

In the early 1990s, activists in Canada and the United States formed the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) movement to address the crisis of systemic violence against Native American women. Throughout the following decades, federal and state legislation in the United States has moved towards allocating resources and support to tribal communities impacted by this crisis. While the MMIW movement has made considerable progress in the last thirty years towards raising awareness on this issue, there is currently an insufficient amount of research on the networks of support and activism that existed prior to MMIW. This research will connect examples of community support devised by Native American women in the United States—particularly safety and education shelters—throughout the twentieth century to the emergence of the MMIW movement in the 1990s. To this effect, this paper will argue that Native American women’s awareness and response towards systemic violence long preceded the emergence of the MMIW movement; for decades prior, Native American women found community-oriented ways of addressing this issue that subverted state and federal power structures in the United States. The legacy of these efforts, ultimately, is historically inseparable from a discussion on the MMIW movement.

A 2016 study funded by the National Institute of Justice found that over eighty-percent of Native American women have experienced violence in their lifetime.¹ Further, researchers have pointed out that a lack of media coverage towards these statistics has led to widespread ignorance towards this matter.² As platformed by the MMIW movement, acknowledgement of this crisis must take into account factors related to race, gender, and apparatuses of state and federal power—the

¹ André Rosay, “Violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women and men.” National Institute of Justice, (2016), <https://nij.gov:443/journals/277/pages/violence-against-american-indians-alaska-natives.aspx>

² Morgan Hawes, Danielle Slakoff, and Nikolay Anguelov, “Understanding the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis: An Analysis of the NamUs Database,” *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 34(2), (2023):184-207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08874034221098909>

media, for example—to critically engage the roots of such an issue. Regarding the racial dimensions of this crisis, a virtual exhibit published by American University notes that Native American women are “disproportionately targeted by those outside their own race,” which represents an abnormality in patterns of violence in the United States.³ While Native Americans in general are subjected to violence at disproportionate levels, an intersectional approach must also be taken to understand why Native women’s experiences with violence constitutes a “crisis.” The rise of the MMIW movement in Canada in the 1990s, which eventually spread throughout the United States in the following decades, had adopted this approach; the movement signifies a grassroots effort towards resisting systemic, racialized, and gendered violence. This grassroots resistance, however, has clear historical precedents that must be considered.

To understand the MMIW crisis, it must first be contextualized within hundreds of years of settler colonialism in North America. Historians have mapped the convergences of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy inherent under colonial power structures—past and present—as a framework for understanding systemic violence against Native American women.⁴ On the connection between violence and settler colonialism, scholar Patrick Wolfe writes that settler colonialism is motivated primarily by motives of land expansion. In America, the “obstruction” created by Native American inhabitants towards European settlers’ access to their land warranted the crafting of a racial categorization that “straightforwardly furthered the logic of elimination.”⁵

Compared to the racialization of people of African descent, whose enslavement became a source of

³ “Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women: A Digital Exhibition,” American University, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://edspace.american.edu/mmiwlawsandlegacies/>.

⁴ Hawes, Slakoff, and Anguelov, “Understanding the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis.”

⁵ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, doi:10.1080/14623520601056240.

labor and profit, Wolfe argues that Native Americans were merely racialized as bodies preventing the expansion of European territory. With the formation of settler colonial states in North America beginning in the sixteenth century, the ideology of settler colonialism has continued to define the relationship between White Americans, Native Americans, and land. While the manifestations of settler colonial ideologies have shifted—and perhaps softened in some ways—throughout history, its legacy has proven to be immutable up until the modern day.

Gender must be further analyzed in a discussion connecting the history of settler colonialism to the MMIW movement. In a journal article on colonial violence towards Native American women, author Hilary Weaver considers the transformation of gender roles in Native American communities before and after colonization. She writes that in many pre-colonial tribes, “[g]ender roles were usually balanced and egalitarian.”⁶ However, following the introduction of colonial, and hence patriarchal, power structures, Weaver notes that tribal general roles moved away from egalitarianism and “began to adopt internalized sexism and a type of ‘trickle down patriarchy’ found in contemporary Native communities.”⁷ While Native American communities writ large have faced disproportionate levels of violence in colonial and postcolonial American society, Weaver and other scholars provide a necessary framework for understanding how this experience is deeply gendered as well. Not only do Native American women face violence and oppression from state and federal powers—higher rates of police brutality, for example—but they are also subjected to patriarchal ideologies within their own tribal communities.⁸ A book published in 2007 by Amnesty International

