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‘Indigenous communities are fighting to keep our families together’

written by Mahtowin Munro
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Protesters defend the Indian Child Welfare Act outside the U.S. Supreme Court, Nov. 9, 2022.

Talk given by Mahtowin Munro of United American Indians of New England (UAIINE) at the webinar "What We Can Learn from Cuba's 'Code of Freedom' for Families," hosted by Women In Struggle/Mujeres En Lucha on Jan. 22.

The new Families Code is an incredible achievement of the Cuban people, born out of thousands of hours of discussions and a desire to ensure that ideas and policies properly reflect what families should have at this historic time in their socialist system.

I contrast what Cuba has with what we have in the U.S. - or perhaps I should say,

what we don't have. I will largely speak about this from an Indigenous family perspective, but we know that conditions are also abysmal for other oppressed and marginalized communities.

Because I have been to Cuba, I know that there are many supports for families there, with daycare and health care right there in their communities. Housing is a right, whereas here, there are many thousands of unhoused children – more than 100,000 in New York City alone.

In Cuba, families are supported, and the children are treated with great care, and this is reflected in the confidence of the children themselves and the extension of key rights through the Families Code.

Here in the U.S., children are criminalized as part of the school-to-prison pipeline. Many thousands of children, disproportionately children of color, are detained, disciplined at schools, and subjected to harsh discipline. Some of these children are as young as kindergarten age.

In the U.S., it can be hard to even have a family. Back in the 1970s, it was revealed that the U.S. government was sterilizing Indigenous women, Puerto Rican women, and Black women without their consent.

It can also be hard to choose not to have a family. This is true not only because of Roe v. Wade being overturned. For instance, the Indian Health Service, upon which many Indigenous people rely, does not provide abortion services. So Native child-bearers must overcome substantial hurdles in order to get the services they need.

Indigenous, Black, and other women of color are less likely to have the prenatal care that they need as well. In addition, maternal mortality and infant mortality rates are much higher in Black and Indigenous communities than for white people.

Boarding schools = concentration camps

The attacks on Indigenous families have been severe and have endured for generations. These attacks are not accidental but are key features of settler colonialism and capitalism. Because settlers and the U.S. government have been dedicated to stealing Indigenous lands and extracting resources from the lands, Indigenous families and communities have been shattered in many ways in order to weaken ties to the land and to make it easier to steal and exploit even more land and resources. These attacks are meant to destroy our spirits and cultures, break our communities, and break our ties to the land.

The Indian boarding schools that were established in Canada and the U.S. in the latter part of the 1800s were very much part of consolidating these attacks that had been occurring since invasion. The Canadian and U.S. governments worked hand in hand with churches to fill the seats at these schools.

While some Indigenous families were persuaded that their children would be better off at the schools, many families were coerced and told that they would not receive their rations if they did not let their children be removed, at a time of starvation when many Indigenous people were denied the right to hunt and fish on their own homelands. Many children were forced to attend these schools, even at the point of being kidnapped from their home communities.

Once at the schools, which in reality were not schools but concentration camps for kids and instruments of genocide, children were stripped of their clothing and put into uniforms, had their hair cut off, were beaten for speaking their own tribal languages, and were physically and sexually abused on a routine basis.

In some of the schools, children were not allowed to return home at all for years. When they became older and went back home, they often no longer felt they belonged and could not even speak their own language. Children died at these so-called schools by the thousands.

These institutions did not close until the 1960s and, in some cases, later than that. In the U.S. and Canada, there have been recent efforts by Indigenous people to speak the truth about what happened at these institutions, to demand reparations, to talk about the resulting intergenerational trauma, and to begin the very hard work of trying to find and identify unmarked graves at these schools.

Far from being over, the attacks on Indigenous families continued. By the 1970s, about a third of Native children in the U.S. had been taken from their families and adopted, usually by non-Native families, where they grew up without knowing who they were.

ICWA under attack

Following a huge effort by tribes and individuals, the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978 and was intended to keep Native children in Native communities.

However, the ICWA is now under attack. Right-wing think tanks like the Goldwater Institute, evangelicals, and funding from energy companies have led to a case now before the Supreme Court that would and may overturn ICWA.

Indigenous children are also much more likely to be in foster care, with many hurdles existing before their families can get the children returned.

There are many more attacks against our families, including the ongoing epidemic of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit people in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere. In the U.S., at least 84% of Native women have experienced violence. While the government and police often say that this is due to the violence of Native men, in fact, it is non-Natives who commit the vast majority of this violence.

Native women are murdered at a rate of 10 times the national average. The rates in urban areas, where the majority of Native people live, are also disproportionately

high. Indigenous women hold families and cultures together. When one of them is attacked, disappears, or is killed, the impact is shattering.

This is not a new issue, but rather is part of the ongoing violence against all Indigenous peoples that first began when Europeans arrived.

The violence against Indigenous women, Two Spirit people and children has deep roots in the invasion and colonization of Indigenous homelands and in white supremacy, marginalization, and poverty. The violence is a mechanism of domination and oppression. It is intended to terrorize, disrupt and demoralize Indigenous populations. It is a direct function of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and capitalism.

But Indigenous communities throughout the Americas have been fighting back and are continuing to do everything possible to keep our families together, strengthen our communities, and defend the land and water.

