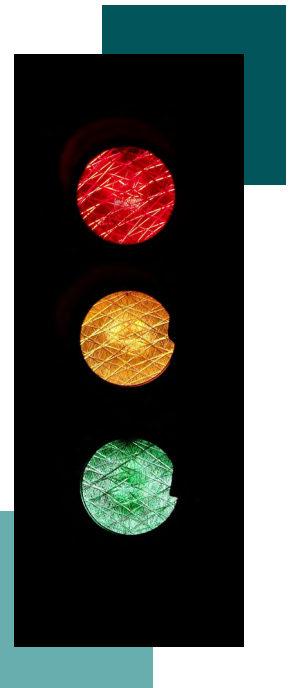
This paper seeks to illustrate the impact of human trafficking on Native women and girls in our times, with particular attention to the historical context in the United States and the interconnection between trafficking and housing instability.

## Historical Sex Trafficking of Native Women

Christopher Columbus and his men raped, enslaved, maimed, and murdered the Taino people upon landing on their shores. This included selling the Taino women and girls for rape--what is now called sex trafficking. Columbus wrote in his journals,

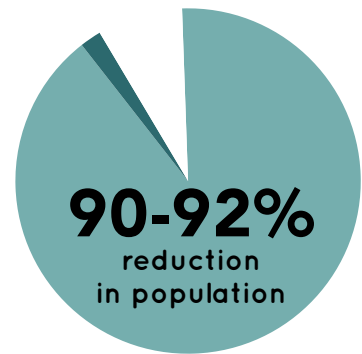
““ A hundred castellanos are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand ”” (Columbus, 2003).

These abuses spread as Spanish and other European countries colonized the continent, making sex trafficking a central component of the colonization of Indigenous people in Central and North America. During the American Revolution George “Washington’s troops put to death all the women and children, excepting some of the young women, whom they carried away for the use of their soldiers and were afterwards put to death in a more shameful manner” (Sjursen, 2018). As European countries settled the continent, Indigenous women and children were bought and sold for sex and labor trafficking, including at government and Christian-run boarding schools (Stark, 2019). From the beginning, Europeans scapegoated Indigenous people, casting Indigenous women as prostitutes that exist to be sexually used.



## Historical Homelessness of Native People

The homelessness of American Indian people was created through the colonization and genocide of the indigenous people of this land. Chronic homelessness of American Indian people is the direct result of the creation of the reservation system which was accomplished through treaties. Poverty, starvation, and contagious diseases, some intentionally inflicted by the military, were prevalent among Native people due to the loss and theft of their land. **The attempted genocide of Indigenous people resulted in a 90-92% reduction in population** (Dunbar Ortiz, 2014). Removal from homelands resulted in parents and tribes being unable to adequately house, feed and clothe their children, which was used as a reason for authorities to remove Indian children from their families to boarding school. Some parents saw boarding schools as a better option than having their children starve to death. However, “[s]ignificant abuse and cultural trauma occurred through the use of residential schools to house and educate Indigenous children. Furthermore, the 60’s Scoop – which took Indigenous children and placed them in white foster homes within the child welfare system has led to unstable families and homes” (Indigenous Peoples, 2019). Colonization disrupted every aspect of how Indigenous people have lived on this land for thousands of years, including what they lived in, where they lived, and how they lived in community, culture, and social connections.



## Contemporary Sexual Violence

One contemporary result of the attempted genocide of Native people is violence against Native women. Native women experience:

- **The highest rates of violence of any group in the U.S., including Black men** (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000);
- **Native women have the highest rate of domestic violence and rape of any group of women** (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000 & Center for Disease, 2008).
- **On some reservations Native women are murdered at more than ten times higher than the national average rate** (Perrelli, 2011).

Jurisdictional issues specific to Native women further complicate and impede their ability to find just treatment in the criminal justice system, which decreases their willingness to report crimes. The perpetrators of violence against Native women are primarily non-Native men.



Native women experience numerous disparities in income, incarceration, education and poverty that inhibit them from being able to live their lives as they would like. Instead, many exist in a revolving door of homelessness, domestic violence, rape, abduction, stalking, and sexual exploitation and torture in prostitution and sex trafficking.

