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Feminists or Reformers? American Indian Women and Political Activism in Phoenix, 1965-1980

PÄIVI HOIKKALA

In 1928 the Institute for Government Research published the results of its study on the conditions of the nation's indigenous population. This inquiry, commonly known as the Meriam report, included a chapter on "migrated Indians," acknowledging the fact that American Indians had begun to move away from reservations to the nation's urban areas. The report estimated the number of these Indians at less than 10,000 nationally, but recognized that "general social and economic forces will inevitably operate to accelerate the migration of Indians from reservations to industrial communities."¹ This prediction proved correct. The decades since World War II especially have witnessed a major geographic redistribution of the Indian population in the United States from reservations to urban centers. This change in residence patterns resulted partly from the relocation and employment assistance programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), but general trends in American society also contributed to the migrations. World War II brought many Indian women and men to cities through military service or employment in the war industries; some stayed after the war was over. Changes in the nation's eco-

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conomic structure led to a decrease in agricultural employment, and large numbers of rural people of all races and ethnic backgrounds moved to new jobs in urban areas. Educational and recreational opportunities in the city offered further incentives to move. An increasing number of American Indians took advantage of these opportunities, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s.²

Clearly, then, urbanization has been a major trend in American Indian history since World War II, yet few historians have addressed this urban experience. In the 1970s, sociologists and anthropologists explored some of the reasons for and effects of urbanization. The authors of these studies generally agree on the reasons for migration, but in their attempts to measure Indian urbanization on a success-failure scale, they offer a depressing picture of life in the city: high mobility, social disintegration, substance abuse, crime, and violence.³ Such an image of "the urban Indian" not only perpetuates negative notions of Native Americans, but also offers a limited view of life in the city. The fact that more than half of the nation's Indian population today lives in urban areas points to the conclusion that they have made cities their home. Furthermore, the variety of Indian institutions and organizations in the cities exemplifies their participation in urban life. It is important to look at these positive experiences of building an Indian community in the city, while not forgetting the difficulties that remain part of the adjustment to urban living. To do so, we need to turn to the Indian people themselves for evaluations of their experiences. It is especially important to include women who often are the cultural brokers—and cultural preservers—in the urban environment, thus playing an essential role in creating a sense of community in the city.

This article briefly examines women in this process of community building in Phoenix, Arizona, concentrating on the years between 1965 and 1980. The Indian population in the city grew significantly in the 1960s, bringing to the forefront the many issues that reservation residents faced in the urban environment. At the same time, the federal government, under the auspices of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, devoted attention and monies to poor and disadvantaged urban communities. American Indians in Phoenix used this opportunity to start a variety of services in the city. By 1980, the Indian community had matured and developed a structure that warranted an unprecedented role for Native Americans as an interest

group in Phoenix. Interviews with activists in the community reveal women's significant contributions to this process. They served as volunteers in church organizations, worked as professionals in the Phoenix Indian Center, and attempted to organize the community as a political force in the city. As they gained experience with the public space in their community work, they also became aware of power relationships that limited their choices and denied them their rights as Indian women. This awareness led to their organizing as women and to their identification of issues in terms of gender, displaying attitudes and opinions reflective of feminism. However, interviews with these women offer a very different perspective on their motivation and their relationship to feminism. Feminists or reformers? This article allows Indian women to determine the answer.

Throughout the history of Phoenix, Native Americans have represented only a small segment of the total metropolitan population. According to the 1990 census, Indians counted for 1.85 percent of the population of Phoenix proper.⁴ Other than the Yaqui settlement of Guadalupe in south Phoenix, the city has also lacked a clearly identifiable Indian neighborhood, although Native Americans have tended to settle in the areas close to the Phoenix Indian School and the Indian Health Service (IHS).

Despite their small numbers, American Indians have left their mark on Phoenix, and today it is clearly an "Indian city." In addition to the Indian urban population, the four reservations in the vicinity of Phoenix—Salt River, Fort McDowell, Gila River, and Ak Chin—add to their visibility in the city. Phoenix has also developed into a major administrative center for Indian affairs. Besides the BIA and the IHS, Phoenix houses the offices of several statewide Native American organizations. These agencies draw reservation residents to town on tribal business and provide employment opportunities in the urban area. Many activities centered around the Phoenix Indian High School until it closed in 1990, but other educational facilities in the metropolitan area continue to bring Indian youth into the urban environment. Finally, Phoenix is a major center of Southwestern Native culture. Throughout the year, the nearby reservations and local Indian clubs organize powwows and other cultural events in the metropolitan area. The Heard Museum and the Pueblo Grande Museum not only promote awareness of Native art and history, but also sponsor annual

Indian markets, attracting artists and craftsmen from around the country. In addition, there are numerous galleries specializing in Indian arts and crafts, especially in the city of Scottsdale immediately east of Phoenix.

