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(page 24)

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## Study guide

# The silent epidemic

*Indigenous ELCA women combat gender injustice and violence*

By Robert C. Blezard

In our culture, violence against women remains a problem of disgraceful proportions, but it's especially alarming among Native Americans. Indigenous girls and women are much more likely to be a victim of violence or sexual assault and, just as tragically, their cases are less likely to be investigated and prosecuted.

### Exercise 1: Prevalent violence

Only 15 in 100 Native American women can expect to be free from violence in her lifetime, according to the National Institute of Justice's 2016 report about violence against indigenous peoples. This compares to 29 out of 100 white, non-Hispanic women who can expect to be free from violence in her lifetime. Moreover, Native American women are more likely than non-Native women to suffer sexual violence or physical violence by an intimate partner, or be a victim of stalking.

Review the institute's full report (go to [nij.gov](http://nij.gov) and search for "Native American").

- What were the top lessons you learned from the report?
- What surprised you, and why? What didn't surprise you, and why?
- Until you read the article in *Living Lutheran*, did you know that violence against American Indian and Native Alaskan girls and women was much of a problem? Why do you think some have termed it the "silent epidemic"?
- What are some specific actions you and your congregation take to raise awareness about the problem and assist in finding solutions?

### Exercise 2: "Me too" meets racism

In today's era of "me too," our culture is waking up to the ways our girls and woman are denigrated, demeaned, and subject to violence and sexual assault. We are also learning how racism worsens the problem.

- Reflect on the news coverage of the Me Too movement and how it has led to the disgrace of prominent men who have engaged in sexual harassment or abuse. Have you been surprised at how widespread the victimization of women is in our culture? Why or why not? Why do you think this problem was hidden for so long?
- Thinking back to only a generation or two ago, in what specific ways



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## Study guide: **The silent epidemic** *continued*

has our culture tended to view and treat women as inferior to men? What women characters in popular movies, television and fiction have portrayed females as less able than males?

- Historically, have women received the same opportunities for education, jobs, status, social advancement? Explain.
- How has our culture encouraged men to think of women primarily in sexual terms? How does our culture glorify and celebrate the sexuality of female media stars—actresses, musicians, newscasters? Why are women on TV news programs almost always youthful and beautiful, whereas their male counterparts may be older? What message does this send about the attributes of women that our culture values most?
- Now turning to racism against American Indians and Native Alaskans, in what specific ways has our culture tended to view and treat indigenous people as inferior to white people? What images from popular entertainment and culture can you think of that reinforce cultural prejudice?
- With the intersecting problems of sexism against women and racism against Native Americans, why is it not surprising that girls and women in these cultures experience a higher rate of violence?

### Exercise 3: Jurisdictional tangles

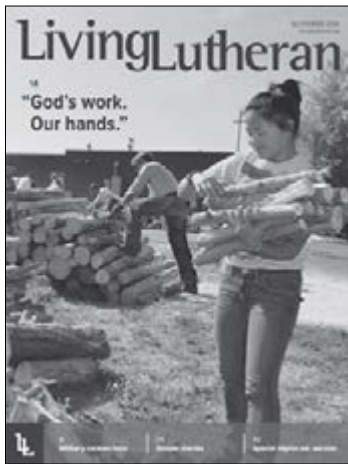
The National Institute of Justice report lifts up a legal problem that hampers tribes in the investigation and prosecution of non-Native perpetrators of violence against Native American women (*emphasis added*):

*The federal government has a “trust responsibility to assist tribal governments in safeguarding the lives of Indian women.” Yet in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* (1978), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that tribes did not have criminal jurisdiction over non-Indian perpetrators. This meant that federally recognized tribes **had no authority to criminally prosecute non-Indian offenders, even for crimes committed in Indian Country. This essentially provided immunity to non-Indian offenders and compromised the safety of American Indian and Alaska Native women and men.***

*The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 **partially corrected** this problem by providing federally recognized tribes with special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction, which allows tribes that meet certain conditions to prosecute certain cases involving non-Indian offenders.*

Advocates for Native American women say this jurisdictional problem contributes to both the high incidence of violence against indigenous women and girls, as well as to the low arrest and conviction rate for perpetrators. Discuss:

- Imagine that your community’s police department lacked the authority to prosecute violent criminals who came in from out of town. What might be the logical consequences?



