

## “Feminist Leadership”

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### Introduction

Vine Deloria, Jr., Standing Rock Sioux, describing the trial of leaders of the American Indian Movement for the armed occupation of the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1973, commented that while Indian male defendants and witnesses testified, they kept their eyes on a row of elderly Indian women seated in the back of the room. Whether this scenario represents a version of feminist leadership as conceptualized in this book may be debatable, but it definitely speaks to the role of Indian women in their own communities as upholders of standards of moral order and responsibility. American Indian women have occupied numerous roles in Native communities, including caretakers and protectors as mothers and grandmothers; homemakers, encouraging supporters and steadfast friends as spousal partners; and participants in cooperative and collaborative events within their communities as daughters, sisters, and community members. From these historical and traditional roles in daily life emerged “feminist leadership” for American Indian women. In this chapter we will describe and discuss the historical emergence of “feminist leadership” within Indian tribal communities; visit the controversy over stereotypical male leadership in tribal societies vs. feminist leadership; review the egalitarian relationship between men and women in tribal society; and trace the continuing influence of “feminist leadership” as practiced by contemporary American Indian women

In this chapter we also describe the cultural dimensions of traditional leadership in Indian communities and how they affect the way that Indian women exercise leadership. We will show how both culture and the unique political relationship of Indian tribes vis a vis the United States government affect the roles of women as leaders and how the objectives of Indian women leaders differ from those of feminist leaders in the majority society. We argue that the value of inclusiveness, which is considered the key factor in feminist leadership in this book, is inherent in the nature of American Indian community life, where traditionally decision-making rested on consensus rather than majority rule. The challenges to Indian feminist leadership come not from hierarchical male/female power relationships in Indian communities but from hierarchical structures of governance imposed on Indian communities as a result of their unique relationship with the federal government.

#### The Current Status of American Indian Nations

American Indian people in the U.S. today represent more than 600 federally recognized tribes throughout all 50 states.<sup>1</sup> Many anthropologists have observed more differences among Indian tribal groups than between races. Given such tremendous diversity, it is easy to understand how Indian communities may vary according to geography and population. American Indian communities exist in settings that range from remote, rural enclaves such as the Pine Point community on the White Earth

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<sup>1</sup> The term “American Indian” will be used throughout this chapter even though there are other names by which Indians are known. Native American, First Americans, First Nations, and Native People are all terms that are used. Indeed, Native Alaskans, Eskimos, and Aleut are included under a broader ‘Native American’ umbrella term (Trimble, 2000). American Indian women resided on tribal lands and in urban areas and with over 400 federally recognized tribes and 220 Alaska Native villages the population and languages of American Indian women is as diverse as the tribe (Snipp, 1996, Trimble, 2000). American Indians are a young population with an average age of 27.8 years, eight years younger than the mean age of the entire population of the U.S. While we live all across the U.S., half of us reside in the western portion of the U.S. One-half of American Indians now reside in urban areas and have relocated to find work, to access educational opportunities, and to flee poverty (Willis and Bigfoot, 2004).

Chippewa reservation in Minnesota, to relatively large communities like Window Rock on the Navajo reservation. Window Rock is the seat of the tribal government and also provides shopping centers and recreational facilities. There are relatively dispersed urban populations whose members congregate around an urban Indian center, such as the Chicago Indian Center. These communities are very diverse, but they are characterized by close kinship ties in rural communities, tribal connections in larger towns, and by a more generalized sense of Indian identity in urban communities.

### Cultural Values and Women's Roles

What characterizes contemporary American Indian communities is a strong sense of egalitarianism among their members, a value stemming from the nature of pre-contact subsistence communities where all younger members of the community contributed in some way to the food supply and older people sustained the collective wisdom and experience of the group. The roles of men and women in such societies complemented each other—men hunted and women gave birth and raised children. Food collection and reproduction constituted the most basic elements of a social group. Each function was essential to the whole. The nature of leadership in tribal societies depended on individual achievement that gained the respect of members of the group. One might say that feminist leadership in pre-contact American Indian communities was a natural state based on women's roles as mothers of children and their ability to make decisions that affected the well-being of those children.