When the city was founded in 1870, Anglo Phoenicians had little tolerance for the Indians who came into town to sell their handicrafts and firewood, to deliver grains to the local mills, and to acquire supplies on which they had come to depend. Contemporary newspaper comments suggest the irritation that local residents felt about Indians in public places; especially offensive was the scant clothing and the occasional intoxication of these frequent visitors. In 1881 the city passed its first piece of restrictive legislation against Native Americans, requiring that they wear proper clothing and leave town before sundown.⁵ The ordinance did not keep Indians from coming into Phoenix to conduct business. In her autobiography, Anna Moore Shaw, a Pima from the Gila River reservation, recalls how her people got around this restriction:

Then a young brave had a bright idea. "I know! Let's buy one or two overalls. Then we'll take turns wearing them into town!" A basket was passed around and each person threw in his few coins.... It so happened that there was a mesquite thicket nearby [the city] . . . , and it was just the right spot for the Indians to change their clothes. . . . When it was evening and all [men] had bought their groceries, they rolled up their overalls and safely hid them in the thorny branches of the mesquite. Then they mounted their ponies and rode home.⁶

The opening of the Phoenix Indian School in 1891 marked a significant event in the formation of the city's Indian community. Not only did it bring Indian youngsters into town, but it also signaled the beginning of the development of Phoenix into a center of Indian administration. The establishment of a sanatorium next to the school in 1909 provided the next step in this process, and by the 1940s, the two institutions had become focal points for all Native Americans in the state. Furthermore, the Indian school encouraged the students to establish homes and look for employment in the city after graduation. The outing program served the same goal of assimilation by sending Indian girls to work as domestics in Phoenix families while the boys worked in menial tasks at local business enterprises.⁷

Although most school children returned to their home reservations, a small number remained in the city, including Anna Moore Shaw. In 1920 she married her school sweetheart Ross Shaw, a Pima from Salt River, and according to Pima tradition, the couple returned to live with the husband's parents on the reservation. In her autobiography, Shaw poignantly illustrates the difficulties they experienced returning to reservation life after their education that "had prepared us to bring in money from the white man's world; it would be wrong to waste all those years of schooling on a life of primitive farming."⁸ The Shaws moved back to Phoenix where Ross Shaw got a job at the American Railway Express Company loading trains and eventually advancing to the position of supervisor of drivers; Anna Moore Shaw tended to the family household in a multiracial neighborhood of mainly Mexican Americans, Indians, and blacks.⁹

As the caretaker and the housekeeper, Anna Moore Shaw provided the focus for the family, reflecting the pivotal role of traditional support networks in the adjustment to the city. The family's outside interests centered on the Central Presbyterian Church.¹⁰ Formally organized in 1915, the church quickly assumed a character as the "Indian church" in the city. Drawing its membership largely from among Native Americans, its activities targeted this constituency. Central Presbyterian also served a mediating function in the community. Worship services and social activities brought together people from different tribal groups and from different walks of life. Residents from nearby reservation communities also participated in church services and other events. Finally, the congregation included non-Indian members. The church thus offered a cultural mediating ground between different tribal cultures, between the reservation and the city, and between Indians and non-Indians. Central Presbyterian became the "one place [where Indians] mix with white men but still control things."¹¹

World War II marked an important watershed in the history of Central Presbyterian, reflecting the changes in Indian communities brought about by the war experience. As the city attracted more Native Americans in search of employment opportunities, church membership diversified. In 1949, Central Presbyterian also received its own building—an event of great symbolic meaning. The church building was the tangible manifestation of an Indian community in the city, and it gave them legitimacy as part of the larger American Indian community in

Arizona. Furthermore, the church increasingly took on the role as the nexus for the urban support structure as traditional support networks proved insufficient to care for all the needs of the rapidly growing urban Indian population.¹²

