

2006

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Recommended Citation

Kearl, Holly (2006) "Elusive Matriarchy: The Impact of the Native American and Feminist Movements on Navajo Gender Dynamics," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 11 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol11/iss1/11>

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Elusive Matriarchy: The Impact of the Native American and Feminist Movements on Navajo Gender Dynamics

Holly Kearl

Contact with European invaders impacted all Native Americans. From the introduction of new items through trade, to fatal diseases, intermarriage, community relocation and forced “civilizing,” Native American lives would never be the same. The Navajo, or Diné, a name they also call themselves, were able to avoid many of these problems longer than other tribes, helping make them one of the largest tribes in the United States today. Although their population has fared relatively well, forced assimilation by the United States government, specifically during the 1920s and 1930s, affected many aspects of Navajo life, including gender dynamics. The outcome of the changes from assimilation made women more economically and politically dependent on men than they had been previously. Before assimilation, women and men were able to equally contribute to the family income and, as a matriarchal society, women played a significant social and political role, but the assimilation program in the United States reduced women’s economic and political status. During the 1960s and 1970s there was a nation-wide movement of Native American people for self-determination, cultural pride and a renewal of traditional ways, which may have meant a re-emphasis of matriarchy among the Navajo. However, it turned out that the Native American Movement had little impact among the Navajo. Instead, it was the contemporary Feminist Movement that had a greater,

if indirect, impact on the gender dynamics by providing women with more economic opportunities. Politically, the former matriarchal structure has remained elusive, as males dominate the governing tribal council.

I. Pre-Assimilation

Two main periods of contact between the Navajo and non-Native peoples occurred. Between the mid-1600s and early 1800s the Navajo had sporadic interactions with the Spanish, and, from the mid-1800s on, they experienced growing contact with Americans. The Spaniards did not try on a wide scale to “tame” or “civilize” the Navajo peoples, nor were they successful in their limited attempts. The significant ways the Navajo changed through contact with the Spanish were indirect and assimilation did not occur until Euro-Americans enforced it in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

Anthropological studies indicate that the Navajo migrated to the Southwestern part of the United States between 1100 and 1500 C.E from as far north as Canada.¹ Some characteristics that are similar to their northern Athabascan relatives are their language, flexibility in adapting to new situations, high status of women, optimistic outlook and value of individualism.² The Navajo were originally hunter-gatherers, organized

¹ Cheryl Howard, *Navajo Tribal Demography, 1983-1986, A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc: 1993), 7; see also Robin Langley Somner, *North American Indian Women* (Greenwich, CT: Brompton Books, 1998), 9.

² Peter Iverson, *Dine A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 19.

into small groups, with patrilineal descent.³ In the Southwest, their lifestyle greatly changed because of the influence of neighboring people, specifically the Spanish and the neighboring Pueblo tribe.

Spanish records show that there was contact with the Navajo as early as the 1620s. Over the next two hundred years, various missionaries recorded their largely fruitless efforts to convert the Navajo to Christianity.⁴ As the Navajo were a migrant people scattered across a large area, it was difficult for the Spanish to directly influence them as a group. When they did encounter each other, the Navajo did not experience the significant population decline that many other tribes did with European contact because they lived in remote areas in small groups, their diet was rich in protein and they migrated regularly, reducing their chances of catching or spread a disease.⁵ The main type of contact the Navajo had with the Spanish was through raids. For two hundred years, the Navajo raided back and forth with the Spanish (and neighboring tribes like the Utes, Apaches, and Pueblos).⁶

³ Howard, 7; see also Wendell H. Oswalt, "The Navajos: Transformation among a Desert People," in *This Land was Theirs, A Study of Native Americans, Seventh Edition* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Mayfield, 2002), 328.

⁴ Florence H. Ellis, *Navajo Indians I: An Anthropological Study of the Navajo Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 21; see also Bertha P. Dutton, *American Indians of the Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 68.

⁵ Howard, 4-5.

⁶ Rose Mitchell, *Tall Woman, The Life and Story of Rose Mitchell, A Navajo Woman 1874-1977* ed. Charlotte J. Frisbie (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 15; see also Iverson, 26; see also Carol Douglas Sparks, "The Land

Through the raiding, the Navajo gained large herds of sheep, goats, and horses, which significantly changed their lifestyle. By the late seventeenth century, the Navajo primarily herded rather than engaging in their previous economic activities of hunting and growing maize.⁷

An important indirect influence of the Spanish resulted from their brutality towards the Pueblo, who lived closer to the Spanish than did the Navajo. After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and their re-conquest in 1692 by the Spanish, many Pueblo people migrated north. The Pueblo were then in closer proximity to the Navajo and, after a relatively brief number of years, because of the Navajo's openness to other cultures, the Navajo came to adopt many aspects of Pueblo culture, including the Pueblo's use of clans, matrilineal descent, matrilineal residence, weaving, animal husbandry and parts of their mythology and religious ceremonies.⁸ Many of these changes increased the role and importance of women within the Navajo tribe.

Male and female gender roles during the seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries were in many ways complementary and equal, especially economically. Men acquired most of the family's livestock through

Incarnate, Navajo Women and the Dialogue of Colonialism, 1821-1870," in *Negotiators of Change, Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1995), 138.

⁷ Oswalt, 328; see also Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth, the Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (New York: Collier Books, 1977), 127-128.