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- Would you feel safe? Why or why not?
- Would you work with your elected officials to change the law? Why? How?
- How might you and your congregation work to change the federal laws so that tribal law enforcement officers would have more authority to prosecute violent crimes?

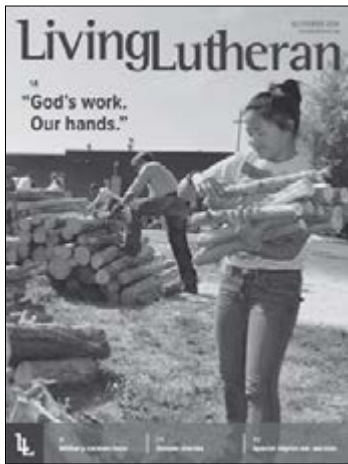
### Exercise 4: Rape culture?

The ELCA's draft social statement on women and justice speaks to many issues facing girls and women. It criticizes our broader culture for encouraging and tolerating sexual violence against women, something it calls "rape culture." Here is an excerpt from page 24:

*As a society, we often blame women for what happens to them because of gender-based oppression, and we often excuse their oppressors. A prime example lies in sexual violence and this society's culture of rape. Rape culture is evident in our society in the media we consume, the games we play, the male role models we idolize, the jokes we tell, our perceptions of sexuality, the prominence of dehumanizing stereotypes, and the hyper-masculinity we tolerate among men and boys. It is further evident in low conviction and penalty rates in rape cases and the high number of untested rape kits across this country.*

- From your life experience and observations, what do you find true in this statement?
- From recent news events our society has learned about the prevalence of "date rape," coerced sexual encounters and pressure that many girls and women face. On college campuses there is even a debate over what constitutes a woman's consent to engage in sexual activity. How do these things reinforce the idea that rape culture is a problem in our nation?
- What are specific examples of how rape culture is "evident in the media we consume, the games we play"?
- Looking at specific examples from the news in recent years, how is rape culture evident in "the male role models we idolize" and the "hyper-masculinity we tolerate among men and boys"?
- How does this analysis of rape culture reflect what is happening with indigenous women?
- The National Institute of Justice report found that instances of violence and rape among Native girls and women were underreported, under-investigated and under-prosecuted. How does this correlate to rape culture being "evident in low conviction and penalty rates in rape cases"?

Want to learn more? Study the complete draft statement, available at [elca.org/womenandjustice](http://elca.org/womenandjustice).



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## Study guide: **The silent epidemic** *continued*

### Exercise 5: Steps to help

The ELCA's 2015 social message on gender-based violence addresses many of the issues facing Native American women. As does the draft of the social statement on women and justice, the message criticizes our culture for not doing enough to help women victimized by gender-based violence. It lifts up steps that the church can take to help (page 15):

- Become allies with others.
- Seek improved laws and social patterns.
- Challenge organizations and agencies to adopt and use policies and practices that prevent and reduce gender-based violence.

Discuss:

- What are some specific, tangible ways that your congregation can become allies with Native American women in their struggle?
- What groups are working with indigenous women that your congregation might be able to support through prayer, education or financial gifts?
- How could your congregation work with your elected officials and advocates on the federal level to improve investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against Native women (see "Exercise 3: Jurisdictional tangles")?
- What are specific ways that your congregation can raise awareness about and confront the sexist and racial attitudes and stereotypes that contribute to gender-based violence, especially in disadvantaged communities?
- How can our church be a leader in challenging our culture, our institutions and our government to adopt policies that reduce gender-based violence and promote safer communities?

Want to learn more? Study the social message on gender-based violence. Download a PDF at [elca.org/socialmessages](http://elca.org/socialmessages).

# The silent epidemic

## Indigenous ELCA women combat gender injustice and violence

By Francine Knowles



Prairie Rose Seminole, ELCA program director for American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries, speaks at the 2018 Rocky Mountain Synod Theological Conference.



Seminole leads a Blanket Exercise, an experiential workshop, at the 2018 ELCA Bishop's Academy.

The statistics are staggering.

Native American women are murdered at a rate 10 times the national average in many U.S. counties, according to a report funded by the U.S. Department of Justice. They are assaulted at rates higher than any other racial or ethnic minority, with the overwhelming majority of assaults perpetrated by nonnatives. Thousands of native women are missing or have been killed in North America, federal officials have reported.