⁶ Hilary Weaver, “The Colonial Context of Violence: Reflections on Violence in the Lives of Native American Women,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(9), (2009): 1554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508323665>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Skylar Joseph, “A Modern Trail of Tears: The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) Crisis in the US.” *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 79 (2021). 10.1016/j.jflm.2021.102136.

provides a necessary synthesis of these ideas that points towards an understanding of this crisis in the twentieth and twenty-first century. This book points out that not only do Native American women face hugely disproportionate levels of sexual violence and homicide, but that the very acknowledgement of this crisis only skims the surface of reality. Popular understandings—and in turn responses—towards this issue are informed merely by law enforcement reports; this means, in effect, that one of the only ways to raise state and federal awareness is for Native American women to report it to the very power structures that are fueling it.⁹ In turn, this issue highlights the need for research and activism that directly critiques state and federal law enforcement as perpetrators of violence against Native American women. The MMIW movement, in a contemporary context, must be supported as an organization working to this end.

Before a discussion on the historical precedents of the MMIW movement, this topic must be situated more deeply in discourses on race in America. The nature of MMIW—a response to racial gendered violence, in simple terms—requires an intersectional understanding of race and gender, rather than approaching these factors in isolation. In addition to providing a more dynamic conceptual framework to understanding this specific crisis, intersectionality has become foregrounded in a vast array of contemporary racial scholarship; adopting such an approach for a study of this nature assures the relevancy of this historical inquiry. Further, this paper’s consideration of race will operate under the framework of “racialization” as set used by sociology scholars Saheer Selod and David Embrick in a 2013 article on Muslim American identity in the twenty-first century. Selod and Embrick argue that “[r]acialization as a concept reflects the changing meanings of race within different political, social, and economic contexts producing a more expansive and complex

⁹ Amnesty International, *Maze of injustice: The failure to protect indigenous women from sexual violence in the USA*. (London: 2007), 14-18.

discussion of race.”¹⁰ While this definition is employed by Selod and Embrick in application to Muslim American identity, this terminology allows for an expansive application across racial groups. Just as Selod and Embrick use racialization to account for changes in cultural attitudes towards Muslim American identity, the term also applies to the instability of Native American racial categorizations throughout history. Additionally, the term rejects an understanding of race split between the polarity of cultural versus biological categorization. Given the ways in which racial identities and definitions transform throughout history, historical scholarship on race must employ terminology that can account for such changes. Finally, Selod and Embrick address criticisms that the terminology of racialization is not specific to race, and that it also encompasses factors of gender.¹¹ Given this paper’s intersectional approach, this criticism lacks relevance and even enhances the affordances of the term racialization in this sort of scholarship.

While the political involvement of Native American women stretches further back into the twentieth century, the American Indian Movement (AIM) of the 1970s provides a logical starting point for approaching the direct precedents of activism behind the MMIW movement. AIM was established in 1968, influenced by a lineage of Native American protest activism throughout the twentieth century as well as the more recent Civil Rights Movement and anti-Vietnam War protests.¹² The organization had a broad agenda, encompassing the advancement of Native American rights, sovereignty, and legal justice. In an academic article on AIM, author Joane Nagel discusses

¹⁰ Saher Selod and David G. Embrick, “Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship,” *Sociology Compass* 7/8 (2013): 648.

¹¹ Selod and Embrick, “Racialization and Muslims,” 647.

¹² Joane Nagel, “American Indian Movement (AIM),” *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, 2nd ed., edited by Patrick L. Mason, 100-102, Vol. 1. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2013, *Gale eBooks* <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX4190600036/GVRL?u=gonzagafoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=b62c00c7>.

the gender dynamics of the movement: “[d]espite the limits faced by women in AIM, many Native American women from the generation of AIM activism [rose] to prominent positions in tribal government and as leaders of native rights organizations.”¹³ Nagel highlights a recurring theme related to twentieth century Native American activist movements: the relegation of women to roles of support and service while men often dominated the political rhetoric of these organizations. Despite this, AIM can be approached critically as an organization that both replicated patriarchal gender dynamics, but also one that allowed for the platforming of Native American women activists.

