

An Intersectional Feminist Assessment of the Economic Status of Native American Women in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Native American women in the US today are a too often forgotten group in American society, due largely to existing power dynamics which disadvantage Native peoples and women, both separately and together. This interplay of ethnicity, particularly of a peoples subjected to genocide, and gender, is itself a topic worth volumes. The focus here on economic status is one facet of life, though affected by all others, that has a large role in determining well-being. This examination looks to first person accounts by Native women to understand unique factors of life, such as spirituality, sexuality, and relations to others, that affect both economic status and wellbeing. By coding samples of works by Native women, patterns appear showing how different parts of life shape the overall financial wellbeing of Native women. Using the experiences of individuals gives in depth, but a limited scope of, insight. To augment the research, in addition to reviewing what other scholars have said on the subject, the paper also looks to raw data and statistics to enhance understanding. Preliminary findings show that the issue of representation is forefront for many Native peoples, and that relations with non-natives occupy much of Native people's focus. Economic implications of this are that Native peoples are disadvantaged by stereotypes and false ideas of who Natives are more so than other groups in the US. The aim of this paper is to increase awareness and availability of information about issues facing Native peoples today.

Keywords: Native American, Women, Economy

1. Introduction

Much academic literature concerning Native women today focuses on addressing symptoms of larger issues. This is true for a number of reasons, but mainly because the larger issues are intractable and intangible. Lives of Native American women today are shaped by history of genocide, ineffective bureaucracy, cultural stereotypes, and countless other forces that are difficult to address. The role of intersectionality in examining the status of Native women cannot be understated. However, it is not easy to study such phenomena, especially as an outsider, and is easier to prescribe small, short term solutions. As such, there is a need to understand larger forces that shaper the lives of Native women. One key determinant of quality of life is economic status, but there is little research into what the overall economic status of Native women is or why it is this way.

2. Literature Review

To understand the economic status of Native women, it is key to understand what financial well-being means, and examine its major influencers. Financial well-being is a broad term, but here it considers not only income and debts,

but also economic resiliency, financial literacy, and fiscal planning¹. One determinant of overall financial well-being is educational attainment. Here Native American peoples are at a disadvantage, having the highest rate high school dropout in the nation². Native women specifically trail only Native men and Hispanic men in dropout rates. Barriers to access to education for Native people include economic burdens at home, discrimination, inadequate school funding, and the lack of culturally relevant support networks and curricula³. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found in 2019 that lower educational attainment is linked both to higher unemployment rates and lower median wages⁴. Another major influence of economic status is health, where there are large disparities between Natives and non-natives in the US. Behind cancer and heart disease, injury is the leading cause of death of Native women⁵. Native women also face high rates of mental health struggles, particularly due to substance abuse prevalent in Native communities. The Economic Policy Institute finds that twice as many Native Americans than white people have a disability, and that “Individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed⁶”. In addition to these general conditions, there is specific academia on the myriad of unique problems faced by Native communities.

Roughly ¼ of Natives live in poverty in the US, the highest percent of any racial/ ethnic demographic in the US, though the rate is higher for Natives living on a reservation than those living off a reservation⁷. Native Americans also have the highest non-employed rate of any ethnicity in the US and are faced with the “increasing pressure to conform to the global market economy in the form of profit-driven development projects” which is different from traditional cultural values which emphasize community and connection to the earth⁸. Additionally, because reservations are generally isolated and difficult for non-natives to engage with, economies on reservations are similarly isolated. There is little capital to be had with even less coming in and few financial resources available to ease economic mobility. This is compounded by the fact that each tribe manages their own economies, making it difficult to enact widespread policy that might boost members’ financial status. However, Native Americans face employment and financial barriers both on and off the reservation. Throughout the US, Natives face disproportionately high rates of equal pay disparity, as well as discrimination in applying to jobs and colleges⁹. Additionally, Native people in the US receive less formal and informal financial education and are less able and/or willing to engage with formal financial processes¹⁰. This leads to higher rates of financial insecurity and debt, regardless of a Native person’s location within the US.

