



#TimesUp in Native Communities

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It was a cold night in the town of Emmonak, Alaska. It is almost always cold when you're this far north, at the junction of the Yukon River and the Bering Sea. A fishing village of just 800, there's a certain chilling effect to the isolation. Some feel it more than others.

An unnamed 19-year-old Alaska Native woman was home for the night when a man broke in, raped her, and left. Alone in the cold dark, she called the tribal police. Nobody from the three-person unit was there to answer. She left a voice mail. They never called back.

Though isolated, this woman is far from alone. Native American women are more likely to experience rape and sexual assault than any other demographic group—2.5 times more likely than Whites or African-Americans, and 5 times more likely than Asian-Americans (Bachman, Zaykowski, Kallmyer, Poteyeva, & Lanier, 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Reports from the Department of Justice suggest that one in three Native women have been raped during her lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), but on certain reservations, female leaders argue that nearly every single woman has been raped (Williams, 2012). The issue is so ubiquitous that the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center published an illustrated book called *What to Do When You're Raped: An ABC Handbook for Native Girls*. The book takes each letter of the alphabet and presents information on rape, as well as what to do and where to go for help. For these girls, it isn't a matter of *if*, but *when*.

Even when these cases are given adequate attention by tribal authorities, there is rarely anything that can be done. In the 1978 Supreme Court case *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, the Court ruled that tribal governments do not have jurisdiction over non-Natives. This established a dangerous legal loophole in which non-Natives had the ability to target Native women without fear of repercussion. It created a

clear example of what Natives describe as “modern imperialism.” This loophole was only partially closed by the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, which granted tribal courts the right to rule on cases of domestic violence between a non-Native man and a Native woman. This solution, however, failed to address issues of interracial sexual assault or rape, which continue to fall outside the reach of tribal courts. It is no coincidence that rapes and sexual assaults against Natives are more likely to be interracial than for any other group (Bachman et al., 2008).

Irrespective of the perpetrator's race, not enough is done to support Native victims. The federally sponsored Indian Health Service (IHS) is charged with providing free health-care for millions of Natives, yet often lacks the funding and resources to adequately do so. IHS hospitals are known to experience shortages of sexual assault kits, birth control, and tests for sexually transmitted diseases. They also lack the infrastructure to handle such cases, with just over half of IHS hospitals even offering examinations for victims of rape, comprising a total of 73 healthcare providers trained in sexual assault examinations (Williams, 2012).

As the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements march on, the national conversation tends to revolve around a long-overdue change in rape culture, an ambitious yet crucial process that will require widespread popular support over several years. Such a change remains the most important step in ensuring that future generations are safer than our own. However, this national awakening possesses few opportunities for as straightforward and immediate an improvement as on our Native reservations. We must expand the Violence Against Women Act and allow tribes the jurisdiction to rule on cases of interracial sexual assault and rape. We must fund the IHS and train Native healthcare workers so that victims can receive adequate medical attention. These are perhaps the simplest first steps to take as we begin the fight against what has become systematic predation.

Native women are calling. Is anyone going to answer?

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