In this context, members of the congregation belonged to an extended urban Indian family. Women active in the church assumed a role as community mothers as their familial duties now included the entire Indian congregation at Central Presbyterian. The Women's Missionary Society provided food and refreshments at church events and engaged in charity and fundraising activities. In 1956 the Society sent two women to leadership training, signaling a change toward more prominence of women in the church organization. The ordination of the first female elder, Anna Moore Shaw, in 1958 officially recognized women's authority.¹³ Shaw's involvement also exemplifies women's work in the community during these years of growth. In addition to her commitment to the church, Shaw extended her involvement to the larger community through PTA meetings and by joining the United Church Women as its only Native American member in the early 1940s. Shaw noted that "[m]y determination to conquer prejudice by proving that the American Indian is an asset to our nation" served as a motive for her to become active in non-Indian organizations.¹⁴

Shaw and her contemporaries pioneered women's community work in Phoenix. Their motives were strongly based on Christianity and the desire to prove that American Indians were worthy members of the larger American community. The next generation of community workers took a much more practical approach: They asked for services to urban Indians. Central Presbyterian formed the link between the two groups. It provided a meeting ground for people of different ages and strongly encouraged leadership development among its youth. In 1956 a group of young church members formed a chapter of the Westminster Youth Fellowship that came to reflect a growing awareness of community issues. Most important, the Fellowship allowed young people in the community to establish friendships. Many future community activists and leaders participated in its functions and formed lasting associations that they later used to recruit people to work in community projects.¹⁵

Federal funding through Great Society programs made it possible for the Central Presbyterian Church to realize its commitment to providing for more than just the spiritual needs of

urban Indians. In 1965 the preschool board applied for funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to underwrite a community action program that would include both preschool and daycare services; by the following summer, the church operated a Head Start program with approximately thirty children. This program filled a dire need for child care services, but it also provided women with an unprecedented opportunity to become involved in the community. Head Start allowed these mothers and educators in their families to employ their skills in the community. For example, between May 1968 and March 1969, Head Start employed fifteen staff members—only one of whom was male. Women also volunteered their services to the program and participated in the various school events and parent-teacher meetings.¹⁶

Women's experiences as staff members and volunteers often acquainted them with problem areas in the community as well as funding sources available for programs. Staff members also benefited from the training they received through the city's poverty agency and at the nearby Arizona State University. They gained self-esteem and experience in dealing with various agencies that before might have seemed overwhelmingly unfamiliar. This experience led them to take on other issues. Cecelia Miller (Tohono O'Odham) noted that "some of [the activism] also came out of Head Start, . . . parents wanting more funding and more things for their children."¹⁷ Miller herself exemplifies this trend. She had come to Phoenix to attend high school, dropped out in 1956 to get married, and between 1957 and 1965 had five children. During these years, she also took her GED examination and attended college. After her marriage ended, Miller found work in Head Start and became active in the Central Presbyterian Church. These activities acquainted her with issues of concern to Indian people in the city, while the community came to identify her as an activist. Miller thus established herself as a "trustworthy" member of the community that came to expect her participation. After Head Start, she worked in other community projects and in the Phoenix Indian Center.¹⁸

The Head Start program also appears to have encouraged community cohesion as people realized that they had power over their own affairs. An indication of this cohesion is the high percentage of Indian children in the program while it was open to children of all ethnic backgrounds; by 1968, 60 percent of the children came from Native American families. The governing

body of the Central Presbyterian Church also noted that "Indian people are moving to this area due to the program."¹⁹ As a result, the area around the church was identified as an Indian community.

This newly found community cohesion resulted in an acute awareness of the lack of Native American representation in the city structures. In December 1968, a group of Head Start parents went to the city's poverty agency in an effort to establish a neighborhood council and to list the needs of the Indians in the community. They received funding to establish such a council to serve a twenty-block radius of Central Presbyterian, and in June 1969, the Central Community Council, or the Tri-C, became one of the seven community councils in Phoenix under its poverty agency.²⁰ The organization of Tri-C signaled an important watershed in the history of the relationship between the city of Phoenix and its Indian residents. For the first time, Native Americans as a community had official representation in the poverty programs and could now benefit directly from the funding available through this agency.

