

# Weaving Strength, Weaving Power



# Weaving Strength, Weaving Power

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*Violence and Abuse against  
Indigenous Women*

Venida S. Chenault

PRAIRIE BAND POTAWATOMI AND KICKAPOO

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May those who work for social justice, as well as their families, always be blessed. Igwien.



# Introduction

*Indigenous populations are composed of existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them, and, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial condition ... (United Nations, 1972).*

It can be very difficult for those whose perspective of Indigenous Peoples has been primarily informed by the occasional media story, an image in a movie, a parody of tribal experience in a music video, or the occasional paragraph in a public school text, to move beyond the one-dimensional caricatures, stereotypes, and myths that often inform societal attitudes and beliefs about First Nations People in the United States. Equally challenging is the daunting task confronting tribal leaders, scholars, activists, researchers, and practitioners who devote their expertise and lives to advancing Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in arenas dominated by legacies of anti-Indianism.<sup>1</sup> A general public that is largely uninformed or misinformed is an absent ally in the discourse shaping public opinion, perceptions, and change

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1. Cook-Lynn (2007) advanced the concept of *anti-Indianism*, which describes practices, policies, and attitudes that displace and exclude Indigenous People for the purposes of socially isolating, expunging or expelling, defaming, or repulsing Indigenous People in order to control lands, resources, and First Nations.

in the larger society, hindering First Nations. It is not uncommon for college students and professors in the most revered institutions of higher education, state and federal legislators, judges throughout the court systems, and educated professionals in every discipline to be fully uninformed or woefully misinformed about the history, experiences, and unique political status of Indigenous Peoples. Others who argue that 'the past is the past' have simply grown accustomed to the privilege gained by the politics of oppression and are unwilling to give up the advantage created by unjust structures of disparity that remain today. This reality exists while non-tribal decision-makers in multiple systems serving at various levels contemplate issues and render opinions affecting the political and cultural survival of Indigenous Nations using the same colonial systems, laws, and processes historically used to usurp the lands, power, and resources of First Nations and to justify the degradation and deprivation of Indigenous Peoples ignored for generations. The invisibility and continued political struggles of First Nations to exist as constitutionally sovereign and treaty-based Peoples bear witness to the Indigenous legacy of colonialism in the United States, as well as to the corrosive and ongoing effects of colonization. These effects are found in a litany of destabilizing social problems produced by colonialism-induced disruption throughout the social structures of tribal people, including, but not limited to, alcoholism and drug abuse, disproportionate incarceration rates, and soaring levels of violence, suicide, poverty, and unemployment.

The need for research and scholarship focused on pressing issues identified by and with tribal peoples provides an invaluable resource to tribal governments, communities, and organizations as solution-oriented strategies are developed for retaining political rights, advancing tribal interests, and building capacity in communities devastated by the genocidal practices, policies, and laws of colonialism. *Weaving Strength, Weaving Power*, focuses on the Indigenous experience of colonization and the contemporary manifestation of this experience in violence and abuse against Indigenous women, as well as the dysfunctional systems and mindsets that enable oppression to continue. *Social justice*, as defined in

structural social work scholarship,<sup>2</sup> is committed to “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression,”<sup>3</sup> an approach essential for addressing the multidimensional issues facing Indigenous Peoples. This philosophic approach is cognizant of the structural dynamics that undergird injustice and is especially relevant to examination of Indigenous colonization. This conceptualization of *social justice* best describes parallel work within the discipline of Native Studies, or *Indigenous Studies*, as will be used here. The discipline of Indigenous Studies is characterized by frameworks, models, approaches, and practices supporting the advancement of sovereign Indigenous Nations, including the dissemination of research and scholarship addressing tribal priorities and needs. Advocacy and social action at multiple levels are the tools for social change relevant to this discipline, as well as relevant for social justice practitioners. Seeking to overcome a long history of subjugation, new generations of Indigenous agents of change are engaged in intentional efforts to resolve a legacy of entrenched structural imbalance and systemic dysfunction diverting the potential of tribal communities. Using the knowledge, experiences, and political status retained by Indigenous Nations and Peoples, whenever possible, these proponents of change are weaving existing knowledge with innovative new strategies and research-based scholarship in campaigns to overcome the legacy of colonization and subjugation in order to ensure the survival of Indigenous cultures, worldviews, philosophies, and hopefulness for the future of tribal peoples.

