



America is neglecting missing Indigenous women

By Eugene M. Hyman

To find the likes of Gabby Petito and Brian Laundrie, we step over the bodies of those deemed not important enough.

Over the course of the long, sordid history of the American enterprise, perhaps no group has been subject to more neglect than Indigenous women. A 2016 study of 71 U.S. cities by the Urban Indian Health Institute found there were 5,712 reported cases of missing Indigenous women and girls.

At the forefront of this crisis is the state of Montana, where Indigenous people are four times more likely to go missing than non-Native people, according to a report from the state's Department of Justice. Despite comprising only 6.7% of the state's population, Indigenous people account for 31% of the state's active missing persons as of Sept. 15.

Among those missing is Ashley Loring Heavyrunner, an Indigenous woman that vanished from Montana's Blackfeet Indian Reservation in 2017. A 20-year-old studying environmental studies at a community college, she'd planned to pursue a career that would raise awareness to the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous woman. By all accounts, Loring was a vibrant young woman — passionate, beautiful, thoughtful. So why did Petito's disappearance capture the world's attention and trigger an all-hands-on-deck, multi-national search and manhunt, when Loring's didn't?

Four years after her disappearance, Loring is finally getting a fraction of the attention she deserves as a figurehead for this apparent hypocrisy. While the term "missing White woman syndrome" was coined in 2004, the issue is something that we have understood to be a problem — for whatever reason — since the inception of modern media.

Yet we still haven't addressed the core of the "syndrome" because we continue failing to either identify those reasons or act on them. We can start with the obvious, that Gabby Petito was White while Ashley Loring Heavyrunner was not. Caucasians statistically have typically higher income and levels of education, which some social scientists studying "missing White woman syndrome" correlate to stronger "pull" with local government and media. When misfortune strikes those with less perceived value, it is much more palatable to a wide audience and palatable misfortune will not sell itself as a headline story.

Gabby fit the traditional beauty standards of a Hollywood actress, and box office reports continue to show that films featuring traditionally attractive White women tend to perform better than films with more diverse lead casts. As the line between entertainment and media blurs, this becomes a real problem — if national broadcasters find that news on a missing White woman gets more ratings, they're going to prioritize stories about missing White women. As unfortunate as it is, the news is a profit-driven enterprise and there is profit in the allure and mystique of a case like Petito's in an age where "True Crime" mysteries are so popular.

We can start addressing this problem now by focusing entirely on what can be done to help victims of domestic violence, no matter their identity or status. Petito was murdered by strangulation and according to a report from the Alliance for HOPE International, "men who strangle women are the most dangerous men on the planet." A study by the organization found that strangulation is a significant predictor of homicide: If a victim is strangled even one time, she is 750% more likely to be killed by her abuser.

If we provided more funding and focused on the investigation and prosecution of these non-fatal instances of strangulation as felony crimes, it's reasonable to conclude that we'd see a reduction in domestic violence homicides across the board, whether they're someone like Gabby or someone like Ashley.

We should support preexisting social services and create new ones for the further benefit of victims of domestic abuse. Numerous studies show an overwhelming lack of faith in the institutions we've established to protect and support these victims. In court, many abuse victims refuse to testify against their abusers, either out of fear, conflicted feelings or simply a lack of confidence that their testimony would be used effectively to protect them.

Implicit bias in law enforcement and our court systems must be addressed. According to the National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book, when making a judgment about facts, "there is a tendency to ignore base rates and doubts about the veracity of a description and favor a judgment of representativeness," which results from a "focus on aligning a description with a stereotype." In other words, a jaded judge or prosecutor who thinks they've "seen it all" might be inclined to prejudge victims based on experience in previous domestic violence cases.

We must work to make the system more victim-centric, as much of our focus — in the media, in law enforcement and our courts — remains on the accused. The manhunt for Brian Laundrie only seemed to intensify in the days after Petito's remains were found, and by the time his remains were positively identified, law enforcement officers had discovered five bodies that they suspected could have been Laundrie's.

We should examine why the likes of Gabby Petito receive our attention while others like Ashley Loring Heavyrunner do not, and work on a solution to the iniquity. In the meantime, we should act on what we know will help all victims of domestic abuse.

The attention given to the Gabby Petito case can be considered a poster child for all of the rampant social injustice in our nation. Movements such as "#SayHerName" or "#missing-DCgirls" have been working to bring attention to cases with "imperfect victims," whether this be due to their race, career, status, gender identity, etc.

Care must be given to not fall toward a conclusion of a misguided narrative such as lowering the attention given to cases such as Gabby Petito's, and instead strive to come to a society where equal coverage is given to all cases of human misfortune and mistreatment. Many such as those behind today's social movements struggle to assert, "We matter too, just as she does."

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