Despite Head Start, the lack of daycare facilities remained a major problem in the community. Of special concern were the children of single mothers who had no traditional daycare alternatives, such as extended family, available to them. In 1970, 16.3 percent of the Native American households in Phoenix were headed by a female; of these households, 20.4 percent had children under six years of age.²¹ To alleviate the situation, women at the Central Presbyterian Church again took action and started a cooperative daycare center in 1971. With staff help from another daycare facility in the area and funding from various metropolitan area churches, this effort culminated in the incorporation of the Kee N' Bah Child Development Center in October of 1971.²²

The significance of Head Start and Kee N' Bah lies not only in providing desperately needed low-cost services to Indian families in Phoenix, but in the role they played as vehicles of empowerment for those women and men who helped initiate and operate the programs. Kee N' Bah especially proved to be much more than just a daycare facility. From its very beginning, it sought to develop community leadership, responsibility, and concern by involving the parents. Parents of enrolled children made up two-thirds of the board of directors, acquiring experience in community affairs. Mothers were especially active in the operation of the center, and as volunteers they

gained knowledge of child care and other related matters. The center also offered employment opportunities for mothers who had little education. With the skills they acquired and the confidence they gained in Kee N' Bah, they advanced to other jobs or returned to school to complete their education. Finally, Kee N' Bah helped families by informing parents of work and educational programs and available social services. Cecelia Miller acknowledged the program's impact on her personally and on the community as a whole:

It gave me a lot more self-confidence in terms of what I could do. . . [and] I feel like it was really able to help a lot of parents. Some of the women I see today and some of the jobs they have, I think, . . . were helped by their working for Kee N' Bah.²³

Kee N' Bah thus represented a transitional phase from volunteer to professional community work. At the same time, the Phoenix Indian Center (PIC) replaced the church as the focus of activism. The Center had emerged out of concerns for the problems of the growing Indian population in 1947. Its founders also included a group of prominent merchants and bankers concerned about the image of the downtown area where many Indians congregated. Located in a downtown storefront, the Center served as a point of contact for local Indians and those new to the city. However, the lack of funding limited the Center's activities to social gatherings and initial assistance to newly arrived Indians in finding housing and employment. In the mid-sixties, developments both at the national and local level changed the relationship between the Indian Center and the city of Phoenix. Nationally, the War on Poverty focused attention on the problems of the inner city and the necessity of involving the poor in the planning of services. The city of Phoenix responded by creating the LEAP commission, or Leadership for the Advancement and Education of Phoenix, in 1964 as the city's poverty agency. The first Indian representative on the commission, Kent Ware, Sr., drew attention to the conditions of poverty and the invisibility of Native Americans in Phoenix. Simultaneously, the PIC contacted people who worked in the city's poverty programs. City officials responded in 1969 by funding a study of the needs of Indians in Phoenix; the grant also included a demonstration project to provide services for Indians through the Indian Center. It was

also in 1969 that the Tri-C was included in LEAP as one of its community councils at the initiative of members of Central Presbyterian.²⁴

Recognition by the city did not solve the PIC's financial difficulties as the need for Indian-oriented programs increased with the growing numbers of migrants to the city. The answer to these financial needs lay in the monies available from a variety of federal programs designed to address the problems of impoverished urban groups. The Central Presbyterian Head Start undoubtedly served as an example for the Indian Center to apply for funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity. At the same time, the rising Indian activism nationally drew attention to American Indians, specifically in urban areas. The first OEO grant came in 1970, designed to "develop more comprehensive programs, such as social services, recreational services, and professional information and referral services for the urban Indian population."²⁵

Part of this grant went to hiring new staff members, and in September 1970, the Center increased its staff from six to twenty employees.²⁶ Among the new hires was Karen Thorne. Her background and career reflect the new generation of professional community workers that accompanied the federal funding. Thorne was born in Phoenix, raised by her mother who worked as a domestic for a wealthy Phoenix family. Thorne grew up almost as a member of the family and attended a local north Phoenix elementary school. After her mother remarried, they moved to the inner city, "into a more culturally diverse neighborhood. And that in itself was another kind of learning experience in my life."²⁷

The family returned to the mother's home reservation of Gila River for visits, but Thorne's contacts with other Indians came mostly through Central Presbyterian where she participated in the Westminster Youth Fellowship activities. She was also a member of the Indian Club at Phoenix College that she attended after graduation from high school in 1965. After two years, she transferred to Arizona State University with financial assistance from the tribe in Sacaton, Arizona:

It was an exciting time, being in college or university, because of all the social issues and things that were happening. And I think a lot of minority people, particularly Indian people, [were] getting help with [their] education costs from [their] tribe. I think a lot of the tribes looked at it:

"Well, once you get your education, your training, then you can come back and help your people." And I think a lot of us bought into it. . . . But then, the reality of the fact was that I had really no close ties! I had not lived down there so how was I gonna help "my people?" And so, probably that . . . explains why I ended up here at Phoenix Indian Center, in terms of working with Indian people.²⁸

