There Is No Word for Feminism in My Language

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As long as I can remember, the Diné (or Navajo, as we are also referred to) women in my life have always shown courage, determination, strength, persistence, and endurance in their own special way. My female relatives lived their lives within the Diné matrilineal culture that valued, honored, and respected them. These women passed on to their daughters not only their strength, but the expectation to assume responsibility for the family, and therefore were expected to act as leaders for the family and the tribe. Despite five hundred years of Western patriarchal intrusion, this practice continues.

My mother dropped out of high school, ran away to the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and ended up becoming pregnant for my father, who had recently returned from World War II. They married, and more children followed. After several children and a failing marriage, my mother gathered all us kids up, and we went to live near her mother, who was teaching on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. In the early 1950s, my mother took her young family of four boys and one daughter to live in a hogan, a Diné traditional home. Our home had no plumbing or electricity. With less than a high school education, my mother took a job as a cook with the Bureau of Indian Affairs school, where she cooked over institutional stoves, washed heavy steel pots, and served food to Diné boarding school students. My mother, with her trays and cumbersome pans, and I, with my word processor, are just one generation apart.
I have children of my own now. I hold a Ph.D., write, and teach in a large Southwestern research university. I live a relatively comfortable life, unlike that of my mother and her generation of Indian women, who were for the most part thrust into a world that required them to know how to fill out job applications and pass a driver’s license test. The world had changed for these women, who were still bound to the traditional ways of living and providing for the family. I imagine my mother now and the daily struggles Indian women from her era had to endure and still endure. I ask myself: How did this previous generation of Diné women do it? How did they survive the hand-to-mouth existence that became more common after boarding schools and the introduction of a monetary system? Tremendous changes took place in the lives of these women, particularly during and after World War II. However, this is not a story about “those poor” Indian women who were assimilated, colonized, Christianized, or victimized. This is a story about how these women cling to the roots of their female lineage despite the many institutional forces imposed on Indian communities and how they continue to survive despite five hundred years of colonialism. The Diné women continue to possess the qualities of leadership and strength and continue to endure and ultimately to pass on those qualities to their daughters, even though there is no word for feminism in the Diné language.

Diné women have always worked to help support the family, even before the reservation system was established. Later, when the white man established trading posts on the reservation, the women wove and sold blankets in exchange for food and supplies. While the male roles diminished as protectors and providers for the family, the women’s roles persisted and, in many instances, the women adapted more easily.

Changing Woman, sometimes known as White Shell Woman, is the principal mythological deity in the Diné culture. She gave to the Diné the first clans and the guidelines of how the Diné should live their lives. She birthed the Twin Heroes who destroyed the monsters that were ravaging the people. She underwent the first Kinaaldá ceremony, the puberty ceremony for young women. Through her, the matriarchal system of the Diné was established.

The Diné culture takes its identity from the female, not the male, through clan membership. Changing Woman created from her body the first clans. “I am from the Sleepy Rock People clan, born for the Bitter Water clan” means that I am born from my mother and born for my father. This distinction is important because it means that we are born from our mother’s body, and she birthed us for our father. The maternal clan is always introduced first, then the paternal clan, followed by the grandparent clans. This complex clan system prevents in-
cest and establishes kinship ties that define appropriate behavior between relatives and nonrelatives.

When I reached puberty, my mother advised me that I could no longer play with my brothers as I had as a girl child. I was a young woman and expected to behave as such. My brothers were advised that I was to be treated with appropriate behavior.

In the traditional Diné culture long ago, since there were no professions in the Western sense, one did not identify the self as teacher, writer, or cook. Instead, roles were determined by age, sex, and kinship. A girl plays the role of daughter to her mother and is introduced in that way. She carries out her responsibilities as daughter until she passes into a different phase of her life. As she matures, she is groomed by the female members of her family in preparation for a greater role, as a leader for her family and community. She is groomed for motherhood, which carries a different connotation in Diné culture than in Western culture.

The role and identity of the mother signifies creator and protector of life. Within the Diné culture mother means more than just the one who births the children and prepares and cooks the meals; she is more than a mere caregiver. She might also be a rancher, shepherd, weaver, or teacher. A woman earns the right to claim her place as a mother after the birth of her first child. The title "mother" carries with it the numerous roles needed to see to the needs of her family and clan without the necessity of revealing her other roles. It is generally understood within this context that she holds many responsibilities in being a mother. The work she does makes her role honorable. From an early age a girl is groomed to become a leader by being given responsibilities within the home so that she will be able to care for herself and her family. As she matures, her responsibilities increase in proportion to her age and abilities. However, a woman need not give birth to be called "aunt." She might be an aunt and still be thought of as a mother. The English term, "aunt," is translated as "little mother" in Diné. A non-relative may also address a woman as an aunt if she is near her/his mother's age, thereby establishing kinship and appropriate behavior. Clan relationship serves to establish familial responsibility between strangers to prevent taking sexual advantage of the female.

