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Forgotten Women:  
The Involuntary Sterilization of American Indian Women during the Twentieth Century

By  
Morgan T. Peters

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of History

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## ABSTRACT

PETERS, MORGAN

### Forgotten Women: The Involuntary Sterilization of American Indian Women During the Twentieth Century

This thesis explores the marginalization of American Indian women, specifically in mainstream media and social movements. From 1970 to 1980 it is estimated that at least 25% of indigenous women between the ages of 15 to 44 were sterilized, with some speculating the number to be as high as 50%. American Indian women were not the only targets of sterilization abuse; African American women and Latina women also had similar experiences. The public was more aware of these women's experiences than those of American Indian women because the mainstream media was more likely to cover the involuntary procedures of women of color who initiated lawsuits, a strategy which very few American Indian chose to pursue.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) discovered the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women in records they removed after occupying the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1972. It would take nearly two years for information on the sterilization of American Indian women to be made public in 1974 by the *Akwesasne Notes*, a newspaper published by the Mohawk Nation. Mainstream media, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, would take another two years to publish an article on the matter in 1976. Their articles appeared after the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report investigating allegations against the IHS. The report revealed that 3,406 sterilization procedures were performed on American Indian females between the ages of 15 to 44 in the Aberdeen, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City, and Phoenix areas alone from 1973 to 1976.

American Indian women's issues were clearly present but insufficiently recognized not only in news coverage, but also in the American Indian and feminist social movements' agendas. American Indian women played an active role in AIM, but it was ultimately dominated by men, and thus didn't focus on female concerns. Mainstream media diminished women's roles in major AIM events, such as the Trail of Broken Treaties and siege at Wounded Knee. Hence the creation of Women of all Red Nations (WARN), which was intended to focus exclusively on American Indian women's issues. American Indian women attended the 1975 World Congress for Women in Mexico City and the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, but the conflicting views of white feminists and women of color on the matter of sterilization and abortion made it difficult for their voices to be heard. This thesis ends with The Longest Walk in 1978, which included WARN members marching to Washington D.C. to shed light on issues such as sterilization abuse and environmental justice.

The examination of news coverage on sterilization abuse of minority women, and American Indian activism in mainstream media and the limited attention given by regional newspapers illuminates the invisibility of American Indian women during this period. The analysis of American Indian activists and feminist activists' agendas through personal accounts, AIM manifestos, and National Women's Conference proceedings show the lack of focus on American Indian women's concerns from 1968 to 1978.

## Chapter One

During the 1960s through the 1970s, the Indian Health Service (IHS) sterilized American Indian women in large numbers without obtaining proper consent. Native Americans accused the IHS of sterilizing at least 25% of Native American women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four during the 1970s alone.<sup>1</sup> The IHS began providing family planning services to American Indian women in 1965. These services included information on the different methods of birth control provided through the IHS to American Indian women, which included the birth control pill, the intrauterine device (IUD), spermicidal creams, and sterilization through surgery. Part of the service provided women with help in picking what form of contraceptive would be most suitable for them. American Indian women had the option to take advantage of the program, and the right to choose whichever method they preferred, as long as it did not interfere with any existing medical issues.<sup>2</sup>

While sterilization was an option that American Indian women could consider when choosing birth control, the IHS performed the surgical procedure without following the necessary protocol and steps to obtain consent. Necessary information regarding sterilization was not given to the women although it was mandated that the IHS do so; instead, the IHS used coercion to force women to complete consent forms, provided inadequate consent forms given, and did not observe the required waiting period of seventy-two hours between when consent was given and the actual medical procedure was performed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 400. JSTOR.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women": 402.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women": 400.

For example in the early 1950s, an 11-year-old girl believed she was given a shot for an infection from a vaccination she received previously at the IHS; that she later experienced stomach pains and bleeding from. When she went to an IHS facility a decade later, the young Indian woman was informed that she had had a partial hysterectomy.<sup>4</sup> In the mid 1960s, an IHS physician gave another American Indian woman who struggled with alcohol abuse a complete hysterectomy at 20 years old. The physician who performed the complete hysterectomy had told this woman that the procedure was reversible, which it is not.<sup>5</sup> In 1972, two American Indian girls believed that they were having appendectomies, but actually underwent tubal ligations while having surgery in a hospital in Montana. They were only fifteen years old and their parents had no knowledge of their sterilization. The young women had never bore any children previous to the appendectomy and tubal ligation, and neither of the teenage girls, who were minors, nor their parents had consented to the sterilization procedure.

Cases like these would not become public knowledge until 1976. The mainstream media would not publish the sterilization abuse of American Indian woman until the General Accounting Office released a report on allegations against the IHS. It was difficult for American Indian women's voices to be heard both in the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the feminist movement. Their invisibility is evident in the lack of media coverage they receive from the time AIM forms in 1968, to The Longest Walk march in 1978. Not only did the media ignore their problems, but also both movements they were apart of failed to bring their issues to the forefront. The American Indian movement never makes

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<sup>4</sup> Myla Vicenti Carpio, "The Lost Generation: American Indian Women and Sterilization Abuse," *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (98) (2004): 40. JSTOR.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women": 400.

sterilization one of its main concerns, and white feminists do not allow sterilization abuse to become a major platform because they believe it will interfere with the work they are doing to get safe and legal abortions and birth control.

Historian Jane Lawrence states, "In 1974, Choctaw-Cherokee physician Dr. Connie Pinkerton-Uri conducted a study that indicated that twenty-five thousand Native American women would be sterilized by the end of 1975. The information she gathered revealed that IHS facilities singled out full-blood Indian women for sterilization procedures."<sup>6</sup> The IHS was able to perform these involuntary sterilizations through problematic diagnoses, and blatant lies about the women's health conditions and necessary treatments. IHS doctors also used the same consent form for medically required sterilizations as they did for voluntary sterilizations. This would lead patients to believe that they were signing a form of consent for something that was medically necessary for their well-being.<sup>7</sup> For example, Lawrence mentions a twenty-eight year old woman who was sterilized in 1974 by the IHS in Minnesota. While in labor, the woman signed a form that she was told was for a painkiller.<sup>8</sup>

In order to better understand the control of the federal government has had over American Indians it is important to acknowledge the history of their relationship with one another. Tribe-by-tribe, American Indians have been forced into systematic dependence on the federal government since before the beginning of the United States government. In 1778 the federal government signed its first treaty with Delaware, which is considered the "beginning of demarcation of Native lands but also initiating the extinguishing of land title

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women": 411.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Carpio, "The Lost Generation: American Indian Women and Sterilization Abuse": 42.

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women": 414.



and cessions".<sup>9</sup> The overall goal of this treaty was to essentially take away American Indians' title to their lands. The Constitution gave Congress the power to regulate trade with American Indians. Over time Congress assumed absolute power over Indian affairs. Examples of Congress's control early on includes the Trade and Intercourse Act of 1790, which prohibited the sale of American Indian lands to any individual or state without federal permission. Therefore, the federal government established early on what could happen to American Indians' land.

Later, in 1823 the Office of Indian Affairs was created to deal with the interactions between the federal government and American Indians. In the same year, it was ruled that Native Americans did not hold the full rights and titles to their ancestral lands in *Johnson v. McIntosh*. This case concluded that American Indians had a limited "right of occupancy" on the land they inhabited which could be taken away by the federal government. Disputes over sovereignty and right of occupancy escalated over the next seven years, and in 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. Over eighty thousand American Indians were forced to move west of the Mississippi River between 1828 and 1838. Removal of American Indians from their land continued under the act until 1877. The federal government acquired 115,355,767 acres of American Indian land and resources during this period, which was nearly all reallocated to white Americans.<sup>10</sup>

American Indians' removal beyond the Mississippi was only a temporary solution for the federal government leading up to westward expansion and a period of intense nationalism. These national sentiments resulted in the ideology of the disappearing Indian.

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond J. Campbell, "Reservation System," In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Detroit: Gale (2013): 1.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 1.

The disappearing Indian stems from white Americans' manifest destiny complex developed, and the emergence of scientific racism, which created racial destiny. John Coward states, "The idea of the vanishing Indian grew out of the widespread belief that stronger races were meant to dominate weaker ones, just as the mound builders of prehistoric America were displaced by the current tribes of Indians. This belief, articulated and explained in the press, helped justify Indian removal to Congress and the public."<sup>11</sup> The concept of the disappearing Indian made the public view American Indians in such a way that their removal was deemed necessary.<sup>12</sup> The dominant ideologies emerging out of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the federal government annexing massive amounts of land and opening up the West for colonization. This further displaced American Indians.

The rapid growth and development in the West led the federal government to shift its policies towards American Indians, and in 1851 it created the reservation to consolidate Native Americans on a limited amount of land. From 1851 to 1871, the federal government held "negotiations" with numerous tribes to create reservations; any resistance from American Indians was squashed with military force. By 1871, the federal government no longer looked to negotiate and ratify treaties with tribes, and established reservations by executive order. In 1919, the power to establish a reservation was given to Congress.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, beyond taking away American Indians' land, the federal government also started efforts to "civilize" indigenous people. For example, the Office of Indian Affairs

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<sup>11</sup> John M. Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90*. University of Illinois Press, 1999, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 2.

attempted to eliminate indigenous religious practices on reservations. The federal government attempted to squash cultural practices by imprisoning whole tribal councils.<sup>14</sup>

A major policy in the “civilizing process” was the Dawes Act, which was passed in 1887 and continued until 1934 with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act. During this period, 60% of American Indian lands passed from Indian to non-Indian possession. The Dawes Act, or General Allotment Act, was the federal government’s attempt to assimilate American Indians into the general population of the states. Its main goal was to permanently end the existence of Indian nations. Raymond Campbell states the act’s guidelines in the following:

Government officials felt that no high degree of “civilization” could be achieved among indigenous people until a sense of private property could be instilled among them. Under the General Allotment Act, reservation land would be surveyed into 40- to 160-acre parcels and allotted to Native American families or individuals. These lands would be held in trust by the federal government for twenty-five years. After that period, individual owners could be declared “competent” by governmental authorities and could use the land in any manner they desired, including selling it to non-Indians. Two years after the passage of the General Allotment Act, the commissioner of Indian affairs, Thomas J. Morgan, proposed the elimination of all tribes and their reservations.<sup>15</sup>

The Dawes Act was a direct attack on tribal government and identity. American Indians had to suffer through not only forced assimilation and allotment, but also the assault on their cultural practices and policy failures that were guiding it.<sup>16</sup>

The policy failures that occurred from forced assimilation and allotment required urgent reform, due to impoverished reservation conditions. The federal government attempted to reform the reservation conditions through the Indian New Deal and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA). The main purpose of the IRA was to end the

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<sup>14</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 5.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 6.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 10.

allotment, which also meant solving the land issue that had been created by dissolving Native American land holdings. The IRA gave tribes the option to organize themselves, which many chose to do by forming constitutional governments. The IRA also attempted to create an American Indian economy, which would allow tribes to develop economically. For example, the federal government extended credit to assist “tribal enterprises”.<sup>17</sup> While the IRA was an attempt to reverse some of the damage done by allotment, the relationship between American Indians and the federal government continued in to the late twentieth century did not really improve. In the early 1950s, the federal government implemented relocation policies that attempted to make American Indians to move to urban cities. Eisenhower announced his intentions to have American Indians relocate to urban areas in 1952, calling it “Operation Relocation”.<sup>18</sup> American Indians moving into cities meant they no longer qualified for federal services. Historian Larry Burt describes the federal governments tactics to remove as many Indians from reservations as possible in the following:

Bureau officials denied the existence of quotas, but the way relocation officers were encouraged and pressured to enlist as many people as possible suggested that the greatest emphasis was on quantity. One officer later reported that his superiors threatened to abolish his office because he was not recruiting enough Indians...The BIA contended that it carefully screened applicants to weed out those unlikely to make a successful adjustment to life in the city, but the process was oftentimes haphazard and far less than selective.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, the federal government’s goal of relocation was to completely terminate reservations. “Relocates” still remained involved with the federal government to find housing and jobs. Most ended up living in lower class neighborhoods due to the small aid

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 11.

