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Women of the Mountains Conference

“God Shed His Grace on Thee”

It's hard to believe that here on American soil there is still a place where basic rights for women and children are neglected. There are places here where, education and the quality of life is that of a third world county, simple legal rights, that we Americans sometimes take for granted, are non-existent, and where basic health care needs are not met. These lands are known as the Indian reservations. On the reservations there are ongoing problems, which have been out of the public's eye, that primarily affect women and children, trapped in these deteriorated communities.

You may already know about the history of Indian reservations but it's crucial to understand the events that define what our reservations are today. It first started with the Indian Appropriation Act of 1851, which authorized the creation of the first Indian reservations. The lands the Indians were relocated to were either desert, badlands, or mountainous regions, all across the United States. This was to satisfy the encroaching settlers of the mid 1900s and to create a place where the Native Americans could be contained and have their culture assimilated. Over 19th and 20th centuries one by one, Indian tribes we conquered or bought away onto these reservations. This ended finally with the Indian reorganization act of 1934. The Indian Reorganization Act began to give power back, and to encourage tribal sovereignty among the reservations, leaving the United States with very limited legal precedence of the Indian Nations. Since then the United States government has retained its minimal authority over the reservations, but has left the various Indian cultures a broken shadow of what they once were. The various reservations are now left to govern themselves under funded, and unsupported (“Indian”).

Due to previous events the Indian reservations have been deteriorating societies with many problems affecting women and children directly. The first major impediment to women and children on Indian reservations is the deprived health care system operating within the Indian Nations. To make matters worse, the residents on Indian Reservations are already at a disadvantage. According to a study done by MSNBC in 2009, on Native American reservations, the infant mortality rate is nearly twice that of the national average. The chance of dying from diabetes is also twice as high. Indians on reservations have a 60% higher chance of dying from a stroke, are 30% more likely to have high blood pressure and have a 20% higher risk of dying from heart disease. Besides having more health complications than the rest of the United States, Indian health care is significantly reduced when compared to the rest of America. Most of the healthcare on reservations is dealt with by the Indian Health Service, which offers inadequate or no treatment at all. In 2009 Ta'shon Rain Little Light age 5, reported to her mother, Stephanie that she had a growing pain in her stomach so intense that she had stopped walking and eating. When she was brought to an Indian Health Service clinic they diagnosed her with depression. They went to the clinic over 10 times in the following months, until Ta'shon Rain's lung collapsed and she was then transferred to the Children's Hospital in Denver, Colorado. There she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died a few weeks later. Ta'shon's story is one that is seen far too often on reservations, where currently, the Indian Health Service serves over 2 million Native Americans ("Reservations").

It is often quoted on the reservations, "Don't get sick after June." this refers to when the federal dollars run out about half way through the year, leaving the health care systems with no funding until the next year. On many of the poorest reservations many residents have no money for additional health care, and are geographically separated from simple care. Officials on reservations state that they receive only half of the funding that is needed to properly care for the Native American population. Because of this doctors must choose which patients are the ones who will receive medical care, and who will not.

The fact of the matter is there are not enough federal dollars given to the reservations for the proper medical supplies and treatment for those living on them. This has led to high infant mortality rates among the nations, as well as other health problems that go untreated. To add further insult, according to 2005 data from the health service, while the Native Americans receive less than minimal care, about one-third more is spent per capita on health care for felons in federal prison. Not only are the materials that are needed not supplied, the doctors themselves are not adequate to help care for women and children on reservations. Rhonda Sandland, while living on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation had advanced frostbite, and was denied treatment until she claimed she would commit suicide because of the pain. The doctors at the hospital then decided they would amputate five of Rhonda's fingers, though a doctor visiting from Bismarck intervened and discovered they only needed to remove some of the end of her fingers and her first layer of skin. Instances such as this happen because of the lack of funding, and support given to the Indian reservations, where every year thousands of women and children live on without proper medical care ("Reservations").

The second major Issue that affects women and children on reservations is the lack of legal precedence, leading to the highest rate of rapes and child abuse in the entire nation. The tragic story of 20 year old Leslie Ironroad, illustrates a typical rape investigation on Indian reservations. Leslie had recently moved in with her friend Rhea Archambault on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. She had been there to help make star quilts with Rhea. One night Leslie went to a party, though she never returned home. The only warning that something was wrong was a panicked call that Rhea's brother received from Leslie asking him to pick her up, because some men were going to fight her. The next day Rhea found Leslie in a hospital in Bismarck North Dakota. She was heavily bruised from a severe beating she had received the night before. Rhea contacted the Bureau of Indian Affairs but it wasn't until several days passed that an agent finally appeared. Leslie managed to scribble her statement out on a tablet that lay across her stomach. She told the officer that she was raped and beat by several men who locked

her in a bathroom. The next morning someone found her and called an ambulance. A week later Leslie Ironroad died from her injuries and just like her, the investigation was never heard of again from the FBI, BIA or anyone. No one ever investigated the men who Leslie Ironroad specifically named for raping and beating her. Sadly stories like Leslie Ironroad's happen all over the nation on every Indian reservation. According to the US Justice Department, 1 in 3 women currently living on an Indian reservation will be raped. According to a statement given by Doug Wilkinson the BIA officer who was on Ironroad's case, investigations like Ironroad's are never investigated. Wilkinson also said the officers are too overwhelmed with the number of rapes, sexual assaults and child abuse that they receive each day. In fact, there are only 5000 police officers nationwide for all 210 Native American reservations in the United States (Sullivan).

Sadly this story is typical on Indian reservations throughout the nation. Though, at least in the case of Leslie Ironroad she had the ability to prosecute even if it was never carried out. Yet, because of a highly controversial court case ruling in 1978, Native Americans on Indian reservations are not allowed to prosecute anyone who is not a resident of the reservation regardless of the crime committed on Indians lands. These cases must be taken to the national government where over 65% of cases are turned down immediately. To add further damage it has been found that 86% of the rapes on these reservations are committed by non-Indians. "Going out there was like trying to do your job with one hand tied behind your backs," says Damon Roughface, a former tribal police chief of White Eagle, in Oklahoma's Ponca trust land, in reaction to this law. Also Tribal courts can only prosecute misdemeanors committed by residents of the reservations. The maximum sentence allowed for crimes committed on the reservations by residents therein; is only three years in prison. So not only are Native American women not receiving proper legal representation, in some cases they are receiving none at all (McClelland).

Native Americans and the United States have always had a complicated relationship that usually disfavors the Indians especially the women and children population. Though, many students in the United States receive a brief history of Native Americans and Indian Reservations there is almost no teaching in schools about what is currently happening on these reservations. Also there is no talk of the affect it has had on women of these reservations. This is a serious problem that should be brought before the public's eye. President Barrack Obama recently signed the Tribal Law and Order Act in July 2010, giving a little hope to Native American women on the reservations, but more current awareness and support is needed. If the majority of the populous would know of the condition of the women and children living on reservations in our very country, a solution to this age old problem may be found. Maybe one day every women and child living in America will have all the God-given rights promised in our constitution. The right to live and prosper, though not in fear, but in freedom.

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