⁸ Howard 7, 13-14; see also Dutton 69; see also Somner, 9; see also Peter Iverson, *Dine A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 20002), 23-28.

raiding and usually owned and cared for the horses and cattle, while usually women owned and cared for the vast sheep herds.⁹ Women wove valuable blankets and rugs from their sheep's wool. Besides weaving, women also usually made pottery and baskets while men made bows and arrows and crafted items out of iron, leather, and silver. However, these activities were not strictly divided by gender.¹⁰ All of the products were important to daily life and trade. Both women and men also contributed to the construction of their hogan¹¹-type homes. Men made and set up the wooden frame, while women applied the outer layer of mud. They built these at the various seasonal grazing sites.¹²

In many of the social aspects there was egalitarianism too. Carolyn Niethammer found that "restrictions on achievement were never made on the basis of sex, only on the basis of ability."¹³ Women and men could be medicine-people and many held important positions

⁹ Lawrence David Weiss, *The Development of Capitalism in the Navajo Nation: A Political-Economic History* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1984), 33; see also Somner, 9; see also Sparks, 138.

¹⁰ Mary Shepardson, "The Gender Status of Navajo Women," in *Women and Power in Native North America*, ed Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 166.

¹¹ Hogans were houses shaped like mounds made out of wood and mud, with a diameter on the inside ranging from 19 to 23 feet. The female Hogan was the place where the family lived, and a male Hogan was where ceremonies and meetings were conducted. Both Hogans have great religious significance.

¹² Shepardson, 166.

¹³ Niethammer, 127-128.

within their clan network.¹⁴ Women usually taught the small children and older daughters while the father instructed older sons. Inheritance was often evenly divided among children, with neither sex gaining more or less than the other.¹⁵ Either the wife or the husband could initiate divorce.¹⁶

Other aspects of their culture were not as egalitarian. With matrilineal descent and matrilocal residences, motherhood, not fatherhood, was central to Navajo culture.¹⁷ The earth, agricultural fields, and sacred mountains were all called mother, as were corn and sheep. Motherhood was thus defined in terms of reproduction and the ability to sustain life.¹⁸ Mothers were responsible for passing along Navajo religion and traditions to their young children and sustaining them through love and care.¹⁹ Three of their most central mythological characters were the maternal figures Changing Woman, Spider Woman, and Salt Woman.²⁰ When girls reached puberty, everyone celebrated the young woman's ability to become mothers at a *Kinaalda* ceremony.²¹

¹⁴ Ruth Roesell, *Women in Navajo Society* (Rough Rock, AZ: Navajo Resource Center, 1981), 121-123, 143-144.

¹⁵ Shepardson, 160, 168.

¹⁶ Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 125-126, see also Shepardson 159-161, see also Roesell 61-62

¹⁷ Witherspoon, "Sheep in Navajo Culture," *American Anthropologist* 72 (1973): 1442; see also Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship*, 15; see also Howard, 8.

¹⁸ Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship*, 16, 125-126.

¹⁹ Roesell, 71; see also Somner, 13; see also Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship*, 16.

²⁰ Howard, 8; see also Shepardson, 160.

²¹ Shepardson, 160, 164; see also Mitchell, 17.

Politically and socially, women held a more central role than men. While men generally held leadership positions for intertribal meetings and led wars and raids, the Navajo at that time were not held together by a centralized government but by clans, and within the clans women had an equal, and even over-riding say in all decisions.²² As it was a matriarchal society, mothers and grandmothers were the head of the clan and each matriarch generally had the final word in all family matters.²³ Women's central role was also exhibited by the custom of grown female children settling near their mothers with their own families and by mothers determining their children's clan and land and livestock inheritance. Mary Shepardson states that clan affiliations were a significant source of women's high status because Navajos were "born into" their mother's clan, which became their clan, and "born for" their father's clan, making the mother's clan of primary importance.²⁴ Additionally, the strongest relationship bonds were between mother and child and between siblings, with spousal and father-child bonds weaker, partly as a result of the other bonds and men's frequent absences.²⁵

Not only were men often absent raiding and conducting warfare, but in Navajo culture polygamy was acceptable and widely practiced, so participating men always alternated between their wives' houses.²⁶

²² Sparks, 138; see also Niethammer, 127-128.

²³ Niethammer, 128-129; see also Sparks, 138; Dutton, 74-75.

²⁴ Shepardson, 159-160; see also Oswalt, 340.

²⁵ Howard, 9-10; see also Roesell, 61-62; see also Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship*, 27; see also Oswalt, 341.

²⁶ Shepardson, 168-169; see also Roesell, 60.

Marriages were often arranged and based on a contract of clan alliances by the husband's maternal uncle and the wife's parents.²⁷ Usually, a man married sisters and after the weddings, the sisters continued herding and weaving with their other female relatives, maintaining their economic and emotional support network. Extramarital relations were not looked down on and usually it was married men conducting them with unmarried women. A mother-in-law rule existed among the Navajo preventing a son-in-law and mother-in-law from ever looking directly at each other which also contributed to a male's absence from home, as he usually lived in close proximity to his mother-in-law. So, with husbands away raiding, fighting, staying with a different wife or sexual partner or with their own mothers, the home and female relatives gave women stability and economic independence from their husbands through herding and weaving.²⁸

The combination of women's ability to economically contribute to the family and their more central role in the family than men made them far less dependent on men than women in other societies. With men's frequent absences, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and female cousins all worked together to maintain the homes, families and herds. Marsha L. Weisiger notes that when female members of a family formed strong bonds of interdependence, "men often stood on the periphery," and because women significantly controlled the land and livestock, women were

²⁷ Roesell, 57.

