



Revitalization of Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian Systems

An Issue Paper

**Prepared for the
National Aboriginal Women's Summit
June 20-22, 2007
in Corner Brook, NL**

Introduction

The intent of this document is to:

- ❖ Examine how natural laws built into Aboriginal Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems ensured gender equity prior to colonization thus benefiting Aboriginal women, their children and their nations;
- ❖ Highlight current obstacles barring Aboriginal women from exercising their rights as ensured in national and international covenants; and
- ❖ Provide recommendations on future work needed to restore and revitalize the traditional beliefs and principles characteristic of Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian societies, and to ensure that Aboriginal women have meaningful and direct engagement in any and all activities that affect their 'ways of being'.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a nationally representative political organization comprised of thirteen Provincial Territorial Member Associations (PTMA's). Our goal is to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well being of Aboriginal women within First Nations, Inuit, Métis and Canadian societies. The founding of the NWAC in 1974 was closely tied to Aboriginal women's struggle to overcome discriminations inherent in the Indian Act. NWAC now serves a broader mandate aimed at addressing all forms, causes and consequences of discrimination against Aboriginal women and their families.

NWAC works collaboratively with other Aboriginal women's organizations to empower Aboriginal women by facilitating their participation in legislative and policy reforms that promote equality.

Beginning in early 2004 NWAC participated in the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable discussions. Our unprecedented role at this and the following First Ministers (FMM) and Aboriginal Leaders Meeting (Kelowna) which took place in November 2005 were viewed as 'history in the making'. NWAC argued for recognition of Aboriginal women's issues, but despite assurances to the contrary, violence against women and girls was not included on the FMM agenda

Subsequently, through NWAC's perseverance, commitments were made to hold the National Aboriginal Women's Summit (NAWS) to address issues that affect Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) women and girls. We commend Premier Danny Williams of Newfoundland and Labrador for stepping forward and agreeing to co-host the first summit of its kind to specifically address violence and other interrelated issues of importance to Aboriginal women.

I. Executive Summary

Traditional teachings show that Aboriginal women historically engaged in clear and fundamental roles ensuring good governance, and wellness, roles and responsibilities that were grounded in their core value and belief systems.

The effects of the impacts of 'power over', which is a trait of colonization, and how these impacts have harmed Aboriginal laws, beliefs and traditions, have been well documented. Racist and genocidal patriarchal legislation and policies were used to intentionally deconstruct, dehumanize, and displace Aboriginal women at every decision-making level within their own societies. This compromised their traditional roles and responsibilities, as well as their relationship to the land, to their family and to their systems of governance. Aboriginal women became the targets of violence and discrimination of every type.

Aboriginal women are central and integral forces in the success of revitalizing Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems. Now Aboriginal women, with the support of Aboriginal men, are taking sustainable action toward revitalizing Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems. For decades Aboriginal women have been calling on anyone who knows about "our way of being" to come together to take concrete action toward revitalizing our traditional Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems. Aboriginal women are reclaiming and renewing women's traditional social and political roles characteristic of Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian societies and resuming their rightful position in all discussions and at all levels of government.

Today we witness strong Aboriginal women from all corners of Turtle Island leading the way toward revitalizing their '*way of being*' by engaging in meaningful work addressing human rights injustices and addressing all forms of violence that directly impact Aboriginal women and girls.

II. Pre Contact

Aboriginal women held unique roles and responsibilities to their nations and to the Creator. These roles and responsibilities varied over the diverse nations but there was a common thread throughout - women were respected, valued, honoured and viewed as sacred human beings.

Aboriginal women's roles and responsibilities were defined as *central* to maintaining the Fire - in essence as keepers of their culture and knowledge systems they were responsible for transmitting values and beliefs to their families. They held influential positions of authority and were actively involved in

various forms of governing, socially, economically, and politically including having substantial authority over land and property. (RCAP: 18: v.4)

Matrilineal societies promoted balance and equality among all members of its society. Although there were clear lines of gendered divisions of labour no individuals were deemed more important than others.¹ The Haudensaunee of the Iroquois Confederacy and the Haida Gwitschin First Nations are two examples of traditional Matrilineal/Matriarchal societies. They exercised similar styles of governance over matters relating to property, titles, naming, environmental protection, governance and spiritual ways. Of particular relevance to many matrilineal societies is the line of descent. Traditionally, the identity and heredity of children was determined through the mother's line of descent. This lineage further determined roles and responsibilities, often through Clan systems. Clan systems provided significant governance and direction for ceremonial and spiritual practices, medicine, matrimonial choices, kinship rules, and so on.

III. Contact

European colonizers viewed women very differently. European women were subordinate objects deemed to be property of the men. They were suppressed and oppressed. The attitudes and treatment white men used to subjugate white women were shifted to Aboriginal women displacing and dispossessing them from their positions of power and influence. (Fiske & George, 2006). This displacement also served to deconstruct traditional matrilineal and matriarchal or egalitarian institutions and practices. Fundamental Indigenous teachings about relationships between women and men and the roles of each in society, as well as the responsibilities each had to the other, to their extended families, to their communities, and to Creation were replaced by patriarchal notions flowing from the larger society.

The *Indian Act* (1867) was shaped by Western colonial thinking and implemented with one goal in mind: to assimilate First Nations people in order to free up lands and resources and allow the Crown to avoid its fiduciary responsibilities. The *Indian Act* negatively impacted First Nations women and girls more than any other group; however the negative effects of colonial attitudes equally impact Inuit and Métis women. The *Indian Act* exemplifies the patriarchal notions common to this time period. In particular it established legislation and policies through which Indian identity and status were derived from through the male line of descent. This practice, which was common to European societies, was directly contradictory to the practices of matriarchal communities whereby hereditary rights and identity of the children were passed on through the female line of descent.

