

# New Mexico Memorial & Truth and Reconciliation Commission — Forced Sterilization of Indigenous Women

## Overview & U.S. Context

For more than a century, the reproductive rights of Indigenous women have been systematically violated through a federally sanctioned forced sterilization program carried out by the United States Government. From 1907 to 1987, Indigenous women became a distinct class of victims—used as testing grounds for U.S. eugenics policies after race was formally added as a justification for sterilization.

Federal and independent investigations confirm upwards of 70,000 forced or coerced sterilizations performed by the Indian Health Service (IHS) and contracted physicians between 1960 and 1978, when the campaign reached its height under federal funding. By the mid-1970s, preliminary evidence showed that 25–50 percent of Indigenous women of childbearing age had been sterilized, with a disproportionate number of procedures carried out in New Mexico.

The full scale of these crimes remains unknown. Many Indigenous women carried the burden in silence, discovering only later that they had been permanently sterilized. Numerous procedures were performed without informed consent, on women under 21 in violation of federal law, and often under coercion or misinformation. These acts—arguably rising to the level of biological and cultural genocide—constitute one of the most overlooked human-rights violations in U.S. history.

## Global Comparisons

This violence is not unique to the United States, but part of a global pattern of colonial and eugenic control:

- Canada (1928–1973): Under provincial eugenics laws, Indigenous women were disproportionately sterilized. In Alberta, though Indigenous peoples comprised only 2–3 percent of the population, they represented 6 percent of sterilizations, with 74 percent performed without genuine consent.
- Peru (1996–2000): Nearly \*\*300,000 women—primarily Indigenous and poor—\*\*were sterilized under President Fujimori’s National Population Program, often through deception, coercion, or in exchange for basic necessities.
- Australia & Tibet: Indigenous women faced widespread reproductive control, forced sterilization, and child removal under colonial regimes—underscoring the global scope of this violence.

Across continents, the reproductive control of Indigenous women has served as a weapon of cultural domination, erasure, and state control.

## Toward Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

The demographic, cultural, and spiritual impacts of these crimes—lost generations, broken lineages, and silenced voices—remain profoundly understudied. Yet the scale and intent of these acts fit within international legal definitions of crimes against humanity under the *Rome Statute* of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Because Indigenous women face formidable legal and structural barriers to seeking justice or reparations in domestic and international courts, a Transitional Justice Framework (TJF) provides the most practical and healing-centered path forward. This framework—rooted in truth-telling, memorialization, and institutional reform—has been successfully applied to atrocities against Indigenous peoples worldwide.

Precedents include:

- Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–2015), which investigated the Indian Residential School system and issued 94 Calls to Action.
- Maine’s Wabanaki–State Child Welfare TRC (2012), the first state-level truth commission in U.S. history.
- South Africa’s TRC (1996–2002), which dismantled apartheid’s structural violence through truth-telling and testimony.

These models demonstrate that truth commissions are both feasible and transformative—offering New Mexico a proven framework for accountability, repair, and healing.

### **A Defining Legacy for New Mexico**

By advancing a Memorial for Victims of Forced Sterilization, New Mexico has the opportunity to lead the nation in both acknowledging and redressing this history. This memorial represents far more than a gesture of remembrance; it is the essential first step toward establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission—a formal, Indigenous-led body empowered to investigate forced sterilization and the broader spectrum of violence against Indigenous women.

This initiative would align state leadership with grassroots, Indigenous-driven efforts to build a holistic model of care—integrating culturally grounded truth-telling, trauma-informed healthcare, and community-based healing services. Together, these measures would mark a historic commitment to Indigenous women’s rights and well-being, setting a new national standard for truth, justice, and reparative care.

### **International Momentum and Opportunity for Global Leadership**

In 2025, during the UN Permanent Forum on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the American Indian Movement West delegation met with Dr. Albert K. Barume, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to raise the issue of the forced sterilization of Indigenous American women and to call for a UN global study on the scope and scale of these crimes.

In a landmark development, Dr. Barume agreed to conduct a national visit to the United States to meet with affected communities and survivors—including a commitment to visit New Mexico, meet with state officials, and host an international press conference on this issue.

This level of intentional global engagement underscores the urgency of action and the visibility of New Mexico’s leadership in this movement. It offers a legacy-defining opportunity for New Mexico’s legislators, governors, and tribal leaders to set a national and international precedent for truth, justice, and healing.

### **Conclusion**

For a senator, representative, or governor, championing this effort is more than an act of political leadership—it is a honorable calling and a historic responsibility. Just as South Africa, Canada, and Maine are remembered for their truth commissions, New Mexico can be remembered as the first U.S. state—and a global leader—to confront reproductive violence against Indigenous women head-on.

In doing so, New Mexico can help transform silence into truth, trauma into healing, and history into justice—offering the world a model for what genuine reconciliation can look like when courage meets compassion.