

USA: A well of grief: the relatives of murdered Native women speak out

Native American women and girls are targeted at rates that far outweigh other American women, and are 10 times more likely to be murdered.

By Sara Hylton

The Guardian (13.01.2020) – <https://bit.ly/30qH4iU> – On a warm summer day in 2018, Lissa Yellow-bird Chase packed her vehicle with sunscreen, iPads, spiritual items and water. She drove to the bank of Lake Sakakawea on the edge of Fort Berthold Reservation, in western North Dakota.

She parked her vehicle, bearing the license plate “SEARCH”, and prepared for a long day ahead. As she’d done several days that summer, she began to scour her territory for clues. With fishing sonar equipment and a dilapidated old boat, she had nothing to go by but her instincts.

It was here, in the deep blue lake, that she and volunteers from her group the Sahnish Scouts of North Dakota, found the body of Olivia Lonebear. The 32-year-old and mother of five had last been seen in New Town, a small oil-boom city on the edge of Fort Berthold Reservation, nine months prior.

A hidden epidemic

Countless women have been victims of similar, less high-profile cases, but Lonebear's death exposed the reality in which Native American women and girls live – what the former North Dakota senator Heidi Heitkamp called a “hidden epidemic”. The facts are dire. Native American women and girls are sexually assaulted and targeted at rates far greater than other American women, and they are 10 times more likely to be murdered.

In 2015, the Canadian government announced a national inquiry into the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). In June, the commissioners found the state responsible for “a race-based genocide”. The treatment of Indigenous women is no less alarming across the border: while Canada collects some data, the US federal government does not track how many people like Lonebear go missing or turn up murdered.

Twenty-three-year-old Heather Belgrade, Lonebear's cousin who lives across the border in north-eastern Montana, has also been grieving the death of her best friend Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, who was brutally murdered in 2017. The case helped to bring about Savanna's Act, which enacted a set of reforms in how law enforcement agencies deal with cases of missing and murdered Native Americans.

The dangers of the oil industry

While the realities facing Native American women and girls are gaining more attention, what is less understood are the effects of extractive industries, mainly oil, on Native American women and communities.

Residents across Fort Peck Reservation are sensitized to the impacts of the oil industry. The reservation is situated not far from large oil boom towns like Williston and Watford City in North Dakota and is in the direct vicinity of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline expansion. Many of the community members I spoke to discussed the influx of crime, sexual violence and drugs when the Bakken oil boom began in 2006. They're bracing for what's to come.

Prairiedawn Thunderchild and her older sister Tahnee Thunderchild learned of those dangers early one evening when they were walking home to their apartment in Wolf Point, a small town of a few thousand people, on Fort Peck Reservation in Montana.

That evening, the girls saw a car with North Dakota license plates approaching. The car began to follow them, and the men, whom they didn't recognize from their community, told the sisters to get into the vehicle.

The girls knew that a car full of non-native men with North Dakota plates probably meant they were oil employees. They had heard stories of trafficking, kidnapping and sexual assault. They ran and called the tribal police. "[They] probably wanted gross things from us," Tahnee told me.

Some activists have linked the environmental impacts of extractive practices with an increase of rape among women in the region.

“Man camps,” as they have come to be known, house thousands of temporary oil workers with disposable income, who are dealing with the stressors of dangerous working conditions. The proposed Keystone XL pipeline would bring in more “man camps” affecting Native American women and communities.

“Oil industry camps may be impacting domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking in the direct and surrounding communities in which they reside,” the Department Of Justice found.

Eight-year-old Macylilly Whitehawk was sexually assaulted and abducted when she was just four years old, and meth was found in her system from the assailant’s semen. Though the assailant was from the reservation, Macylilly’s grandmother and caregiver, Valerie Whitehawk, believes what happened to her granddaughter is linked to the increase in drugs and violence stemming from the region’s oil industry.

The complications of dealing with crimes in Indian country often means that cases fall between the cracks or go unreported. In cases of sexual assault, non-native men who assault women on reservations cannot be arrested or prosecuted by tribal authorities. A minority of reservations, including Fort Peck Reservation, fall under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which allows tribal authorities jurisdiction to prosecute non-native men who commit crimes within their

territory.

According to Stacie Smith, Fort Peck's elected tribal chief judge, this jurisdiction was established in 2013 in order to respond to threats facing the community in large part by the oil industry. Smith is working with community activist Angeline Cheek to develop a set of tools to educate the community on the dangers of "man camps" and to prepare for the worst. They are also working to establish "Amber Alert", an early warning system to help find missing and abducted people.

On one of my last days in Wolf Point, I attended the Fort Peck powwow. I noticed a tipi in the distance that the light seemed to particularly favor. I walked over and was greeted by the tribal chief of the Assiniboine tribe, a tall, gentle man, who goes by Joe Miller. He invited me to sit with him and shared the story of how he named his life partner Eagle Woman Flies Above.

I shared with Joe that a few weeks before, I had seen an eagle flying around in Brooklyn that perched above the tree where I was sitting. A rare occurrence in a concrete jungle. Joe told me that the eagle is a sacred symbol, representing courage and wisdom. "It brought you here," he said.

I sat with his response, feeling its significance. The sun was settling into a magenta hue and a crescent moon began to take shape. I asked Joe what he thought about the issues facing the women in his community, and he responded: "They are the life givers of our people ... if they weren't here, we wouldn't be here."

It occurred to me that perhaps if we paid more attention, we would notice many eagles flying above, calling us to listen with more wisdom and courage. Calling us to awaken to this assault against our common humanity.