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Community-Based Commentary

Ensuring the Well-Being of Pueblo and Indigenous Women Through Policy and Practice

Peggy Bird (Kewa)*

Abstract

What happens when Indigenous nations do not have written policy to ensure the well-being of their people, and more specifically, policy that ensures the safety of the most vulnerable, including women in the community? What are some considerations for establishment of such policy by Indigenous nations? Speaking from the standpoint of a Pueblo Indian woman from New Mexico, I explore considerations for policy development that draws from Indigenous and Pueblo core values that addresses the safety of Indigenous women affiliated with Indigenous nations and living on Indigenous lands. In this community-based commentary, I speak from my experiences as an advocate

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for Indigenous women’s rights worldwide, from my epistemological roots as a Kewa woman, and as an attorney-scholar-researcher.

Keywords: Pueblo women; Indigenous women; Indigenous policy development

I am an Indigenous woman from Kewa, one of the nineteen Pueblos in New Mexico. While my intent in this commentary is not to write about Kewa (nor do I speak for Kewa), I do believe it is important to highlight my own positionality in relation to the Pueblos.

The Contexts from Which I Write

Kewa is one of the remaining Pueblo Indian nations in the United States (U.S.) that has been able to survive and thrive despite the onslaught of colonialism that began when the Spaniards came to the lands where we live in the 16th century. Kewa is located about forty miles north of Albuquerque, and the main village is located close to the Rio Grande River. Of the 5,000 tribal members, there are approximately 3,500 people who live in the community. Kewa is my home community and is the place where I am connected to no matter where I may physically find myself.

I am a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence, as well as an advocate who has been working to end violence against women for the last 25 years. I am also an attorney, a tribal court judge¹, a mother, aunt, cousin, daughter, and grandmother. Personal impetus for this commentary comes from my experience working for a number of Pueblo Indian nations, including those considered to be among the most “traditional” of the 19 Pueblo Indian nations in New Mexico. Note that I use the term “traditional” here as it is used in the 19 Pueblos, which tends to mean long-established,

¹ Most of the 573 federally recognized Indian tribes in the United States have tribal courts that were established and operate under a tribal code or custom of the Indian tribe. A tribal court judge presides over matters that are brought before the tribal court.

observing customary cultural, religious, and governance practices that are less changed over a long period of time. However, I am aware that what may be considered traditional and defined as such has been critiqued by other scholars—meaning, we need to be explicit and critical when we use terms like it in relation to our cultural practices and consider implications for Indigenous community adaptability and inclusivity (Huaman, 2015).

Using such a critical lens can also help Indigenous communities to consider bringing to the surface the need for written policies that help to ensure the safety and well-being (as defined by *all* community members and where the voices of women are heard) of Indigenous women within the larger context of local and Indigenous values of respect for women and for Mother Earth. The role of research in this regard necessarily includes taking a look at the relationship between respect for earth and women. For example, my own doctoral dissertation explored the histories and sociopolitical contexts of Pueblo women leaders in New Mexico through their narratives. My broader interests focused on attitude shifts towards women in our communities over time, and I wondered—*What did and does respect for the earth mother look like? What did and does respect for Pueblo women look like in our communities today?* Based on my research and professional experiences, I fear grave implications for Pueblo communities, for Indigenous peoples worldwide, and for the world if Indigenous communities do not make real connections between these two questions.

While I have written with the intention to share this commentary with Pueblo peoples and communities, it is my hope that there are pieces that will be useful to other Indigenous peoples. First, I acknowledge the voices of the Pueblo women I interviewed in my dissertation research who played a huge part in helping me to decide the focus of this commentary. Those women, from three different generations – grandmother, mother, and daughter ages – are involved in community-based work and activism that focuses on the protection of water, the environment, the lands, and the overall health and well-being of Indigenous and Pueblo women and Mother Earth. Other sources that inform this commentary are the written and oral, including my own life-long learning experiences.