Native women face more specific challenges in enhancing their economic wellbeing. The most obvious is that they are often relegated to caretaking of family members, making it more difficult for Native women to hold employment and reach financial independency. This work is not valued in the same way paid jobs are valued, but still Native women are expected to forgo employment and care for others, depending on a partner or other family members to support them¹¹. Even when Native women obtain official employment, there still exists a high wage gap, both between Native men and women and between Natives and non-natives. A challenge unique to Native women is the globalization of the economy and the erasure of substance economies, also called domestic production, which are communities with economies that revolve around seasonal cycles, and particularly the availability of resources. Native communities overwhelmingly have tradition in substance economies, with the American Indian Quarterly explaining “Women’s subsistence and other economic activities have formed the foundation of community sustenance... the war against subsistence represents also a war against women and their economic, political, and social autonomy in society.¹²” With Native women’s contributions and role in the economy largely gone in today’s society, there are major constraints on their economic opportunities. The existing literature indicates that Native women are in a disadvantaged economic position, but with little specificity into exact conditions affecting Native women.

3. Methods

The sample studied is four first-person accounts of life as a Native person in America today. To narrow the range of possibilities, the narratives of women told within the last decade were prioritized. The sources chosen were *All My Relations*¹³, a podcast by Matika Wilbur and Adrienne Keene, and three books - *Crazy Brave*¹⁴ by Joy Harjo, *One Bead at a Time*¹⁵ told by Beverly Little Thunder, and *Lakota Woman*¹⁶ by Mary Crow Dog. Using a digital random number generator, four samples were chosen from within that source – i.e. four chapters from each book and four episodes of the podcast, totaling 16 samples. Quartiles of each sample were taken, examining four parts of each sample with a minimum of 5 pages/minutes of each quartile. The total of coded words came out to 800, making for a robust sample.

Before taking a sociological approach, each book was read, and all ten episodes of the podcast were listened to. Having consumed this media, a list of concepts to code was compiled, categorized in broad spheres of life in order to provide a wholistic assessment of wellbeing. The overarching focus is on the economic status of Native women, but

to understand that it is key to see how other facets of life interact with each other, including economic status. The codes are broken down in the table below.

Table 1: Codes used to identify themes in media

| Domestic | Economic | Self | Relational |
|------------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Father Figure | Employment | Gender | Nature |
| Mother Figure | Access to Resources | Well-being | Community |
| Elders | Financial Independence | Blood Quantum | Sexuality |
| Child | Workplace Environment | Safety | Spirituality |
| Sibling/Cousin | Socioeconomic Status | | Interests/Hobbies |
| Romantic Partner | | | Non-natives |
| | | | Culture/ Tradition |

4. Findings

In analyzing the data, percentages of code was primarily used, looking at how frequent the phenomena embedded in the code is compared to the rest of the codes. Overall, there was less direct discussion of economic status than expected in the coding, though there was much mention of cultural factors. This presented difficulty in assessing trends in financial well-being but provided great insight into factors that shape economic status.

One notable pattern is the prevalence of discussion of non-natives by these Native women. These conversations revolve around representation of Native Americans in US society, interpersonal interactions between Natives and non-natives, and perception of non-natives by Natives. Indeed “non-natives” was the most frequently applied code, making up 12% of coded words, as compared to the average coded frequency of around 3.5%. The representation of Natives is of particular importance because, as *All My Relations* states, “The research shows that over 60% of Americans have never met a Native American... (they think) Indians were something that existed in the historic past and are not being actively disenfranchised.” The image of Native Americans most people in America have does not reflect reality but does influence how non-natives treat Native peoples. As such, relations with non-natives are key to the economic health of Native peoples because of the high-stakes power dynamics. The erasure of Native peoples from the American conscious has contributed to significant barriers to entry for Native peoples into any field that could enhance economic wellbeing.

Another key pattern that emerged is the unique domestic relations that exist between Native women and her family. Most notably, the men in the lives of these women are in general either not present or abusive. In the three books, each woman described experiencing both childhood and partner abuse at the hands of men. The podcast did not mention any sort of father figures in childhood, and briefly discusses male romantic partners but does not mention specifics of relationships. This is another common thread, as the term father was coded only once. Suffering childhood abuse is a trauma that affects the rest of a person’s life, and the seeming commonality of this experience suggests it is something that impacts many Native women. Trauma survivors tend to have more difficulty achieving financial stability. As one survivor said, “Until I went to therapy, I never connected the dots between the after-effects of trauma and my lifetime of financial instability.”¹⁷ The prevalence of childhood trauma in Native women affects their economic wellbeing throughout their life.

Continued trauma has an equally devastating effect on the lives of the survivor but can manifest into different problems. Many Native women, including but not limited to many who leave an abusive home, are pressured into serious relationships with men because they don’t have the means to become financially independent. In fact, “financial independency” was a coded phrase with occurred in 2.5% of the samples, indicating that indeed this is something that evades the Native women in the samples. Additionally, young marriages and/or pregnancies were common in the samples and tended to be followed by the spouse and/or father leaving his family, forcing Native women into increasingly difficult situations. In one instance in *Crazy Brave*, the author is forced to live with her verbally abusive ex-mother-in-law while raising a child because her husband, who was providing for his mother, wife, and child, left abruptly and permanently. This combination of domestic issues creates difficulties for Native women in pursuing economic opportunity.