The term "sáani" is usually used to refer to women. However, the root of the word "sáani" refers to elderly women and men, indicating old age, wisdom, and experience from having lived a long life. The women are responsible for most of the teaching and transmittal of culture. The term, therefore, implies teaching, which refers back to "sááni," elder and wise one. Female and male elders are revered and honored for their experience and knowledge of culture in the traditional Diné world. Old age was not a stigma but an honorable stage of life.
When Changing Woman reached puberty she underwent a four-day coming-of-age ceremony that is still practiced among traditional families. It is a holistic celebration that includes the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual components of female life. For the duration of this special ceremony, the young woman is immersed in the care and advice of the women and the community. The initiate participates in an event that celebrates her transformation from girl to woman. When I was twelve I participated in the Kinaaldá, Walking into Beauty, ceremony.

The ritualistic run into the east began in the August dawn, just at sunrise. My paternal grandmother woke me every morning for three days and said, “Nídiidááh, shinálí. Ha’íí’áh. K’ad nídiilyeed.” Wake up, granddaughter. The sun is rising. It’s time for you to run. My soft sheepskin bed felt warm and cozy yet, and I didn’t want to leave it so soon. Rising, I smoothed my hair and clothes and pulled on my moccasins. The desert dawn felt cool. The arid land would eventually turn warm, and the heat would shimmer from the earth like waves of water.

As I ran, my grandmother’s words came to me that I should shout to clear the stale air in my lungs to alert other plants, animal life, and most important to let the Holy People know of my transformation so that they too could be part of the ceremony. Back at my grandmother’s house, my relatives had come to help celebrate by doing the work necessary for the completion of the ceremony and by bringing gifts of food, jewelry, blankets, cloth, and money.

During this time, a female relative is chosen for a role model, a woman who possesses the desired qualities in a Diné woman: generosity, wisdom, strength of character, and one who is respected by her community. My aunt was chosen as the ideal woman. She massaged my body and through this symbolic act was molding and forming me so that I would grow by the example set by her and by Changing Woman. I was expected to show generosity, cheerfulness, and respect to my guests in the manner of Changing Woman. My diet consisted of only natural foods and liquids to keep my body sacred and healthy, nothing foreign, no processed foods. This ceremony also promotes self-control and discipline.

On the final night of the ceremony, an all-night blessing took place. I was sung into a woman by the Medicine Man and the guests that served to bless and honor my new life. At dawn my mother washed my hair with yucca soap and made me ready for the final run, at which time my brothers, grandfather, and cousins joined me. Because I held the place of honor, they could not pass me. Afterwards, the sweet corn cake that baked all night was distributed to the guests along with gifts of food, jewelry, and dry goods.

Throughout this ceremony, my body was acknowledged, celebrated, and made ready for the role of a mature woman. Reaching pu-
berty was not a shameful, dirty, and dreadful experience. Celebrating puberty with the Kinaaldá ceremony ushers the young woman into a society that values her. As I recall it now, how different this experience was from the seventh-grade teacher who taped black construction paper to the windows and gave the boys a longer lunch break, so that he could show us “The Film” on female puberty.

In this educational film, the young white girl went through her day alone with only her mother to give her instructions. The narrator advised her on the right water temperature to take a shower in and showed pictures of internal organs that resembled a Rorschach inkblot test. It was not an event that gathered family for community celebration. When our young teacher from Wyoming finally turned on the lights, his face was flushed red with embarrassment. He removed the black construction paper, replaced the film in the canister, and allowed the boys to return to the classroom. One asked what movie we had seen. No one answered him; we had felt the need to be silent. The underlying message was that puberty was a dirty and shameful business that you went through alone.

Now that I am an adult, I am beginning to understand the fuller significance of the Kinaaldá and how it continues to affect my life. Like my mother and other Indian women who grew up in a matrilineal culture, when we cross into the Western world, we see how that world values women differently. The Diné women learned this after the return from the military-enforced Long Walk, when they were forced to attend government boarding schools. Young girls were forced to leave home and learn not only an alien culture but also a vocational skill that would supposedly enable them to make a living in the white man’s world.

Though they may have found jobs in a white world as blue-collar workers, the women have always worked and didn't expect to be pampered or taken care of by their fathers or husbands. In the traditional world of my female ancestors, my great-great-grandmother made her living in a creative way. My mother was raised by her until she was old enough to attend school and would return to her for the summer. My mother tells me stories of her:

Great-grandmother needed to increase her herd of sheep. Sheep provided food and wool for the blankets that the women wove and took to the trading post to sell and trade for other goods. Great-grandmother was a weaver and had accumulated a number of flour sacks that she had bought or traded for at the trading post. She set about cutting and sewing by hand a number of skirts that Navajo women wore. When she was finished, she gathered up other items of trade to take with her. If her husband was there, he stayed behind to attend to his own work. Great-grandmother did not expect to be taken care of and treated like a helpless individual. Having made sure that
things would be taken care of at home, she left the older ones in charge and told them she would be back when she completed her business.