²⁸ Roesell, 61-62.

able to hold power over their own lives.²⁹ Unlike women in other societies who also economically contributed to the family, Navajo women maintained control of their land, livestock, crafts and any money they earned from them, ensuring themselves an income.³⁰

II. Assimilation - 1850s to 1950s

While the Spaniards influenced the Navajo, it was not through force or by policy. The United States, on the other hand, was forceful in making the Navajo act in the best interest of America and making them to assimilate into American culture. Among other negative outcomes, women's power within the community decreased as they became much more economically dependent on men and lost their political voice.

By the 1840s the Navajo were fairly wealthy from their livestock and there were about 9,500 members of the Navajo Nation in loosely related clans.³¹ Starting in 1846, the United States tried to end the raiding of the Navajo because it was interfering with American economic expansion. After several unsuccessful attempts, in November of 1863, Colonel "Kit" Carson and his troops conducted a "scorched earth" campaign, destroying as much of the Navajo's livestock and land as possible.³² Some Navajo managed to hide

²⁹ Marsha L. Weisiger, "Sheep Dreams: Environment, Cultural Identity, and Gender in Navajo Country," dissertation, (New Mexico State University, 2001), 92-96.

³⁰ Dutton, 74-75.

³¹ Weiss, 30.

³² Eric Henderson "Historical Background: Tuba City and Shiprock in *Drinking, Conduct Disorder, and Social Change: Navajo Experiences* ed Stephen J. Kunitz and Jerrold E. Levy

but about eight thousand had to surrender. On March 6, 1864 they started the "Long Walk," a forced three hundred mile march to Fort Sumner, also called Bosque Redondo. The Navajo were kept in captivity at the fort for four years and nearly two thousand died.³³ The alkaline water made them ill, the crops they were forced to plant continually failed, supplies and provisions were inadequate and medical conditions like syphilis, dysentery and malnutrition affected many.

After four years, the cost of maintaining the Navajo at the fort, plus a commissioner's publicized report of the terrible conditions made the government rethink its policy, and under the Treaty of 1868, the Navajo were allowed to leave.³⁴ They were allowed to return to their former land and received a new supply of sheep. In many ways they were able to resume their former way of life. It was during the Long Walk period that the Navajo began to see themselves as one people because they were treated as one by the American government.³⁵

Back on their reservation, through herding and making crafts, the Navajo slowly shifted from a subsistence economy to a profit-generating economy. With new trading posts appearing nearby, Navajo women and men were still able to equally contribute economically to the family. Women worked hard weaving rugs and blankets, while men crafted silver into jewelry, belts and other items for trade.

Women's role as the educator and transmitter of

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14-15; see also Ellis, 21-22.

³³ Ellis, 121-122; see also Dutton, 72; see also Howard, 15.

³⁴ Howard, 14-15.

³⁵ Iverson, 10; see also Howard, 16.

culture became threatened when in 1887 Congress passed the Compulsory Indian Education Law, forcing many Navajo children to attend boarding school with Euro-American customs and curriculum. Usually the police had to pick the children up because they and their families resisted separation and forced acculturation. In the boarding schools, children were punished for speaking Navajo and teachers attempted to eradicate any trace of Navajo culture. Students frequently ran away.³⁶ Boarding schools also weakened the usually strong bonds between mother and children that had previously lasted all of their lives and composed the backbone of the culture as they worked together herding and weaving.

Because few pioneers were interested in settling on the Navajo land, the Navajo did not face relocation like numerous other tribes. However, their lands were rich in minerals, and the United States government was quick to make treaties with them to explore and mine these lands. For example, the Metalliferous Minerals Leasing Act of 1918 allowed the Secretary of the Interior to lease Navajo lands for mineral exploration and gave the Navajo five percent of the royalties to be used as Congress decided.³⁷ The mines provided employment opportunities for men, but few for women, creating an additional economic opportunity for men and thus somewhat altering economic gender dynamics in men's favor.

Despite these interferences by the American government, the Navajo were generally able to live well, herding and trading. In 1932, however, John Collier,

³⁶ Iverson, 13; see also Howard, 16.

³⁷ Howard, 18.

the newly appointed Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) enacted a stock reduction policy because he and other government officials believed that the Navajo were overgrazing their lands. At this time, more than seventy percent of Navajo income came from livestock, farming and crafts.³⁸ According to historian Peter Iverson, livestock, especially sheep, were essential to Navajo society and economy. They furnished security, became an integral part of one's identity and influenced how social groups were organized because caring for them provided the base for social cooperation and mutual interdependence; especially for women.³⁹ Due to the national depression, there was not a large market for the livestock and thousands of sheep were slaughtered between 1932 and 1936 by the U.S. government. According to Teresa L. McCarty, "stock reduction permeated all aspects of family and community life," and it "removed a way of living without providing an alternative."⁴⁰ Navajo Edward H. Spicer said that before the 1930s few Navajo were educated for occupations off the reservation, so with stock reduction they were ill-qualified to do work elsewhere.⁴¹

The stock reduction program was particularly detrimental to Navajo women because it deprived them of their livelihood. They had fewer sheep to herd and

³⁸ Henderson, 19.

³⁹ Iverson, 23-24.

⁴⁰ Teresa L. McCarty, *A Place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 58-59.

