



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 2006 HONOREE

Task Force on Violence Against Women National Coalition of Native Nations & Organizations Affiliated Through the National Congress of American Indians

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Recognizing and acting upon the belief that safety for Native women is among their highest priorities, leadership from Native nations joined with Native and non-Native grassroots coalitions and organizations over 500 entities in total to create an ongoing national movement educating Congress on the need for enhancing the safety of Native women. Formalizing their affiliation through the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the coordinated efforts led to the 2005 re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). The Act includes financial resources and protection for Native women, a first in the history of the VAWA. Now, tribal governments are better situated to combat the scourge of domestic violence present in Indian Country and mark a return to more traditional modes of honoring family and community.

With over 560 federally recognized Native nations in the United States, Indian Country spans many geographies, economies, and cultures. While the nations remain distinct, with diverse cultures, needs, and challenges, some issues span the entire Native population. For example, American Indian women experience alarming rates of occurrences associated with violence: one in three will be raped in their lifetime, six in ten will be physically assaulted, and stalking rates are twice that of any other population of women in the U.S. Violent crimes such as battery, rape, assault, and homicide also occur at higher rates in Native women than any other group of women. Those statistics hold true in cases with Native and non-Native offenders. Violence against women unites Indian Country around a single issue demanding immediate attention.

The 2000 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) failed to adequately address the need for tribal-specific legislation and associated jurisdictional challenges. For example, orders of protection filed in state courts were not necessarily enforceable on tribal lands, and orders filed with tribal courts could not protect Native women from non-Native offenders. The Act was vague in laying out authority and enforcement. As VAWA was coming up for re-authorization again in 2005, Native grassroots organizations providing domestic violence services began to mobilize. Strategizing on how to include more protection for Native women, increase financial resources, and recognize tribal sovereignty within the federal legislation, the grassroots organizations reached out to tribal governments through NCAI to establish a formal collaboration.

In 2003, after a number of presentations and one-on-one meetings with as many tribal leaders, regional organizations, and service providers as possible, NCAI unanimously passed a resolution to create the Task Force on Violence Against Women. The Task Force became the administrative hub for partnerships among Native organizations and with non-Native organizations and began organizing quarterly meetings. Through its efforts, several things quickly became apparent. First, domestic violence in Indian Country is a policy issue that can no longer be treated as a dirty little secret. Second, when tribes come together and combine efforts over shared concerns, their impact is dramatically heightened: As a result of the Task Force's efforts, the 2005 re-authorization dramatically improved VAWA for tribes and Native citizens. Third, by partnering with national groups not necessarily familiar with Indian Country over similar matters, Native nations greatly expand their voice. And finally, it was officially recognized that if Native nations do not provide for the protection and health of their families, the future of those nations is gravely at stake.

Native nations taking initiative and treating violence against women as a policy issue paved the way for the Task Force to assist individual tribal governments' efforts. The Task Force has been able to educate tribal leaders about available resources, provide technical assistance for the implementation of programs, and facilitate meaningful government-to-government consultation as mandated by the VAWA re-authorization. For example, the educational efforts draw on, and demonstrate how direct access to federal crime databases can positively impact citizen protection. Now the tribes are able to enter in and request data supporting measures such as orders of protection. Also, the Task Force successfully fought to include government-to-government relations under the responsibilities of the Department of Justice's Office of Violence Against Women. As part of the legislation, tribes are now guaranteed annual consultation and a tribal deputy position.

By affiliating through NCAI, the Task Force immediately placed the critical issue of violence against women at the forefront of issues facing native leaders. NCAI, founded in 1944, historically stresses the need for unity and cooperation among tribal governments for the protection of their treaty and sovereign rights. Now serving as the major national intertribal government organization, NCAI is perhaps the best positioned organization to monitor federal policy and coordinate efforts to inform federal decisions that affect Native nations' interests. It is noteworthy, that the Task Force did not limit its legislative efforts to only NCAI membership, but instead, joined together non-member grassroots and service organizations with NCAI to maximize the contributions of all.

The Task Force has also forged partnerships with many non-Native entities that address concerns central to violence against women. This has served to not only expand the voice of the Native nations, but has also increased the momentum of efforts already in place. Additionally, it educates others about Native-specific concerns and statistics. The alliances with other national domestic violence organizations assisted legislative efforts: Non-Native national organizations did not fight the funds earmarked for Native nations, and some actively supported funding for Native issues.

Placing the issue of violence against women at the forefront of tribal governments' agendas serves to remind everyone that the heart of sovereignty, development, and cultural survival rests with the health of our individual families. Violence against those who bring life has never been attributed to traditional values of any Native nation and therefore must be purged from our existing systems. The paraphrased words of one tribal leader demonstrate the importance of the issue: It's essential that we continue aggressive efforts since the future of the nation depends on the strength of the women. Violence against women is not just a social issue. It even affects our ability to develop economically. And, another leader stated: The

work of the Task Force has brought the sensitive issue of violence against women out of the shadows and has enabled the Indian community to begin discussing honestly how we can improve the health and wellbeing of our families.

The Task Force demonstrates how Native nations can mobilize efforts through partnerships, legislation, and education. The results strengthen sovereignty and improve overall community health. The reach and success experienced by this courageous and dedicated group serves as a model in practice and a source of inspiration for other shared issues prevalent in Indian Country.

Lessons:

- Intertribal advocacy coalitions can amplify the voices of individual Native nations, strengthening the advocacy for critical Indian issues in national policy arenas.
- Squarely facing difficult issues in policy, law, and social service provisions, tribal governments are better positioned to solve problems and serve the community.
- Governments that address domestic violence through public policy initiatives create awareness and bring to light an often taboo topic.

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