Another influence on Thorne's career choice came in the summer of 1968 when she attended an Indian studies workshop in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, with two of her friends. This workshop brought together Indian youth from both urban and reservation backgrounds, offering classes in cultural history, contemporary issues, and the role of the BIA in the lives of Indian people. Thorne reflected back on the summer as "sort of an eyeopener in terms of part of my [Indian] background." It also exposed her to people and experiences from different parts of the country and introduced her to the concepts of pan-Indianism and Indian activism: "So here we all came back, these militant young women! And I guess . . . each one of us had begun to look at what we could do, you know, what kind of an impact we could make."²⁹

After the summer institute, Thorne became active in the Indian Club at the university. However, she dropped out of school because of medical problems and family matters. She also grew tired of the routine, wanting to accomplish more in life. The position as social worker at the Indian Center gave her the opportunity. This was a time when the Center was transforming from a small neighborhood structure into a professional community organization. The staff was small and the atmosphere casual. Furthermore, most of the new jobs were in traditionally female areas: clerical work, social and educational programs. Many staff members, like Thorne herself, had had some professional education but had not finished their degrees. At the same time, Thorne's experience reflected the instability of the Center's footing in the community at this transitional stage. After less than a year, she was abruptly laid off together with a number of other employees. Thorne suspected that these layoffs were related to the controversy between the PIC board of directors and the Indian community.³⁰

The roots of the conflict lay in the increased activities of the Center while community members began to show interest in its operation. The closed nature of the governing body of the

Center drew increasing criticism, focusing on the failure of PIC to meet the social and economic needs of the community despite continued funding from the OEO. Personal disputes also entered the conflict. At the same time, the Indian community was changing as more young people attended colleges and universities and assertively pursued their goals. Like Karen Thorne, they acted in campus organizations against the backdrop of national Indian activism. What ensued were several years of discord in the Indian community. On the positive side, the conflict over PIC became the rallying point for various grassroots organizations. This activism reflected the rising community consciousness among Phoenix Indians and helped bring about services that they desperately needed.³¹

The coordination of the discontent fell to a newcomer among Indian organizational efforts, the Southwest Indian Development (SID). This organization emerged in 1969 as an advocacy group on the Navajo reservation, but it soon assumed a broader perspective on Indian affairs. In the early 1970s, SID organizers shifted their interest to the metropolitan Phoenix area that they saw as a focal point for Native American activities in the Southwest. They expressed concern over the factionalism and conflict in the Indian community while city-wide and neighborhood problems remained unresolved. Because the public bureaucracy had failed to respond to the city's Indian community, SID organizers believed it critical to involve Native Americans in the decision-making process. Accordingly, SID sought to unite Indian groups in the city and to create a self-sustaining Indian community structure based on grassroots involvement. They thus helped develop local leadership by actively searching out and educating potential leaders. In sum, SID attempted to enhance the sense of an Indian community and its values in Phoenix.³²

John Lewis (Pima/Mohave/Tohono O'Odham) assumed an instrumental role in SID. Son of the first American Indian pastor at Central Presbyterian, Lewis grew up in Phoenix and was active in the church, including the Westminster Youth Fellowship. During these years, he formed friendships and connections with other Indian youth that he later used to recruit people for SID and other activist organizations. His own activism took shape in the context of the social reform in the 1960s. He attended Phoenix College, Arizona State University, and the University of Oklahoma where he graduated in 1965, majoring in history and anthropology. During his college years,

Lewis became acquainted with Indian activists, and after graduation, he worked on the Colorado River reservation in community action. After receiving a master's degree from Arizona State in 1970, he shifted his focus toward Phoenix.³³

Diane Daychild (Pima) was one of Lewis' early recruits. She got involved in 1972 because "John knew me because of my family, and he knew that I had lived here all my life. He knew that I knew the community pretty well."³⁴ Daychild participated in SID's grassroots organizing efforts, chairing the steering committee that addressed the Indian Center issue. Her background—like that of Lewis and Thorne—exemplifies the nature of organizational leadership in Phoenix at the time: young with some college education, concerned with both reservation and urban experiences although not immersed in reservation culture. Daychild grew up in Phoenix, living with her aunt and uncle and attending public schools. Her contacts with Pima culture and language remained minimal, and she did not start exploring her identity as an Indian person until college where she met reservation youth and participated in the Indian Club.