<sup>18</sup> Larry W. Burt, “Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s,” *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1986): 88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1183982>.

<sup>19</sup> Burt, “Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s,” 89.

packages they received, and the limited jobs they were able to find once in the city.<sup>20</sup>

American Indians today are still forced to be dependent on the federal government, and this is linked to how the federal government was able to orchestrate the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women.

Around the same time that the federal government was implementing urban relocation programs, the Indian Health Service (IHS) was formed in 1955. Originally, it was known as the Division of Indian Health, and was created a year after the Transfer Act. The Transfer Act quite literally transferred the responsibility for providing health services for American Indians from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to the Public Health Service (PHS).<sup>21</sup> Major IHS facilities were mostly located on reservations, and because of lack of funding, they did not immediately make their way to urban areas. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1976 intended to address this issue and extend IHS services to American Indians in cities.<sup>22</sup> There IHS served 12 areas including Alaska, Albuquerque, Bemidji, Billings, California, Great Plains, Nashville, Navajo, Oklahoma City, Phoenix, Portland, and Tucson area.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, the IHS headquarters are located in Washington, D.C., which is very far from American Indian populations.

Not all studies of American Indian women's sterilization base their work on the long term colonial relationship between American Indians and the United States. Others approach American Indian women's sterilization in the context of eugenics in the United States. As mentioned previously, scientific racism began in America in the late nineteenth

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<sup>20</sup> Burt, "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s," 90.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham B. Bergman. "A Political History of the Indian Health Service," *The Milbank Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (1999): 579. JSTOR.

<sup>22</sup> Bergman. "A Political History of the Indian Health Service," 592.

<sup>23</sup> Indian Health Service Locations. "Locations." <https://www.ihs.gov/locations/>

century, and became more accepted by the public, scientists, and government officials in the early twentieth century. Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Dalton suggested applying similar genetic selection techniques used in agriculture to create a group of people without undesirable traits. Eugenics also was argued to have a compassionate element, as it would end the possibility of continued suffering of people deemed genetically undesirable.

Dalton's ideology came over to the United States in the early twentieth century, and was embraced by many Americans. His theory did add to the racial destiny complex that came out of westward expansion and intense nationalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Eugenics was praised for being modern by influential American figures, such as Alexander Graham Bell and Theodore Roosevelt. Deborah Ummel states, "Although eugenics was born from compassion, there was from the beginning an undercurrent of intolerance. Its supporters viewed eugenics not only as a method for improving the health and 'fitness' of the future generations, but also as a way to increase the number of citizens with good Nordic backgrounds".<sup>25</sup> Americans believed that people could inherit attributes beyond physical traits, such as intelligence, behavior, and moral character. Americans believed that certain backgrounds, such as Nordic backgrounds, had better traits than others. Harry H. Laughlin, an influential eugenicist used pedigree charts to show congress that there was "excessive insanity" among immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. As a result the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the immigration of Italians and Russians. For example, the quota of Italian immigrants was 40,000, and was cut to 4,000.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Ummel, "Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present," *CrossCurrents*. Vol 66, No. 3 (2016): 389. Wiley Online Library," accessed March 19, 2018, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/cros.12205>.

<sup>25</sup> Ummel, "Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present": 390.

<sup>26</sup> Ummel, "Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present": 391.

American sterilization programs began in the 1920s and continued after World War I. The Department of Public Welfare would push for health care providers to promote sterilization as a solution to poverty and illegitimacy. Laughlin also helped states pass their own sterilization laws by publishing *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* in 1922. In his publication he included a model for a eugenic sterilization law. It included forced sterilization of the feebleminded, criminals, alcoholics, blind, deaf, deformed, and insane. It also included people that were considered “dependent” such as orphans, prostitutes, and the homeless.<sup>27</sup> The United States Supreme Court supported forced sterilization of people who were deemed “feeble minded”, as shown in the decision of the Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. Eighteen states passed sterilization laws based on the model Laughlin had published, which resulted in 64,000 forced sterilizations in thirty-one states between 1922 to the mid 1930s.<sup>28</sup>

After World War II, one would assume the eugenics movement had died in the United States. Surprisingly, it hadn't; many Americans still believed that reducing the number of “suffering” people could solve many of society's problems. In 1962 Alan Guttmacher, the former vice president of the American Eugenics Society replaced Margaret Sanger as the president of Planned Parenthood. He served from 1962 to 1974. Ummel states, “Between 1973 and 1976, the Indian Health Service sterilized 3,406 Native American women, some without their knowledge, often during unrelated surgeries. Others were told that they would lose future health care or custody of their children if they did not consent”.<sup>29</sup> American Indian women were not the only women who faced sterilization

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<sup>27</sup> Ummel, “Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present”: 390.

<sup>28</sup> Ummel, “Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present”: 391.

<sup>29</sup> Ummel, “Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present”: 394.

abuse. Puerto Rican and African American women were sterilized as well. 34% of Puerto Rican women of “child-bearing age” had been sterilized by 1965. Pregnant Puerto Rican woman with two or more children were denied access to hospitals to give birth, unless they had agreed to be sterilized after labor.<sup>30</sup>

The shared experiences of women of color regarding sterilization abuse brought them together in the feminist movement. This is seen at the World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. Women in developing countries could also relate to American women of color, as sterilization abuse was occurring on an international scale. Sterilization abuse also appeared at the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977. White feminists were fighting for legal and safe abortions, while minority women were fighting for the right to have their children.

White feminists feared the topic of sterilization entering the forefront of the feminist movement, because they did not want it to affect the work the progress they had made on abortion and birth control. They did not ignore the issue altogether, as minority women were able to meet and discuss issues specific to them that would be included in the National Plan of Action as Plank 17.

Patterns in the secondary literature indicate two analytical approaches to explaining the involuntary sterilization of American Indian Women in two ways. One way the scholarship examines it is as the continued effects of colonialism on Native Americans. The second common pattern I have found in my research is the linking of the coerced sterilization of American Indian women to the revival of the eugenics movement against women of color, in the second half of the twentieth century. Both approaches make valid

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<sup>30</sup> Ummel, “Dream or Nightmare? The Impact of American Eugenics, Past and Present,”: 395.



points about the implications of the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women during the twentieth century, and the reasons for why it happened.

The first approach I have noticed come up often in secondary scholarship is that the sterilization abuse of American Indian women is the continuance of colonialism through state violence. Andrea Smith and Luana Ross state, “The issue is not simply that violence against women happens during colonization, but that the colonial process is itself structured by sexual violence. Native nations cannot decolonize themselves until they address gender violence, because colonization has succeeded through this kind of violence.”<sup>31</sup> Hence, the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women is an act of sexual violence committed by the United States federal government, through the Indian Health Service, and therefore can be interpreted as the continued existence of colonialism. According to Smith and Ross, the federal government used sterilization as tool of genocide, which shows that the “struggle for sovereignty and the struggle against sexual violence cannot be separated”.<sup>32</sup> The federal government used family planning through the IHS to target American Indians and control their high birth rate in the 1970s.<sup>33</sup>

The argument that the government’s attack on American Indian women’s reproductive freedom as part of the continued colonization of Native people is also apparent in tribal dependence on the federal government through its agencies.<sup>34</sup> The federal government is able to have so much control over women’s reproductive

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<sup>31</sup> Andrea Smith and Luana Ross, “Introduction: Native Women and State Violence,” *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (2004): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Smith and Ross. “Introduction: Native Women and State Violence”: 3.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence, “The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women”: 402.

<sup>34</sup> Sally J. Torpy, “Native American Women and Coerced Sterilization: On the Trail of Tears in the 1970s,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 24, no. 2 (January 2000): 2. UCLA American Indian Studies Center.

capabilities, because they have so much control over their medical access, primarily through the IHS, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). American Indians have little choice in their dependence on the federal government for some of their most basic needs, which has and continues to keep them trapped, and unable to decolonize as Smith and Ross mentioned. Raymond Campbell states, "In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), the Supreme Court legally defined Native people's land rights and their subordinate sovereign status as "domestic dependent nations".<sup>35</sup> In addition to being defined as dependent, American Indians have literally been forced by federal government removal and reservation policies from very early on. The systematic dependence they unwillingly had, and continue to have, made it difficult for them to escape systematic genocide that occurred through the IHS, especially when women were misled and unaware of the medical procedures being done to them.

Many of the secondary scholarship that follows this approach is written and published in the early 2000s, whereas another set of scholars, writing in the mid to late 1990s link the sterilization of American Indian women to the return of Eugenics, or perhaps the "last gasp" of Eugenics in the post World War II period. The examination of the subject shifts from a eugenics focus to a different approach about colonization in a few short years. However, Secondary scholarships' approaches may not only be related to chronology, as many of the scholars that take the colonization approach also recognize the role of eugenics. Whereas, scholars that take the eugenics approach are less likely to

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<sup>35</sup> Campbell, "Reservation System": 1.

include American Indian women's race and the role that the federal government played in their lives.

Furthermore, although one might expect that eugenics would have died down completely in the United States after World War II and Hitler's eugenics policies in Nazi Germany. There are multiple secondary sources that recognize the sterilization of American Indian women as the final remnants of official eugenics. Bruce Johansen states, "By the time sterilization reached its zenith of popularity in the Indian Health Service, it was the last official gasp of a century-old 'scientific' effort to breed 'desirable' human traits... During this wave of sterilizations, no other medical structure had the captive clientele of the IHS."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Johansen who wrote this journal in the late 1990s, bridges the two explanations given in the secondary literature that would come out a few years later. Not only does he argue that eugenics was a key factor in HIS practices, but he also highlights the relation of the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women to the remaining colonialism over Native people by the federal government. Johansen actually quotes Torpy's thesis in this journal article, and Torpy later released a journal article in the early 2000s about coerced sterilization and its ties to colonialism over American Indians.<sup>37</sup>

Many scholars draw connections between the eugenics and colonization arguments. For example, Thomas Volscho's secondary scholarship mostly focuses on the colonization approach, but he acknowledges how the European colonization focused on population control in the following:

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce E. Johansen, "Americans and the 'Last Gasp of Eugenics.'" *Native Americas* 15, no. 4 (Dec. 31, 1998): 45. ProQuest.

<sup>37</sup> Torpy, "Native American Women and Coerced Sterilization: On the Trail of Tears in the 1970s": 1-22.

The origins of racism and racial oppression in the Americas are the result of European conquest and colonization. The early colonization process involved various forms of population control. European colonizers established a system of capital accumulation in the Americas, in part, by controlling the population sizes of American Indians and African Americans. In the case of American Indians, various genocidal and "removal" policies aimed at women and children, by European colonizers and their descendants, were implemented to free territory on which to build plantations.<sup>38</sup>

Volscho also believes that the way American Indian women were presented to mainstream America played a crucial role in the justification of the coerced sterilization of American Indian women. Volscho talks about the two ways American Indian women were portrayed as either a "squaw" or an "Indian princess". The squaw was depicted as "dirty, subservient, abused, alcoholic, and ugly". The Indian princess was portrayed as exotic, and often a woman that left her people to be with a European American man.<sup>39</sup> These stereotypical depictions continued to influence how white Americans viewed American Indian women. One of the main characteristics of the squaw is her lack of emotion, which is seen as neglect toward children. This image influences the reproductive healthcare American Indian women receive, because rather than being treated as an individual, they are all seen as the squaw.<sup>40</sup> The image of the squaw can also be seen as justification for the removal of American Indian children from their homes. Volscho's interpretation, while it mainly focuses on sterilization in relation to colonization, does draw upon the eugenics argument offered by other historians. Moreover, Volscho articulates the idea that reproductive

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<sup>38</sup>Thomas W. Volscho, "Sterilization Racism and Pan-Ethnic Disparities of the Past Decade: The Continued Encroachment on Reproductive Rights," *Wicazo Sa Review* 25, no. 1 (2010): 17.