Initially, when choosing how I would shape this commentary, I considered the major themes that run through my advocacy work with Pueblo and Indigenous communities. This reflection brought me to a few options where women are integral as organizers, leaders, and participants—community initiatives regarding food and healthy diets within Pueblo communities, new educational initiatives for Pueblo children, tribal membership and enrollment policies, and the safety of Pueblo women in our communities. I chose to write about the safety of Pueblo women in our communities from a well-being-in-policy perspective because our ability to do good work and to be productive members of our communities relies upon our safety and well-being. Furthermore, as a survivor and long-time advocate, this is personal for me and for many other Pueblo and Indigenous women. In my years of advocacy, I have seen much progress take place in raising awareness about domestic violence, and in recent years, awareness is being raised about sexual assault through wider public and Indigenous community discussions of human trafficking and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWGs). I understand that actual change sometimes happens slowly, and I also believe that policy changes, whether written or unwritten, have the power to support the way that change happens.

Description of the Issues and Initial steps

“Well-being” and the Safety of Pueblo Women

Before I reflect on notions of well-being, how this relates to vulnerable community members, and the role of policy, it is vital to define what a formal written policy is in our Indigenous communities. Hypothetically speaking, I would begin this conversation by obtaining input from Pueblo community members in their own languages in order to discuss policy development. Use of a given Pueblo’s language² for discussion is the correct,

² There are five Pueblo languages spoken throughout the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico: Zuni, Tiwa, Towa, Keres, and Tewa. For more information see the American Indian Language Policy Research and Teacher Training Center at the University of New Mexico:

respectful, most epistemologically rich approach. In moving forward in this way, I acknowledge that I am not a fluent Keres language speaker, so I am aware that such a presentation to people in Pueblo communities and ensuing discussion may take longer so that concepts are thoroughly discussed and explained in the language spoken in the particular Pueblo.

When I think of what a formal written well-being policy could be, especially focused on women, I believe that such a policy must contain a vision statement on well-being for the entire Pueblo. Despite being an English term, well-being can be explored as open-ended across multiple language communities. To me, well-being encompasses where a person is within the context of *all* life and how that person conducts oneself, behaving respectfully, acknowledging relatives, being grateful and being aware of how behavior and energies connect to all life in a positive way. In the work and movement to end violence against women and in the justice system, we need to take an overall view of our connections to all life in the universe, both physical and spiritual—when prayers are offered, songs are sung, dances take place within our Indigenous communities, in our own ways we strive to find our being well, our being to be good, positive and reflective of Indigenous values.

I call for Indigenous peoples to define for themselves what well-being is using their own languages and cultural values: What is well-being for this particular community? Is it a goal, a process, and upon what does it depend? Has it been defined in the past and by whom? Who gets to define it today? Whose voices are missing? How do we individually and collectively envision well-being, and for how long—meaning, where do we see the overall *goodness* of this Pueblo one year from now? What about five, ten, or 20 years from now? Does our definition of well-being take into consideration the safety of women in the Pueblo? Defining safety must also undergo a similar line of critical questioning.

<https://coe.unm.edu/uploads/docs/coe-main/about-coe/educting-nm-wo8-lang-policy.pdf>

I experience well-being in my Pueblo as a generally good feeling when connected with other people in the Pueblo, knowing that we share three major elements—safety, love, and caring for one another. When I think about well-being, I also think about the feelings of connectedness that come when I wake up in the morning, think about the dreams I just had, look outside the window to see whether it is sunny or overcast, and look around at the houses and where my mom lives at Kewa, and I see children going to school or outside playing while they are waiting for the bus. I also experience that connectedness when walking in the village and passing another person—both of us greet each other—or when driving, community members raise a finger or our hand up from the steering wheel to acknowledge the person in the other car as we pass each other. Well-being is also that feeling that happens when I am in the plaza watching a traditional dance, sitting there with others, greeting each other, and sharing snacks as the day goes on, hearing the songs, or participating in the dance, laughing, and talking with each other. That sense of well-being is recognizing that I belong to that place, that I am happy, at peace, and whole—that I have everything I need; *my being is well*.