⁴¹ Edward H. Spicer "The American Indians," in *Native American Voices, a Reader*, eds Susan Lobo and Steve Talbot (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 15-16.

less wool with which to weave rugs and blankets to use in trade. Smaller flocks meant that not all of the female members and children of the family were needed to work together caring for them as before, so cooperation within and between family members and clans declined.⁴² Women also became more financially dependent on men because men were more likely to find ways to earn an income through employment on the railroads, in the mines or doing seasonal agriculture at large towns on and off the reservation.⁴³ Men's exposure to white culture was more extensive than women's, helping them economically. For example, more men than women served in the military during World War II, earning pensions, gaining exposure to the outside society and acquiring cultural knowledge that could help them find jobs. The few federal work programs offered in compensation for the stock reduction were primarily aimed at men, and the jobs that were available to women paid less.⁴⁴

Navajo Rose Mitchell (1874-1977) clearly showed in her autobiography how important sheep were to her family and how losing many of them as a result of the stock reduction changed their lives. In her family, her mother cared for the children, the home, and cooked, her father cared for the horses and cattle, went hunting and conducted ceremonies as a medicine man, and the older children cared for the sheep and goats. Growing up, Mitchell wove rugs while herding sheep with her older sisters. Mitchell wrote, "There was no end to our work as far as carding the wool, spinning it,

⁴² Henderson, 19.

⁴³ Howard, 18-19; see also McCarthy, 58-59.

⁴⁴ Shepardson, 174-175.

and then putting up the looms” but she said they liked that their work permitted them to buy items from the trading posts.⁴⁵ When Mitchell married, her mother advised her to keep weaving because then she would always be able to support herself and her children.⁴⁶ After several years of marriage, the stock reduction occurred, and Mitchell made fewer rugs because of the reduced wool at her disposal. For several years her husband worked at a distant mill, commuting home on the weekends. Eventually, he moved their family by the mill, breaking up the tightly knit kinship network. His work was the family’s main source of income.⁴⁷

The American government enforced patriarchy on the Navajo in several ways. The government ignored the matrilineal descent tradition of the Navajo when they wrote treaties and compiled the census and other records. For example, in the Treaty of 1868, although single women over the age of eighteen were eligible to own land, men were the only ones referred to as heads of households and eligible for one hundred and sixty acres.⁴⁸ In the censuses, men were nearly always listed as the heads of households. In the 1930s when the Bureau of Indian Affairs surveyed the Navajo lands for overgrazing, they also surveyed the ownership of the stock. Men were listed as the owners, although in reality women owned most livestock. Only Navajo men

⁴⁵ Mitchell, 47.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, 84.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, 91.

⁴⁸ “Treaty with the Navajo 1868,” in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties Volume II*, editor Charles J. Kappler (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/nav1015.htm#mn30>.

were consulted about the stock reduction policy.⁴⁹

Politically, women lost their power because the U.S. changed the Navajo's political structure by centralizing it and placing men in all of the positions. Iverson noted that from the early twentieth century on, the Navajo government was patriarchal in practice because it reflected Euro-American ideas about leadership and it also reflected the values of patriarchal Christianity.⁵⁰ Navajo Emma Whitehorse notes that Navajo society worked well until the Christian missionaries arrived, telling the people that the men had to run everything.⁵¹ According to historian Roesell, before American influence, men welcomed and expected the participation of women in roles of leadership and decision-making and, additionally, women were not expected to keep quiet.⁵² When the United States helped organize the Navajo Tribal Council in 1923, women were not allowed to vote for the first several years, even though nationally American women had suffrage.⁵³ Over the years few women have served on the Tribal Council.

While the United States tried to enforce patriarchy by putting men in charge of households and appointing them as the political leaders, not all Navajo internalized these principles. In many families, women still held a central role with an equal voice in decision-

⁴⁹ Shepardson, 296-297.

⁵⁰ Iverson, 303.

⁵¹ Emma Whitehorse, "In My Family, the Women Ran Everything," in *Messengers of the Wind, Native American Women Tell their Life Stories*, ed Jane Katz (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 57.

⁵² Roesell 132-133, 143

⁵³ Shepardson, 174-175.

making.⁵⁴ However, the stock reduction policy devastated many families by taking away women's economic independence and, along with boarding schools, reduced their influence in the family. As a result, gender dynamics changed from an equal economic partnership with women central to the home and Navajo life to women being more economically dependent on men and having less of a voice in the larger community. Yet, while men were more likely to find work outside of the home than were women, they still faced racism, low pay and dangerous jobs like mining and working on railroads, which make the Navajo less wealthy as a group.

III. Native American Movement

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a national pan-Indian movement to fight for their rights and resist giving up their cultural ways. While among the Navajo this may have meant a return to a more herding-based and matriarchal society, surprisingly, few Navajo even participated in the movement and gender dynamics were not impacted.

After John Collier resigned as commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1945, federal government officials changed their attitude and policies towards Native Americans, and attempted to end any relationship with them. The resulting policy, called "termination," lasted from about 1945 to 1965.⁵⁵ As a first step in the termination policy, Congress established in 1946 the

⁵⁴ Roesell, Mitchell and Whitehorse.

⁵⁵ Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos, the Reservation Years* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1986), 239.

Indian Claims Commission, an office that examined past interactions between the federal government and the tribes over land cessions and treaty payments. The federal government hoped that it could pay the tribes whatever money the Commission found the government owed them and that this payment would clear the government of any further responsibility toward the tribes.⁵⁶ Congress wanted to eventually shut down the BIA. The government also rejected Collier's policy of cultural pluralism and hoped to force Native Americans to integrate into mainstream society.⁵⁷

With the Termination Policy, tribal lands were available for purchase. Between 1954 and 1962 over one hundred tribes were terminated from federal assistance and approximately 2.5 million acres of their lands were taken from them soon after.⁵⁸ Native Americans were not consulted about the land purchase policies. When they did learn of them, the National Congress of American Indians voiced their opposition.⁵⁹ Soon they were joined by other groups.