Key to the discussion on the economic status of Native women how Native women themselves view gender and its role in Native societies. The code for gender was the second most frequent code, comprising 8% of the analyses. However, identifying patterns was difficult because of the breadth of the topic and the ways each woman experienced

gender differently. There was much insight in Little Thunder's memoir, and her view of women speaks volumes, as she says "I take care of the things that are needed. That's what women do." This summarizes the patterns well – women do the work that keeps life going and people together. While this is vital, as was found in the literature review this work goes uncompensated, putting women at an economic disadvantage.

To do a thoroughly intersectional analysis, spirituality and sexuality must be examined to understand how these factors influence the lives of Native women and by extension their economic status. Both were discussed at a slightly above average rate of 5%. Spirituality is a catch all for many differing Native belief systems, and while it is an important facet of life, most religions were so harshly suppressed under settler colonial rule, even as recently as the 1980s in the US, that few spiritual teachings and traditions remain. Even today elders with knowledge of practices are reticent to share because they were conditioned to fear retribution if they so much as discussed their Native religion. The economic implications of this not severe, but practicing spirituality has a statistically stabilizing effect on mood and relations, as explained in *Lakota Woman* when the author discusses her mental state before and after reconnecting with her nation's spiritual practices, saying "Grandpa Fool Bull took me to my first peyote meeting... (It) makes me understand myself and the world around me."

Sexuality was of little note in three of the samples, with the exception being the two-spirit woman, Beverly Little Thunder, who dictated *One Bead at a Time*. While the other samples discussed relationships in general, none touched on sexuality outside of hegemonic heteronormativity. This made it difficult to analyze the impacts of sexuality outside the norm (the pattern found was of heterosexism). There are homophobic people within Native nations that do not accept two-spirit peoples, but the majority of Native Americans and tribes mentioned in Little Thunder's book were accepting of gay Natives. That does not mean two-spirit people do not face discrimination, but that it is often not overt. Non-heteronormative relationships can be difficult, especially for young people, to navigate if they don't have examples of healthy relationships, which can increase overall instability, harming economic potential.

A last pervasive issue was the argument over blood quantum, which is "how much" Native blood a person has. Though it was not mentioned at a high frequency, the impacts of using this policy are deep. This measurement presents a number of problems, the first of which is we cannot accurately measure blood quantum. DNA tests can give an indication of heritage but cannot prove a person's ethnicity. A second problem is this system contradicts the traditional Native family structure, which is not decided entirely by biological relation but through familial ties. Third, the blood quantum system determines who the federal government recognizes as a Native person, regardless of their heritage. This also applies for tribal membership, though a person can join a tribe through patrilineal descent. This is where Native women are again uniquely burdened. Depending on the individual and their tribe, the child of a Native woman may not qualify for membership in their mother's nation. This forces Native women to base decisions not on their best interests but the interests of their possible children, especially concerning choices of their partner. This limits women's ability to choose the options that would give best economic mobility and opportunity.

5. Conclusion

Analyzing any single facet of life, such as economic status, cannot be done without an understanding of the complete picture. Predictors of financial well-being such as educational attainment, physical & mental health, and economic stability account for overt forces that lead to many Natives not being financially well-off. Though this study is limited to four accounts, it attempts to understand issues that shape unequal access to and levels of these predictors. Analysis of first-person accounts by Native women about their experiences living in the US today provides insight into these various issues. Looking at the data has demonstrated that factors unique to Native women impact their overall financial well-being. One issue is the matter of representation in society relating to power dynamics between Natives and non-natives. Native women particularly are subjected to higher than average rates of childhood and partner trauma, which can significantly deteriorate one's health, making it difficult to achieve economic stability and/or independence. In doing a complete intersectional analysis, data shows spirituality and sexuality are not especially impactful. Looking at the content of the samples, that is the specifics of how sexuality and spirituality shape Native women's lives, shows that spirituality and sexuality, both historically repressed by US policies towards Native Americans, can be difficult for Native women to connect with. The last major influencer of economic health is blood quantum, which, though varying for each individual, is an issue. Though this study is by no means a complete exhaustion of forces shaping financial wellbeing of Native women, this increased understanding informs analysis that better reflects reality.

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