In addition to defining well-being based on the good feelings that emerge from connectedness, I also define well-being in Pueblo communities from a woman's perspective and as the absence of violence and a sense of balance and prevailing justice. According to that side of the definition, Pueblo women are safe to walk alone in their communities without fear of being sexually harassed or abused and are safe from fear of physical and sexual abuse in their homes. Pueblo women's homes are the places where women's knowledges are taught, shared, modeled, and passed on to children. Pueblo homes are places where Pueblo values are demonstrated on a daily basis throughout a Pueblo person's life. Thus, Pueblo well-being from a Pueblo woman's perspective means that our homes are safe places where we can be free from fear of harm, where we can be comfortable, where the food we cook becomes infused with the good thoughts and vibes that come from the feelings of security, love, respect, and that our homes are spaces demonstrating interconnections with the

rest of the community. In this vision of well-being, Pueblo homes and Pueblo communities are spaces where there is no violence against women.

Written and oral policies

In my professional work, I have had the opportunity to view the internal operations of tribal programs and governing systems. I have observed that there is not necessarily formal written tribal policy to ensure the well-being, and by extension the safety, of Pueblo women—whether in certain Pueblos or across the 19 Pueblo nations as a politically unified group. In some cases, there is no formal written tribal policy because the Pueblo might operate according to oral tradition, which is a critical part of the cultural history of Pueblo peoples, meaning that most policies, laws, and regulations are unwritten and delivered to the people in the community primarily through oral means.

Many contextual questions came to mind when I was thinking about the issues related to developing written policies that ensure the well-being and safety of Pueblo women, which include respect for women and Mother Earth. I asked myself,

- What is the current sociopolitical environment in Pueblo communities where Pueblo leadership is primarily composed of men? What are the core values reflected in those communities?
- Did attendance at Indian boarding schools³ and other traumatic historical events have any direct influence on the beliefs, values, and resulting behaviors of Pueblo people who attended boarding school and their descendants?
- From where do existing beliefs and practices, which might be viewed as patriarchal, come? If present, how do those patriarchal beliefs contrast with the matriarchal foundations of Pueblo society?

³ For more information on American Indian boarding school experiences in the U.S., see Lomawaima & McCarty's *To remain an Indian* (2006).

- Do patriarchal beliefs, particularly those borrowed from the Spanish colonizers, have an influence on Pueblo people's contemporary attitudes, beliefs, core values, and behaviors?
- Will the topic of this commentary have any type of impact on the safety of my family, my relatives, and people in my home community?

From my perspective, what appears to be a fairly innocuous title for this commentary, "Ensuring the Safety of Pueblo and Indigenous Women Through Policy and Practice," may not be such a straightforward process. The more recent work of Laguna Pueblo scholar June Lorenzo (2017) demonstrates the complexities raised when exploring these issues, especially as she examines Pueblo law in relation to Spanish colonizing/common laws and their motives, which ultimately transformed the way Pueblo women enjoy rights (or not) today.

In conversation with many community members, we wonder whether Pueblo communities and particularly Pueblo leadership, have prioritized economic development, housing, and interacting with the various state and federal entities who are requesting consultations or participation in meetings on a daily basis. These are undeniably important concerns. At the same time, we can also be reflective—Are our communities focused on traditional, seasonal, and recurring community events in ways such that daily issues concerning the safety of women and children in the community are not being addressed adequately, except when tribal programs sponsor activities such as "Child abuse awareness month" or "Domestic violence awareness month?" Over the past decade, I have worked with tribal programs, and I have rarely seen grassroots community-sponsored (*not* tribal-government program sponsored) events that focus on the well-being and safety of Pueblo women. I have rarely witnessed events organized by Indigenous men in Pueblo communities that focus on the well-being and safety of Pueblo women. When they are held, events are organized by Indigenous and Pueblo women or advocacy organizations, and they are endorsed by a particular tribal program.

Currently in the world outside of Pueblo communities, women are coming forward to talk about sexual harassment and sexual abuse, they are naming those who have committed acts of violence towards them, and they are being heard. As this article goes to press, I ask why or why not this may be happening in Pueblo country. I am aware that these are loaded questions—historically, politically, and socially, yet I wonder if there are models or stories regarding how sexual harassment and sexual abuse is being navigated in other Indigenous communities that may share some of the same characteristics of Pueblo communities—tight knit, hierarchical, place-based, and so forth?