Daychild's awareness of her background culminated when she attended an Indian summer institute in 1967, and again the following summer together with Thorne. As in Thorne's case, this experience launched Daychild into community work: "[T]hat was the turning point, as far as my own involvement with tribal people and concerns and understanding why Indian people have these overriding problems regarding identity and socialization."³⁵ And like Thorne, Daychild dropped out of the sociology program at Arizona State University and went to work for the Indian Center. She resigned in June 1971, together with five other PIC employees, in protest against the management policies of the chairman of the board of directors. Daychild thus positioned herself for political activism in SID.³⁶

In addition to the Indian Center issue, SID focused on creating awareness of the needs of the Indian community among Phoenicians and the city government. The city responded to the pressure in May 1973 by forming a permanent Urban Indian Advisory Committee (UIAC). The city manager's office also helped sponsor a citywide Indian conference in June 1973 to discuss issues of health, education, and inclusion of Native Americans in city politics. This conference elected the Indian representatives to the UIAC, thus formalizing the relationship between the city structure and the Indian residents of Phoenix that had begun to take shape when the city first awarded funds

to the PIC in 1969. The conference also provided the occasion for the creation of a pressure group separate from the city government: the Metropolitan Phoenix Indian Coalition (MPIC). The MPIC merged a number of various groups and activities under one umbrella organization. John Lewis defined its task as that of "a moving committee to focus on the issues." In the summer of 1973, this attention centered on the PIC controversy, and the coalition's role at the head of this discontent launched the organization into community leadership. Furthermore, the publicity around the controversy attracted new segments of the urban Indian population to become active in community affairs. The representative base of the organizational efforts in the city thus widened to include a wide cross-section of Native American residents.³⁷

Mildred Marshall (Blackfoot/Chippewa/Cree) got involved in community activism because of the Indian Center issue. She came to Phoenix in 1962 to work for the BIA after her husband had left her and their four children. Until the PIC controversy, Marshall had very little contact with other Native Americans in the city. She recalled finding out about the issue when driving by the Center on her way to the store:

[I saw] a bunch of Indians standing at the corner. I drove by and stopped and asked them, "are you guys waiting around for the government to come down and give you hand-outs?" They answered that they were demonstrating the PIC policies. [I felt that the] Indian Center should be for all Indians, [and said], "I'll just stop with you here."³⁸

After this initial involvement, Marshall "got sucked into other things. We decided that standing around wasn't going to do anything." The issue of an organized pressure group thus came up in discussions among community activists, resulting in the establishment of the MPIC. Marshall was appointed co-chair of the Committee with Floyd Bringing Good from Oklahoma.³⁹

During the summer and fall of 1973, resolving the issue of PIC leadership dominated the MPIC efforts to organize the community and to pressure the city for changes. Besides appeals through the political establishment, the coalition employed such activist tactics as picketing and mass protests. Under these mounting pressures, the conflict came to an end in the spring of 1974. The board of directors elected five new

members in an open meeting and reorganized the Center's management structure. Syd Beane, a South Dakota Sioux, was elected executive director of PIC in August, launching a period of extensive growth in its programs and constituency.⁴⁰ Under his leadership, the Center developed into a comprehensive community service agency responsive to the Indian population in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Phyllis Bigpond, member of the Yuchi tribe who followed Beane as executive director in 1978, agreed with this contention: "[The Center] experienced a major growth, and new resources coming in—and more of [Indian] control. [It was] under the control of Indian people more than it had been previously."⁴¹

Expanded services translated into an increase in employment opportunities at the Center. These new employees tended to be young and educated—and female. Phyllis Bigpond held a master's degree in social work when she started working for the Center in 1975 in its new mental health program. She already had experience working in the community as supervisor of a project to place Phoenix Indian High School students. In addition, Bigpond had taken an interest in community affairs, serving as president of MPIC and sitting on the PIC board of directors.⁴² The Center also rehired former employees such as Karen Thorne, who returned to work in the employment services department in the mid-1970s. After being dismissed from the Center in 1971, Thorne had worked as a consultant for Southwest Indian Development. She commented on the positive changes in PIC services during her years of absence, agreeing that the programs were "more productive than ever." The Center now constantly reviewed and improved its services, and "[the] level and commitment of the staff was better."⁴³

By 1980, the Phoenix Indian Center had evolved from a small neighborhood gathering place into a professional community work agency, offering services ranging from employment assistance to education to alcoholism programs. The employees reflected this metamorphosis: They held professional degrees more often than in the early 1970s, and those without degrees could get additional training and education while at the Center. Because many of the new jobs were in fields within the traditional female sphere, women became a prominent group at the Center. At the same time, the PIC's role in the community changed and its importance as the nexus of activity subsided. Phyllis Bigpond reflected on these changes

during her eleven years as director of PIC. She pointed to the emergence of other community organizations as one reason for the diminishing role of the Indian Center. The abundance of organizations also meant competition for resources while funding began to dwindle in the 1980s. Furthermore, Bigpond commented that organizing activity decreased significantly in all sectors after services were in place; organizations seemed to lack a rallying point, and enthusiasm died down. Finally, the focus of activism shifted from exclusively Indian organizations to involvement in the broader community to advocate Native American issues.⁴⁴