During the 1960s and early 1970s many Native Americans fought against the idea that monetary settlement could be used to erase the damage done to Native Americans, and they opposed the termination

⁵⁶ Roger L. Nichols, *American Indians in U.S. History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 188-189.

⁵⁷ Nichols, 189-191.

⁵⁸ Fremont J. Lyden and Lyman H. Legters, "A Historical Context for Evaluation, U.S. Commission on Human Rights," in *Native Americans and Public Policy*, eds Lyden and Legters (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 27-28.

⁵⁹ Nichols, 189-191.

policy, the destruction of their culture and the seizure of their land and resource rights. Within their new urban neighborhoods, Native Americans formed and joined multi-tribal groups to protest and fight against the government; these groups included the Indian Rights Association, the Association on American Indian Affairs, American Indian Civil Rights Council, Indian Land Rights Association, and the more radical youth-led groups of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) and American Indian Movement (AIM).⁶⁰ In 1964 the newly formed NIYC demanded Red Power: “the power of the Indian people over all their own affairs,” and advocated that Native Americans “establish lives for themselves on their own terms.”⁶¹ Four years later, radical youth founded AIM, a group that demanded their people be able to live traditional lives on their own lands without the patronization of the BIA.⁶²

Both women and men participated in these organizations, although there were far more male leaders, especially in the beginning. However, when police jailed more men, women took over more of the leadership. As Madonna Thunderhawk, of the Hunkpapa Lakota AIM, said, “Indian women have had to be strong because of what this colonial system has done to our men...alcohol, suicide, car wrecks, the whole thing. And after Wounded Knee [1973], while all that persecution of the men was going on, we women had

⁶⁰ Olson and Wilson, 160-161; also see Ted Schwarz, *The Last Warrior* (NY: Orion Books, 1993), 313-314.

⁶¹ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *Red Power, the American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), 13-14; also see Nichols, 195.

⁶² Schwarz, 314.

to keep things going.”⁶³ Women also formed their own activism groups, such as Women of All Red Nations (WARN), which at its founding conference was composed of three hundred women from thirty nations.⁶⁴ Phyllis Young, a WARN founder said, “What we are about is drawing on our traditions, regaining our strength as women in the ways handed down to us by our grandmothers, and their grandmothers before them. Our creation of an Indian women’s organization is not a criticism or division from our men... [but] a common struggle for the liberation of our people and our land.”⁶⁵

All of the different organizations shared the desire for Native Americans to shape their own identity and future through self-determination.⁶⁶ Self-determination meant “maintaining the federal protective role, but providing at the same time increased tribal participation and functioning in crucial areas of local government.”⁶⁷ Ultimately, they were successful. In 1975 Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act, giving tribes independence from the federal government but not making them

⁶³ Diane R. Schulz, “Speaking to Survival,” in *Awakened Women e-magazine*, August 19, 2001, http://www.awakenedwoman.com/native_women.htm.

⁶⁴ Donna Langston, “American Indian women’s activism in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Hypatia – A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 18, no. 2 (2003) p. 114 via First Search on CWI.

⁶⁵ Schulz, http://www.awakenedwoman.com/native_women.htm.

⁶⁶ Jack D. Forbes, *Native Americans and Nixon, Presidential Politics and Minority Self-Determination 1969-1972* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1981), 19; see also Olson and Wilson, 161 and 166.

⁶⁷ Lyden and Legters, 28.

assimilate; they dealt with federal officials on a government-to-government basis.⁶⁸

Navajo Herbert Blatchford was one of the founders of the NIYC activist group, but overall very few Navajo were involved directly in the various national Native American activist and political groups. This was in great part because they rarely interacted with non-Navajos. The Navajo had the largest reservation in the country, and most of those who lived there permanently had little direct contact or interaction with the outside world. Even of those who lived in cities (by the 1970s nearly forty-percent did for at least part of the year), where most of the Native American activist organizations started and found the greatest support, few were involved in any pan-Indian activism.⁶⁹ According to a study conducted on Native Americans living in Los Angeles during that time, Navajos continued to refrain from associating with non-Navajos, including avoiding contact with non-Navajo Native American and pan-Indian organizations and non-Native American organizations. Compared to other urban Native Americans, Navajos generally maintained stronger ties to the reservation, making frequent visits take part in events like elections, festivals and family gatherings. The study also showed that compared to other urban residents, Navajo women and men were more likely to marry another Navajo and were more likely to rely on relatives and Navajo friends as a major source of help.⁷⁰ Another study in the 1980s showed

⁶⁸ Nichols, 205.

⁶⁹ Olson and Wilson, 210.

⁷⁰ Ann Metcalf, "Navajo Women in the City: Lessons from a Quarter-Century of Relocation," *American Indian Quarterly* 6, no. 1-2 (1982), 77 and 78.

similar results; ethnic identity continued to be strongly valued among the Navajo and that those in the cities hardly interacted with non-Navajo.⁷¹

Another important reason why the majority of Navajos did not participate in the pan-Indian movement was that they faced different problems than did most other tribes. The Navajo were never considered for termination as they were classified as a Group Three tribe, one that would continue receiving government supervision for an indefinite period.⁷² Due to an income from mining on their land by the government and private corporations, the Navajo Nation was wealthier than many other tribes and their Navajo Council enjoyed more tribal sovereignty than did many other tribes' governments, so they were not as in need of self-determination as were other tribes. Also, they did not face the problem of immigrating people trying to take their lands.