The links among these disparities is evident in the number of Native women in prostitution and trafficking who are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. While advocates and women in prostitution and trafficking often talk of “aging out,” the high number of older and elderly

Native women in prostitution is indicative of the extreme difficulty Native women have in finding alternatives to escape prostitution. Prostitution is not a choice for the women, but rather a cycle of entrapment due to a variety of violent and coercive barriers that are a violation of the human rights of Native women. For instance, in one major metropolitan area there are many Native homeless women in prostitution in their 50s and 60s. They are targeted by rapists and some report being raped for hours with a weapon. These women are our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters. They are part of our communities, not scapegoats. Yet they are ignored and blamed by society, especially the criminal justice system who view them as “prostitutes” and “sex workers” who make unencumbered choices to be in prostitution. Referring to these women as “sex workers” in an attempt to give them dignity or to portray them as empowered only makes invisible the systemic violence and other profound oppressions in their lives. Using the term “sex worker” does nothing to change the circumstances of their lives. The violence that Native women endure causes significant instability for them and their families throughout their lives. Violence is often a direct and indirect cause of homelessness, and vice versa.

## Contemporary Homelessness

Homelessness continues to be widespread among Native people. *“In a country where Native Americans die at higher rates than most Americans from diabetes, drugs and homicide, and have experienced a long history of often violent displacement, they also make up an outsized portion of the homeless population”* (Davila, 2018). Homeless Native women are particularly vulnerable to all forms of sexual and physical violence. A

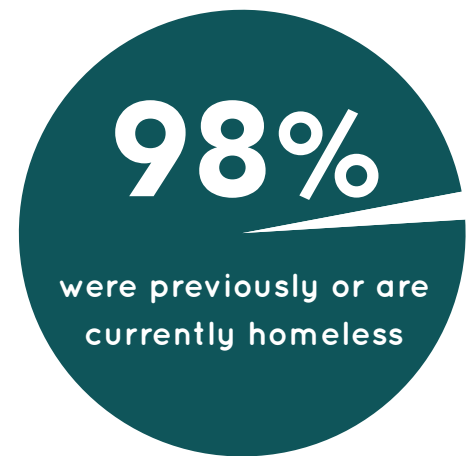
profound link between homelessness and prostitution and trafficking of Native women is evident in the [Garden of Truth: The Prostitution and Trafficking of Native Women](#), which found that **98% of the 105 Native prostituted and sex trafficked women interviewed were previously or currently homeless** (Farley et al., 2011).

Native women might become involved in prostitution and sex trafficking due to being homeless, or due to domestic violence that puts them on the street or couch hopping, thus making them vulnerable to prostitution and trafficking. High rates of poverty among Native women also puts them at risk for homelessness, keeps them trapped in domestic violence relationships, and sets them up for being trafficked or engaging in prostitution in order to eat, feed, and clothe their children.

LGBT and Two Spirit Native people also experience high rates of homelessness and anecdotal evidence suggests they also have high rates of being sex trafficked and involved in prostitution. Chronic, intergenerational homelessness and the institutionalization of Native women as “prostitute” are two reasons among a multitude of discriminations that entrap Native women and girls in prostitution and sex trafficking.

## Trauma and Invisibility

Recently, the U.S. has been engaged in public discourse regarding survivors of prostitution and trafficking and what their needs may be. However, minimal documentation about the experience of Native women has been included. The experience of Native women illustrates how the complexities of being trafficked and prostituted are woven into a tapestry of torture and trauma. This legacy has its roots in first contact and has a journey that persists in the invisibility of mainstream policy, practices,



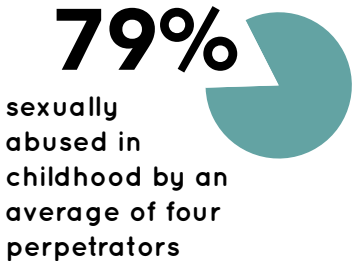
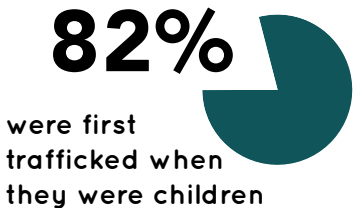


and discrimination. Much like a heartbeat, it just is. Native women are not consciously aware how this happened or how our own lack of knowledge and understanding of the Native experience molds our opinion. The complexity leaves hollow minimal actions to create safety and to “case plan” victims of torture, measuring them by meager standards of care. What emerged in the stories of Native women in the [Garden of Truth](#), was the centrality of the status of Native women as being non-human, being vulnerable to being degraded by non-Natives, and simply existing to be victimized. Colleen Echohawk, the Executive Director of Chief Seattle Club, says

*“Trauma can severely impact a person’s ability to establish and maintain housing stability. In simplistic terms, the pain makes it hard to seek help, and history makes it difficult to trust another system – it’s hard to believe things will change.”*

Related to trauma and invisibility is the separation of an institutionalized system of sexual exploitation into the terms “prostitution” and “sex trafficking—” a system rooted in colonization, sexism, poverty, racism, childhood sexual abuse, and homelessness. While we recognize that this is a charged political issue, we disagree with this delineation along with the use of the term “sex work.”