Women's extensive involvement in these formative events resulted in the emergence of a strong female support network. As they worked in close proximity with the community, they also came to see some community concerns in terms of gender. Brenda Young, a Cherokee who worked at PIC on a childcare project, commented on her realization of problems specific to Indian women:

I dealt with so many families where it was a one-parent family, almost always a woman, almost always working as a clerk or typist or secretary, raising one or two children on her own. And you get to see the inequities of the system, how difficult it is for these people! . . . Woman [sic] having such a difficult time, because women's lib or no women's lib, women wind up with the children!⁴⁵

Other women recognized similar patterns and began to discuss their concerns as Native American *women*. In September 1975, several women from the metropolitan area attended the Southwest Indian Women's Conference in Window Rock, Arizona. Annie Wauneka (Navajo) had initiated this conference as part of the International Women's Year to address issues of concern to Native American women. The following January, Indian women in the Phoenix area held a follow-up meeting where they discussed their involvement in family, education, politics, and employment. They resolved that "Indian women have always been a guiding influence for Indian people," and to continue this guiding role, they agreed to hold a statewide conference of Arizona Indian women.⁴⁶

When the Arizona Indian Women's Conference met in Phoenix in October of 1976, approximately four hundred women attended and participated in its eight workshops and

other events. The conference theme, "Indian Women's Rights: Revolution or Return to Tradition?," reflected the role of women in tribal societies "with full rights and responsibilities," stressing the need "to reaffirm this tradition, rather than revolutionize [women's] current situation."⁴⁷ Keynote speaker Veronica Murdock, vice chair of the Colorado River Indian Tribes, emphasized women's knowledge as a valuable resource and urged conference participants to get involved in all aspects of community life and to share their expertise. Murdock especially encouraged women's political participation as an essential element in self-determination:

You talk about self-determination. That's an individual type of undertaking that the tribes have to take. It didn't take that law [Indian Self-Determination and Education Act of 1975] to tell us to be self-determining. We ourselves must be self-determining. That is the only way we can move forward.⁴⁸

The workshops at the conference addressed a variety of issues affecting the lives of American Indian women. They included employment, changing occupational roles, education, service resources, the status of elderly women, and legal rights. By far the most popular workshop addressed abuse and violence in Indian communities. In the discussion, women clearly identified some violent behavior as primarily a women's concern. The discussants also pointed to male bias as a reason for the lack of support for rape and abuse victims. On the other hand, these gender-specific issues became community issues as women recognized that cultural changes, resulting from the history of Indian-white relations, often were at the root of the problems of Indian males:

We talked about the historical reasons for spousal abuse, and it was brought out that it is related to the fact that Indian men historically have been the pampered people in the family. . . . As the Indian people were settled on the reservations, these kinds of cultural props were broken down and were no longer existent. The women did not have their cultural props taken away. They were there to a limited degree and the women could still function.⁴⁹

An examination of statements at the conference as well as interviews with participants support the conclusion that

although Indian women recognized gender as a differentiating factor in their lives, the larger context of the community informed their involvement and activism. The conference emphasized that women use their traditional roles in tribal societies as a starting point for their community involvement. In other words, they should first act as mothers, educating their children about their heritage and their choices. Once they had determined what kind of mothers they were going to be, they could move on to other endeavors in their community while their children would have the strong base of family and tradition to guide them.

The work of American Indian women in the Phoenix urban community—whether as volunteers, professionals, or political activists—clearly awakened in them an awareness of power relationships that limited their choices not only as Native people but as women. Like Brenda Young, who saw single mothers struggling for family livelihood, other women recognized inequities in the system. Their own work in the community and within the bureaucracy gave them the knowledge necessary to identify these inequities and to take on the injustices. In the process, they grew even closer together as women.