<sup>39</sup> Volscho, "Sterilization Racism and Pan-Ethnic Disparities of the Past Decade: The Continued Encroachment on Reproductive Rights.": 24.

<sup>40</sup> Volscho, "Sterilization Racism and Pan-Ethnic Disparities of the Past Decade: The Continued Encroachment on Reproductive Rights.": 24.

healthcare for American Indian women was being altered to hinder them specifically from reproducing.

Secondary literature that follows the eugenics approach more often puts the blame on the medical care providers, such as IHS physicians and health care professionals. While the colonialism approach in the secondary literature focuses the blame on the federal government, Gregory Rutecki interprets the doctors working for the IHS to be completely responsible for the coerced sterilization of American Indian women, as they were the ones actually coercing women into and performing these procedures.<sup>41</sup> One would not disagree with his view, as it is expected a medical professional's main priority should be the patient's health and well-being, not government orders. Rutecki states an important question to consider when questioning the motives of IHS physicians in the following:

Were these anonymous physicians who sterilized and performed abortions on Native American women solely motivated by the animus of their recent and contemporary colleagues? Were they knowingly participating in a policy of eugenic birth control through abortions and sterilization? Or alternatively might there be additional rationale for their unethical behavior?<sup>42</sup>

These questions are important to consider when looking at the eugenics approach. Was eugenics beyond the federal policy regarding the IHS, and held as common medical belief by IHS doctors in the twentieth century? The sterilization abuse of American Indian women was happening in large enough numbers that to argue it was done solely on individual physicians' practice is somewhat impractical. Were the doctors merely an extension of the federal government? Were IHS physicians creating their own policy? Rutecki concludes that many of these doctors were young and just recently trained. He also believes that they

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory W. Rutecki. "Forced Sterilization of Native Americans: Later Twentieth Century Physician Cooperation with National Eugenic Policies?" *Ethics & Medicine* Vol. 27 (Spring 2011): 34.

<sup>42</sup> Rutecki, "Forced Sterilization of Native Americans: Later Twentieth Century Physician Cooperation with National Eugenic Policies?": 37.

did not have an economic incentive to follow the “do no harm” medical oath because an IHS physician’s salary was not extravagant.<sup>43</sup> One can see more to this, because these doctors were coercing young women to be sterilized. It is interesting to see a perspective that places a lot of blame on the medical health professionals versus the federal government, and their involvement with policy and control of the IHS. As the secondary literature moves into the early 2000s blame really starts to shift completely on to the government, and focuses very little of the blame on the actions of the doctors that coerced and performed these medical procedures on American Indian women.

To examine whether and how the media and activist movements paid attention to American Indian women’s concerns, specifically sterilization, a variety of primary sources are required. The types of primary sources used include newspaper articles from mainstream and regional papers. Also the *Akwesasne Notes*, a newspaper published by the Mohawk Nation. Mainstream media articles, from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, covering major American Indian activism, sterilization abuse, and the National Women’s Conference all say so much more about what they fail to mention, American Indian women. The lack of coverage of the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women compared to other women of color is significant. This is because black and Hispanic women were more likely to go to court over sterilization abuse. Only one case of an American Indian woman going to court over sterilization abuse occurs in 1975, and is only covered by regional papers in Pennsylvania. Newspapers also provide a solid timeline for how much information the public new about sterilization abuse at what point in time. Sterilization abuse was uncovered during the BIA occupation in 1972, and the *Akwesasne*

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<sup>43</sup> Rutecki, Gregory W. "Forced Sterilization of Native Americans: Later Twentieth Century Physician Cooperation with National Eugenic Policies?": 41.

*Notes* does not publish anything on sterilization until 1974, which is not nearly as far reaching as when the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* publish articles in 1976 in response to the Government Office of Accountability's (GAO) report.

Other primary sources used include Mary Crow Dog's personal accounts of American Indian activism in her memoir, *Lakota Woman*. Also used are other major American female Indian activists' personal accounts quoted from secondary literature, such as Lorelai Decora, Martha Grass, and Madonna Thunderhawk. These women did not receive any mainstream media attention for the important roles they played in the American Indian movement, but they are quoted by Mary Crow Dog, and in some secondary sources. The American Indian Movement's "Twenty Points" manifesto shows the main concerns of the AIM, and the lack of attention they pay to women's issues in general.

Government documents such as the 1976 GAO report on the allegations against the IHS, that reveal a large number of American Indian women sterilized in just a short four period window. The GAO report also shows the lack of initiative the government took with the sterilization abuse of American Indian women. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) does very little about the issue once it is brought to light in the mainstream media. It is not until white feminists become involved with the National Plan of Action, that HEW actually makes some reforms to its policies and procedures. The proceedings from the National Women's Conference in Houston show the conflict that arose between minority women and white feminists, when it came time to recognize sterilization abuse as a problem exclusive to women of color. Minority women had their own plank to use a platform for issues that did not affect white feminists. All of these

primary sources help show how forgotten American Indian women were both in the social movements they participated in, and in the mainstream media news coverage.



## Chapter Two

### The American Indian Movement

The American Indian Movement (AIM) began in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1968, and was originally formed to address issues of police brutality against American Indians, but quickly grew to become an advocate for an entire spectrum of American Indian issues. The founding members included Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, Eddie Benton-Benai, and George Mitchell. AIM spoke out against issues such as high unemployment, poor housing, racism, treaty rights, and the reclamation of tribal land.<sup>44</sup> Mary Crow Dog, an American Indian activist and writer, documented her involvement with AIM in her memoir *Lakota Woman*. Mary Crow Dog describes AIM during its inception in the following:

In the beginning AIM was mainly confined to St. Paul and Minneapolis. The early AIM people were mostly ghetto Indians, often from tribes which had lost much of their language, traditions, and ceremonies... AIM opened the window for us through which the wind of the 1960s and early '70s could blow, and it was no gentle breeze but a hurricane that whirled us around.

AIM worked to bring back American Indian traditions and culture that had been lost over decades of government policy that tried to make American Indians disappear. The unification of traditional culture and American Indians living in urban environments helped grow AIM into a much larger movement. Mary Crow Dog states, "It was after the traditional reservation Indians and the ghetto kids had gotten together that AIM became a force nationwide. It was flint striking flint, lighting a spark which grew into a flame at which we could warm ourselves after a long, long winter."<sup>45</sup> The restoration of traditional American Indian culture to urban American Indians helped drive the movement into focus

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<sup>44</sup> Laura Waterman Wittstock, *We Are Still Here: A Photographic History of the American Indian Movement*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1991, 76.

under the unifying pride of being an American Indian despite what the federal government had done to try and take that away.

The creation of AIM was not the first effort of organized American Indian activism; one of the first altercations with the United States government was in 1969, when American Indian activists took over Alcatraz Island. Their occupation lasted for a total of 19 months, ending in June of 1971.<sup>46</sup> American Indians from tribes all over the country moved onto the island to make the public aware of their plans for a university and cultural center. The protest was not planned by AIM, but many members were involved in the occupation of the island, and bringing national attention to American Indian grievances. Annelise Orleck states, “Though they got little attention from the media at the time, native women ran much of the occupation. They staffed the kitchen, taught school for the children and delivered health services. The occupation focused national attention on Native American issues and sparked the rise of a pan-Indian civil rights movement that would spread across the country. It also became a founding ground for a Native-American women’s movement”.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Trail of Broken Treaties**

In 1972 AIM leaders drafted a list of twenty demands to present to the federal government called the “Twenty Points”. The preamble of the “Twenty Points” asks the government and Americans to correct their wrongs against American Indians in the following: “We need not give another recitation of past complaints nor engage in redundant dialogue of discontent. Our conditions and their cause for being should perhaps be best

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<sup>46</sup> Gwendolyn Laird, “American Indian Movement” In *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*. Edited by Roger Chapman and James Ciment. M.E. Sharpe, 2013: 20.

<sup>47</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015: 139.

known by those who have written the record of America's action against Indian people." As an example, they mention the Sauk Indian leader, Black Hawk, who was interviewed after his people were removed to a reservation. They state, "In 1832, Black Hawk correctly observed: "You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it.""<sup>48</sup> According to AIM, "the government of the United States knows the reasons for our going to its capital city. Unfortunately, they don't know how to greet us. We go because America has been only too ready to express shame, and suffer none from the expression - while remaining wholly unwilling to change to allow life for Indian people."<sup>49</sup> The Twenty Points was not only calling for government reform, but also American awareness of the plight American Indians have had to endure, and the lack of consequences as a result of ill treatment. The preamble expresses some hope, "We seek a new American majority - a majority that is not content merely to confirm itself by superiority in numbers, but which by conscience is committed toward prevailing upon the public will in ceasing wrongs and in doing right."<sup>50</sup>

To do right, the American government must take the demands made in the "Twenty Points." Among these are the abolition of the BIA by 1976, establishment of a national federal Indian grand jury, and jurisdiction over Non-Indians within reservations. American Indian issues specific to women aren't a main point in the twenty points. The final point is on health, housing, employment, economic development, and education. Notably, there is no mention of sterilization abuse in regard to health. The point only focuses on health in regards to the proposed budget, and the care American Indians should be entitled to under

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<sup>48</sup> "Twenty Points," American Indian Movement, <https://www.aimovement.org/archives/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> "Twenty Points," American Indian Movement.

<sup>50</sup> "Twenty Points," American Indian Movement.

it.<sup>51</sup> Clearly, American Indian Women's priorities are marginalized, if not forgotten, in the document.

Following the Twenty Points, AIM then led a march on Washington, D.C., known as the Trail of Broken Treaties. Orleck states, "500 Indian activists left from the West Coast... As was the tradition in Native-American activism, the protestors came as families—elders, women, children, and men."<sup>52</sup> The participants reached Washington, D.C. on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1972. While it was not originally the motive of their organization, upon their arrival, protestors stormed the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) offices because they had no place to stay, and a six-day standoff ensued. Orleck highlights the public participation of American Indian women, "On the first night, 71 year old Pawnee Martha Grass spoke to protestors gathered in the auditorium about the long history of broken treaties. 'There are nothing but crooks and liars up here. They will steal you blind,' she said".<sup>53</sup> Mary Crow Dog was inspired by Martha Grass' actions as an AIM member during the Trail of Broken Treaties:

For me the high point came not with our men arming themselves, but with Martha Grass, a simple middle-aged Cherokee woman from Oklahoma, standing up to Interior Secretary Morton and giving him a piece of her mind, speaking from the heart, speaking for all of us. She talked about everyday things, women's things, children's problems, getting down to the nitty-gritty. She shook her fists in Morton's face, saying, 'Enough of your bullshit!' It was good to see an Indian mother stand up to one of Washington's highest officials.<sup>54</sup>

Martha Grass does not mention sterilization, but emphasizes the basic needs of American Indians. Mary Crow Dog also provides the evidence of female leadership in AIM that is not covered in the news. Martha Grass' actions do not appear in the mainstream media's coverage of the BIA occupation.

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<sup>51</sup> "Twenty Points," American Indian Movement.

<sup>52</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 141.

<sup>53</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 90.

The mainstream media often described the protestors as “militant Indians” when covering the occupation. William M. Blair describes the protestors in a *New York Times* article from November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1972: “At the Indian Affairs Bureau, the protestors, numbering about 500 appeared to be making preparations against any attempt to dislodge them. Many of them were armed with improvised clubs and spears made of knives lashed to poles. Some had smeared their faces with lipstick in simulation of war paint.”<sup>55</sup> The depiction of the protestors also comes off as a masculine and stereotypical American Indian warrior. The depiction’s emphasis on their use of lipstick and improvised weapons also undermines their legitimacy as a movement, and comes off as a suggestion that they protestors were incapable. There is little mention of women, although they were present. Blair mentions women later in the article. He states, “A few women and children remained in the building at 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Constitution Avenue, a few blocks from the White House, but most of them had been removed to housing arranged by volunteers.”<sup>56</sup> His depiction of women at the event makes them sound rather like bystanders than active participants, which was untrue. The mainstream media also only quoted men, mostly the notable founding male members of AIM.

