

## **Sexual Abuse of Children in Indian Country**

Vi Waln: Sexual abuse is a dark reality throughout Indian Country

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"To understand another human being you must gain some insight into the conditions which made him what he is." -- Margaret Bourke-White

Sometimes I think I would rather not understand certain people. In fact, I would rather be far, far away from specific people. But in order to write about the things people do, I suppose I must try to understand how a person came to actually be the way they are.

The topics I address here are sometimes very sensitive subjects which many people would rather not see in print. I believe if you are ashamed of what I write, well then something needs to be changed so there will no longer be any embarrassment. I realize my words affect my readers in different ways. Some of you encourage me while others condemn me. It is difficult to live on rez and watch the day-to-day struggles that I see. I believe someone has to bring these dark issues out into the light. Our children are really suffering. We are the only ones who can change what our children experience.

Last week I was asked by a member of my community to write about sexual abuse. Sexual abuse on the reservation is the dark reality in many of our peoples' lives, especially our children. Fear is what keeps people quiet. There are family members living in our communities who know about the sexual crimes being committed in their homes. Some chose to do or say nothing about it which allows the perpetrator to continue inflicting pain and fear upon a defenseless child.

Other exposed instances will see the families shocked to learn of what has been happening in their homes, especially if it has been going on for a long time. And there are instances where family sexual abuse went on for years and years before someone found the courage to report it. Incest often devastates a family. Some people will deny the obvious facts of an abusive situation, even when it is happening right in front of their very faces. Still other members of the family will be enraged about the sexual molestation, and rightfully so when it involves a child.

A family might even decide to move away from the community, especially if the perpetrator has relatives that threaten to retaliate against the victims. Denial does strange things to people; they will often defend a pedophile even after the person is convicted of the crime and sentenced to prison. For some families the only real solution is to move away. Still, finding the resources to relocate can be nearly impossible. So the victimized child must often grow up in the same community where the crime was committed. It is extremely difficult to face the family members of the person who sexually assaulted you, especially if they blame you for the crime! I really don't see how a small child can be guilty of a crime when they were the one violated.

Our children are our most precious resource. They will carry on the things we start today. But what kind of society are we creating by allowing all the sexual abuse, molestation and rapes to continue? Being molested or raped as a child carries life-long effects on an individual.

A child who is molested or raped will most likely grow up into an adult who will take advantage of another helpless child when presented with an opportunity; like at a marathon drinking party where no one is paying attention because they are too drunk to care. Sexual abuse is so prevalent on the reservation. Many of us are in denial that it even exists. If everyone who was ever raped or sexually molested would come forward tomorrow I believe our reservation would be in a state of shock.

What are those statistics put out by the federal government? Oh yeah, more than one in three Native American women will be raped in her lifetime. I bet many of us were assaulted or molested when we were little girls. All the sex cases now working their way through the federal court system are heinous, in my opinion.

There are Indian people pleading guilty to child pornography crimes now. I know that child pornography has been going on for a very long time on my reservation. I know of a teen girl who was videotaped while engaging in a sexual act with a man old enough to be her father. The only reason he was not charged with the crime of child pornography was because the tape was never found by police. Who really knows how many people on our rez are guilty of producing child pornography in the privacy of their homes?

Of course, all the drinking and drug use happening now is a big contributor to the sexual abuse. It's no excuse anymore. Drinking yourself into an alcoholic black out does not excuse your behavior if you choose to rape a child. But sometimes we have to drink ourselves into an alcoholic black out in order to forget what we went through when we were sexually molested as a child. And so the vicious cycle continues, all at the expense of our children's safety.

When I was a child there was no such thing as people being indicted in federal court for aggravated sexual abuse, abusive sexual contact or for raping children. But that doesn't mean the crimes were not being committed. Child sexual molestation did not just appear out of nowhere. I believe you cannot be a child molester or sex offender unless you were first a victim. How many of our people who have been convicted of sex crimes were actually molested when they were children? I would bet money that the percent of Indian people molested is very high.

Reporting a rape or sexual molestation to authorities is the first step we can take to begin the healing process. Our children need our help and they need it now.

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