



18th UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII18)

Intervention by Jean Whitehorse on the forced sterilization of Indigenous women.

Item of Agenda: Future Work

Jean begins with a message in the Navajo language.

I'd like to honor our brothers and sisters as the first inhabitants and protectors of the land on which we stand here today – the Hurons, Algonkians, Mohawks, Iroquois, Oneida, Seneca, Onandoga, Missisaugas - all of whom had territory in what is now New York state before the colonizers came.

We are faced with a very serious situation on our hands.

What I'm about to speak today, the sterilization of Indigenous women, is something that the United States Government does not wish to disclose—*outside the secret circles of power*—because it is so shocking that it tears at the fabric of human rights in general, creates holes in the genetic fabric of the lineage of Indigenous peoples, while degrading the fundamental rights of all Indigenous women. In fact, great lengths have been taken and countless lives have been lost to assure my silence as a victim of sterilization, and the silence of my fellow tribal sisters across this land.

For over a century, the reproductive and human rights of Indigenous women in the United States have been secretly targeted in federally sanctioned, forced-sterilization programs enacted by the Government. Indigenous women represented a unique class of *victims*, who became a testing ground for the U.S. Eugenic policies that utilized sterilization as tools to control and eliminate so called “undesirable” human characteristics, once the inclusion of race and poverty as ‘reasons’ for sterilization had the stamp of approval.

Both federal and independent investigations confirm the preliminary evidentiary findings that upwards of 70,000 forced or coerced sterilization procedures were conducted by Indian Health Services (IHS) and privately contracted physicians between the years 1960 and 1978. The forced sterilization campaign against Indigenous women reached its peak during these years and in the decades past, for example, eugenics programs were readily adopted by 33 U.S. states.

Sterilization without full, free, and informed consent has been described by international, regional, and national human rights' bodies as an involuntary, coercive, and/or forced practice, and a violation of fundamental human rights. Today, we have on record the confessions of perpetrators of these crimes, as well as, countless Indigenous victims who have come forward- in courage and in truth- to disclose their own stories of sterilization.

My own is also included.

These violations draw from the Right to Health, Right to Information, Right to Privacy, the Right to Decide on the Number and Spacing of Children, the Right to Found a Family, and the Right to be Free from Discrimination, and which would also include the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) specifically found in articles 19 through 24. Moreover, Human rights bodies have also recognized that forced sterilization is a violation of the Right to be Free from Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishments. These forms of widespread and systematic forced-sterilizations have been further recognized as crimes against humanity by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), arguably rising to the status of the crime of biological and cultural *genocide*.

As Mother, or Amá, in my language, Indigenous women are a natural part of the Creation. We were put here on this sacred Mother Earth to serve a purpose; we are the givers of life. So much pain, suffering, and loss have filled our hearts... filled our bodies, because our children have been taken from us by the sterilization of Indigenous women. It's much more than a 'lost generation'; it is a lost future for all Indigenous nations world-wide.

The evidence supports a significantly larger demographic impact on Native American women, pieced together through the study of smaller, unconnected case studies. For example, Professor Lehman Brightman, (Sioux and Creek) had long been committed to investigating the abuses of forced sterilization practices in the United States and Canada. In 1979, Professor Brightman contended that out of the whole Indigenous population of the United States, 10% of the men and 42% of the women had been 'coercively' sterilized. This was also confirmed by Doctor Connie Pinkerton-Uri's (Choctaw/Cherokee) groundbreaking study in 1974, including from Women of All Red Nations (WARN)-an Indigenous led grassroots organization.

To conclude, the demographic impact on Native American women and their families remains deeply understudied, yet marks a vital piece of human rights history requiring thorough investigation by multi-party actors.

To conclude my delegation, in order to begin the healing process, we #1. Seek an apology from the USA; and #2. Call upon this august body to #3 initiate a global study on the practice of the sterilization of Indigenous women, to be conducted with a survey of governments who perform these procedures. In addition, #4. Invite the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous peoples to conduct and recommend the implications of this study to appropriate UN bodies, as well as #5. request the World Health Organization (WHO) to coordinate their research on this topic, together with #6. the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) in an effort to calculate the extent of violence on the sterilization of Indigenous women, and the impact this has had upon Indigenous families, and lastly #7. that these malicious, systemic and criminal medical procedures and practices must cease immediately.

Madam/Mr. Chairperson, in the interest of time, my complete intervention can be found in the back of the room.

Aho! Thank you, (Madame/Mr.) Chairperson, may your Sun be brilliant!