The activism and murder of AIM member Annie Mae Aquash, recognized as one of the most influential Native American women activists of the twentieth century, warrants particular attention in the historical connection between AIM and MMIW. Aquash was a Mi’kmaq tribal member from Canada who joined AIM in the early 1970s, and was found dead—murdered—in South Dakota in 1976.¹⁴ During her time in AIM, Aquash and other women activists in the movement challenged the foregrounding of men in AIM despite the fact that women made up roughly half of the movement’s membership. While the circumstances surrounding Aquash’s murder led to extensive federal and state investigations, Eric Konigsberg wrote in a 2014 article that “over the last decade, several teams of state and federal attorneys in South Dakota have established that her killing was in fact an inside job, orchestrated by AIM members who believed she was working as an F.B.I. informer.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Eric Konigsberg, “Who Killed Anna Mae?” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 25, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/magazine/who-killed-anna-mae.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 1 & 2: The marriage of Anna Mae Aquash at Wounded Knee in 1973 (left); funeral of Anna Mae Aquash at Pine Ridge in 1976 (right) (Photographs: title and photographers unknown, 1973 & 1976, accessed through an online archive: [https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/2020/08/30/the-brave-hearted-women-1976/.](https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/2020/08/30/the-brave-hearted-women-1976/))

Regardless of the specific circumstances surrounding her death, Aquash's influence on Native American women activists has been profound. An article published just after Aquash's death in 1976 by *Akwesasne Notes*, an indigenous newspaper based in New York, laments that:

The Brave-Hearted Women who remain to face the dangers of the Indian World have sadly been given a martyr, Anna Mae ... Will the Brave-Hearted Women decide that, with Anna Mae's death, the war is over? Or will they decide with Lorelei Means who declares, 'Hell, we're struggling for our life. We're struggling to survive as a people.'¹⁶

¹⁶ Shirley Witt, "The Brave-Hearted Women," *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Summer, 1976, 16+, *Indigenous Peoples of North America* (accessed March 25, 2024), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/LTZHPD122311977/INDP?u=gonzagafoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=13314d22>.

In spite of the tragedy of her death, Aquash's legacy has remained a touchstone for Native American activism. Not only did she act against the structural patriarchy inherent in AIM, but her death also drew mainstream attention towards the intersections of race and gender that underlies violence towards Native American women.

Outside of AIM and activist organizations, opportunities for Native American women began to greatly expand in the second half of the twentieth century. While analyzing such a trend may seem like a counterproductive way of accounting for systemic violence and oppression, it is also important to acknowledge elements of this history that are not defined entirely by the traumatic nature of such issues. Further, understanding this trend leads naturally into a discussion on the systems of support that Native American women began to organize after the 1970s. These systems cannot be considered merely as responses to traumatic violence and patriarchal oppression; they also indicate the political and social progress achieved by Native American women throughout the twentieth century. In a Native American magazine published in 1940, author Eleanor Williams identifies the expansion Native American women's voting rights and their increasing resistance to politically-rooted discrimination. Williams writes that "Indian women are generally becoming more and more interested in tribal affairs as they observe how these matters affect the welfare of their families."¹⁷ In another article published by the *Akwesasne Notes* in 1975, the (then) director of the American Indian Press Associate, Laura Wittstock, writes that "it can now be stated that American Indian women are holding more positions of responsibility and authority, are more mobile, [and] have a greater part in the policy-making processes than at any other time since they were forced to live with and under an

¹⁷ Eleanor B. Williams, "Constitutional Rights of Indian Women Upheld in Development of Modern Tribal Government," *Indians at Work* 8, no. 2 (1940): 5+, *Indigenous Peoples of North America* (accessed March 25, 2024), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/MFOXAZ335692046/INDP?u=gonzagaufoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=fd7fdade>.

alien government.”¹⁸ Not only did these political advancements give Native women direct access to and participation in legislative processes, but they also expanded the awareness of Native women towards issues of violence and gender-based oppression. While the scope of their political involvement still remained largely on a tribal level, Native women’s ability to enact political and social change grew significantly as the twentieth century progressed.