After 72 hours, President Nixon attempted to appease protestors by promising to pay for travel accommodations for them if they left. The protestors were persuaded and left, but two months later he pulled the proposal, which was exactly how he responded to

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<sup>55</sup> William M. Blair, “Eviction of Indians by U.S. Delayed by Appeals Court,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 1972. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/11/07/archives/eviction-of-indians-by-us-delayed-by-appeals-court.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Blair, “Eviction of Indians by U.S. Delayed by Appeals Court”.

the Alcatraz incident previously.<sup>57</sup> Journalist Richard J Margolis describes the end of the occupation in the following:

Last Wednesday they walked out voluntarily, having reached agreement with White House aides that a study of their problems would be made. They also carried a number of documents from Government files that, they declared, contained “highly incriminating” evidence of exploitation of Indians by present and past members of Congress.<sup>58</sup>

Among these documents would be evidence of the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women.

The sterilization abuse of American Indian women was first uncovered when AIM took BIA documents during their 1972 occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. From these files, they learned that forty-two percent of Indian women had been sterilized, the majority without their consent.<sup>59</sup> However, AIM did not make this information public. Two years after the occupation of the BIA, news of sterilization abuses against American Indians was released in the *Akwesasne Notes* in an article titled “Sterilization of Young Native Women Alleged at Indian Hospital—48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone.” This article did not mention any information that was found during the BIA occupation, it only covered the high numbers of coerced sterilization at an IHS facility in Claremore, Oklahoma.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Laird, “American Indian Movement”, in *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*: 21.

<sup>58</sup> Richard J Margolis, “A Long List of Grievances,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1972. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/11/12/archives/a-long-list-of-grievances-indians.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Donna Hightower Langston. “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s,” accessed February 22, 2018, <https://www.manataka.org/page2449.html>.

<sup>60</sup> “Sterilization of Young Native Women Alleged at Indian Hospital—48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone,” *Akwesasne Notes*, 1974. This newspaper was published by the Mowhawk Nation between 1969 and 1996.

## The Siege at Wounded Knee

Only about three months after the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs was the Siege at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. Over 200 American Indian activists occupied the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre after multiple failed attempts to remove Dick Wilson as tribal chairman by traditional women elders on the Pine Ridge reservation. Wilson was believed to be corrupt, and pocketing federal dollars. He also oversaw his own personal militia, the Guardians of the Ogalala Nation, who attacked American Indian activists several times. Mary Crow Dog states, "Wilson, the tribal chairman at Pine Ridge, had established a regime of terror. Being shot at or having one's house fire-bombed were daily occurrences Pine Ridge people had to live with."<sup>61</sup> Orleck states, "Pine Ridge had the highest murder rate and was one of the poorest counties in the U.S. Though the reservation also had the highest ratio of FBI agents to regular citizens, nearly 200 of its residents had disappeared without a trace since Wilson's first term in office."<sup>62</sup>

By late January of 1973, tensions escalated when a white man had stabbed Wesley Bad Heart Bull to death. The attacker was only sentenced to one day in prison for the crime. Bad Heart Bull's mother went to protest and was thrown down the steps of the Custer courthouse by police; she also was arrested for rallying without a permit, and received one to five years in prison. She was valorized by AIM, who sought to avenge her by setting the courthouse on fire.<sup>63</sup> The occupation continued, and about a month later AIM members demanded that Dick Wilson step down, and a free election take place. Soon after, state police and federal marshals surrounded the activists and fired into the crowd, beginning

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<sup>61</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 192.

<sup>62</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 141.

<sup>63</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 142.

with what would become a seventy-one day stand off between authorities and the occupiers.<sup>64</sup> Madonna Thunderhawk recalled the stand off, “I was ready to do whatever it takes for change. I didn’t care. I had children, and for them I figured I could make a stand here”.<sup>65</sup> It was during this period that Mary Crow Dog gave birth to a child at Wounded Knee. Women were instrumental in the Wounded Knee occupation but failed to gain any recognition.

Women were not mentioned often in the mainstream media’s coverage of Wounded Knee. In one case, Bessie Cornelius, an American Indian women described Wounded Knee as, “It’s brother against brother, sister against sister.”<sup>66</sup> In the same article women are mentioned complaining alongside Francis Randall, the community chairman at Wounded Knee, about AIM’s actions and the destruction and fear it caused. Mr. Randall stated, “The other Indians on this reservation are scared of AIM.” One of the women, whose name is not provided states, “No one is going to feel safe here anymore... If you don’t join AIM, they’ll try to kill you”.<sup>67</sup> This depiction of women by the mainstream media regarding Wounded Knee shows women being on the outside of the American Indian Movement, and fearful of it, while that was not the case across the board, as seen with activists like Mary Crow Dog and Madonna Thunderhawk. Men were the focus of the movement, the media, and the U.S. government, in part because they portrayed the idea of the American Indian warrior.

At Wounded Knee relations between American Indian men and women had appeared to be changing. For example, for hundreds of years all women had been barred

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<sup>64</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> Madonna Thunderhawk quoted in *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 141.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Waldron, “Deteriorating Situation at Wounded Knee is Described as ‘Brother Against Brother, Sister Against Sister’”, *The New York Times*, April 23, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> Waldron, “Deteriorating Situation at Wounded Knee is Described as ‘Brother Against Brother, Sister Against Sister’”, *The New York Times*, April 23, 1973.



from sun dances due to spiritual beliefs about menstruation, as “medicine men” believed a woman menstruating would negate the ritual’s “medicine;” however that year it was decided women could attend and even dance in the ceremony. Newspaper reporter Martin Waldron describes the ban on women coming to sun dances prior to Wounded Knee in the following:

In earlier years the Indian women acknowledged their menstrual condition by wrapping themselves in blankets and isolating themselves from the tribe. The Indian women later abandoned the practice and the “medicine men” barred women from attending the ritual on the ground that it was not certain which ones might be menstruating.<sup>68</sup>

With an increase in tourism after Wounded Knee, newsmen and white people were barred from attending that year’s sun dance. There was some disagreement over women’s involvement in the sun dance by the “tradition-minded”, but 17 out of the 39 dancers were women.<sup>69</sup>

Although women were part of the Sun Dance during the siege, some female members of AIM felt frustrated by gender relations within the movement. Orleck describes an effort made by a woman to make male leaders aware of this:

After the siege ended, Janet McCloud called together AIM’s male leaders and told them that they needed to deal with [violence targeting women]. Rally Indian men, she challenged them, to take the lead in fighting domestic violence against Native women. She also challenged AIM to root out sexism in its own ranks. By 1978, AIM had dissolved, but Native women’s groups took the struggle into the next millennium.<sup>70</sup>

Clearly American Indian men and women’s relations were not changing, as what was hoped for after Wounded Knee and women participating in the sun dance. Domestic violence was

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<sup>68</sup> Martin Waldron, “Wounded Knee After Long Siege: So me Ruins, Hundreds of Tourists Daily”, *The New York Times*, August 9, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> Waldron, “Wounded Knee After Long Siege: So me Ruins, Hundreds of Tourists Daily”, *The New York Times*, August 9, 1973.

<sup>70</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 142.

a serious issue that American Indian women faced, and when asking AIM men to address it, American Indian women did not get what they wanted. Hence, the formation of American Indian women's groups.

After Wounded Knee, the relationship between AIM and the federal government was "a virtual civil war".<sup>71</sup> AIM and Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) members, people who opposed Wilson, and those present at Wounded Knee had become targets. Crow Dog states, "Some estimate that as many as two hundred and fifty people, women and children among them, were killed during this time—out of a population of eight thousand! Between forty and fifty of these murders have been listed in official government files. The vast majority of these killings were never investigated."<sup>72</sup> Several AIM members were murdered. A shootout between protestors and the FBI resulted in the deaths of Joe Stuntz, a Lakota man and two FBI agents. Leonard Peltier was convicted for the agents' deaths, and is serving two life sentences.<sup>73</sup>

Women were also targeted after the Siege at Wounded Knee as well. Mary Crow Dog describes what happened to women who were targeted in the following:

Jeanette Bissonette was shot and killed driving home from the burial of another victim...Jacinta Eagle Deer was killed in an unexplained "accident" after having been savagely beaten. She had last been seen in the car of her lover, who turned out to be an informer and who had brutally mistreated her many times before. Jacinta was then suing a high South Dakota official for rape. Her mother, Delphine, Leonard's older sister, wanted to take up the suit but was beaten to death by a BIA policeman who claimed "drunkenness" as his excuse.<sup>74</sup>

While women did not get any media recognition for their participation in the American Indian movement and the Siege at Wounded Knee, the federal government noticed it and it

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<sup>71</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 142.

<sup>72</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 193.

<sup>73</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 142.

<sup>74</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 193.

made them targets. Another major female target was Annie Mae Aquash. Aquash was a very close friend of Mary Crow Dog, who helped deliver her child at Wounded Knee and was also a member of AIM. Annie Mae Aquash was a Mimac Indian from Nova Scotia who became a member of AIM in 1970, and participated in the occupation of the BIA, the Siege at Wounded Knee, and the Sun Dance at Wounded Knee. Mary Crow Dog describes Aquash's devotion to AIM, "She gave herself to the cause and that meant giving her children to her sister Mary to care for. That was hard and heart-wrenching. It was the sacrifice Annie Mae made to the movement—her motherhood."<sup>75</sup> Aquash had given up her own motherhood to fight for the motherhood of American Indian women.

Aquash knew that she was a target because of her close relationship to Leonard Peltier. In November of 1975 Annie Mae Aquash went missing, and was assumed to be underground by the people closest to her. Her body was found in the snow off in March of 1976. Mary Crow Dog explains what was done with Annie Mae's remains in the following:

They shipped her to Scotts Bluff for an autopsy. They cut her hands off to send to Washington for identification—a needless cruelty as they could have made fingerprints on the spot without mutilating her. It seems that those who killed her had also raped her. She was buried in a pauper's grave. After the FBI identified her, an official report was issued that she had died of exposure. The implication was that here was just another drunken Indian passing out and freezing to death.<sup>76</sup>

Cleary, Annie Mae's murder was covered up. There were no alcohol or drugs found in her autopsy. Her family knew that it was a cover up and had her body exhumed for a second autopsy that would reveal the execution style gun shot wound in her skull.<sup>77</sup> Mary Crow Dog states, "William Janklow, the attorney general of the State of South Dakota had said

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<sup>75</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 189.

<sup>76</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 197.

<sup>77</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 197.

that the only way to deal with renegade AIM Indians was to put a bullet through the back of their heads, and someone had taken the hint.”<sup>78</sup>

### **Allegations Against the Indian Health Service**

From 1972 when documents reveal the sterilization of American Indian women to the disbanding of AIM in 1978, only two articles were published in the mainstream media that report on the sterilization of American Indian women; one in the *New York Times* and the other in the *Washington Post*. Otherwise, as mentioned earlier, the first news source to report on the sterilization of American Indian women is the *Akwesasne Notes*, a newspaper published by the Mowhawk Nation in upstate New York that covered all areas of American Indian affairs and issues.<sup>79</sup> The sterilization of American Indian women first came to light during the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the Trail of Broken Treaties in November of 1972. During the six day occupation, documents were uncovered that revealed a high percentage of American Indian women had been involuntarily sterilized—this will be discussed further in the next chapter on American Indian women’s involvement in social movements. It would take two years for this information to be published, when *Akwesasne Notes* published “Sterilization of Young Native Women Alleged at Indian Hospital—48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone” in 1974. The article focused on the high rates of sterilization at an IHS facility in Claremore, Oklahoma.<sup>80</sup> The article does not out right

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<sup>78</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 198.

