

THE STERILIZATION
OF
NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN
IN
OKLAHOMA

by Aerielle Koss

LESSON PLAN 2

HISTORY, 9



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These lesson plans are created with Farina King and the History Department at Northeastern State University. Students of the program – most of them active schoolteachers – study areas of the political and cultural history of Native American individuals and tribes and create thorough, engaging lesson plans based on their research. It is through the generosity of Farina King and her students that the Museum of Native American History is able to share this wonderful material with the Education community, with the hope of creating a broader and more inclusive understanding of Native American history and culture.

This lesson plan was created by Aerielle Koss



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How To Use This File

This file is designed to give you all the resources necessary to create a compelling lesson plan using whichever program or lesson planning style you are most comfortable with. All of the text can be easily copied and pasted, and all websites referenced can be reached directly using their hyperlinks.

A separate sheet containing links to all of the web resources has been included so that the links can be shared with students without including the lesson plan.

Overview & Lesson Layout

In this lesson we will follow the events surrounding the forced sterilization of Native American women in Oklahoma, specifically in the 1970s surrounding the discoveries by Dr. Connie Uri at the Indian Health System's Claremore Indian Hospital.

MATERIALS INCLUDED

- Lesson Layout Grid (p. 4)
- Works Cited (p. 5)
- “Health Injustice Against Native American Women in Oklahoma”: essay by Aerielle Mitchell
- Student Links (adjoining .PDF)

SUBJECT

Eugenics and Reproductive Justice

KEYWORDS

Women's Rights
Eugenics
Reproductive Justice
Civil Rights Movement

LESSON LAYOUT GRID

	<i>teacher guide</i>	<i>student guide</i>
<i>objectives</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address group primarily affected by sterilization • How was sterilization discovered? • Explore what IHS and Creek Nation health are doing differently to ensure proper practices are maintained and patients are protected. 	<p>Refer to Dr. Uri interview by Jim Berland (Audio Recording). https://www.pacificradioarchives.org/recording/bc1963</p>
<i>information</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women who had been using the Claremore Indian Hospital for regular clinics and emergency services had been sterilized without consent. Many were deceived and told they could have a procedure later to counter this, or they were forced to sign forms without fully knowing what the procedure consisted of. 	<p>Read "Around the Campfire: Racism in Medicine." https://nativetimes.com/archives/22/1783-around-the-campfire-racism-in-medicine</p>
<i>verification</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the many ways in which exposure of these scandals were covered by the media and eventually led to a trial. 	<p>https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/OK/OK.html#:~:text=Some%20estimates%20place%20the%20percentage,included%20records%20from%20Oklahoma%20City.</p>
<i>activity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the various types of ways in which Native Americans are standing up against attempted genocide and reproductive justice. 	<p>Read the Forward Together article on Reproductive Justice https://forwardtogether.org/tools/the-road-to-reproductive-justice-native-americans-in-new-mexico/</p>
<i>summary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are we doing now as a country and as fellow Native Americans to ensure this does not happen again? What has changed in health care? 	<p>Refer to this scholarly article: https://www.nhd.org/sites/default/files/sophiashepherd-nationals.pdf</p>

Works Cited

Chaudhuri, Jonodev O. "Opinion: Our Muscogee People Suffered for Generations In a Hope of a Better Tomorrow. It's Finally Here." *The Washington Post*. July 14, 2020.

For this source, I plan to cite the constant struggle of the Muscogee Creek Nation as compared to health. I plan to speak on the many problems the community has faced with the layout of the health system and how it has changed since then.

Chavers, Dean. "Around the Campfire: Racism in Medicine." <https://nativetimes.com>. May 24, 2009.

From this source I would like to discuss the assortment of struggles that men and women of the Indian nations in Oklahoma have faced, and the prejudice against them in the health field.

"Decades after forced sterilization, Native American Women in the US still face rejection And retraumatization in healthcare." *Lady Science*. September 11, 2019.

This source discusses the attempts at genocide of the Native Americans and how tribal women are combatting it by continuing to reproduce and have children, despite the many years of oppression that indigenous women endured. This article also goes in depth about reproductive justice within local tribes.

Laurence, Jane. "The Indian Health Services of Native American Women." Vol. 24, No.

This article highlights the issues faced by Native American in Oklahoma and other parts of the country.

Rickert, Levi. "Allegations of Unwanted Hysterectomies at ICE Facility Reminescent of Feds' Mass Sterilization of Native Women in 1970s." *Native News Online*. <http://nativenewsonline.net/opinion>. September 20, 2020.

Rickert cites the horrible happenings at Claremore Indian Hospital in the 1970s and compares it to current events.

"Sterilization of Young Native Women alleged at Indian Hospital—48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone." *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Summer, 1974.

This source holds the interviews of the doctor who uncovered the mass sterilizations against the consent of Native American women and female children in the 1960s and 1970s. Dr. Pinkerton-Uri's work led to a mass uncovering of incidents and helped protect tribal women of Oklahoma in the future from facing such horrific procedures against their consent in the future.

Tarpy, Sally J. "Native American Women and Coerced Sterilization: On the Trail of Tears of the 1970s." *American and Culture Research Journal*. 24:2. (2000). 1-22.