The history of Indigenous Peoples documents the catastrophic disruption and damage produced by imperialism and colonialism.

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2. Mullaly's scholarship, *Structural Social Work: Ideology, Theory, and Practice* (1997), advances the position that the primary focus of structural social work is to end oppression. The emphasis of this approach is consistent with similar positions within the discipline of Indigenous Studies, particularly the 2007 work of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *New Indians, Old Wars*.

3. This stance is grounded in the work of Iris Marion Young's 1990 book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, as well as Barry D. Adam's 1978 analysis of internalized oppression in *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization in Everyday Life* as discussed by Mullaly (1997, p. 140).

Too often this history and these experiences are approached as if there were no impact on the people, the structures, or the systems that exist in the civilizations of Indigenous Nations. Approaches cognizant of systemic disruption and the dynamics of disempowerment on First Nations are critical to capacity- or nation-building efforts. Little progress can be achieved without acknowledgement of both this history and the necessary engagement with change processes: first, acknowledging this history in creating social and structural disruption, and second, acknowledging the use of change processes that engage communities—devastated by practices of subjugation—in self-determination as next steps are identified. Linking such approaches with the knowledge and political status retained by Indigenous Nations and with the experiences, strengths, resources, and capacity within tribal communities ensures a strong foundation for this work. Indigenous social justice is a convergence of such intent with the work of Indigenous Studies, described by eminent Native Studies scholar, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn as a sacred responsibility that is situated in the indigeness and sovereignty of First Nations.<sup>4</sup>

The external forces that set colonialism into motion represent just one dimension of change, but additional layers must also be addressed. Equally important is the acknowledgement of the extent to which this history and the associated practices of oppression have disrupted traditional cultures, knowledge, and systems and have been consciously and unconsciously adopted by American Indians. Not only must individual tribal members be held accountable, but also tribal governments, communities, and organizations that benefit from the adoption of attitudes and practices of domination to ensure the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression within each arena of Indigenous Nations.

*Weaving Power, Weaving Strength* examines the disruptive interpersonal and structural effect of colonialism on Indigenous social structures, particularly the debilitating consequences on gendered systems and knowledge, as well as the traditional cultural teachings and gen-

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4. Cook-Lynn (2007).

dered practices. Violence and abuse against Indigenous women is approached as a manifestation of the collapse and disruption of structures and cultural systems valuing women. *Structural approaches* are contrary to *victim-blaming approaches*, which situate causation in the individual or culture without any examination of the structural forces or conditions that contribute to social problems.

A *structural approach* expands the analysis to consider the multi-layered and interlocking effects of structural disruption on social systems, organizations, and functioning throughout the civilizations of Indigenous Peoples. This approach focuses both on the social change that engages those affected by existing conditions and on the utilization of existing strengths and capacity for doing so. By incorporating a gendered structural analysis of colonialism, the role of the multidimensional dynamics of colonization in the oppression of Indigenous women can be considered to ensure that systemic and culturally relevant solutions are advanced for violence and abuse against Indigenous women. Clearly, the subjugation of Indigenous Nations at every level, and in every system, must also be challenged if the desired goal of social justice is to be fully achieved on Indigenous terms.

*Weaving Power, Weaving Strength* is a product of a sustained Indigenous movement of sociopolitical change, inspired by a long history of grassroots activism and many generations of fiercely independent and strong tribal people who mentor and motivate emerging First Nations scholars, practitioners, and researchers to consciously confront oppression and injustice through the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge. While this book addresses the disturbing problem of violence and abuse against Indigenous women, the approach may be equally valuable in examining other systemic social problems associated with colonialism-induced structural disruption.