Today, the discussion of political leadership in contemporary American Indian communities must focus on many different circumstances arising from the fact that most reservation communities can no longer depend on subsistence farming, that poverty is a

fact of life for many Indian people in rural communities with no economic base (Bishaw and Iceland, 2003, pp. 3, 5), and that Indian tribes have a unique (and often problematic) relationship with the United States government based on treaty rights and historical circumstances (Wilkins and Lomawaima, 2001). Thus, the emergence of “feminist leadership” in Native communities, as stated above, was based primarily on women’s roles as mothers of children and their ability to make responsible decisions affecting the well being of those children.

### Contemporary Indian Feminist Leadership

Feminist leadership in Indian communities today resides primarily in the political arena i.e., that which people exercise vis a vis organized governments that control economic resources and social services. It is a much different kind of leadership than that based in the cultural values of Indian communities. Many, but not all, American Indian Nations now operate under constitutional forms of government, some adopted in the 1930’s under the guidance of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, (Deloria and Lytle, 1984), and others formulated in the era of tribal sovereignty ushered in by the Indian Self-Determination and Education Improvement Act passed by the United States Congress in 1975.<sup>2</sup> The issues that they deal with range from providing social services to their members to running business operations such as tribal casinos to generate income for the tribe.

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<sup>2</sup>The U.S. Supreme Court defined Indian Tribes in 1901 as, “...a body of Indians of the same or similar race, united in community under one leadership or government, and inhabiting a particular though sometimes ill-defined territory.” (Willis and Bigfoot, 2003, p.83) Prior to the federal definition, tribes could be characterized as “a group of indigenous people, bound together by blood ties, who were socially, politically, and religiously organized according to the tenets of their own culture, who lived together, occupying a definite territory, and who spoke a common language or dialect.” (Willis and Bigfoot, 2003, p.83).

Women have been elected to leadership roles in many Indian Nations and also function in national organizations that have formed as political lobbying groups to support Indian causes such as more federal funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and to fend off Congressional and state attacks on tribal sovereignty, i.e., the rights of tribes to exercise internal self-governance over both members and land.

American Indian vs. Feminist Issues? A matter of emphasis

Within the context of this book we will focus on defining “feminist” from an American Indian perspective and define “leadership” within the contemporary political context of American Indian Nations. The feminist movement of the 1960’s emphasized women’s demands for equal social status with men, equated with equal pay for equal work, equal employment opportunities, and control over their own fertility in the form of abortion rights. These demands had little resonance in American Indian communities where unemployment and poverty were the norm, where women were more likely than men to be hired for wage work because they were perceived to be more reliable workers than men, and where doctors in public health service hospitals sometime sterilized women on the grounds that they could not care for the children they already had (Lawrence, 2000).

In the era of Indian activism in the 1960’s and 1970’s that led to the takeovers of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay (1969-71), the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, D.C. (1972), and the trading post at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota (1973), American Indian men and women joined to protest the oppressive treatment of Indian tribes by the United States government (Smith and

Warrior, 1996). Although the confrontational and sometimes violent activism of that era has died out, Indian women generally see their energies directed toward American Indian issues rather than narrowly defined feminist issues.

In the broader sense that feminist values include social justice, Indian women are indeed feminist when as leaders they address issues of poverty, discrimination, and the effects of oppressive federal bureaucracy and judicial actions in their communities. Their issues are not, however, those primarily associated with majority feminism. In a survey of thirty-six Indian women elected tribal officials in the early 1990's their primary political agenda items were tribal economic development, health care, education, housing, and tribal/federal relations. In this regard, they shared these priorities with male leaders (McCoy, 1998, p. 238).

#### The Challenges of Leadership in American Indian Communities

Any discussion of leadership in Indian communities must be prefaced by the widely understood analogy of the crab bucket. When one crab tries to climb out of the bucket, the others hang on to it and try to pull it back into the bucket. When an individual in an Indian community appears to be making himself or herself better than others, especially if it seems to be at the expense of others, that individual is subjected to gossip, ridicule, and possibly harassment. If inclusiveness is a characteristic of feminist leadership, then values of kinship ties and obligations to one's family first and the tribe second may work against inclusion of the whole community in tribal services.