<sup>79</sup> “How It Is With Us,” *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1974.

<sup>80</sup> “Sterilization of Young Native Women Alleged at Indian Hospital—48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone,” *Akwesasne Notes*, 1974.

say that the women were coerced, but mentions the lack of information and proper counseling given to the women about the procedure prior to them giving consent.<sup>81</sup>

It would take another two years for the sterilization abuse of American Indian women to be covered by mainstream media after it was first published in the Akwesasne notes. Both the New York Times and the Washington post published their only articles on the sterilization abuse of American Indian women on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1976. These major newspapers reported on the issue because the day before they were published, the Government Accountability Office released a report on allegations concerning the IHS. The report from the General Accounting Office (GAO) was done at the request of Senator James Abourezk of South Dakota. He requested the report after receiving several complaints about coerced sterilization from American Indian women in his state. The GAO report states, "Indian Health Service records show that 3,406 sterilization procedures were performed on female Indians in the Aberdeen, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City, and Phoenix areas during fiscal years 1973-76...Of the 3,406 procedures performed, 3,001 involved women of child-bearing age (ages 15-44) and 1,024 were performed at the Indian Health Service contract facilities."<sup>82</sup> The other 2,382 procedures took place at contract facilities. These statistics begin a year after the occupation of the BIA, and the uncovering of the documents that showed that 42% of American Indian Women had been sterilized.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Meera White, "Sterilization in the 1970s: Native Women, Newspaper Coverage, and Community", *Georgetown History Journal*, Accessed December 16, 2017 [https://georgetownhistoryjournal.org/spring-2016-edition/native-women-sterilization-in-the-1970s-newspaper-coverage-and-community/#\\_ftnref7](https://georgetownhistoryjournal.org/spring-2016-edition/native-women-sterilization-in-the-1970s-newspaper-coverage-and-community/#_ftnref7).

<sup>82</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 3.

<sup>83</sup> Hightower Langston, *American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s*.

The *New York Times* article states, “The Indian Health Service sterilized more than 3,400 Indians during a four year period, often apparently without telling them such operations were not mandatory, the General Accounting Office said today.”<sup>84</sup> The *Washington Post* article states, “The report indicated there may not have been informed consent by the sterilization patients as required by law [and] that the consent forms in the IHS medical files ‘were generally not in compliance with the Indian Health Service regulations.’”<sup>85</sup> Both articles are careful with their use of language, but make the point that a vast majority of the procedures were done without proper consent. The *New York Times* states, “According to Mr. Abourzek, the accounting agency closely checked 113 voluntary-sterilization cases and found some type of consent form on file. But the most commonly used form was for sterilization required for medical reasons not for voluntary, birth-control purposes, he added”.<sup>86</sup> The GAO Report describes the improper ways the IHS obtained consent in the following:

As of 1975, the Aberdeen, Albuquerque, Oklahoma city, and Phoenix areas were generally not in compliance with the Indian Health Service regulations. Several different consent forms were used. The most widely used form did not (1) indicate that the basic elements of informed consent had been presented orally to the patient, (2) contain written summaries of the oral presentation, and (3) contain a statement at the top of the form notifying the subjects of their right to withdraw consent. One consent form document did meet the Indian Health Service requirements, but when used was filled out incorrectly.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> “Study Finds Many Indians Sterilized by U.S. Agency Without Full Explanation,” *New York Times*. Accessed March 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/11/23/archives/study-finds-many-indians-sterilized-by-us-agency-without-full.html>.

<sup>85</sup> “Probe Hits Sterilization Of Indians,” *Washington Post*, November 23, 1976. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/146604362?accountid=14637>.

<sup>86</sup> “Study Finds Many Indians Sterilized by U.S. Agency Without Full Explanation,” *New York Times*.

<sup>87</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 4.

Clearly, if the women were even given a consent form for the procedure, it was not the proper form for a surgical sterilization.

Furthermore, both articles also note that minors were sterilized, going against a court ordered moratorium. The Washington Post states, “The GAO report said that 3,0001 sterilizations were performed by the Indian Health Service on women of child-bearing age between 15 and 44...The report also said that 36 women under the age of 21 were sterilized during this period despite a court ordered moratorium on sterilizing persons under the age of 21.”<sup>88</sup> The GAO Report gives two excuses for the sterilization for American Indian females under the age 21 in the following:

Even though the number of persons under 21 years of age sterilized has decreased considerably since the regulations were issued, the Indian Health Service identified 13 moratorium violations between April 30, 1974, and March 30, 1976. The violations occurred apparently because (1) some Indian Health Service physicians did not completely understand the regulations and (2) contract physicians were not required to adhere to regulations.<sup>89</sup>

Of the 3,406 sterilizations reported, the report claims 30% were performed by IHS doctors or in IHS facilities. The report also claims that the General Accounting Office did not reach out to patients who had been sterilized because of “recently published research” that showed “a high level of inaccuracy in the recollection of patients 4 to 6 months after giving informed consent”.<sup>90</sup> Therefore the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) never actually looked into whether the patients had been properly informed on the procedure before consenting.

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<sup>88</sup> Probe Hits Sterilization of Indians”, The Washington Post.

<sup>89</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 4.

<sup>90</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 4.

The report concludes the sterilization allegations against the IHS with five recommendations for HEW to follow regarding their sterilization procedures. The first recommendation was for HEW to create a standard consent form. The second recommendation was the training of IHS physicians to ensure that they fully understand the sterilization of minors and the “mentally incompetent”, as they cannot legally consent to a procedure. Also, it is recommended that the IHS physicians be trained in obtaining informed consent. Other recommendations included contracts with outside medical facilities to comply with HEW sterilization procedures, to comply with the court ordered moratorium on the sterilization of people under the age of 21, and the monitoring of contracted physicians. Finally, the report recommended that the Secretary of HEW call for HEW’s sterilization regulations to be changed to avoid coercion by not allowing the verbal threat of federal benefits being taken away if a person does not consent to the procedure, and that the signature of the patient be on the consent form.<sup>91</sup>

While the report showed that the IHS had not been obtaining consent properly or at all, it concluded that there was no evidence of the Indian Health Service sterilizing American Indian women without a patient consent form on file, making them not guilty of the allegations. This was decided without talking to any patients to hear what they had been told prior to signing consent forms, because ironically the GAO believes it would cause inaccuracies in the report. The report states that there is zero evidence showing the IHS sterilized American Indian women without a consent form being signed, but the IHS did fail to follow HEW regulations in the following:

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<sup>91</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 5.



We found no evidence of IHS sterilizing Indians without a patient consent form on file, although we did find several weaknesses in complying with HEW's sterilization regulations. The primary weaknesses related to (1) sterilization of persons under 21 years of age, (2) inadequately documenting what the Indian subjects were told before signing the consent form (largely attributable to the use of consent forms that failed to meet HEW standards), (3) lack of widespread physician understanding of the regulations, and (4) the lack of definitive requirements for informed consent when sterilizations are performed by contract doctors at contract facilities.<sup>92</sup>

Clearly, the IHS was not forced to take responsibility for the involuntary sterilization of thousands of American Indian women in just a four-year window, but rather only received recommendations by GAO on how to better follow HEW's sterilization procedures in the future. HEW also did not shoulder much of the blame, as the department was only encouraged to amend its policies in the future.

Regional newspapers, especially in the four areas mentioned in the GAO report, covered the sterilization abuse of American Indian women. Articles from regional papers on sterilization are mostly written from 1976 to 1978. This is most likely because the GAO report was revealed the sterilization abuse in 1976, and HEW reformed its procedures over those three years, more specifically after the National Women's conference in 1977. For example, on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1976, the *Hobbs Daily News Sun* published "Indian Health Service Head Denies Sterilization Accusations". The article interviews the director of the Albuquerque IHS facility after the GAO report is released, and his claims that it is untrue.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, Elmer B. Staats, HRD-77-, November 4, 1976: 19.

<sup>93</sup> "Indian Health Service Head Denies Sterilization Allegations," *Hobbs Daily News Sun*, November 23, 1976, Newspaper Archive.

Albuquerque is the only area in the GAO report where the sterilizations occurred at contract facilities.<sup>94</sup>

Evidently, American Indian women's frustration came to a head as their issues were not being brought to the forefront of the American Indian movement, especially after Wounded Knee with much of the media and focus on the outcome of American Indian men after the occupation ended, and after government agencies were not held accountable.

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<sup>94</sup> Government Accountability Office, *Investigation of Allegations Concerning Indian Health Service*, 27.

## Chapter Three

### WARN

While there were many female members of AIM, the American Indian Movement did not take women's concerns, and women themselves, seriously. As described by Mary Crow Dog in her memoir, it was difficult for women to get their voices heard regarding AIM's agenda. Crow Dog states, "I was happy watching the women taking a big part in these discussions. One of the AIM men laughingly said, 'For years we couldn't get the women to speak up, and now we can't get them to shut up.' I just listened."<sup>95</sup> This shows a great contradiction in Mary Crow Dog's earlier statement, describing AIM as a symbol of equality between American Indian men and women. What she describes and Janet McCloud had experienced reveal the intersection of race and gender that women of color experience in their movements with men. The women involved in the predominantly white students' movement also experienced this. African American female members of the Black Panthers also faced a similar issue in getting women's issues to be taken seriously by the movement's leadership during the Civil Rights era.

American Indian women played an active role in the American Indian movement. As Mary Crow Dog noted, "It is to AIM's everlasting credit that it tried to change men's attitudes toward women. In the movement we were all equal".<sup>96</sup> However, founding female members of AIM rarely received any recognition. For example, La Nada Boyer Means, a Shoshone woman who participated in the Alcatraz occupation.<sup>97</sup> Madonna Thunderhawk, a

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<sup>95</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 83.

<sup>96</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 206.

<sup>97</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 140.

Lakota Sioux, also was involved with the founding of AIM, and later the founding of Women of all Red Nations and they are not hailed as the founding members.<sup>98</sup>

### **The Formation of Women of All Red Nations**

Moments such as the one Mary Crow Dog described inspired American Indian Women to break off and form their own movement, Women of all Red Nations (WARN). WARN was established in 1974, a year after McCloud takes the male leaders of AIM to task for their disregard of women, to address issues directly facing American Indian women. According to Lynne Ford, "Native American women founded WARN in part because the federal government's persecution of AIM after the 1973 occupation had created the need for new leadership."<sup>99</sup> Madonna Thunderhawk explained American Indian women's struggle in the following:

Indian women have had to be strong because of what this colonialist system has done to our men. I mean alcohol, suicides, car wrecks, the whole thing. And after Wounded Knee, while all that persecution of the men was going on the women had to keep things going.<sup>100</sup>

Its founding members include Lorelei DeCora Means, a Lakota Sioux woman and the youngest member of the American Indian Movement's board of directors, Madonna Thunderhawk of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Janet McCloud, a Suquamish woman, and Phyllis Young of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.<sup>101</sup> WARN's inaugural conference took place in Rapid City, South Dakota with more than 300 women from 30 different tribal communities attending. Many of WARN's members had been apart of AIM and participated

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<sup>98</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 141.

<sup>99</sup> Lynne E. Ford, *Encyclopedia of Women and American Politics*. New York: Facts on File, 2008: 501.

<sup>100</sup> Alvin M. Josephy. "Red Power Protest." In *Red Power: The American Indian's Fight for Freedom*. Edited by Alvin M. Josephy, Joane Nagel, and Troy Johnson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999: 52.