This book connects strengths, empowerment, and structural approaches from social work with the concepts of sovereignty, self-determination, and indigenesness from Indigenous Studies as a basis for Indigenous social justice that seeks to end the institutionalized domination and oppression of Indigenous Nations. This work intentionally links interdisciplinary research with the renegade re-

search and wisdom of grassroots Indigenous scholars and practitioners, whose contributions have been historically marginalized by mainstream systems. Such approaches are consistent with Indigenous worldviews and philosophies of interconnectedness versus disconnection. Those seeking a fragmented disciplinary approach, a simplistic ‘cookie-cutter’ method for fixing violence against women, or a template that relies on deficit approaches will be greatly disappointed.

Colonialism is approached as the trigger for massive structural disruption and system collapse throughout the civilizations and social organizations of Indigenous Nations. Evidence of the destabilization produced by these calamitous changes is wide-ranging; however, this examination considers the example of violence and abuse against Indigenous women. Violence and abuse against women is an adopted behavior that contradicts the traditional cultural worldviews and philosophies and the instructions found in emergence narratives, as well as the practices inherent to the gendered systems, knowledge, and teachings of tribal peoples. Rather than viewing violence against women as an isolated phenomenon, an integrated analysis of the source of corruption of gendered systems and practices that uphold Indigenous cultures are considered as key factors in the destabilization of tribal cultures and social disruption affecting Indigenous Nations today.

Violence against Indian women is without doubt an attack on tribal women, but it also represents a continued assault on the traditional cultures of tribal peoples that maintain very different philosophies about the power, place, and value of Indigenous women. By reconnecting to and utilizing the strengths of the traditional cultures, the wisdom of the origin narratives, the gendered teachings within these creation stories, and the systems and processes that support strong tribal women, the full power of Indigenous Peoples is embraced. The use of culturally based solutions become powerful steps toward the reclamation and revitalization of gendered wisdom—as reflected by commonly acknowledged Cheyenne saying: *A Nation is not defeated until the hearts of its women are on the ground*—and toward the perpetuation of cultures that must be lived in order to be saved.

The importance of connecting knowledge from seemingly disparate academic disciplines in order to understand the contemporary phenomenon of violence against Indigenous women will be problematic for some, but it is appropriate from an Indigenous orientation and integral to structural analysis. While this connection poses challenges within the academy about proscribed disciplinary boundaries, an interdisciplinary approach lends itself to examination of the multifarious nature of colonization and its layered effects on structures and systems throughout the cultures of Indigenous Nations. Broadly speaking, *systems and interdisciplinary approaches* typically consider the interactions and relationships within and between multiple systems, as well as the interactions of these smaller systems within a larger structure and the effects of such throughout these connected systems. These approaches recognize that *change produces more change*, both intended and unintended at every level, from the micro (smallest) to macro (largest) levels of systems. It has been long recognized, for example, that rapid social change that does not provide for meaningful participation in the changes being made and that inadequate time to prepare for or adjust to change can be disruptive on multiple levels, including a loss of meaning as beliefs and practices are lost. The emergence of practices inconsistent with former worldviews, beliefs, and practices is not unusual when voids are not filled with what is meaningful. Behaviors acquired that are inconsistent with traditional teachings and norms often produce discord at multiple levels. As one considers the historical effect of imposed changes resulting from colonialism, a potential shift in the analysis of impact is possible by linking the knowledge about human behavior, community organization, and the dynamics of change into the equation.