The egalitarian values of past subsistence based cultures persist; social pressure is to share resources with other community members rather than use them for one's own benefit. Any attempt by an individual to control the behavior of others is met with

resistance and resentment. In communities where elected tribal governments are viewed by some members as impositions by the federal government, tribal members simply opt not to participate at all in governmental functions such as council meetings, not to vote in elections, and to view with suspicion anything that elected tribal officials attempt to do.

In this sense, true leadership is often exercised at an informal level, and very often by women who administer tribal programs that provide services for members. They become key communicators who create the information flow in a community and mobilize community resources to provide cooks for senior citizens' centers, to deliver meals, to provide childcare, to work as home health aids, etc.

In Indian communities, however, the crab analogy holds not only for individuals but for family groups. Particularly in more remote Indian communities where kinship ties remain strong, family groups create factions within the community. Generally, some communal events—yearly pow-wows, rodeos, high school basketball games, and traditional ceremonial activities—hold the factions together in a social sense. But the economic power that can come to a tribal council through business development and administration of social service programs comes from outside the community in the form of grants or contracts from federal agencies such as the BIA, and control over this money requires that individuals who manage the programs favor their relatives by hiring them for jobs and by distributing more services to them than to others. While non-Native society might call these practices “nepotism,” American Indian society operates quite differently. Indeed, most tribal groups expect that those in positions of leadership will naturally favor family members. The foundation of this practice rests in the kinship system of Indian tribal society, which still persists to a remarkable degree. This situation

pulls against the larger bonds of tribal identity, and the very family ties that have given women influence in their communities may cause political disruption within those communities

### Women Leaders in Contemporary Society

Given the diversity of Indian communities and their situations, we can focus on several Indian women who have become nationally recognized as women political leaders and look for commonalities and differences in their experiences to focus on issues raised in this book. Wilma Mankiller, Ada Deer, LaDonna Harris, Annie Wauneka, Elouise Cobell, and Cecelia Fire Thunder, although not household names, demonstrate qualities of political leadership in contemporary Native America. Mankiller, Harris, and Wauneka achieved political prominence through their associations with powerful men, while Deer was influenced most strongly by her mother. Wauneka rose to political prominence in 1951 when she became the first woman elected to the Navajo Tribal Council. Her father had been the first chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council. Harris was in the vanguard of political activism in the early 1960's in Oklahoma as the wife of Senator Fred Harris from that state. Mankiller's career began in the mid 1980's with her work in the Cherokee tribal government, and she served as vice-chief under a powerful male chief, Ross Swimmer. Elouise Cobell took on the fight for Indian rights in 1996 as a result of her concern for her family. Cecelia Fire Thunder challenged a politically powerful Indian man, noted activist Russell Means, for the chairmanship of the Pine Ridge Sioux reservation in South Dakota in 2004. These women's stories demonstrate the scope of feminist leadership in the second half of the twentieth century. The

commonality in their experiences is that all worked at a grass-roots political level in their own communities, although they went on to achieve national prominence.

Wilma Mankiller was elected chair of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma in 1987. Born and raised near Tahlequah, in Northeastern Oklahoma, Mankiller spent part of her youth and early adulthood in the San Francisco Bay Area, where her family moved as a result of the federal government's program to relocate Indian people to urban areas for greater job opportunities. She became a social worker in Oakland before returning to Oklahoma in 1977. She had numerous family members in northeastern Oklahoma, and became involved in several projects to improve services in local communities. She was chosen by Ross Swimmer, elected chief of the Cherokee Nation, to serve as his running mate for vice-chief in 1983 and then ran on her own and was elected Chief in 1987. Her record of grass roots activism and her family's reputation were largely responsible for her success (Mankiller, 1993).

Ada Deer, a member of the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin, was born on the tribe's reservation and became actively involved in the struggle to reverse the termination of her tribe in the 1960's. Termination was a federal policy of ending the government's relationship with Indian tribes and the services to tribes that it entailed. The Menominee were the first tribe to be subjected to the policy, and as a result, high rates of poverty and unemployment came to prevail on the reservation, and tribal members lost educational and health care services. Deer's white mother, who had been a nurse, became an outspoken activist against termination, and Deer and her sister were aware of the struggle in their teens.