<sup>101</sup> Josephy. "Red Power Protest." In *Red Power: The American Indian's Fight for Freedom*: 51.

at Wounded Knee in 1973. Political Science Professor, Lynne Ford provides additional reasons that American Indian women were motivated to create WARN in the following:

Their experiences working within AIM, which mirrored those of African-American and white women of the civil rights movement, also compelled these activists to address issues specific to Native American women, especially the forced sterilization of Native American women at Indian Health Service hospitals, domestic violence, substance abuse, and other threats to American Indian women's health.<sup>102</sup>

Similar to AIM, much of its membership was also made up of younger people from urban areas. While WARN's focus was considered more radical, both groups had a similar philosophy. Secondary literature even mimics why WARN formed, as women are often left out of the story when looking at the major American Indian social movements towards the end of the twentieth century. WARN is cited as forming because many male leaders were imprisoned or missing after Wounded Knee, it also formed out of the necessity for American Indian women's issues to be heard. What both motives have in common is that men needed to be taken out of the equation for women to bring their concerns to the forefront.

Janet McCloud, a founding member of WARN, cited sexism as an issue in the American Indian rights movement. Historian Alvin Josephy states, "Many of these native women had been active in AIM but also had developed an awareness of the distinctive gendered experiences of Indian men and women at the hands of the U.S. government. For instance, many native women were arrested, charged, and convicted—and some died—for their roles in the Red Power activist movement and because of their association with male

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<sup>102</sup> Ford, *Encyclopedia of Women and American Politics*, 501.

activists”.<sup>103</sup> Whether they became involved because of sexism or the need for leadership, WARN agreed that change was required in American Indian women’s lives.

WARN was mainly concerned with the sterilization abuse, domestic violence, and energy resources.<sup>104</sup> Josephy states, “On reservations, Indian women and children bore the greater burden of poor nutrition, inadequate health care, and forced or deceptive sterilization programs; native women and children also faced higher levels of domestic violence resulting from poverty, joblessness, substance abuse, and hopelessness.”<sup>105</sup> WARN looked into the sterilization of American Indian women during this period and reported that between 40% and 50% of all Indigenous women were sterilized during the 1970s.<sup>106</sup> Between 1970 and 1980 the number of children bore by American Indian women had been reduced by one-third.

Beyond sterilization, WARN played a large role in forming the environmental justice movement. Women protested the contamination of land and water on Indian reservations. They collected data on the effects of the contamination by looking at rates of miscarriages, and birth defects. WARN also was involved on Pine Ridge reservation after Wounded Knee. Madonna Thunderhawk, with the help of WARN, created a group home for children whose parents were arrested or disappeared during the occupation. Lorelei DeCora, with the help of WARN, opened a clinic on her reservation in Nebraska in 1974. There she practiced traditional Winnebago spiritual and medicinal medicine..<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Josephy. “Red Power Protest.” In *Red Power: The American Indian’s Fight for Freedom*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> Hightower Langston, *American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s*.

<sup>105</sup> Josephy. “Red Power Protest.” In *Red Power: The American Indian’s Fight for Freedom*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2015: 82.

<sup>107</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 99.

## Involuntary Sterilization in the Mainstream Media

Not only did American Indian women struggle to bring sterilization abuse to the forefront of the American Indian movement, they also struggled for the issue to be paid attention to nationally because of the lack of mainstream media coverage. The most prominent case of involuntary sterilization during the period researched is of two young black girls in Alabama. The case began in 1973, when two black girls from Alabama filed a sterilization suit in federal court. The case included Minnie and Mary Alice Relf, who had been sterilized after their illiterate mother signed a paper she believed, was giving consent for her daughter to receive “some shots”.<sup>108</sup> The form actually allowed them to be sterilized; Minnie at the time was only twelve years old and Mary Alice only fourteen. In an article dated, June 27, 1973, *The New York Times* states, “The petition said Mrs. Relf was illiterate and did not understand the nature of the operation when she signed an ‘X’ on the form for parental consent. The next day, the suit said, the girls were admitted to a local hospital where tubular ligation operations were performed leaving them sterile”.<sup>109</sup> Nearly two weeks after the article in the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* describes Mary Alice and Minnie’s understanding of what had happened to them in the following:

Mary Alice is mentally retarded. She talks little but smiles often and nods when she understands the conversation that swirls around her. Her sister, Minnie who is much more verbal, says she understands an operation was performed but doesn’t understand what its purpose was. Minnie has been promoted to the seventh grade and is being transferred from a class for slow learners to a “regular school”.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “Suit Says Girls Were Sterilized: It Asserts Illiterate Mother Signed ‘X’ for Shots,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/119856608?accountid=14637>.

<sup>109</sup> “Suit Says Girls Were Sterilized: It Asserts Illiterate Mother Signed ‘X’ for Shots,” *New York Times*.

<sup>110</sup> Joel Dreyfuss, “The Relfs: Did They Understand?: The Relfs: A Family Caught Up in a National Controversy,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/148378578?accountid=14637>.

Clearly, neither the Relfs mother nor the young girls were aware of the procedure being performed.

The clinic defended sterilizing the Relf sisters because the social worker was “alarmed” that boys were hanging out with the sisters, and they believed birth control would be most effective in preventing the sisters from getting pregnant, as the birth control shot they had been receiving from the clinic was banned by HEW. Joseph Conklin the director of the clinic stated that birth control pills were not out of the question for the Relf sisters because “the two girls were not to have the ‘mental talents’ to take them on schedule’.<sup>111</sup> The suit would later expand to include two black women from South Carolina who had also been sterilized. The Washington Post and The New York Times printed fourteen articles on this case combined in 1973, compared to the two articles they wrote on the sterilization of American Indian women as a whole. The case of Minnie and Mary Alice Relf was covered more in three months, than mainstream media covered the sterilization of American Indian women in a the whole decade. Contextually, the coverage of this case makes sense because the Civil Rights movement had drawn media attention, over a long period of time compared to the American Indian movement. It is important to take into account the locations where these suits were filed, relative to American Indian populations. Many cases occurred on the east coast, where mainstream media is located. The articles on the Relf sisters came out three years before any mention of the sterilization of American Indian women in mainstream news coverage, which shows that it wasn’t that the mainstream media was uncomfortable talking about sterilization.

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<sup>111</sup> “Clinic Defends Sterilization of 2 Girls, 12 and 14,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/119847023?accountid=14637>.



In 1977 months before the National Women's Conference in Houston, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article called "Doctor Raps Sterilization of Indian Women". This is one of the first articles to come out in the mainstream media about the sterilization of American Indian women since *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had written about it in 1976 after the GAO report was released. The article, dated May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1977, states, "About one-fourth of all American Indian women treated in the obstetric wards of U.S. Indian Health Service hospitals may have been sterilized."<sup>112</sup> The article quotes Dr. Constance Uri, who is mentioned in a previous chapter. In the article Dr. Uri describes why she thinks medical professionals preformed the coerced sterilizations:

The Indian physician said she believed most of the sterilizations stemmed from the "warped thinking of doctors who think the solution to poverty is not to allow people to be born." "In almost every situation." She was quoted as saying, "the woman is talked into it in a very coerced manner." Often, she added, while heavily sedated.<sup>113</sup>

As shown by the reports that were covered by mainstream media, many of these cases did have to do with poverty, as the procedures were paid for with federal funds. Dr. Uri also states, "We do know there are some doctors who are racists, who are pushers (of sterilization). It doesn't take many if they have the patients, and they do."<sup>114</sup> Clearly women of color and poor women were targets of doctors performing coerced sterilization. The article also mentioned the GAO report and its numbers to compare to Dr. Uri's. Dr. Uri's numbers go back beginning at 1972 and come from the information she has gathered from employees at 26 of the 35 IHS facilities that have obstetric wards. The *Los Angeles Times*

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<sup>112</sup> "Doctor Raps Sterilization of Indian Women: Claims That Many Are Pressured at Government Hospitals," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1977, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/158361121?accountid=14637>.

<sup>113</sup> "Doctor Raps Sterilization of Indian Women," *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>114</sup> "Doctor Raps Sterilization of Indian Women," *Los Angeles Times*.

states, “According to Dr. Uri, about 500,000 of the nation’s 950,000 Indians are treated at Indian Health Service hospitals, of the former about 100,000 are fertile women between the child bearing ages of 15 and 44. If her estimate is correct, it would mean that about 25,000 have been sterilized.”<sup>115</sup> Dr. Uri confirmed that the IHS had attempted to address some of its procedures after the GAO report was released. Dr. Uri also said that she has urged the government to release more information about the sterilization of American Indian women, and how far reaching the issue had become for the American Indian population, but overall had met resistance.

Legal cases, like the young black girls in Alabama drew also drew the media’s attention because of the number of people involved. Compared to Norma Jean Serena, one American Indian woman, the mainstream media paid more attention to cases involving multiple women. For example, The Washington Post covered another case regarding the sterilization abuse of minority women in 1978. The case involved ten Mexican-American women who were involuntarily sterilized. The women were denied two million dollars in compensation, and the judge argued that they were sterilized because of a miscommunication. The Washington Post describes the women’s defense and the judge’s response in the following:

He rejected arguments by the women’s lawyer, Charles Nabarrete, that hospital officials used deceptive tactics to obtain the signatures from the women, who had entered the hospital to give birth. Saying the case was “essentially a result of a breakdown in communications between the patients and doctors,” [the judge] said the doctors had performed the operation “in the bonafide belief” that the women had given voluntary consent.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> “Doctor Raps Sterilization of Indian Women,” *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>116</sup> “Women Lose Lawsuit Over Sterilizations,” *Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., July 2, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/146851917?accountid=14637>.

The women's lawyer also argued that the doctors sterilized the women because they believed they had had enough children. Clearly, although these women's cases received attention in at least one national newspaper in the mainstream media, the federal courts were not taking their struggle seriously.

Norma Jean Serena is the only American Indian woman who took legal action after being involuntarily sterilized, and whose court case appeared in the news, albeit in a newspaper with limited rather than mainstream distribution. Norma Jean Serena's case is printed by the Akwesasne Notes in 1975. Not only was Norma Jean Serena sterilized; her children were also removed from her home and put in foster care. Norma Jean Serena was told that any other pregnancies would result in deformed children, therefore forcing her to sign a consent form.<sup>117</sup> The Akwesasne notes followed up on Norma Jean Serena's case four years later in 1979. Serena received compensation for the removal of her children, but not for the forced sterilization. She was disappointed at the lack of legal attention her sterilization received because she did not have a full understanding of the medical procedure when signing the consent form.<sup>118</sup> Norma Jean Serena is never quoted in any articles, which also goes to show how hard it was for American Indian women to have their literal voices heard by the public.

National mainstream media did not cover Norma Jean Serena's case, but regional papers in Pennsylvania reported it prior to its Akwesasne Notes coverage. Serena's case was reproduced in several local papers, all the same story reprinted for different papers; the *Pennsylvania Chester Delaware County Daily Times*, *Clearfield Progress*, *Bucks County*

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<sup>117</sup> "Woman Sues Over Illegal Sterilization, Seizure of Children," *Akwesasne Notes*, Summer 1975.

<sup>118</sup> "Serena Wins Half-Battle," *Akwesasne Notes*, late Winter 1979.

*Courier Times*, and *Franklin News Herald* all published the same story on Norma Jean Serena on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1974. The article details the suit filed by Serena that sought compensatory and punitive damages for her involuntary sterilization, and the removal of her children. The article states how Serena found out she had been sterilized in the following:

Mrs. Serena claims that two days after giving birth to her fifth child at Citizens General Hospital in New Kensington, in August 1970, she was sterilized without her consent or even knowledge. She claims that several days later she overheard a conversation at the hospital and learned that the sterilization had occurred. Further, she says that during a 1972 custody hearing involving three of her children did she learn that the sterilization was not mandatory.<sup>119</sup>

Clearly, Serena was not properly informed on the procedure, or even really given a choice to whether she would undergo the procedure. As mentioned previously she was told that she had enough children and any more pregnancies could result in the “birth of retarded or deformed children.”<sup>120</sup> It is also important to note that it does not mention her American Indian background in the regional articles. Norma Jean Serena was a Creek-Shawnee woman. Although her sterilization was not performed at an IHS hospital, primarily because she was located in the east in rural Pennsylvania, it was federally funded and requested by the welfare department of child protective services in Pennsylvania.