*Systems theory or structural frameworks* are typically not attributed to Indigenous Peoples; however, it is argued here these approaches are evident within the Indigenous worldviews and cultural philosophies. Within tribal systems, there is both a recognition of and respect for the myriad of multilayered relationships within a variety of systems, both human and non-human. This type of thinking is common across tribes, including the well-known Lakota acknowledgment, *mitake oyasin (all are related)*, which honors the

ways we are connected and related to all of life. If one believes that all are related and connected to human and non-human entities, that all have purpose, and that all are equally valued within the cosmos, such a worldview fundamentally alters decisions, attitudes, and practices. Such perspectives enable one to appreciate basic concepts of Indigenous worldviews, which promote connectedness rather than disconnection and equality of life versus inequality. Again, these beliefs of traditional Indigenous Peoples are important to consider in examination of how Indigenous Nations that value and respect women have reached the point at which violence and abuse against Indigenous women is a growing epidemic, as well as important in investigation of what is needed to correct this dysfunction.

Tribal philosophies are acquired, memorialized, and reinforced in innumerable practices of Indigenous People to ensure that these relationships and connections are acknowledged, honored, and restored as needed. Acquiring wisdom about the significance of the many teachings occurs over the course of a lifetime and comes from listening to, observation of, participation in, and living the beliefs of tribal peoples. Theories of origin or emergence narratives are the basis for the worldviews and philosophies of a given People and often provide the 'instructions for life'. These processes of socialization ensure one develops an appreciation and comprehension of the layers of knowledge within the traditional cultures, worldviews, and philosophies of tribal peoples that provide a cultural basis for life.

*Indigenous system thinking* is also founded on the use of a long-term or generational perspective that considers the impacts of decisions and actions on future generations, both human and non-human, often referred to as *seven generations philosophies*. Even in the approach to the issue of violence and abuse against Indigenous women, one does so thinking about the future generations of women being born and prepared to assume pivotal roles in advancing the survival and sovereignty of Indigenous Nations. The traditional decision-making processes within Indigenous Nations are characterized by deliberative and consensual processes for input and an approach that relies on the connection to the sacred for guidance. These processes are also generally characterized by in-

clusionary versus exclusionary approaches to ensure that all voices are represented in the deliberations, especially those of women. As cultures that recognize the textured and profound intersections between human, natural, and spiritual systems and the cosmos, attention is given to the consequences of actions and changes being made, particularly those with the potential for disrupting hardship. This recognition of—and respect for—the relationships and systems that exist between all elements of Creation is embedded throughout these cultures and interwoven throughout the traditional cultures, systems, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and practices of First Nations. Disturbances within systems or the foundations of a culture, which produce discord or imbalance, are viewed as problematic when functioning is disrupted. **This recognition of the concept of *interconnectedness* and the need to maintain a balance within Creation is the fundamental foundation of Indigenous worldviews, spirituality, and practices in which every element of Creation is honored and acknowledged to ensure balance is maintained and restored if needed.** Although these ways of thinking, as well as the systems and structures promoting such practices have been under siege during much of the history of Indigenous colonization in the United States, they have never been fully crushed.

Indigenous empowerment models predicated on sovereignty and indigenesness—emphasizing the inherent right to utilize tribal cultures, knowledge, systems, and practices in responses and initiatives at multiple levels—are increasingly used by tribal Nations confronting injustice across many domains. Communities and organizations dedicated to cultural revitalization and capacity-building on Indigenous terms, are incorporating parallel strategies that contemplate the effects on sovereignty and embrace the inherent tribal right to determine approaches in overcoming these legacies of oppression. These approaches are increasingly common to tribally based programs responding to violence against Indigenous women.