Indigenous Lutherans are working to raise awareness about these and other gender justice issues related to native communities.

“Eighty-four percent of Native American women experience violence in their life,” said Kelly Sherman-Conroy, citing a report from the National Institute of Justice.

In her work as a Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minn.) doctoral candidate and minister of social justice and advocacy for children, youth and family ministry at Nativity Lutheran Church, St. Anthony, Minn., Sherman-Conroy lifts up this reality through research, activism and liturgy. “The stories of these women haven’t been told,” she said.

For many indigenous American women, there are significant barriers to opportunity, said Prairie Rose Seminole, ELCA program director for American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries. “Women are fearful,” she said. “Women are not trusting of institutions like the justice system. ... When it comes to being an indigenous

person in this country, often, especially in tribal communities, if we are raped or have an abuser, it’s ignored by law enforcement.”

Jurisdiction in such cases is often an issue, said Wendy Helgemo, director of the AT&T Center for Indigenous Politics and Policy at George Washington University, Washington, D.C. “Pay equity, violence, employment issues, family issues—those affect [indigenous] women disproportionately,” she said.

Helgemo worked with former U.S. Sen. Harry Reid to include provisions in the 2013 Violence Against Women Act reauthorization that enable tribes to investigate, prosecute, convict and sentence nonnatives who assault native spouses or dating partners or violate protection orders on native land.

But jurisdictional problems remain, she said. For example, tribes have no such power in cases of crime between strangers, including sexual assault.

“Women are the largest demographic at risk in our communities,” Seminole said. “We are trying to create more visibility about the issues facing Indian country.”

### Relationships and accountability

One tool Seminole uses in such work is the Blanket Exercise, an experiential workshop developed by the organization Kairos, which she trains advocates to employ.

“Participants bring blankets, and the blankets represent the land base. [The participants]



Photos: Courtesy of Karen Ressel

Rose Stanley, a Lutheran/Lakota Job Corps participant, prepares food at the Pine Ridge (S.D.) Retreat Center.



Job Corps participant Jeanene Two Two cleans the Pine Ridge Retreat Center prior to the arrival of a visiting team.

represent the indigenous people on that land base,” she said. The exercise explores the experience of land being ripped away through unjust practices.

The workshop provides “a deeper understanding of indigenous people and [their] history in this country and their relationship to the church,” Seminole said, including bringing attention to missing and murdered indigenous women.

The tool will be used in ELCA congregations to start conversations, Seminole said, adding, “What I really want to see in the next year or two years is the development of some real relationships and real accountability within our congregations, and an understanding of barriers” to higher quality of life for indigenous women and others.

Unemployment is one of the biggest barriers, said Karen Ressel, pastor and director of the Pine Ridge (S.D.) Retreat Center. The unemployment rate on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, home to the Lakota tribe, is estimated at 85 to 90 percent, she said.

In response, Ressel launched the Lutheran/Lakota Job Corps. As part of the program, she hires women and men from Pine Ridge to do work at the center. Job Corps “gives them a steady income and helps provide stability,” she said. “It’s part of developing a workforce.”


The program also complements the retreat center’s cultural immersion ministry. When visiting volunteer teams serve at the center, they work alongside Job Corps participants, helping bridge

the gap between visitors and community members, Ressel said.

Solomon Trimble, a member of the task force developing an ELCA social statement on women and justice, also seeks to bridge gaps on awareness of issues facing indigenous women. “I have had the opportunity to bring many different native issues and perspectives to the task force,” he said.

An actor who appeared in *Twilight*, Trimble is also the screenwriter of the award-winning short film *Missing Indigenous*, which examines what it calls the “silent epidemic” of the disappearance of indigenous women. “Each member of our team had a family member or direct friend fall victim to the crisis,” he said of the film crew.

Trimble would like to see ELCA members play a more proactive role in gender justice among native women. He hopes advocates will “go *into* indigenous communities and ask what difficulties they face to formulate a plan of action to assist.

“As Lutherans, we do a great job on the work before us. I am asking that we seek and physically put ourselves where the work is.” 

Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



**Francine Knowles** is a freelance writer and former religion and business reporter with the *Chicago Sun-Times*.