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Deer: Demanding Justice – Anti-rape Activism in Indian Country

By Sarah Deer

On April 24, Amnesty International released a report – “Maze of Injustice” – documenting the numerous human rights violations associated with the sexual assault of Native women in the United States. I was fortunate enough to be one among the many Native women who contributed to the research and writing of the report.

When I was originally approached about working with AI, I considered the opportunity it presented to amplify our voices as Native women. AI is a worldwide organization with more than 2.2 million members in over 150 countries and territories across the world. Their work on such issues as genocide in Darfur and the civil rights of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay has received international attention. During the past three years I served as one of the Native consultants for the “Maze of Injustice” project. I cannot overstate the level of professionalism, courtesy and reverence exhibited by the human rights activists at AI toward the women who shared their stories for this report. Dozens of survivors trusted AI to document and give voice to their stories of despair and hope. Attempting to capture this stark reality in a mere 133-page report was a major challenge.

Clearly, the statistics highlighted in the report are not new. The NCAI Task Force on Violence Against Women, along with Native women’s organizations across the nation, has been tirelessly raising the issue for several years. Native women suffer the highest rates of rape, battering and murder in the nation. Yet mainstream society remains woefully ignorant of our plight. The work AI is doing is to educate and activate the masses - those who can and should be allies in our work for justice. I recently corresponded with activist and artist Sara Marie Ortiz, Acoma Pueblo, who noted, “An injustice against Native women is an injustice against humanity.”

Thousands of Native women have actively resisted rape and colonialism throughout the last 500 years. Very few of them are remembered or honored in mainstream history – even in the mainstream anti-rape movement. As Native women, we honor these women and remember them through song, ceremony and oral traditions.

Human rights educator and Paiute spokesman Sarah Winnemucca (circa 1841 - 1891) has been an inspiration to me and other Native women seeking justice for rape victims. In Winnemucca’s “Life Among the Paiutes,” the first book published by a Native woman in the United States, she documented systemic issues of sexual violence and degradation experienced by Paiute women. While the book covered a multitude of issues facing Native people in the late 19th century, I am particularly drawn to passages about sexual violence

experienced by Winnemucca's sisters and cousins. "My people have been so unhappy for a long time they wish now to disincrease, instead of multiply." She wrote in 1883. "The mothers are afraid to have more children, for fear they shall have daughters, who are not safe even in their mother's presence." Her words left no doubt of the connection between sexual assault and genocide.

In 2005, Cherokee scholar and activist Andrea Smith continued this examination in her groundbreaking book, "Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide." Smith documents the links between sexual violence and other colonial attacks on tribal nations, including environmental degradation and spiritual appropriation. In Smith's analysis, rape of Native women is figuratively and literally an attack on our nations.

"Maze of Injustice" is effecting change and action on a number of levels. First and foremost, I hope that it will play a role as a catalyst for more Native women to break the silence about their experiences. Shame and embarrassment are often impediments to discussing sexual violence. Since the launch of the report, I have had an opportunity to talk to many Native women about the impact this report is having in tribal communities. My friend Shelley Miller, a Kiowa woman who has worked as an advocate in Oklahoma for many years, told me, "I hope it will make it easier for tribal members to say, 'I'm not the only one and there are people here who can help me.'"

Politically, this AI report amplifies the many voices asking for accountability from the numerous federal entities purporting to protect us. Where is the data from the FBI, the BIA and the U.S. Attorneys' offices regarding the reporting and prosecution of sexual assault of Native women? If they are doing their jobs, then it should be no problem to provide us with the documentation. Why does the IHS continue to be nonresponsive to the calls for comprehensive sexual assault forensic examination services? The time for an honest reckoning is long overdue.

Change is occurring on more localized levels as well. One of the most poignant outcomes of the report in the week following its release has been the groundswell of support for a small women's shelter on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, Pretty Bird Woman House. Featured in a four-minute spot on National Public Radio, the shelter was immediately deluged with calls from listeners wanting to know how they could help. Within 36 hours of hearing the plight of women at Standing Rock, a listener established a Web presence with credit-card donation capabilities. As of May 1, nearly \$13,000 has been raised to support their work. The Web site for the shelter is <http://prettybirdwomanhouse.chipin.com/pretty-bird-woman-house>.

"Maze of Injustice," like "Life Among the Paiutes" and "Conquest," will serve as a testament to the thousands of Native women who have survived sexual violence. What are we asking for? Nothing more than human dignity. Nothing less than justice.

Sarah Deer, J.D., Muscogee, is an activist working to end violence against Native women and co-editor of the forthcoming book, "Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence."

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