Traditionally, tribal women were not relegated to a second-class or inferior status within the systems of tribal peoples. In fact, such approaches are antithetical to the canons found in the aforementioned traditional cultural philosophies and beliefs. Strong women

and female deities, equally powerful in the cultures of Indigenous Peoples, abound in the theories of origin, teachings, lessons of survival, and rich experiences of tribes. Gendered beliefs and philosophies that retain these ways of thinking are embedded in the cultural teachings, in the daily and ceremonial practices, and in the systems operating throughout these civilizations, which often still exist among many tribes today. An orientation that bespeaks the respect that traditional tribal peoples hold for gender, including women and female powers within Creation, is invaluable to systemic solutions for violence and abuse against Indigenous women. For many, the 2009 Indigenous Bolivian delegation's successful lobby to the United Nations to recognize *Earth Day* as *Mother Earth Day* was unnoticed; however, to others, this important symbolic change was a significant and long overdue shift in honoring and acknowledging the relationships with the original Mother. Actions that change consciousness about the relationships and responsibilities between human and non-human entities produce the potential for changing worldviews and philosophies of domination and oppression, including the subjugation of women by violence and abuse and marginalization within First Nations and Mother Earth.

Unfortunately, the right of traditional Indigenous Peoples to protect the First Mother and her sacred sites or to carry out cultural responsibilities divinely vested with First Nations is continually challenged by litigation and a litany of genocidal rules, laws, and regulations that interfere with the traditional religious and cultural practices of Indigenous Peoples today. Worldwide, many First Nations People view the collective ignorance, greed, hubris, and lack of regard for traditional philosophies and practices of Indigenous Peoples as contributing to imbalance on many levels, with the dissonant practices and attitudes towards women and female power providing further evidence of the discord produced by philosophies steeped in male entitlement and subjugation.

Today bears witness to the multiple layers of disruption and imbalance worldwide, set into motion by the ancient structural forces of imperialism and colonialism. The global consequences are evident of the massive sociocultural structural disruption and turmoil predicated on worldviews and philosophies of domination and op-

pression. These philosophies have triggered global disruption in social organizations by privileging male-dominated hierarchical systems to the exclusion of egalitarian and gendered systems valuing women. The unprecedented level of horrific violence and abuse against women, girls, and female infants throughout the world is but one example of the imbalance produced. There are no women or female children who are immune from violence and abuse or the corrosive effects of changes that have occurred over history in regard to the treatment and respect for women. One must ask why the female population—of every nation, of every religion, of every social class—must live in fear of violence and abuse, for being born female. Too often, attention is diverted away from the structural dynamics that tolerate, promote, and profit from the oppression of women and girls globally and the insidious processes of desensitization to institutionalized violence against the female population, as well as other disenfranchised populations. There is nothing just in blaming women and girls for the violence and abuse they experience in order to protect the profits of capitalism, regimes of misogynistic intolerance, or politics of domination and oppression.

The monumental task of addressing Indigenous issues, including nation-building and advocating on behalf of Indigenous Peoples, requires evaluation of the multidimensional and interlocking dimensions of colonialism and imperialism confronted by First Nations People and the role of these forces in spawning institutionalized domination and oppression. Pawnee scholar, Julia Goodfox, describes decolonization as a “process of reconnection”<sup>5</sup> to the strength of philosophies, knowledge, systems, and practices of First Nations that have served tribal people over millennia. Such understandings are instrumental to Indigenous empowerment and the survival of tribal cultures. Multiple levels of reconnection are essential to capacity-building within Indigenous Nations, including within individuals and families and between communities, organizations, social systems, governments, and Nations, both tribal and non-tribal.

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5. Goodfox (personal conversation, 2009).

The work required does not end with becoming conscious of how the current state of affairs has been reached—instead it requires proactive social change to reverse and end the damage done at every level and to renew the connections to Indigenous knowledge and practices. Institutionalized philosophies, worldviews, and practices of domination and oppression must be critically evaluated at every level and countered with responses that build on the strengths, resources, and capacities found within Indigenous cultures, knowledge, worldviews, philosophies, practices, and experiences. The history and experience of Indigenous Nations must be acknowledged and considered as solutions are advanced to reverse the fragmentation of holistic Indigenous cultures. This movement is about recapturing power and using it to create a future.