Although Indian women's discussions certainly reflected some feminist concerns, such as sexual abuse, feminist rhetoric and ideology seem to have played an insignificant role in their organizing efforts. Instead of jumping on the feminist bandwagon, Native American women felt ambivalent about feminism as a concept and ideology. This ambivalence in part reflected uncertainty about the meaning of the word. Navajo Joy Hanley accepted the term as part of Navajo vocabulary, interpreting feminism as women's strong presence in community life and assertiveness in pursuing their goals: "Navajo women invented the term [chuckle]! Navajo women are really very, very strong—very, very, very aggressive."⁵⁰ But even if they accepted women's assertiveness as the basic premise of feminism, most felt uncomfortable with the strict boundaries that identifying as a feminist seemed to set on them as members of their tribal and urban Indian communities and as individual women. Brenda Young expressed this viewpoint poignantly in her comments about feminism as an elitist movement:

I think that a lot of Indian women feel very uncomfortable with an organization like NOW [National Organization for Women], or [the] kind of group of people that are

involved in women's issues. . . . Feminism is like a subculture, like a club, that feeds itself. They just don't know enough about Indian cultures. . . . It always makes me nervous. Like the question you asked me, "What do Indian women want?" Wow, there are a lot of Indian women out there, a whole bunch of different tribes! And for me to speak for them, I don't really feel comfortable.⁵¹

Despite the reluctance of American Indian women to identify themselves as feminists, scholars can benefit from the application of feminist theories of politics, power, empowerment, and activism to unveil the long history of Indian women's participation in their communities. These theories also allow us to interpret their actions as political. Denied access to the formal decision-making process, women took part in the community in ways conforming to their traditional roles as wives and mothers. By engaging in cultural, educational, and church activities, Native American women in Phoenix drew on tribal notions of womanhood, family, and community— notions shared by many Indian people who came to Phoenix. Women's multilayered perspective on discrimination shaped their activism. These women understood that the history of Indian-white relations affected not only themselves but the lives of all members of the family— male and female—as well as the entire Indian community. Women's issues thus became intertwined with community issues, further implying issues of race, class, and ethnicity. American Indian women in Phoenix seemed to act out of a communal consciousness that was based on solidarity between women and men of the same group. This feeling of unity combined with an awareness of women's traditional roles in tribal communities. Women thus accepted the tasks assigned to them in the gender systems of their societies, but by the same token, they demanded the rights that their obligations entailed. In their questioning of gender relationships, these women displayed attitudes and opinions reflective of feminism, yet they felt uncomfortable about identifying with feminism as it seemed to constrain them as members of Indian communities. They saw themselves more as reformers than as feminists. Scholars need to explore these connections further and to find a common ground between the cultural traditions of Native American women and mainstream feminists. Essential to such research is the inclusion of American Indian women. Feminist analysis and methodology

can certainly help us trace the history of Indian women's community activism, but Native American women need to define their status within and their relationship to the feminist discourse.

NOTES

This article draws from my dissertation research in the Phoenix Indian community in 1993 and 1994. I would like to extend my gratitude to the women and men who participated in this project, offering their time and their insights to help me gain an understanding of the community.

NOTES

1. Institute for Government Research, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), 667.
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4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census. General Population Characteristics: Arizona* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 7, 170. The figures include persons identifying themselves as Eskimo and Aleut.

5. Robert A. Trennert, "Phoenix and the Indians: 1867-1930," in *Phoenix in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Community History*, ed. G. Wesley Johnson, Jr. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 53-55; Bradford Luckingham, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 33.

6. Anna Moore Shaw, *A Pima Past* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 113-14.

7. Trennert, "Phoenix and the Indians," 64; Edward B. Liebow, "A Sense of Place: Urban Indians and the History of Pan-Tribal Institutions in Phoenix, Arizona," Ph.D. dissertation (Arizona State University, 1986), 84, 122-23, 135. In his book, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891-1935*, Robert A. Trennert provides a detailed study of the early years of the school. His article, "Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, edited by Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990), specifically discusses the female experience in the boarding school system, using Phoenix as a case in point.

8. Shaw, *A Pima Past*, 150.

9. *Ibid.*, 151-54.

10. *Ibid.*, 189.

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27. Thorne interview.

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29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Christy, "American Urban Indians," 179-81; Edward B. Liebow, "Urban Indian Institutions in Phoenix: Transformation from Headquarters City to Community," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 18:4 (Winter 1991): 7.
32. Christy, "American Urban Indians," 182-84; Joyotpaul Chaudhuri, *Urban Indians of Arizona: Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 29-30; Bradford Luckingham, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 219; Lewis interview.
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50. Joy Hanley (Navajo), interview with author, 4 November 1993, Phoenix, Arizona.
51. Young interview.