Deer went to college and ultimately to Columbia University for a master's degree in social work, but after working briefly in that field she enrolled in law school and began to work in Washington, D.C., lobbying Congress to overturn the termination legislation and restore the Menominee to federal recognition. Her efforts helped foster the formation of a group of Menominees living in Milwaukee who joined the political efforts for restoration. She was ultimately elected as chair of the tribe after it regained recognition. She was appointed the first female Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior in 1993 but was asked to resign with the change of administration in 1997. Her decisions to recognize Alaska Native villages as tribal governments and to uphold the elected government of the Oneida Tribe in New York against a recall vote were controversial in Indian country, but her political connections in Congress benefited the Menominees and other Indian Nations across the country (Kidwell, 2001).

LaDonna Harris, Comanche, was born in a small community in Oklahoma to a white father and a Comanche mother. She was raised by her Comanche grandparents and married Fred Harris, a young man from her hometown who went to law school and engaged in a successful political career. Fred Harris was elected to the United States Senate, and LaDonna Harris was active in his campaign. As a Senator's wife, Harris also gained attention for her outspoken support of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty programs, particularly as they could benefit American Indian communities. She was the first Indian woman to testify before a senatorial committee when the Office of Equal Opportunity came under congressional attack. Using the resources of her husband's office and her own political savvy, she convened a meeting in 1963 that led to the

founding of Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO), an organization that used federal grants to foster grassroots community economic development activities in Indian communities in the state. Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity challenged the hold that the Bureau of Indian Affairs had over tribal governments. Ultimately, LaDonna Harris established a similar organization in Washington, D.C., Americans for Indian Opportunity, aimed at preparing Indian young people to take positions of political leadership in their own communities (Anderson, 2001).

Annie Wauneka, Navajo, was the daughter of Henry Chee Dodge, first chair of the Navajo tribal council. She was sent to an Indian boarding school where she had first hand experience of the poor health conditions in such schools. The great influenza epidemic killed a number of students at the school, and later an epidemic of trachoma, an eye disease, struck. Wauneka completed the eleventh grade at the school and then returned home. Her father discussed tribal issues with her, and she learned a great deal about the operation of the tribal government. She became an active crusader with the Public Health Service to improve health conditions on the Navajo reservation. She testified on numerous occasions before Congressional committees in Washington, D.C., and she worked with a number of organizations, particularly ones involved in eradicating tuberculosis, which was a major health problem on the reservation. She was the first woman elected to the Navajo Tribal Council and remained active in promoting the betterment of Navajo health conditions until her death in 1997. Her leadership strategy was summed up in the title of her autobiography, I'll go and do more (Neithammer, 2004).

Elouise Cobell was born on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. She attended Montana State University and has served as tribal treasurer of the Blackfeet tribal council. She and her husband operate a cattle ranch. At one point in the mid 1990's, she began to monitor the checks that she and family members received from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for various leases and royalties on their lands and discovered that the amounts seemed not to correspond to the original agreements. In 1996 she filed a class action suit challenging the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs over the management of Individual Money Funds (IMF), i.e., accounts maintained for individuals who had trust land that was leased to individuals or corporations or who drew royalties for resources taken from their lands. The suit has led to federal court judgments requiring the BIA to do a full accounting of the IMF system, which dates back to the allotment of Indian lands in the late nineteenth century. Cobell and supporters of the suit estimate that as much as \$10 billion dollars were never paid to Indian account holders, while the Department of the Interior maintains that such an accounting is impossible because of inadequate record keeping. The case remains active in federal court, although some Indian leaders criticize Cobell for refusing to accept a negotiated settlement, fearing that Congress will find a way to dismiss the whole issue if it cannot be resolved. Cobell's name has, however, become associated with Indian demands for accountability on the part of the government toward individuals with whom it has a trust relationship. (Hamilton, 2002-2003, 375-97; Indian Trust: Cobell v. Norton).