Much of the history of federal “Indian” relations, policy, legislation, and regulations is indelibly stained by the failed strategies of annihilation, termination, and assimilation that fundamentally altered the traditional cultures and social structures of Indigenous People, even today. Righting an Indigenous world that has been turned “upside down,”<sup>6</sup> as described by Yupik scholar, Harold Napoleon, requires talking honestly about the truth, yet too often, those advancing progressive research and scholarship find the Indigenous holocaust denied, and find their disciplines, departments, organizations, and professional reputations under siege, particularly within the disciplines of Indigenous Studies and Social Work. Common knowledge holds that speaking truth to power does not always equate with positive decisions about tenure and promotion within institutions of higher education. More recently, the “ethnic studies” legislation passed in the state of Arizona, HB 2281,<sup>7</sup> signed into law by Governor Jan Brewer in April 2010, bans ethnic studies in kindergarten through twelfth-grade schools within the state by prohibiting classes designed for students of particular ethnic groups that promote ethnic solidarity over individualism or that promote resentment toward other groups. This state legislation tar-

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6. Napoleon (1991, p. 4).

7. State of Arizona (2010).

gets Chicano and Mexican American studies in the Tucson school district and mandates loss of state funding for districts that do not comply. While such programs in colleges and universities are currently exempt, and specific language is included stating that courses or classes for Native American pupils *required to comply with federal law* are exempt, a dangerous precedent has been set for criminalizing ethnic studies, as well as the discipline of Indigenous and American Indian Studies, legitimizing the oppression of cultures and Peoples of Color. The policy declares that public schools students should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people, while legislation outlawing the study of or appreciation for the cultures, histories, experiences, and contributions of Mexican students — as represented by Chicano Studies — are portrayed as subversive.

At the risk of redundancy, the devastating social conditions and problems facing Indigenous Peoples and communities today cannot be fully understood without examining the backdrop of history and the effects of colonialism, imperialism, and colonization on the social systems and fabric of Indigenous Nations. (*Colonization* is defined as the *process phase of colonialism*, as discussed later in text.) These events are the ‘elephant in the room’ that must be discussed in order to move forward, rather than ignored or denied. It is remarkable that, in 2010, Indigenous People in the United States and throughout the world must still utilize limited resources to resist policies and practices that threaten to further destabilize tribal cultures, languages, homelands, and spiritual practices in order to enjoy the simple freedom of living one’s traditional culture without persecution, prosecution, or prostitution, in the broadest sense. The cultures of Indigenous People in the United States are among the most highly regulated but most maligned within the nation. It is unconscionable that energy and resources are effectively diluted or diverted away from the pressing work of nation-building required after centuries of oppression, yet the work of protecting land bases and resuscitating cultures, languages, and traditional practices that are near collapse in some tribes is consistently compromised by the skirmishes and battles in hostile courts and legis-

latures of state and the federal government, as well as the multitude of agencies and institutions with which tribal people engage daily. Indigenous colonization is alive and well, and some maintain that a new phenomenon of re-colonization is gaining momentum in more repressive organizations and tribal communities, particularly those aligned with agendas of oppression inherent to federal “Indian-control” policies. Simultaneously, the race-baiting rhetoric of conservative pundits and politicians, the acts of domestic terrorism by Right Wing elements, and the violence by those associated with White Supremacy groups all attack the sovereign rights and status of Indigenous Nations with a vengeance. Furthermore, such agendas are increasingly promoted through media. Post-colonial discussions are premature, to say the least.

Socialization practices and socially constructed images of Indigenous People, intended and inadvertent, perpetuated by nations, have powerful influences on the social conditions, perceptions, and societal attitudes of individuals, communities, and groups at multiple levels. To ignore the influence of these societal and structural forces is problematic. The unquestioning belief in what one has been taught—or, conversely, not been taught—through the institutions of a society can be so commanding that many of the most destructive and ingrained opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about Indigenous Nations and other diverse populations are not easily corrected. The general public is not immune from acquiring the attitude and belief that certain groups are superior to others or from defending the privilege that comes with such status, even at this juncture in history. Those within diverse communities historically targeted by such practices are also not invulnerable to the toxic effects of internalizing their oppression and acting accordingly or even becoming participants in the oppression and dominations of others.