On the other hand, the Navajo were influenced by the feelings of pride that emerged from the Native American Movement. They shared the sentiments of wanting to preserve their cultural ways and maintain control over their lands and resources. One result of this was a resurgence of Navajo cultural pride on the reservation, especially among the youth, many of whom started wearing more traditional clothing, jewelry and hairstyles and learning more about their history and traditions. However, the renewed pride and the Native American Movement overall seemed to have very little influence on gender dynamics in Navajo society.

⁷¹ Olson and Wilson, 211.

⁷² Baileys, 239.

IV. Feminist Movement

The contemporary feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s did indirectly impact Navajo society. It was indirect because few Native Americans, including Navajo, participated in the movement, but Navajo women benefited from the changed national policies, altering gender dynamics.

From the beginning, most Europeans did not understand that Native American tribes were generally egalitarian societies that valued women and men. Instead, they thought that the men were lazy or emasculated, leading them to try to change Native American culture so that women would be subjugated to men as they were in European cultures. Thus, most Native American women saw patriarchy as the result of assimilation and did not feel the same need as Euro-American women to fight against the men of their own ethnicity but rather against the colonial oppression of all Euro-Americans.⁷³ For Native American women, a way to fight sexism was to advocate a renewal of tribal traditions, such as matrilineal and matrilocal traditions and self-determination.⁷⁴

The racism of the Euro-American women who composed the majority of the movement's membership was another reason few Native American women participated. While they expected Native American women to support them in their issues, Euro-American feminists rarely thought of or wanted to help

⁷³ Jaimes Guerrero, "Patriarchal colonialism' and indigenism: implications for native feminist spirituality and native womanism," *Hypatia – A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2003), p. 58 (accessed through online database CWI).

⁷⁴ Schulz, http://www.awakenedwoman.com/native_women.htm.

native women with the issues they wanted to pursue.⁷⁵

Few Euro-American women were able to understand the Native American women's issues because they did not comprehend the reasons for the oppression they faced. Pam Colorado, an Oneida scholar, said, "Nothing I've encountered in feminist theory addresses the fact of our colonization, or the wrongness of white women's stake in it...I can only conclude that...feminism is essentially a Euro-supremacist ideology and is therefore quite imperialistic in its implication."⁷⁶ Racism also often led white women to assume that their way of thinking and acting was superior when they did try to work together with native women.⁷⁷

Native American women were interested in improving the lives of women, just not necessarily in the same way or for the same reasons as Euro-American women. Euro-American, mostly middle and upper-class women, wanted to be treated as equals to men, receiving the same education, job opportunities, and legal rights. They wanted their identity to be less defined by their marital or maternal status, and they did not want the role of wife and mother to dominate their life. Culturally, many of these issues did not apply the same way to Native American women. For example, while many Euro-American feminists felt that motherhood was the source of women's oppression, Native American women found the role empowering because being a mother and grandmother increased

⁷⁵ Langston, CWI.

⁷⁶ Schulz, http://www.awakenedwoman.com/native_women.htm.

⁷⁷ Langston, CWI

women's status in their society.⁷⁸

Native American women activists combined their two identities as Native Americans and as women to form groups like the Indigenous Women's Network in the United States and Canada and the previously mentioned group WARN.⁷⁹ The goals included improving educational opportunities, health care, and reproductive rights for Native American women, combating violence against women, forced sterilization of women, ending stereotyping and exploitation of Native Americans, and protecting the land and environment where Native Americans live.⁸⁰ Both of these organizations continue to regularly send delegates to international conferences and United Nations forums to advocate for the human rights of all indigenous people.⁸¹ As with the national Native American Movement, few Navajo participated in organizations like WARN or the Indigenous Women's Network. Again, this is probably due to the Navajo tradition of refraining from interaction with non-Navajos. However, in looking at Navajo history, improvements in areas like education, employment, family planning and female-specific issues were addressed and/or improved for Navajo women soon after national laws were changed for women in the general population because of the feminist movement.

As a result of the actions of the feminist movement, federal laws were enacted that improved women's

⁷⁸ Langston, CWI

⁷⁹ Schulz, http://www.awakenedwoman.com/native_women.htm.

⁸⁰ "Women of All Red Nations," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1999, http://search.eb.com/women/articles/Women_of_all_Red_Nations.html, see also Langston on CWI

⁸¹ Guerrero, 58.

education. For example, in 1972 Title IX of the Education Act Amendment required that all educational institutions that used federal funds treat males and females equally. In 1974 the Women's Educational Equity Act passed in Congress, providing federal funds for projects designed to promote gender equity in the curriculum, in counseling and guidance, in physical education and in the development of classroom materials. It also supported expanding vocational and career education for women.⁸² Most Navajo attended public schools and the females benefited from the changes. These laws, combined with the economic necessity for females to attend school because of the stock reduction and a lack of vocational jobs for women, significantly increased the number of Navajo females at school. Until around the mid- to late-1970s there were more Navajo males at school than females, but, since that time Navajo female students have increasingly surpassed the number of male students, especially in college enrollment.⁸³ The Navajo Tribal Council, realizing the benefits of education in their post-stock reduction society, founded and controlled several schools as well as scholarship funds for high school graduates to attend college.⁸⁴ In 1978-1979, 1,119

⁸² "Women's Educational Equity Act," Houghton Mifflin, Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History, n.d. http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wm_040100_womenseducat.htm ; see also Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, "Education," Houghton Mifflin, Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History, n.d. http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/women/html/wm_011000_education.htm

⁸³ Mary Shepardson, "The Status of Navajo Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 6, no. 1-2 (1982), 155.