Shelters became one of the most common, and earliest, forms of explicit community support for Native American women facing issues of domestic violence, discrimination, and poverty. These shelters, many of which continue to operate today, provided Native women of all ages with a range of services: housing, education, community, and career services, to name a few. Among the first and most significant of these shelters was the White Buffalo Calf Women’s Society (WBCWS), established in South Dakota in 1980. An annual report published by this shelter in 1982 demonstrates the shelter’s operations, finances, and challenges. The report lists a total of 426 clients taken in throughout the year—148 adults and 278 children, ranging in age from seventeen to seventy-six.¹⁹ A description included below these titles states that:

Some of our clients have come with severe injuries and others because of fear of injury. We have supported other women because of trouble or joy, education about ourselves and the

¹⁸ Laura Wittstock, "On Women's Rights for Native Peoples," *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Autumn, 1975, 39, *Indigenous Peoples of North America* (accessed March 25, 2024), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IOEHMX590436355/INDP?u=gonzagafoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=01a26f9c>.

¹⁹ White Buffalo Calf Woman Society, 1982, TS 169: 12, The Association on American Indian Affairs: General and Tribal Files, 1851 - 1983: General Files, Mudd Library, Princeton University. *Indigenous Peoples of North America* (accessed March 25, 2024), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/AFAMFT155828020/INDP?u=gonzagafoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=053115f1&pg=16>.

world, our children, rape advocacy, foster parent advocacy, alcoholism education, and other concerns relative to women, children, and the family.²⁰

This description provides a valuable glimpse into how Native women sought out resources in response to factors involving domestic and systemic violence, but also for other reasons concerning their lived experiences. Such a perspective is particularly valuable in the context of this research, as it complicates historical narratives in which Native women are solely recipients of traumatic violence. By accounting for shelters like WBCWS, which provided education and culturally-enriching resources, it is clear that Native women also sought to strengthen through community on the basis of more than trauma responses.



²⁰ Ibid.

Fig. 3: The White Buffalo Calf Woman, a supernatural entity of the Sioux religion who served as an intermediary between the Sioux people and Wakan Tanka, the supreme deity.²¹ (Painting: *Apparition of the Buffalo Calf Maiden*, Frithjof Schuon, 1959)

Similar to WBCWS, but dating back further to 1960, the Seattle Indian Center (SIC) connects to a historical review on early Native American community shelters. This discussion on the SIC is placed after that of the Buffalo Calf Women's Society, despite the former's older lineage, for two reasons; first, the Buffalo Calf Women's Society is the first shelter in the United States established specifically, and exclusively, for women; second, the influence of the Buffalo Calf Women's Society has proven to be more profound than that of the SIC, at least in connection to MMIW. Regardless, the SIC represents an important historical example of Native American communities organizing around matters ranging from violence to poverty to tribal wellness. In a document published after SIC's first year of operation (1960), the center reports being "visited by 225 persons of 40 different Indian tribes, coming from as far as Montana, Alaska, and the Midwest."²² This source demonstrates the significance of shelters and community programs on a local, as well as regional level. Similar to the Buffalo Calf Women's Society, the SIC provided "services of friendly hospitality, provision of clothing for many, counsel on problems of relocation ... provision of a meeting place for Indian groups," and a variety of other programs aimed towards the advancement of Native American communities.²³ While the organization did not explicitly target the

²¹ Joshua Mark, "White Buffalo Calf Woman," *World History Encyclopedia*, Last modified September 07, 2023, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2277/white-buffalo-calf-woman/>.

²² American Indian Womens Service League, 1960, TS 62: 8, The Association on American Indian Affairs: General and Tribal Files, 1851 - 1983: General Files, Mudd Library, Princeton University. *Indigenous Peoples of North America* (accessed April 27, 2024), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/AACIYT538059798/INDP?u=gonzagaufoley&sid=bookmark-INDP&xid=2603b53b&pg=2>.

uplift of women, they were directly influenced by one that did: the American Indian Women's Service League (AIWSL), formed in Seattle in 1958.



Fig. 4: An early photo of the American Indian Women's Service League, likely taken between 1958 and 1960 (Photograph: photograph & title unknown, accessed through a 2014 report published by Philanthropy Northwest.)