“Sex work,” first coined in the 1980s by Carol Leigh (Bindel, 2017), makes invisible the realities of prostitution and further endangers Native prostituted women’s lives by putting forth the idea that Native women in prostitution are there freely, unencumbered by oppressions, and enjoy prostitution. Using the term “sex work” normalizes an industry predicated on buying people, furthering the belief that it is acceptable to buy Native women (and other women) for sex. One study found that “80% of those forcibly initiated into prostitution via sex trafficking also prostituted without a trafficker at a later point” and **82% were first trafficked when they were children** (Roe-Sepowitz and Jabola-Carolus, 2019). Numerous other studies over the years have shown extremely high rates of childhood abuse of women in prostitution, including [Garden of Truth](#) in which **79% of the women had been sexually abused in childhood by an average of four perpetrators** (Farley et al, 2011).



Socially stigmatizing, criminalizing, and denying services to women in prostitution is tantamount to punishing survivors of trafficking, childhood rape, and women in poverty. We understand that women-of-color in general, and Native women specifically, suffer from separating prostitution from sex trafficking at higher rates than white women due to the added barriers of racism and poverty. In *Garden of Truth*, roughly half of the 105 Native women interviewed would legally be considered to be “prostituting,” resulting in their being viewed and treated as criminals, blamed for the exploitation they experienced in prostitution, and being denied services (if any is available). *“The Native Women’s Association of Canada states ‘Aboriginal women have the right to protection and safety of the law regardless of the views of others that they are choosing prostitution’”* (Stark, 2019).

No Native women should be criminalized or denied services, including housing, because of their involvement in prostitution. However, using the term “sex work” is not an answer. “Sex work” erases the violence, racism, poverty, and dehumanization inherent to prostitution. The idea that the exploitation of prostitution is valid “work” for Native women is not new or progressive. Instead it is rooted in the historic hatred of Native women. For instance, in Duluth, Minnesota police ledgers from the late 1800s and early 1900s list the race of an arrested woman as “Indian” and her occupation as “Whore.” Prostitution and trafficking of Native women are also aspects of the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in the U.S. and Canada, which is gaining wider attention. MMIW is incompatible with a term like “sex work.” This system of exploitation cannot theoretically or literally, in the form of the women’s lived lives, be split into “prostitution” and “sex trafficking.”



## **Recommendations**

Women exploited in trafficking are in our midst. We see them every day, yet they and their needs are invisible. Our knowledge and understanding are increasing with the engagement of exploited women identifying what help and assistance is needed. An evaluation process needs to be built into any resource created on their behalf.

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The following recommendations include concrete areas where work is needed to effectively respond to Native human trafficking survivors:

### **Housing**

- Secure Permanent Supportive Housing that includes services and childcare on site;
- Secure Unrestricted Housing with optional services available on site as tangible solutions to the housing instability impacting survivors.
- The participation of survivors in services should not be a requirement to secure safe, accessible, and affordable housing.

### **Services**

- Cultural healing ways are accessible and available on site by tribally known and acknowledged medicine people and healers;
- Expungement and other legal resources are immediately available and accessible, especially assistance with any child welfare issues affecting the survivors;
- Employment and relevant education resources need to be accessible to survivors.

Many survivors are victims of torture. Informed resources should be made available to them as a critical piece in their healing journey.

### **Public Policy**

- Require service providers, as part of their funding compliance, to have training and education regarding the prostitution and trafficking of Native women;
- Develop an outreach campaign for education and awareness related to human trafficking in reservations and urban Native communities;
- Develop a national campaign specifically for the Native Facebook audience;
- Implement the Equality Model, aka Nordic Model, with particular emphasis on culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services, and housing.



## Conclusion

More awareness, research, creation of effective services, and public policies are needed to right the wrongs inflicted on Native women and therefore on Native communities. Prostitution and sex trafficking were not part of Indigenous cultures before European contact. In the report [Garden of Truth](#), cited in this paper, **92% of Native women in prostitution and sex trafficking want to get out immediately but are unable to do so**. Prostitution, sex trafficking, and homelessness are crises inflicted on Native women and tribes for over 500 years as part of the colonization of Indigenous people.

*“Many of the personal issues, including familial dysfunction, substance use, addictions, health issues, community violence, faced by Indigenous Peoples and that act as contributors to homelessness can be directly linked to various types of historical trauma...”* (Indigenous Peoples, 2019)

One of the women from [Garden of Truth](#) said,

*“We need goodhearted people”* (Farley et al., 2011).

We call on these people to work with us toward a future in which colonization has ended, a future in which no one is bought or sold.



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