This was not the only time regional newspapers had covered sterilization. As mentioned in the previous chapter, regional newspapers covered sterilization after the GAO report was released. A regional newspaper published articles as early as 1974. *Ada Evening News* published three articles on sterilization of American Indian women in one

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<sup>119</sup> “Sterilized Welfare Mother Files Suit”, *Pennsylvania Chester Delaware County Daily Times*, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1974. Newspaper Archive.

<sup>120</sup> “Sterilized Welfare Mother Files Suit”, *Pennsylvania Chester Delaware County Daily Times*.

month. The Oklahoma regional paper was covering allegations made against the Claremore hospital, which was mentioned in Dr. Connie Pinkerton Uri's study. The first article, dated September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974, states "Some protestors charged last month that sterilization and surgical procedures were improper."<sup>121</sup> A team of doctors at the hospital claimed the allegations were false. The next day, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1974, another article is published. It states, "Tulsa Indian rights activist said Thursday he may seek a federal grand jury probe 'if conditions continue as they are' at the Claremore Indian Hospital."<sup>122</sup> While regional papers are reporting on sterilization, this article quotes a man, and does not mention any female protestors. The final article published is on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974. The article covers the story of a missing record book from the Claremore hospital. The article quotes Dr. Connie Uri Pinkerton's worries about the missing book in the following:

Dr. Connie Uri of Los Angeles, who led an investigation of the hospital in August, said "I'm very alarmed about this. This book was one where sterilization records were kept and where we got some of our information about alleged improper procedures." Dr. Uri said the findings of her investigation has been reported to a U.S. Senate committee headed by Senator Henry Jackson, D-Wash, which is investigating Indian health problems in the nation.<sup>123</sup>

Clearly, after the protestors had threatened to take the case to a federal grand jury, what Dr. Pinkerton Uri describes as crucial evidence goes missing.

### **The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare**

The issue of forced sterilization is brought up as early as 1973 within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). In the summer of 1973 multiple

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<sup>121</sup> "Team Disproves Claims of Poor Hospital Care," *Ada Evening News*, September 12, 1974, Newspaper Archive.

<sup>122</sup> "Protestors Threaten to Seek Grand Jury Probe At Hospital," *Ada Evening News*, September 13, 1974, Newspaper Archive.

<sup>123</sup> "Surgical Record Book Missing From Hospital," *Ada Evening News*, October 1, 1974, Newspaper Archive.

organizations including the National Council of Negro Women called on the government to stop providing the funds for the sterilization of minors, which had contextual significance as the Relf sisters' suit was going on at the same time. According to *The New York Times*, the organizations wanted federal legislation that ensured the sterilization of minors would be strictly prohibited on the use of federal funds. HEW was forced to respond, and banned the use of federal funds for the sterilization of minors upon further notice and until "detailed guidelines" had been created. Although HEW opposed the organizations proposed legislation because of its interference with states' laws.<sup>124</sup> HEW quickly released general guidelines regarding the use of federal funds for the sterilization of minors within ten days. The guidelines included the establishment of a review committee that would consider and either approve or disapprove the sterilization of a person under 21 years old, or a person legally unable to consent to the sterilization by state law. It also required that sterilization programs have to file a report annually to HEW containing all relevant information.<sup>125</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the GAO report on allegations against the IHS came out in 1976, and made several recommendations on HEW's sterilization regulations. No reforms came after the GAO report urged HEW to change its sterilization regulations. The next proposal for reform from HEW would come in 1977, shortly after the National Women's Conference, which also urged HEW to make reforms to its sterilization

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<sup>124</sup> Bill Kovach. "14 Organizations Urge the Government to Stop Providing Funds for Sterilization of Minors: Legislation Asked," *New York Times*, July 10, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/119861002?accountid=14637>.

<sup>125</sup> "H.E.W. Chief Issues Guidelines to Protect Rights of Minors and Others in Sterilization Cases: Inquiry in South Carolina," *New York Times*, July 20, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/119860195?accountid=14637>.

regulations. In December of 1977, HEW issued new regulations to prevent forced sterilizations. The *New York Times* states the proposed procedures in the following:

The new rules would do the following: Require the patient to sign a consent form, in her primary language, showing that she understood the consequences of a sterilization operation. Require the doctor to state in writing that he has informed the patient of the risks and benefits of sterilization and has impressed on her that she will not lose welfare funds or other benefits if she declines to be sterilized.

These new procedures aim to ensure that there could be no room for coercion. As many American Indian women were told that they would have benefits taken away from them if they did not agree to sign. Furthermore, the proposal extended the window between the signing of the consent form and the actual operation from what was previously only a 72-hour waiting period:

Establish a mandatory waiting period of 30 days between the time a consent form is signed and the time of a sterilization operation, paid for with department funds, is performed. Prohibit payment for sterilization operation on anyone under the age of 21. Prohibit Federal payment for hysterectomies performed solely for birth control. Establish special procedures to assure that people in prisons or mental health institutions and others who are mentally incompetent are not sterilized capriciously.<sup>126</sup>

The forced sterilization of American Indian women, which was revealed nationally in 1976, did not send HEW into action. The collective effort of women of color fighting to put an end to a shared struggle enabled them to create some change in the medical regulations regarding sterilization. DeCora explains her work with WARN in the following:

It's a hard life. It's easy to just think of yourself and drive a nice car and have nice things, but the reward is that when the day comes that I have to die or Madonna has to die, and our ancestors are the spirit world, we can stand in front of them and say, "I didn't just look the other way. I did what I could".<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> David E Rosenbaum, "H.E.W. to Issue New Regulations To Prevent Forced Sterilizations," *New York Times*, n.d., ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, December 2, 1977.

<sup>127</sup> Lorelei DeCora quoted in *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 143.

American Indian women fought tirelessly to incite change and reform within the IHS, and to end involuntary sterilization, still very little was done for the matter until it became part of a bigger picture that included white feminists, and women of color, who also had struggled with sterilization abuse.

### **The National Women's Conference**

The feminist movement was going on at the same time as the American Indian Movement. The National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed in 1966, two years before AIM was created. Over the decade NOW had been working for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), repealing abortion laws, publicly funded childcare, and Title IX. One major milestone for their movement was *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which allowed women the right to an abortion without state regulation.<sup>128</sup> American Indian Women's involvement in both AIM and NOW converged at the 1977 National Women's Conference was held in Houston, Texas and brought together women from all over the United States. The event included 2,000 elected delegates, from 37 states.<sup>129</sup> The conference was intended to start a larger discussion about the status of women in the United States, but ultimately became an argument over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The National Plan of Action came out of the conference, including 26 areas women have demands in. In a November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977 *Los Angeles Times* article by Lorraine Bennett, she discussed delegates such as Billie Masters, an American Indian women, who was a member of the Minority Affairs Committee of the National Education Association and served on the Indian Education Task

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<sup>128</sup> National Organization for Women, "Highlights", <https://now.org/about/history/highlights/>.

<sup>129</sup> Lorraine Bennett, "Women Delegates Find Unity in Their Diversity", *Los Angeles Times*, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977.



Force of HEW was one of the delegates from Orange County, California. Her goals as a delegate at the National Women's Conference were the following:

She says she is going to Houston with the hope of "making the non-Indian aware of the status of the American Indian." She would like to see Indians given a cabinet appointment and see Indian matters wrested from under the Department of the Interior and handled through a separate office. To her, issues of major concern to American Indian women include sterilization problems on reservations and a lack of proper education advantages for Indian children.<sup>130</sup>

While the conference was supposed to bring women together, in some ways it pushed them apart. In the case of reproductive rights, the issue was split between minority women and white feminists. It is also important to note that a woman, Lorraine Bennet, was covering this story for a mainstream newspaper during this period.

This conflict brings up the question of what do reproductive rights actually mean, and to whom? Minority women had been facing sterilization abuse for decades, while white feminists wanted access to contraception and abortions. Orleck states, "For many white feminists, the battle for reproductive rights and reproductive choice was about access to contraception and safe legal abortion. For poor women of color, reproductive rights were about a woman's freedom to decide when and whether to have children."<sup>131</sup> This was not the first time the divide came up. In 1975, also known as "International Women's Year", the issue of forced sterilization was brought up at the World Conference on Women in Mexico City and at the World Congress for International Women's Year in Berlin. Journalist Emily Gibson states, "At both Berlin and Mexico City, feminists strongly endorsed resolutions

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<sup>130</sup> Bennett, "Women Delegates Find Unity in Their Diversity".

<sup>131</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 97.

calling for the right of all women to control their bodies and reproductive processes, but Third World women expressed a fear of forced sterilization and birth control.”<sup>132</sup>

American Indian women were present at the World Congress for Women, and spoke up about forced sterilization with Puerto Rican and Black women. Gibson describes an American Indian woman delegate that spoke at the conference in the following:

American Indian women also introduced a resolution against “a disproportionate ratio of sterilization.” A young Native American woman who traveled with the U.S. delegation, but made clear “I represent my own nation” made specific mention of charges brought by the Mohawk nation against the U.S. Public Health Service and the Indian Health Service Hospital in Claremont, Oklahoma “for the surgical sterilization of 132 Indian women in 1973, which often took place without their knowledge or informed consent.”<sup>133</sup>

Clearly American Indian women felt that they needed to separate themselves from white American feminists at the conference, and ultimately represent their own nation, as the issue was not being recognized nationally. This resolution cited information from Dr. Pinkerton Uri’s article, and came a year before the GAO report and two years before the National Women’s Conference in Houston.

The divide did help unify women of color in their mutual struggles, such as forced sterilization. As Orleck states, “The sterilization abuse campaigns drove a wedge between feminists of color and many white feminists, between poor women and more affluent activists”.<sup>134</sup> This made a larger group of women, specifically minority women, who could speak together and make greater demands, hence their own plank two years later at the National Women’s Conference in Houston. Orleck states, “The issue of sterilization abuse

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<sup>132</sup> Emily Gibson, “World Congress for Women: 3rd World vs. Feminist Priorities,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.union.edu/docview/157942573?accountid=14637>.

<sup>133</sup> Gibson, “World Congress for Women: 3<sup>rd</sup> World vs. Feminist Priorities”.

<sup>134</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 99.

galvanized women's rights activism among women of color with the same passion that the desire for birth control and safe, legal abortion evoked among white feminists in the 1960s and 1970s".<sup>135</sup> Mary Crow Dog passionately describes her personal experience with the involuntary sterilization of American Indian women in the 1970s and the desire American Indian women had to have children in the following:

Birth control went against our beliefs. We felt that there were not enough Indians left to suit us. The more future warriors we brought into the world, the better. My older sister Barbara got pregnant too. She went to the BIA hospital where the doctors told her she needed a cesarean. When she came to, the doctors informed her that they had taken her womb out. In their opinion, at that time, there were already too many little red bastards for the taxpayers to take care of. No use to mollycoddle those happy-go-lucky, irresponsible, oversexed AIM women. Barb's child lived for two hours. For a number of years BIA doctors performed thousands of forced sterilizations on Indian and Chicano women without their knowledge or consent.<sup>136</sup>

Obviously a general distrust of the IHS and white hospitals arose once the sterilization abuse of American Indian women had been uncovered in the mid 1970s. As Crow Dog shows she does not want to deliver her own child in a white hospital because she fears she too could be sterilized, "For this reason I was happy at the thought of having a baby, not only for myself but for Barbara, too. I was determined not to have my child in a white hospital".<sup>137</sup> Clearly, minority women could not see white feminists position on the issue because they were struggling with the right to even freely have their children.