Culturally-based values

What I have outlined thus far lead us to revisit why there is a need for Pueblo Indian nations to adopt policy that addresses the historical and contemporary issues concerning the well-being and safety of Pueblo women. Is there a connection between my observation of the need and the lack of policy, and moreover, how can the relationship between Pueblo values of respect for Mother Earth and women address and rectify any gaps?

When Pueblo and Indigenous peoples talk about the earth as a mother, there is reverence expressed in words, songs, prayers, and behavior (protocols). Pueblo and Indigenous peoples often share common teachings in the enactment of core values of deep respect for the earth mother, the sun, the moon, the stars and all living beings, including Pueblo and Indigenous women (Aikman, 2002; Cook-Lynn, 2008; Mankiller & Steinem, 2011; Sanchez, 2017; Trask, 1996). The earth mother nurtures us, births and grows, and we women are reflections of earth as we have the ability to nurture, to bring life into the world, and grow and change. In my short time with earth mother, I have seen drastic changes that are caused primarily by men who are ravaging her, disrespecting her and attempting to control her. Her face and body are changing as her forests are decimated, her rivers, streams and oceans are being polluted, and greedy corporations are making money off of her. I see the same increase in disrespectful and violent behavior towards women and others who are being abused, raped,

trafficked, and murdered. I expressed those reflections in a poem that was part of my plenary presentation on the connections between Violence Against Women and Violence Against Mother Earth on November 11, 2017, at the Seventh Generation Fund's gathering, "Keeping the Homefires Burning,"

Oh dear Mother
How sad you must be
They have desecrated your body, polluted your waters,
disrespected your
 natural beauty
Yet you continue to provide
gaspings at times for breath

You have endured rape and unspeakable abuse
Yet you are there for us,
 reminding us to be strong
 reminding us of our responsibilities to you and all life

We are one with you, as Indigenous women

We are strong with you

We are resilient with you

We deserve to be protected
You deserve to be protected and honored

Thank you Mother Earth for all that you do

At the same time, we might ask if there is corresponding respect or lack thereof for Pueblo and Indigenous women that is actively practiced through the behavior of people in our communities, and why this is not being discussed. Perhaps these are considered women's issues or less prioritized

social issue, or is the connection between women and Mother Earth not being made?

In Pueblo stories that I have heard (and I will generalize for the sake of conversation here), Pueblo people were placed on the earth mother with explicit instructions on how to live in the Fourth world where they had journeyed to from within the earth mother and past the First, Second and Third worlds. In preparation for their emergence into the Fourth world where we live today, Pueblo people were given the instructions and values to have respect for all life, for the earth mother, the father sun, the stars, the moon and everything in the universe. Those lessons are often repeated through songs, stories, and through daily reminders of our behavior as we go through our lives. Those lessons have led to the development of unwritten policies that have been carried down from generation to generation.

Even though we, Pueblo people, have these daily and regular reminders or in other words, unwritten policies (our “instructions”), our behaviors and actions are indisputably changing, and we can observe disrespect for women and likely due as well to influences and learned behaviors from the world outside our Pueblo communities. However, in the world we live in today where we necessarily interact with external national and other governments, there is a need for written policies in addition to our unwritten policies because some of those unwritten policies, rules, and lessons carried from generation to generation have also been transforming over time, and in some instances, are forgotten or maybe purposefully left aside for whatever reason. Our behaviors, actions, attitudes, and practices have shifted, and this shift impacts our well-being, and I see written policies as one possible intervention.

I also see how unwritten policies, rules and lessons are playing a huge part in the social change work taking place through organizations like Tewa Women United, Inc. (TWU), which was created out of the collective gathering of Pueblo women from the Tewa-speaking Pueblos of northern New Mexico who were concerned about the “traumatic effects of colonization, religious inquisition, and militarization leading to issues such as alcoholism, suicide, domestic/sexual violence and environmental

violence.” Through TWU, these women gathered to support each other, to reclaim and create safe spaces to share their experiences as a circle of grandmothers, to support projects that address sexual abuse, to reclaim birth wisdom, and to address environmental and health issues that are impacting the northern Pueblos and Mother Earth. An example of TWU’s restorative work is their annual “Gathering for Mother Earth” held each September to bring people together to teach and learn from one another and focus positive energies towards protecting Mother Earth. Another example of their restorative work is the practice of honoring the sacredness of birth through the doula program⁴, which is reclaiming unwritten policies and teachings that women, as life bearers, are to be protected, honored and respected.