Clad in a white buckskin dress with long fringe, an eagle feather wrapped in red tied in her hair; an eagle wing fan spread across her chest, and a hand held high in

victory, Cecilia Fire Thunder took the oath of office as president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe on November 2, 2004. She thus took on the role of a Warrior Woman among her people. Fire Thunder defeated well-known activist Russell Means to become the first woman president of the Tribe, located on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Fire Thunder, a former licensed practical nurse, described herself as a grass roots activist. She spent several years in California as a labor organizer before returning to Pine Ridge. She ran a grass roots campaign, visiting communities across the reservation. Her special interests are health and language retention. Fire Thunder, known among her Lakota people as “Good Hearted Woman,” leads a nation with a membership number of over 40,000 people. Her administration will be under high scrutiny because she is the first female leader of a strongly traditional society in which male leadership has been the norm.

Mankiller, Deer, Harris, Wauneka, Cobell and Fire Thunder come from different tribal backgrounds and have dealt with a range of issues. They have operated both in the arena of tribal government and in the halls of Congress. All have been strongly grounded in their own tribal communities, although they have sometimes been seen as distancing themselves from those communities by moving to the national level of political activism. All defy certain stereotypes of Indian women that are still widely held in American society, i.e., that Indian women are subservient to Indian men and that their place is in the home, not in public office.

Some American Indian men, influenced by generations of Christian missionary activity and government boarding schools, buy into these stereotypes, and they can in all

truth cite the fact that public leadership was indeed a male role that Indian women are usurping in contemporary society. Wilma Mankiller encountered this attitude in her time in office and countered it with the argument that sexism in Indian communities was a product of the imposition of Anglo-American values on Indians through Christian churches and formal education, not part of traditional Indian values. LaDonna Harris objected to the fact that her femininity was subsumed in media coverage that portrayed her as a painted Indian on the warpath. Indian men in many cases seem to have bought into the racial stereotyping that has characterized Indians in general. McCoy's study showed that many of the women surveyed felt that Indian men had distinctively different styles of leadership than they did. They viewed men as more controlling, more concerned with self-interest, and more concerned with broad issues. They saw themselves as working to solve the problems of individuals, as being better listeners, as more objective, and as trying to get all points of view (McCoy, 1998, p. 239).

#### Matriarchal Societies & the Influence of Women in Tribal Societies

The stereotypes of subservient Indian women belie the power that women have traditionally had in societies where maternal kinship patterns prevailed. In matrilineal tribal societies, familial descent was traced through the mother (matriarch). Membership in clans and other tribal sub-groups and societies was established according to the mother's family lineage. Indeed, the matrilineal kinship system served to create a social organization of life for Indian people of the southeast United States, including identifying enemies and allies; differentiating potential mates from unsuitable mates; and providing guidelines for inheritance of goods and property (Hudson, 1976).

The matriarchal kinship system was a characteristic of the Five Civilized Tribes removed to Oklahoma in the early to mid-1800's: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole. The U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Bill on May 28, 1830; which authorized the negotiated or enforced removal of "Indians and gave President Jackson the means to initiate steps or secure exchanges of land with any tribe" (U.S. Senate Document 512, 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress, First Session; as quoted in Foreman, 1932). The classification(s) defined by kinship served as a model for other life relationships, such as relationships with other towns, other tribes, other clans, and even other cultures or societies. The Cherokees, for instance, spoke of certain towns as "Mother towns" which served as centers of ceremonial activity and places of sanctuary for lawbreakers. Kinship terms also carried expectations of certain behaviors in human relations (Gilbert, 1943). In matrilineal societies, a woman's brothers were generally called fathers by her children, and her sisters were all mothers. The terms brothers and sisters were used for those who in English would be called cousins. These family relationships meant that an individual could not marry a person who belonged to the same lineage or clan, even though that individual might be only a distant cousin by ordinary genetic or European societal standards (Hudson, 1976). Matrilineal tribal societies provided important experiences and opportunities for exercise of feminist leadership. The female roles of leading ceremonial dances and rituals, preparing specific foods and beverages for ceremonies, and creating ceremonial garments served to make important contributions to tribal society and were consistent with the tenets of feminist leadership.

Even though these matrilineal tribes traced their descent through women and women occupied honored places in their society, women were not "in charge" in

matriarchal societies. Women often served as ceremonial leaders, teachers, and mentors for tribal rituals and practices within their own families; men made decisions that affected the group as a whole. The women of the Iroquois *Owachira*, (female lineages) chose the men of the lineage who would occupy the role of *sachem*, the representatives of the family and tribe in the Grand Council of the League of the Iroquois (Fenton, 1998). Men dealt with influences from outside the tribe, while women's control of food distribution and property provided stability within their lineages (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Swanton, 1928; Hudson, 1976).