Annelise Orleck states, "Women of color felt betrayed and violated by these involuntary sterilizations. Their sense of humiliation and anger was deepened by the fact that so many white feminists seemed unable to grasp the seriousness of the issue".<sup>138</sup> The National Plan

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<sup>135</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 97.

<sup>136</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 79.

<sup>137</sup> Crow Dog and Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*, 79.

<sup>138</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 97.

of Action did mention sterilization as an issue that minority women were collectively facing in Plank 12.

Plank 12 of the National Women's Conference in Houston covered the overall health of women. The background of the Plank brings up sterilization abuse of American Indian women, as reported in the news: "According to *The New York Times* of May 24, 1977, Dr. Donnie Uri estimates that one of every four American Indian women has been sterilized, in many cases without realizing what was being done."<sup>139</sup> Coerced sterilization was not an issue exclusive to American Indian women, the background of the plank also included media coverage of the sterilization of Black women, and Puerto Rican women. As shown in the following from the Plank's background:

In her article, "Forced Sterilization," in the February 1976 issue of *Sister Courage*, Dr. Judith Herman estimated that 20 percent of married black women have been sterilized, compared with seven percent of married white women. The Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, an organization based in New York City, contends that more than a third of women of childbearing age in Puerto Rico have been sterilized.<sup>140</sup>

Clearly, women of color are greatly affected by sterilization abuse. As mentioned earlier Dr. Pinkerton-Uri estimated that at least 25% of American Indian women would be sterilized during the 1970s.

Regarding sterilization, the Plank recommends that HEW take the following actions, "The Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare should undertake a special investigation of the increase in surgical procedures such as hysterectomy, Caesarean section,

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<sup>139</sup> "Plank 12: Health," from National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference, Conference* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 53-56.

<sup>140</sup> "Plank 12: Health," from National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference, Conference* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 53-56.

mastectomy, and forced sterilization".<sup>141</sup> Evidently, white feminists paid little attention to the sterilization of minority women, because they did not want it to interfere with their fight for access to contraceptives and abortion. Orleck states,

The National Organization for Women (NOW) refused to endorse any regulation its leaders felt would restrict women's access to sterilization on demand. So. As women of color fought for new laws and guidelines to prevent involuntary or coerced sterilizations, they came into conflict with almost all of the major national feminist organizations—including NOW and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL).<sup>142</sup>

Furthermore, the National Women's Conference had a forum for minority women to discuss issues that white women at the conference were not experiencing, and to create a National Plan of Action, which would become Plank 17. Historians Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin noticed the glaring similarity that all minority women were facing in the following:

As each group read its statement, it became clear that most issues were shared. A Chicana delegate emphasized her group's suffering from coerced sterilizations; then black representatives cited similar tragic experiences, among their sisters, and an American Indian delegate brought tears to everyone's eyes by asserting that 42 percent of that population's women have been sterilized, with or without informed consent.<sup>143</sup>

As mentioned earlier, sterilization abuse was exclusively an issue among women of color, which made it more difficult to address, due to lack of mainstream media coverage and government reform. As Sklar and Dublin state, "Because of patterns and biases in the medical and birth control fields, as well as greater dependency on publicly supported

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<sup>141</sup> "Plank 12: Health," from National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference, Conference* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 53-56.

<sup>142</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*, 100.

<sup>143</sup> Thomas Dublin, Stephanie Gilmore, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, *How Did the National Women's Conference in Houston in 1977 Shape a Feminist Agenda for the Future?* Binghamton: State University of New York, 2004, 157.

teaching hospitals, minority women are more likely to be the subject of experimental medical techniques and drugs and more likely to undergo sterilization (both hysterectomies and tubal ligations) without informed consent.”<sup>144</sup> Issues that were considered exclusive to American Indian women at the National Women’s Conference in Plank 17 were tribal rights, tribal sovereignty; honor of existing treaties and congressional acts; protection of hunting, fishing, and whaling right; protection of trust status, and removal of the threat of termination. The Plank also called for educational funding, better care through the IHS; the end of removal of American Indian children from their communities; and to allow full participation in federally funded programs.<sup>145</sup> While sterilization abuse was mentioned in the National Plan of Action the issue of what reproductive rights were was not truly settled between white feminists and minority women.

### **The Longest Walk**

In 1978 American Indian activists, including both AIM and WARN members, walked from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. in what is known as the Longest Walk. The main goals of the walk were to prevent Congress from passing multiple bills that threatened American Indian land, as well as hunting and fishing rights. The bills would have eliminated land and water rights on reservations across the country; laws that required American Indians to have permits for fishing and hunting in Washington. In addition, the proposed laws contained assimilation policies and cut off social services in schools, hospitals, and

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<sup>144</sup> Dublin, Gilmore, and Kish Sklar, *How Did the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977 Shape a Feminist Agenda for the Future?*, 71.

<sup>145</sup> "Plank 17: Minority Women," from National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 70.

housing projects. The walk also was supposed to bring awareness about the violation upon the rights of Native Americans. Sterilization abuse was one of the major issues the Longest Walk was trying to bring awareness to.<sup>146</sup>

The Longest Walk began on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1978 and was a 3,000 mile march from Alcatraz Island to Washington D.C. The march was also supposed to pay homage to the Trail of Broken Treaties march in 1972.<sup>147</sup> There were about 2,000 marchers, with about half American Indian. Along the way, marchers would stop to educate Americans about American Indian culture and the discrimination they had faced. The *Akwesasne Notes* covered many of the stops and described the March participants, such as:

“We came here from The Longest Walk,” one of the younger women said. “Our elders have come with us. My grandmother here,” she said pointing out one of the older women, “when she first joined the walk she saw that the people were running. So she ran too! In fact, we couldn’t even catch up wither. She ran a couple of miles!”<sup>148</sup>

26 marchers walked the entire distance, while others took buses, cars, and planes. After five months, the marchers arrived in Washington D.C., on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1978. For the next two weeks, they marched and protested in Washington D.C., and none of the bills passed into law.<sup>149</sup> At the rally in Washington Janet McCloud, a founding member of WARN, made a speech that focused on the forced sterilization of American Indian women.<sup>150</sup> Similar to the National Women’s Conference, American Indian’s had the support of other minorities for

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<sup>146</sup> Hightower Langston, *American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s*.

<sup>147</sup> Carly Rosenfield, “Native Americans Walk from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. for U.S. Civil Rights, 1978,” Global Nonviolent Action Database. accessed March 8, 2018. <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/native-americans-walk-san-francisco-washington-dc-us-civil-rights-1978>.

<sup>148</sup> “The Longest Walk: Vignettes”, *Akwesasne Notes*, Summer 1978.

<sup>149</sup> Rosenfield, “*Native Americans walk from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. for U.S. civil rights, 1978*”, 2011.

<sup>150</sup> Orleck, *Rethinking American Women’s Activism*, 144.

The Longest Walk. An article dated July 24, 1978 states, "But Mr. Bellecourt and other leaders said the walk drew little commitment from Congress, even though the black and Hispanic congressional caucuses supported their cause of deterring the passage of legislation they consider detrimental to their rights."<sup>151</sup> This again shows that people of color can come together to form a larger group and bring their rights to the forefront.

It is evident that American Indian women's voices were not being heard at this time, as there are very few female primary sources on the subject, hence Mary Crow Dog's memoir's significance in this chapter. Even Mary Crow Dog, as mentioned previously, faces contradictions as a member of AIM. She wants to advocate for American Indians, but she also wants to advocate for women. As a woman and a member of AIM, it is difficult for her to find a middle ground, and where it seems she accepts her place in AIM, and as an American Indian woman. Mary Crow Dog does not ever become active with WARN.

As shown in the mainstream media from the late sixties to late seventies, American Indian women's agenda was clearly left out and essentially went unnoticed. This trend was not only apparent in the media, but in the actual social movements taking place during that period. Their presence basically goes unnoticed in major events such as the Trail of Broken Treaties and Wounded Knee. Women were present for these major events, but go unnoticed because they are marginalized not only by mainstream media, but in the American Indian community as seen in their involvement with AIM, and the female community as seen at the 1977 National Women's conference in Houston. American Indian

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<sup>151</sup> "Leader of 'Longest Walk' Warns of 'Armed Struggle,'" *New York Times*, July 23, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/07/24/archives/around-the-nation-2-inmates-and-guard-slain-in-georgia-prison-riot.html>.



women start their own movement, Women of all Red Nations, to combat the silence around their issues and to shed light on the problems they face.

Even today the lack of coverage of American Indian women and sterilization abuse is still present in the mainstream media. A Huffington Post Article by Alexandra Minna Stern, a professor at the University of Michigan, was published in January of 2016 and does not mention American Indian women as one of the groups that were apart of the thousands involuntarily sterilized during the twentieth century. She mainly focuses on those sterilized in California during the 1900s. Stern states, “Of the 60,000 sterilizations in the United States, California performed one-third, or 20,000, of them, making the Golden State the most aggressive sterilizer in the nation... Even though we will never be able to divulge the real names or precise circumstances of the 20,000 people sterilized in California, we can still see the ugly underside of medical paternalism and how authorities treated Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, immigrant groups, and people with disabilities and mental illnesses in 20th-century America”.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern, “That Time the United States Sterilized 60,000 of its Citizens”, Huffington Post, January 6, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sterilization-united-states\\_us\\_568f35f2e4b0c8beacf68713](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sterilization-united-states_us_568f35f2e4b0c8beacf68713).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, American Indian women were marginalized in the mainstream media, and both the American Indian movement and the feminist movement. American Indian women were targets for sterilization abuse by the IHS and the federal government. The public was not made aware of their struggle with involuntary sterilization until four years after it had been uncovered. Once the mainstream media did cover American Indian women's involuntary sterilizations, HEW did not attempt to make any kind of reform based off of the report. This reaction is wildly different to how HEW responded to the Relf sisters case in Alabama. In that case HEW drafted new policies for the sterilization of minors within ten days.

African American women and Latina women shared similar experiences with sterilization abuse to American Indian women, but their experiences were paid more attention to because they were more likely to be covered by the mainstream media. This is because African American women and Latina women were initiating law suits, which was not a strategy American Indian women followed. As can be seen when an American Indian woman did file a suit, in Norma Jean Serena's case, there still was not attention paid to her by the mainstream media. Although regional newspapers were reporting on sterilization abuse of American Indian women, but it failed to ever reach the national level.

The mainstream media did not only ignore the sterilization abuse of American Indian women, but they also ignored American Indian women in general as can be seen in the coverage of American Indian activism from 1968 to 1978. Women played a key role in the AIM, but gained little to no recognition for the work they did. This was not only in the media; the American Indian men they worked alongside with also treated women this way.

This is seen in many of Mary Crow Dog's personal accounts of how AIM men treated AIM women. This caused women to form their own group, Women of All Red Nations (WARN). WARN was able to make their platform all of the concerns they could not get AIM to pay attention to previously. Although WARN did not ever gain the same mainstream media traction that AIM did, it did allow American Indian women to incite change on their own. As seen in the work of

The issue American Indian women faced with AIM men was also an issue for American Indian women in the feminist movement. White feminists did not pay much attention to sterilization abuse because they did not want it to interfere with their work to gain safe and legal abortions and birth control. This brought women of color together, especially at the National Women's Conference, where minority women were able to discuss mutual experiences and concerns exclusive to women of color that should be included in the National Plan of Action. Ultimately, sterilization abuse was not made out to be the forefront of the feminist movement, but it's mention in the National Plan of Action to cause HEW to make some changes. Such as the work of Madonna Thunderhawk and the group home she created for children on Pine Ridge after the Siege at Wounded Knee, and Lorelei DeCora's clinic she opened on her reservation in Nebraska.

While American Indian women were often forgotten by both the media, and the movements they were apart of this did not stop there efforts. Even after AIM disbanded and male leadership became thin after the Siege at Wounded Knee, American Indian women continued with WARN to fight not only for just American Indians but also for women as a whole.

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