Tarpy speaks on the Native women of Oklahoma and elsewhere, explaining that Native American women have always faced problems in the health field and an immediate prejudice which leads to a difficulty in being treated properly.

The Muscogee (Creek) Nation Department of Health. Our History. <https://creekhealth.org>.

The Muscogee Creek's official health site, which briefly describes their history as well as their reorganization and improvements that are being done to ensure healthcare is more accessible to their tribal members.

Health Injustice Against Native American Women in Oklahoma

Aerielle Mitchell

Since the establishment of the Indian Health Systems, many indigenous people have suffered significantly low care from their health providers. It is not secret that since its founding in 1955, there have been many occurrences of malpractice and overall mistreatments of tribes not just in Oklahoma, but all over the country. One of the most significant health related scandals to take place in the state was the surplus of sterilizations that were found to be done at Claremore Indian Hospital in the late 1970s by Dr. Uri. Many women and female children were victims of several white doctors who practiced in Claremore who were blatantly lying to their patients to sterilize them to keep them from having children later. Regardless of their reasons, this scandal brought forth an ongoing issue which had been taking place for hundreds of years; Native Americans have been controlled and harassed by people who claim to know better, and women have faced a huge prejudice in the health community because of their backgrounds.

In 1978, a young woman entered Dr. Connie Uri's office in Los Angeles for a routine appointment and asked her about a womb transplant because her and her husband wanted to start a family. She was surprised to find out that no such procedure existed and explained that years before when she was only fifteen years old a

doctor at Claremore Indian Hospital had convinced her to have a procedure done and that later, in years to come, she would be able to reverse it. It was quickly evident that this doctor who performed the procedure years before purposely lied to the patient in order to sterilize her without her knowledge. The young woman left Dr. Uri's office completely defeated, but it sparked enough outrage and curiosity in the doctor, who was of Choctaw and Cherokee lineage herself, to continue to research the occurrence.

This would not be Connie Pinkerton-Uri's first time to encounter such misconduct. In years to come, she would come across two other females of Native American heritage who were given hysterectomies without their knowledge. When she began to take an in depth look at the procedures, she was shocked to find hundreds of women and girls had been sterilized in Claremore, Oklahoma alone. Once Dr. Uri released her research in 1974, other tribal organizations began to investigate IHS allegations, and there were several accounts of blatant malpractice and attempts to purposefully mislead tribal women in order to achieve a grave outcome.

Dr. Uri's research into sterilization also brings focus to another topic that involves Native American women on a large scale; reproductive justice. Though the sterilization of these indigenous women was cruel and ethically wrong, we must ask why they tried to keep these women from reproducing in the first place. From the research and the "explanations" the doctors had for their actions, it was easy to decipher that ultimately genocide and the "success" of the white race was the main focus. Though many cited a concern for the children to be born to mothers who were not ready for a family, specifically because of alcoholism and poverty, or not being married or having a support system, the ultimate goal can be dwindled down to abolishing all who did not fit the ideals of the American that a majority of the Eurocentric generation hoped for. Though not everyone was guilty of dismissing Native Americans,

prejudice still existed in the late twentieth century.

Most of these procedures were taking place even after there was a temporary moratorium in effect prohibiting doctors from performing sterilization practices on women under the age of twenty-one. In her studies, Pinkerton-Uri found that most of the procedures were done as tubal ligations, closing of the fallopian tubes. Statistically, most of the women that were targeted for the unknown procedures were full-blooded Indian or had a high degree of blood quantum. This meant that one in four Native women were unable to have children without knowing the full reason as to why until after the hysterectomies had already taken place.

Reproductive justice has been a significant movement across Native American women since forced sterilization and even attempted genocide related to events such as smallpox have been evident here in the United States. Many women of indigenous heritage are fighting back against these blatant attempts to extinguish their race by consciously having children and regulating their own methods of reproduction. For hundreds of years, Native women had been the sole owners of their bodies, using methods of childbearing and specific timing in pregnancies since long before Europeans started to invade the lands. Puritans saw their methods as barbaric and uncivilized, and attempted to outlaw their ways of reproduction from early on. When it was established in the late 1970s that nearly 25% of all Native American women in our country had been forcibly sterilized against their prior consent or even their knowledge, it exposed a significant contrast in the pregnancies of white women as compared to indigenous. After facing such heartbreak, many of the tribal women who had lost their ability to have children committed suicide or turned to substances to ease the pain of significant loss.

In 1978, Congress held a hearing and put new laws into effect that would further prevent unwarranted sterilization from hap-

pening to indigenous women in the future. In their verdict, they deemed that women who did not fully understand what the procedure was could not rightfully sign a consent form. Previously, many young women had been coerced into the procedure without a full explanation as to what it was, and they were purposely misled into signing a document they did not understand. These new guidelines would prevent such outcomes from happening. Furthermore, sterilization would no longer be funded federally, which gave less incentive for the doctors to perform them. Though there are several details about what was decided in these hearings for prevention of further reproductive mistreatment of Native American women, there is no proof or documentation on whether these doctors were held accountable for their actions. Many of the doctors who performed these procedures found loopholes to document "legality," by having the patients they performed on sign consent forms without true comprehension. Though these hearings addressed a significant issue, failure to incarcerate those guilty of misconduct further revealed how little white American society cared for the lives of Native American women.