This book is intended to move beyond the victim-blaming approaches of the past. It unapologetically embraces the strength of the cultural knowledge and teachings of First Nations People and the power of indigenusness inherent to this experience. It is intended to advance critical examination and discussion about violence against Indigenous women throughout diverse domains including

the escalating violence, particularly for young tribal women. This book cannot and is not intended to represent all perspectives, to answer every question, or to solve the problem worldwide, but is instead intended to engage the passion of others committed to Indigenous women, empowerment, and social justice to approach the issue from a different orientation.

*Weaving Strength, Weaving Power* is written from the perspective of Indigenous eyes and is about working with people who have been historically marginalized and disillusioned by the promises and realities of democracy in America. This book is about the strengths, the resilience, and the processes of empowerment within individuals, families, communities, and Indigenous Nations. The focus is on reclaiming the power that has been stripped away, given away, taken away, tricked away, or never been fully realized, in order to create the needed action and change. The approach may be useful to those with an interest in the Indigenous experience of violence and abuse; in the effect of colonialism on social structures and systems, including gender systems; and in the frameworks for Indigenous empowerment that engage stakeholders determining next steps for social action and change. It recognizes the physical, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal trauma experienced by women to whom violence and abuse have occurred but also acknowledges the determination and resiliency of Indigenous women to overcome these experiences using approaches valuing traditional tribal knowledge. It builds on the strengths of experiences of tribal women to facilitate the changes needed, in ways that do not require being a victim or even survivor.

Tribal people live and work beside the ordinary citizen, pay taxes, and participate in the democratic processes within tribal communities and the urban areas that serve as home to increasing populations of tribal peoples. In the 21st century, despite the incredible belief of too many, Indigenous People no longer live in teepees in the hinterlands of America, although many reservations are coping with Third World living conditions. Contrary to media hype, the majority of First Nations People are not growing rich from casino enterprises. In fact, the ratio of tribal people who still live in poverty is double that of the total population according to the United States

Census Bureau, many without basic access to running water, electricity, and indoor plumbing.<sup>8</sup> Understanding of the unique political status of Indigenous Peoples, the government-to-government relationship, sovereignty, self-determination, and the sociopolitical experience of First Nations People represents a level of *deep knowledge* that is fundamental for an informed and educated insight into the Indigenous experience. Too often, only those within the circle pursue in-depth study of First Nations: individuals, tribes, and organizations dedicated to advancing social justice and human rights.

Talking honestly about the truth facilitates responses and conditions for individuals, families, communities, and nations to take power back by addressing the issues faced and by engaging in self-determination predicated on choices, including identifying solutions at multiple levels to build capacity or nations. Raising awareness of the dynamics of oppression generates thinking about the ways in which one can engage in resistance to the stereotype, can refuse to acquiesce to oppressive practices, and can reject internalizing tyranny as ‘just the way things are.’ Rage, hopelessness, and despair are not uncommon when one realizes the magnitude of the challenge faced for the crime of being born Indigenous; however, such circumstances do not justify abandoning tribal cultures by engaging in violence against Indigenous women. Being forced to discard the traditional foundation of cultural knowledge, including the philosophically and spiritually based teachings, values, systems, and practices, is an exercise of cultural genocide producing destabilizing consequences, worsened when the vacuum created is not filled with comparable meaning and relevance. These dynamics should not be equated with hopelessness but instead viewed as consciousness of the complexity of the issues faced within and by Indigenous Peoples and as recognition of the need for multidimensional strategies and solutions based on strengths-based empowerment frameworks.

**We are all related — We are all connected.**

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8. United States Census Bureau (2000; 2006, February).