She saddled her horse and tied the skirts and other items together and took them with her. She rode alone through the red rocks, the cedar trees, and the places where the sagebrush scented the warm summer days. She had ridden through these canyons many times before. Her ancestors had recently moved to this high desert land. They had come from up north, from the place that is now known as Aneth, Utah. She remembered that place and knew she would take her great-granddaughter, my mother, there for a visit. Sometimes she camped alone near places of water, and other times she was a guest in other people's homes.

Sixty years later when I drive my air-conditioned van through that rugged land of my kéyah, homeland, I imagine my great-great-grandmother on her horse moving along the trees with her bundle of flour-sack skirts and herd of sheep. When she lay down to sleep at night, the stars spilled across the sky and she must have remembered the story of how the Coyote threw the ashes into the sky. She would remember to tell that story in the winter after the first snowfall. After a month or so, having made the rounds to various families, she arrived home with a herd of sheep and other items of exchange. Thus she increased her herd and her wealth, and she remained largely independent of the outside world that was fast encroaching through the trading posts, railroads, and the small town called Na’ni’zhoozhi, or Gallup, as the white traders named it.

Her daughters would eventually inherit the herd of sheep. In this society, the women usually own the family holdings such as livestock and agriculture, including the home and the possessions in it. Because she held much of the family possessions, she was responsible for its care and maintenance. She might groom a certain daughter to assume the role of main caregiver to the livestock or cornfield and would pass those possessions on to her just as she passed her clan on to her children. Men assumed different roles and were held to different expectations.

A woman brings her husband home to her family when she marries; thereby her family gains a son. It goes against traditional practice for a wife to move into her in-law's household. The matrilineal system works for the female in that her place within her immediate family is already established, and only conflict will result if she moves into her in-law's household. A woman could divorce her spouse simply by leaving his personal possessions outside the door. The extended family remained intact, and the family could continue to assume its responsibility for raising the children. My mother says no good came to a woman who moved into her husband's family.

A man could sometimes take more than one wife. However, he
had to ask permission of his first wife. Great-grandma Lupton had recently given birth when her husband asked to take a second wife. Wanting no part of his arrangement, she packed up her baby daughter on her back and walked home. She set out from what is now known as Fort Defiance, Arizona, and made the thirty-mile walk across the arroyos, through the tall pines, and past the place where long ago the Diné and the Utes fought a battle until she reached her mother’s home. Her mother must have been glad to see her and probably scolded her for moving in with her husband’s family in the first place.

In undergraduate school I came across the term “feminism” in a women’s studies class. I thought if that term applied to women, it must also apply to Indian women. When Indian women joined the feminist dialogue in the 1970s, we found that equality for women was generally directed toward white women’s issues. The issues that were relevant to our tribal communities were not part of white feminist dialogue. Most Indian families were struggling just to survive. How could Indian women discourse in the feminist dialogue of the 1970s or participate in the symbolic act of burning their bras? Some probably owned only one bra and would not even consider burning it. Indian women were on the serving line just about everywhere. Most Indian women ended up in low-paying, dead-end jobs that offered few benefits unless they went to work in government institutions as unskilled labor. On an economic hierarchy, Indian women were on the bottom rung and going nowhere. However, within the last twenty or so years Indian women have made strides in the Western world in terms of education, jobs, and political organizations. When we leave our traditional world and step into the Western world, feminism becomes an issue, and we must confront and deal with the same issues that affect all women. Nevertheless, Diné women have made great advances, and they have done so with the roles and models set out by Changing Woman and their female ancestors.

In the Diné world, a young person grows up knowing that the women are quite capable of being in charge. I grew up seeing their strength manifest itself even in small ways. I grew up knowing that my mother, who divorced my father several years before, would drive us through the thirty miles of muddy reservation road to get groceries. I never doubted that she would get us through the dizzying snowstorm that fell on the deserted dirt road alone with my brothers and me in the back seat. It meant knowing that when we needed financial help, we could go to one of our female relatives. It meant seeing my aunt put on her old cowboy boots and saddle up her horse and drive in the cattle that we branded and vaccinated according to her instructions. The men in our family understood this, and we all worked together to get the work done . . . no resentment, no insecurity about male roles. The livestock mostly belonged to her, so it was only fair that she was responsible for their care. Years later, this responsibility went to her
fourth daughter who, at branding time, called out her instructions to us just as her mother had done.

My stories are not unusual within the Diné world because we know the strength of the women. Though I write about the women from my family and tribal community, I see many of the same qualities in the women I have met from other tribes. We didn’t need to fight for our place in our societies because it surrounded us constantly.

Within the Four Sacred Mountains of the Diné lay the red canyon walls of Canyon de Chelly, carved by the strength of the wind and water; it is the same strength we see carved into the lives of the Diné women. There was no need for feminism because of our matrilineal culture. And it continues. For Diné women, there is no word for feminism.