AIWSL was established in 1958 to address issues facing Native women in Seattle.²⁴ A newspaper article from 1958 states that “[t]he purpose of the organization is to deal with critical situations within the scope of women’s activities—those affecting children, health, housing, etc.”²⁵ At the time of its establishment, AIWSL’s main goal was to help Native women navigate urban life. Following World War II, Seattle became a hub for industrial labor and Native Americans throughout the Pacific Northwest became increasingly urbanized.²⁶ As a result, the strength of Native American

²⁴ Karen Smith, “American Indian Women's Service League,” The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project, 2006, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/AIWSL.htm>.

²⁵ “Indian Women Organize,” *Northwest Indian News*, September 1958.

²⁶ Smith, “American Indian Women’s Service League.”

communities relied on organizations like AIWSL, who sought to provide services and spaces for congregations while also recognizing that the lived experiences of Native women were fundamentally different than those of men. Despite these gendered distinctions, especially in the name of the organization, AIWSL offered community outreach and support beyond lines of gender. Further, while AIWSL did not explicitly address issues of violence towards women, the structure of organizations like this influenced later organizations that were more explicitly oriented towards issues of violence, like the White Buffalo Calf Women's Society.

Scholars have considered the ways in which shelters and community-based organizations have worked to address issues of systemic racial inequality. In an article that connects race to women's movements, Laurel Weldon points out that women of color experience disproportionate levels of violence—both in domestic and societal contexts—and that racial discrimination inhibits their access to necessary resources. Further, women of color are often subjected to racist attitudes and confrontations in non-community based shelters and service centers. As such, Weldon highlights the importance of services provided for women of color within their own communities.²⁷

Complementing Weldon with a more experiential perspective, Cruz Begay considers the importance of a women's shelter within a remote community in the Navajo Nation. Begay points out that rural isolation, combined with limited access to resources and information, often inhibits Native women's ability to receive medical and social support in response to domestic violence.²⁸ After working to establish a successful women's shelter in an isolated Navajo community, Begay posits that shelters

²⁷ S. Laurel Weldon, "Women's Movements, Identity Politics, and Policy Impacts: A Study of Policies on Violence against Women in the 50 United States," *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2006): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148079>.

²⁸ R. Cruz Begay. "A Women's Shelter in a Rural American Indian Community." *Family and Community Health* 34, no. 3 (2011): 229–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44953510>.

are a necessary form of social infrastructure for Native American communities—especially for women.

Returning to a discussion on race, these examples of Native American activism and community-based organizations represent efforts at addressing and resisting systemic, racialized violence that is rooted in the lasting impacts of settler colonialism. Selod and Embrick’s conceptual framework for racialization can again be inserted into this analysis. They argue that “[r]acialization enables the intersection of gender and race that is so often missing from discussions of race,” particularly in the sense that this concept rejects phenotypical and/or cultural definitions of race.²⁹ The racialization of Native women, in alignment with this framework, entails a process through which race and gender cannot be separated from each other. By extension, Native women’s resistance to these racializing structures must successfully resist and subvert intersectional forms of oppression. This points to the necessity of small scale, community-based action. Not only does “community-based” entail an organizational scope on a tribal and sub-regional level; further refinements along lines of gender are also necessary in order to resist structures of patriarchy that have come to dominate Native American culture through the legacy of settler colonialism.

By approaching MMIW through a historical lens, the beginnings of the movement in the 1990s can be best understood within a decades-long lineage of Native American women’s activism and community-based organizing as a means of resisting systemic violence. The modern-day success of MMIW in drawing federal and state attention towards the crisis of violence towards Native women should not be separated from an awareness of the movement’s precedents. Further, in order to critically engage with MMIW and its history, a theoretically-dynamic approach must be assumed.

²⁹ Selod and Embrick, “Racialization and Muslims,” 652.

This entails an understanding of the intersectional nature of this crisis, primarily along converging lines of gender and race, as well as a framework for understanding race that can account for intersectional nuance. Through this, MMIW's ongoing advocacy for Native American women's rights and protection can be effectively complemented with historical narratives that speak to the ongoing agency, resilience, and power of these women.

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