Native American Women: Where Are They Today?

Introduction

Native American women have been known by various names over the past century: Indian princess, squaw, savage, whore—just to name a few—as well as countless other terms that have captured the imagination of European cultures without revealing even a hint of who these women really are. In their attempt to shed light on some of the stereotypes and the truth behind Native American women, Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman succinctly state that, “[s]ilence surrounds the lives of Native North American women.” Within popular culture, for example, most Native American women were depicted as either princesses or squaws, very similar to the European female stereotypes of ladies or whores. Perhaps the most well-known personification of the Native American princess was Pocahontas. A royal figure who leaves her own culture to aid English colonials, Pocahontas became a European bedtime story far removed from the actual woman. On the other side of the spectrum, a popular term for the nameless Native American woman was squaw. Commonly used in geographic place names and old Hollywood movies, the word “squaw” was associated with a low class woman who did menial labor and often served as a prostitute. Yet, the term “squaw” actually originated as French slang for female genitalia and came into use by early French trappers in Canada.

In recent decades, however, a trend has emerged whereby Native American women, alongside women of all groups, are being rewritten into history with more accurate depictions. Anthropologists and sociologists are studying women and their individual life histories to enhance our understanding of how a society functions as a whole. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, autobiographies captured by various ethnographers showed a glimpse into the void of the female societal sphere. Yet, it

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was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the scholarly movement expanded to properly account for gender and Native American studies.\(^6\) Since that time, many new accounts are revealing more truths and details of women’s lives. These accounts, however, are not entirely rosy. While many Native American women stand out in history as strong and courageous individuals, the group today remains an oppressed minority.\(^7\)

Generally, many anthropological accounts of women began with the premise that women, as a group, had been subordinated in all cultures throughout history.\(^8\) In recent studies, however, the focus has changed to encompass cultural differences, and within Native American cultures, female power and status seem to depend on certain varying factors. This article will discuss examples of Native American women’s current status in American society. We will look at women’s role in the familial setting, as both mothers and grandmothers, and at their role in the larger society, touching briefly on the ability of Native American women, and men, to change their role by changing how their gender is perceived. We will then discuss Native Americans in the work place, and compare Native American women to the overall Native American and United States female populations in the workplace. Finally, this article will conclude that Native American women, much as women in all minority groups, are working today to reinforce their roles at home and on the job, and to replace the stereotypes with reality. Through their stories and their struggle, we can better understand their place in history.

**Female Status**

Of the total 1,937,391 Native American individuals residing in the United States, 978,527 are women.\(^9\) The majority of these women are under five years old, the next largest group is under nine years old, and the third largest group is between ages 30 and 34.\(^10\) The 1990 Census reported that 706,293 Native American women are over the age of 15, and of these individuals, 324,642 were married but are now separated from their husbands.\(^11\) One hundred ninety-eight thousand eight hundred and ninety-six never married, and 92,787 are divorced.\(^12\) Where there are unmarried-partner households, 42,564 are male/female partners, 740 are female/female partners, and 564 are male/male partners.\(^13\) For every Native American woman between the ages of 15 and 24, there is 0.533 children (or 533 children per 1000 women). For every Native American woman between the ages of 25 and 34, there is 1.884 children (1884 children per 1000 women), and for every woman between the ages of 35 and 44, there is 2.469 children born (2469 children per 1000 women).\(^14\) Of a total 604,900 Native American households, the greatest number include one or two