Approaches, Implications, Recommendations

Self-Determination and Customary Laws and Policies

I assert that there is a need for Pueblo and Indigenous people to act according to their respective values, which are fundamentally concerned with all life and respect for Mother Earth, which includes women. I am concerned about future generations of Indigenous women and girls being safe in their homes and communities, and I am concerned about the future of the world we live in today and whether or not we will have a world where future generations of Pueblo and Indigenous peoples can live our well-being.

Based on my international advocacy work, I have observed that we have resources that place us in fellowship with other Indigenous peoples worldwide. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the United States during President Barack Obama’s presidential term of office. The UNDRIP has since been

⁴ Doulas, in the definition from Tewa Women United’s perspective are “Mother’s Helpers” which is translated from the Tewa language and they assist with the birthwork, provide services for the whole family and honor the sacredness of birth.

adopted by all of the nation/States around the world and includes standards that those States are currently being challenged to uphold. In the U.S., while the UNDRIP is discussed in Indigenous scholarship, it is not being implemented. One avenue towards implementation is for American Indian and Alaska Native nations and communities to adopt the standards in the UNDRIP in developing policies and laws that respect the rights of Indigenous peoples in their communities. Regarding the safety of women and overall community well-being, Article 22.2 upholds,

States shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the *full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination.* (my emphasis)

Although the Article is focused on political nation states, the Article provides guidance to Indigenous nations who could include this language in their own tribal policies and laws to ensure the safety of American Indian and Alaska Native women to be free from violence.

Another Article, Article 3, in the UNDRIP supports the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and states,

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they *freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.* (my emphasis)

Customary laws and practices may serve as the foundation for a given Pueblo's policy that ensures the safety and well-being of Pueblo women and children. This may be done without revealing our customary laws and practices and may be accomplished from a Pueblo values perspective. As Pueblo peoples, if we take the approach through prayer and being mindful about where we are in this world, our positionalities, and if we are able to look again and again at the stories and songs that have been passed down through time immemorial, we can create written policy that reflects the values of the Pueblo and demonstrates respect for Pueblo women. We will undoubtedly experience challenges and obstacles as we balance our Indigenous values and other approaches, yet by incorporating respect, love,

and community connectivity, we can be strong together to demonstrate that we are self-determining Indigenous nations.

Conclusion

In 2018, I flew with my Pueblo doctoral cohort colleagues to Winnipeg, Canada, for a course focusing on the connections within Indigenous community ecologies where health and gender disparities have mobilized Indigenous community members, scholars, researchers, and allies to rethink the discourse and significance of human rights.

I had a window seat. Flying over the earth provides a perspective to see where Indigenous ancestral lands have been taken into ownership whether it be tribal, state or federal. Ownership is clearly demarcated by the patterns created by fences, roads, and other man-made markers that may be seen as boxes and circles upon the lands. Those boxes and circles upon the lands and the rooted and persistent concepts of ownership, brought to my mind the types of confinements and controls that have dictated how Indigenous and Pueblo women are treated in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere. On a daily basis in the current world, I am bombarded with stories about Indigenous women who are treated without respect—confined, controlled, assaulted, owned, kept within borders or within homes, and abused.

Yet, Pueblo and Indigenous peoples have the ability to do something to change the terms of ownership that have been forced upon us. We can plant the seeds for long-lasting and written policies that will underscore Pueblo and Indigenous respect for all life and respect for Pueblo and Indigenous women, and we can start with what we envision, like well-being, and according to Indigenous terms. Furthermore, we have the ability to cultivate those seeds through our behaviors.

Thank you for listening, for reading, and for being with me as I share these concerns, issues, and recommendations in the hopes that positive social change and transformation may occur in ways that reflect our Indigenous and Pueblo teachings and on our own terms.

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