⁸⁴ Bertha P. Dutton, *American Indians of the Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 77-78.

women and 596 men received scholarships.⁸⁵ By the 1980s, twice as many women as men were in higher education, and women continue to out-number men.⁸⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s many of these college-educated Navajo women were able to find employment without moving to cities because of a shift in the kinds of jobs available on the reservation. During the beginning of the twentieth century most jobs were in mining, agriculture and developing the natural resources, and they were given to males. By the later part of the century, the Navajo Nation, BIA, public schools, National Park Service, and other federal, state, and county agencies became the primary employers.⁸⁷ Many jobs with these organizations required clerical skills or some kind of postsecondary education or training and were not necessarily gender specific. Since women held more college degrees, they had more job choices, raising their economic status.

Employment for Navajo women was also influenced by the Feminist Movement. One of the important pieces of legislation in the 1960s was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The act prohibited discrimination by trade unions, schools or employers on the bases of race and sex. The government established the Equal

⁸⁵ Shepardson, 153, 156; see also Klara B. Kelley, *Navajo Land Use: An Ethnoarchaeological Study* (NY: Academic Press, 1986), 152; see also Baileys, 273-274.

⁸⁶ Peter Iverson, *Dine A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 20002), 303; see also Shepardson, 156; see also William T. Cross, "Pathway to the Professoriate: the American Indian Faculty Pipeline," *Journal of American Indian Education* 30, no. 2 (January 1991) on <http://jaie.asu.edu/v30/V30S2pat.htm>.

⁸⁷ Iverson, *Dine, a History of the Navajo*, 276-277.

Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce the provisions. In the late 1960s the Navajo Nation adopted an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) similar to the one under consideration at that time in Congress. The Navajo ERA stated that: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the Navajo Nation on account of sex."⁸⁸

The new employment equity legislation impacted Navajo women. According to Shepardson most Navajo women worked as waitresses, cooks, or housecleaners in the 1940s. In 1975 she found that many women were employed as teachers, professors, school principals, administrators in education, public health workers, nurses, social workers and there was even one female lawyer, Claudeen Arthur. By 1981 Shepardson called the increased number of women in professional jobs "striking."⁸⁹ Shepardson attributes this to affirmative action by the BIA and Indian Health Services, as "both had officers for Equal Employment Opportunity service whose responsibility it was to keep records on employment of minorities and women."⁹⁰ In the late 1970s Shepardson found that there were even female Navajo police officers on the reservation. Two women had at that time recently been promoted to sergeant.⁹¹ Job choice continued to increase: In 1991 Lori Arviso Alvord became the first female Navajo surgeon, in 1998 Teresa Lynch received her pilot's license and in 2003 Claudeen Arthur became the first

⁸⁸ Shepardson, 161-162.

⁸⁹ Shepardson, 158.

⁹⁰ Shepardson, 158.

⁹¹ Shepardson, 161.

female Chief Justice of the Navajo Supreme Court.⁹²

Family planning was another influence of the Feminist Movement. In 1963 recently legalized Birth Control Pills were widely available, and in 1973 *Roe v. Wade* made abortions legal. On the reservation, the Navajo Council accepted a program of family planning in 1972. In 1974 the Navajo Nation Family Planning Program was organized with a goal to provide Navajos with family planning information and access to services.⁹³ Historian Anne Wright found that among the more assimilated and educated women these changes were appreciated. Many of them wanted to have fewer children because of the economic strain the children often created. They were significantly more likely to use contraceptives than more traditional women who expressed views that being a full-time mother was the only way to be and that children were valuable because they take care of the parents when the parents are old.⁹⁴ However, fewer of these women than the acculturated women worked outside the home, so they did not face the economic drain of paid childcare. Not all women favored family planning, but it helped increase women's economic status by giving them more job options and fewer expenses.

While most of the outcomes of the Feminist Movement helped raise Navajo women's economic status, it also helped address female-specific social issues. For example, in 1983, under the Office of Navajo Women

⁹² Iverson, *Dine, a History of the Navajo*, 304; see also Levi Long, "Council confirms first female chief justice," *Navajo Times*, 23 October 2003, page A1.

⁹³ Shepardson, 161.

⁹⁴ Anne Wright, "An Ethnography of the Navajo Reproductive Cycle," *American Indian Quarterly* 6, no. 1-2 (1982), 59 and 60.

and Families, the Navajo Women's Commission was created to address additional women's issues, many of which were issues that Euro-Americans also addressed in their feminist movement. Under the commission, policies and training developed to help prevent sexual harassment. It created two child support enforcement offices, monitored legislation and lobbied on the state and federal level for child support enforcement, domestic violence prevention, education and a woman's right to choose. The commission also worked to promote more women to leadership roles within the tribe.⁹⁵

Although economically the feminist movement helped make the Navajo gender dynamics closer to what they had been during pre-assimilation times, politically women still lagged behind men. The first few years after the establishment of the Navajo Tribal Council women were not allowed to participate, and it took nearly thirty years until Annie Wauneka became the first female elected to the Council in 1951. For many years she was the lone woman on the Council, although numerous Navajo women were involved in politics by voting. Shepardson notes that, "the Navajo Tribal Council is the organization which has clung most tenaciously to the male-oriented model."⁹⁶

Wauneka's presence on the Council and contribution to Navajo society was significant, showing that women were just as capable as men at leading the tribe. She was quickly appointed chairwoman of the

⁹⁵ Nathan J. Tohtsoni, "We want a woman president' Navajo Women's Commission zeroes in on male attitudes,' *Navajo Times*, 28 December 2000, page A1.