It was Indian men who made treaties with representatives of European governments and the United States. These treaties fostered the expansion of American economic power over Indian Nations with the fur trade and the introduction of new trade goods. Men largely controlled the trade, although women could often barter furs, hides, and agricultural goods with American traders. Over time, however, economic power in a money economy began to shift the roles of men and women in American Indian societies to reflect that of the European society (Willis, 1963). Women were influential rather than powerful in tribal society (Corkran, 1967). The influence of women upon their children and grandchildren spread into all areas of tribal society as demonstrated by collaborative networking between tribal groups, learning about tribal culture and sharing the knowledge with others, and making responsible decisions based on one's upbringing. Thus, the influence of women in tribal societies was felt in every fiber, but women did not usually occupy powerful positions of leadership because of the long held belief that males were endowed with innate power through their position as warriors and providers for the tribe.

In the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory (what is now the state of Oklahoma), the inheritance of property was through the male line by Choctaw law. The kinship terminology of the tribe had also shifted to emphasize descent through the male line rather than the female line (Kidwell, 1995; Eggan, 1937). The ultimate expression of federal Indian policy to assimilate Indians fully into American society came with the General Allotment Act of 1887, in which Congress dictated that Indian reservations would be broken up into individual plots of land and allotted to tribal members. The allotments would go to heads of families (who might, indeed, be women but were more likely to be men), their dependent children, and single individuals over the age of 18. Wives, per se, did not receive allotments. The Indians of the Five Tribes were exempt from the General Allotment Act, but their lands were allotted under the Curtis Act in 1898 and subsequent legislation, and under those acts all tribal members, men, women, and children alike, got equal amounts of land (McDonnell, 1991).

The impact of the Curtis Act varied across Indian tribes. Within the Plains tribes, all land given to women and children became the property of the husband and father; while the Five Civilized Tribes often allowed women to own their own property and began the policy of allowing for women's rights in many arenas of tribal life.

#### From Land to Money—Historical Factors in Cultural Change

The General Allotment and Curtis Acts led to significant loss of property for American Indians. Between 1887 and 1934, the year in which a major shift of federal policy led to the ending of the allotment process, Indian owned land shrank from approximately 138 million acres to approximately 52 million acres (Wilkinson, 2004). The suppression of Indian cultures, the often forcible taking of Indian children to federal

boarding schools, the failure of Indians to become self sufficient farmers as the Allotment acts intended, all contributed to conditions of poverty and social breakdown in Indian communities. The government's attempt to turn men into farmers foundered on a number of factors—traditional roles of men as hunters and women as farmers, the limitation on amounts of land allotted to Indians, and the harsh climatic conditions of the Great Plains that made subsistence farming difficult for even the best equipped white settler.

Federal policy used private property and boarding school education to try to reshape the basic values and gender roles of Indian societies. In doing so, the government undermined both roles. Women were trained to be wives and homemakers and civilizing influences on their husbands. The Cherokee female seminary, run by the Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory, saw as its mission the training of women to be the wives of tribal leaders (Mihesuah, 1993). Under the General Allotment act, however, wives were deprived of the right to control land, and even in the Cherokee Nation, where wives did get land, it often fell under control of their non-Indian husbands. For men, their failure as farmers and providers for their families often forced women into those roles. The traditional, complementary nature of male and female roles was totally disrupted.

Clearly, the impact of such disruptive life influences was visited upon Indian women and their aspirations toward tribal and/or community leadership. Many Indian communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are plagued by high rates of alcoholism and unemployment. Diabetes has replaced tuberculosis as a major health problem in Indian populations. Inadequate federal funding for the federal Indian Health Service denies Indians access to adequate health care, as do proposed cuts in the 2005 federal budget

funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. High rates of spousal and child abuse in many reservation communities are indicative of the effects of past federal policies on Indian family life (Chester, 1994; Norton, 1995; Strong Heart Study, 2001). Thus, the nature and consequences of the numerous problems experienced by Indian people over the past 200 years have encouraged the emergence of women as leaders in tribal societies.