⁹⁶ Shepardson, 28.

council's Health and Welfare Committee. In 1956 she was appointed to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Indian Health.⁹⁷ She led a significant fight against tuberculosis, traveling all over the reservation to provide health care education.⁹⁸ Under her guidance the Health Committee provided education about nutrition, hygiene and sanitation. By the end of the 1950s, the infant death rate declined by nearly fifty-percent.⁹⁹ In 1963 she received the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in peacetime.¹⁰⁰ Wauneka certainly proved that women could be successful on the Council and many women have looked to her as a positive role model.¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, decades after Wauneka retired, the number of women on the Council, composed of 88 members, has continued to remain under ten at any given time. Women also lag behind men in the number serving on various political boards. Conferences centered on empowering women have been held with increasing frequency since the early 1990s to rectify the imbalance. For example, in 1996 the Navajo Women's Commission sponsored a meeting at which women could attend sessions on topics ranging from single parenting, women in politics, childbirth and sexual harassment, to the possibilities of a female

⁹⁷ "Annie Dodge Wauneka headed for National Women's Hall of Fame," *Navajo Times*, 7 September 2000, page A9.

⁹⁸ Deenise Becenti, "Navajos will miss 'Dr. Annie': Many remember, 'She was a good grandma,'" *Navajo Times*, 13 November 1997, page A1.

⁹⁹ Metcalf, 154.

¹⁰⁰ "Annie Dodge Wauneka headed for National Women's Hall of Fame," page A9.

¹⁰¹ Becenti, page A1.

president of the Navajo Nation.¹⁰² Commissioner Gloria Means said, "We're a matriarchal society, I think it's time for women to support one another and praise one another."¹⁰³ Councilwoman Louise Yellowman, who served for twenty-four years, said that men are good thinkers and fathers but as politicians they lack vision, planning, mentoring and individuality. Jack Utter, a former university teacher of federal Indian law who lives and works on the Navajo Reservation, found that Navajo female politicians look to their grandmothers as role models, trying to stay true to their heritage when making decisions, while Navajo men look to non-Indian politicians as their role models.¹⁰⁴ This is another reason many women want more female politicians; that is, to adhere more closely to the traditional ways.

Overall the feminist movement helped gender dynamics to more closely resemble pre-assimilation dynamics economically but not politically; yet, during the 1980s there were mixed feelings among Navajos as to their status, mostly depending on their age and location. All of the urban women agreed that women's status had been reduced with the livestock reduction, but when asked how the present compared to traditional times, they fell into three categories. The first category, mostly composed of younger, more assimilated women, felt that their present status was high because their education made them equal to men, they could enjoy the benefits of modern conveniences and

¹⁰² Iverson, *Dine, a History of a People*, 304.

¹⁰³ Iverson, *Dine, a History of a People*, 304.

¹⁰⁴ Marley Shebala, "Topic: women as politicians, leaders," *Navajo Times*, 21 February 2002, pg A2.

they had more occupational choices. Women in the second category had mixed feelings: they had a higher status but faced discrimination, felt the old way was better for raising children, and they disliked having to leave their extended families to find jobs. Some women in the group said that their husbands acted like macho white men, but others felt equal with their husbands. The last group was mostly comprised of elderly women who said that the old way was best because there was better food, cleaner air and no one to bother them.¹⁰⁵ Christine Conte found that women who lived in a rural part of the reservation preferred living a traditional lifestyle. Most were over the age of forty, monolingual in the native Navajo language, with little education. To live off the reservation they would have to work at a low-paying job and try to pay for housing and child-care. They opted instead to live in greater poverty and stay near their extended families on their own lands. They felt that their status had changed very little.¹⁰⁶

Even though men's political status has increased, since assimilation, it is important to note that their social status has decreased in many ways and neither the Native American nor feminist movement helped changed this. The mother-child bond is still stronger than the father-child bond, and some men believe that the only ways left for them to gain respect and clout are through political or religious leadership. Both of these positions are available only to older men, often

¹⁰⁵ Shepardson, 162-164.

¹⁰⁶ Christine Conte, "Ladies, Livestock, Land and Lucre: Women's Networks and Social Status on the Western Navajo Reservation," *American Indian Quarterly* 6, no. 1-2 (1982), 108-109.

leaving young men unhappy and destructive. Factors like high unemployment and racism have caused more men than women to engage in risk-taking behavior like excessive alcohol consumption which may lead to violence, fast driving or suicide, all of which lower men's life expectancy.¹⁰⁷ Their behavior also negatively affects women. For example, in 1979, the *Navajo Times* reported that rape was the number one crime on the Navajo reservation, which suggests that women are not respected by some men.¹⁰⁸ Native American activist and writer Paula Gunn Allen writes that "cases of violence against women are powerful evidence that the status of women within the tribes has suffered grievous decline since contact...the amount of violence against women, alcoholism, abuse, and neglect by women against their children and their aged relatives have all increased. Those social ills were virtually unheard of among most tribes fifty years ago."¹⁰⁹ Many Navajo are working to try to change these negative realities, but as so much of their culture is influenced by mainstream culture, and Navajo men especially are influenced by non-Navajo men, it is likely that until these problems and racism are solved in mainstream society, they will not end in Navajo society.

¹⁰⁷ Howard, 223 and 224.

¹⁰⁸ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 191.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, 191.