### Learning How to Lead

Indian women continue to play important roles in the political struggles that tribes are waging to protect their right to self-government while demanding that the federal government lives up to its responsibility to protect the resources of tribes and provide adequate social services. Indian women have honed skill of leadership through college education and they continue to occupy honored and influential positions within tribal societies. The American Indian tribal colleges, currently some 35 in number, have given women access to higher education in unprecedented numbers, and women have served as presidents of many of those institutions since their inception—Janine Pease Pretty-on-Top at Little Big Horn College in Montana and Phyllis Young at Fort Berthold Community College in North Dakota were among the early presidents of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the colleges' professional association, which was established in 1973 (Benham and Stein, 2003).

American Indian women exercise leadership not only in National organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians, whose first executive director in 1944 was Helen Peterson, a Lakota woman (Cowger, 1999), but in the day to day operations of tribal governments, where they are often directors of social services programs funded through the Bureau of Indian Affairs or, for more affluent tribes,

through revenues generated by tribal businesses, Indian women exercise a form of feminist leadership in these roles because they are viewed as providers of services.

American Indian women can look to generations of strong female role models as they go about providing for the needs of their families and their communities. They have learned to exercise overt political power in relation to the federal government largely from the 1960's and 1970's. It was during this time that the federal government explicitly tried to terminate its unique trust relationship with Indian tribes. This was also when the Civil Rights Movement and activism against the war in Viet Nam focused the attention of the American public on social injustice at all levels. Challenges remain in that most federal and state politicians seem to view American Indians as a minority group that enjoys special privileges, i.e., exemption from taxation and ability to run lucrative gambling operations, which are denied other American citizens. The rhetoric of equal opportunity is now employed to demand that Indians be stripped of those privileges and denied their right of sovereignty and self-government.

Most politicians do not take Indian rights seriously, and federal court decisions have begun to swing against principles of tribal sovereignty in recent years. There are significant challenges ahead for Indian leaders, both men and women, to defend the treaty rights and sovereignty of Indian nations. They must become effective in lobbying Congress to shape legislation that affects Indian rights and argue in the courts to defend the right of tribes to govern their own affairs. They must become astute negotiators with state and local officials to establish clear understandings of the rights of Indian tribes to be free of external control, particularly in the area of taxation. In all of these areas, Indian women will also face the sexism that still exists in American society at large.

## Conclusion

Although American Indian women have taken on increasingly important roles of political leadership, little research has been done on what constitutes feminist leadership in Indian communities (McCoy, 1998). The practical and political concerns of Indian communities override strictly feminist issues. Women are confronted with much different circumstances than those that fostered the cultural traditions of egalitarianism. When Indian tribal governments are often seen by their constituents as puppets of the Bureau of Indian Affairs rather than truly sovereign entities, feminist leadership in that arena is discredited. When women exercise their leadership as managers of social services programs or community events, they are generally overlooked.

An important research question that should be explored is, where do Indian people in general look for leadership. Despite significant development of the political concept of tribal sovereignty since the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Improvement Act of 1975, there is still a great deal of development that needs to be done in many tribes to build strong, stable, and effective tribal councils. In many tribes, because there has been no governmental infrastructure to support political leadership, it has been exercised by charismatic men who dominated by sheer force of personality. Indian men and women need to work together in a common effort to achieve effective tribal governments. It behooves them to study how their own communities view leadership and how they value it.

In conclusion, feminist leadership among American Indians/Alaska Natives communities, as we see it, is played out more vis-à-vis government and political arenas rather than in the hierarchy of male/female dominance in the communities. Second, we

see leadership as both existing and emergent among Native American communities as historical events of Native American women beside their men together with Native women in change agent roles and leaderships in social programs. In this manner Native women are attempting to restore the strength of Native American communities in the U.S. society through a collective and advocacy role to the group rather than an individualistic perspective.

The feminist movement and other salient women's issues have propelled many Indian women to the forefront of tribal politics, as well as state and local politics. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American Indian women will stand beside, rather than behind, men in their effort to preserve their tribes and treaty rights.

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