¹ Recognition of Being, p.61

The *Indian Act* provisions governing the marriage of First Nations individuals to non-First Nations people are the most egregious example of the application of patriarchal notions that disadvantaged women. First Nations women who married non-First Nations men lost their status, nor were their children eligible for status. First Nations men did not face this loss of status, and indeed their marriage to a non-First Nations woman conferred status upon her and future children. This differential treatment served to prevent First Nations women from living in their own communities, from exercising their matrimonial property rights, and from returning to their community if they separated from their husband, were widowed or divorced.

Long-term subjugation in Native communities exacerbated these conditions, doubling the suffering for women. Colonization has manifested into our own peoples' way of thinking and behaving. This is demonstrated by the current high rates of violence, for example, facing Aboriginal women both within and outside their communities. Men bear a special guilt, adding to Aboriginal women's oppression by inflicting pain on their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters. (Alfred: 35:1999)

IV. Present

The *Indian Act* and the policies that flow from it continue to discriminate against Aboriginal women and girls, and to infringe on their human rights. Over the past thirty years NWAC has continually raised awareness of this discrimination, including issues related to Bill C-31, Matrimonial Real Property and Bill C-44. More recently, NWAC has undertaken initiatives addressing racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

Revitalizing traditional principles of gender equality mechanisms that are built into Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems are key to successfully advancing Aboriginal women's status. They are the building blocks to elevating First Nations, Inuit and Métis women to positions where they can enjoy exercising their human rights, rights that enshrined in domestic and international covenants as well as in many Aboriginal nations' covenants.

V. Future

“Indian people must wake up! They are asleep! ..We were in touch but now we are not. Part of this waking up means replacing women to their rightful place in society, It's been less than one hundred years that men lost touch with reality. There's no power or medicine that has all force unless it' balanced. The woman must be there also, but she has been left out! When we still had our culture, we had the balance. The women made ceremonies, and she was recognized as being united with the moon, the earth and all the forces on it. Men have taken over. Most feel threatened by

holy women. They must stop and remember, remember the loving power of their grandmothers and mothers.”

Rose Auger, Cree Alberta
(Long, Dickason 2000: 81)

Recommendations

1. Canada must publicly apologize to all First Nation, Inuit and Métis women and girls and to their communities and nations for intentionally inflicting racist and discriminatory colonial legislation and policies that devastated their people, communities and nations.
2. Support the capacity of Aboriginal women’s groups to research and to implement strategies aimed at the revitalization of Matrilineal/Matriarchal/Egalitarian systems
3. Any and all policy, legislation and program planning must include direction and meaningful decision-making by the individuals most affected - First Nation, Inuit and Métis women.
4. All self government agreements should contain sections specifically referring to Aboriginal women’s rights.
5. Implementing a Culturally Relevant Gender Based Analysis (CRGBA) framework in all legislative, policy and programming at all government levels will provide critical insight into the current situation forcing outcomes to be more holistic and inclusive. Its intent is to ensure programs and services are developed in a balanced fashion, reflecting the unique needs of those populations most affected capturing the diversity of distinctive cultures of First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples. It also allows for the real or potential impacts of programs to be analyzed in terms of their differential impacts on males and females.
6. The federal government must fund the revitalization of Indigenous languages through programs dedicated to adults, youth and children.

Appendix

Vision

Reclaiming Our Way of Being: a balance of healthy individuals, families, communities, and nations that are grounded in our traditional teachings and knowledge.

Principles

Our stories are how we are. The voices and stories of Aboriginal women are the central source of revitalizing traditional matrimonial/matriarchal systems.

Women and children have always been integral to the traditional laws and values of their nations.

Women are honoured as the givers of life.

Women provide leadership in rebuilding our communities. Their skills and knowledge give them an essential and equal role in the community.

Children are a sacred gift from the Creator.

Children have a right to be raised within their family, their culture, and their community, and to live in a healthy and safe environment.

The well-being of children is best met by their parents finding solutions that consider the needs of the children first.

Men are our equal partners.

Men provide leadership in rebuilding our communities. Their skills and knowledge give them an essential and equal role in the community.

Men contribute to and benefit from strong and respectful families.

Elders are the carriers of our traditional knowledge, and through their guidance and oral teaching they will help us reclaim our way of being.
Good governance and accountability is critical for healthy and viable communities.

Communities are diverse.

(Material from the NWAC Matrimonial Real Property Position Paper, 2007)

Bibliography

Alfred, Taiaiake, (1999) *Peace Power Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* Copyright © Oxford University Press Canada.

Anderson, Kim, *A Recognition of Being: Restructuring Native Womenhood*, Copyright © 2000 Kim Anderson

Branch, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, October 2006

Canadian Aboriginal Women: *Legal Distinction, Rights and Democracy* 2006

Fiske, Jo Anne and George, Evelyn (2006) *Seeking Alternatives to Bill C-31: From Cultural Trauma to Cultural Revitalization Through Customary Law*. Status of Women Canada: available on line at http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/pubspr/066243773X/200609_066243773X_1_e.html

Harvard-Lavell D. Memee, Lavell Corbiere, Jeanette, *Until our Hearts are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* Copyright © 2006 Demeter Press

Long, David, Dickason, Olive Patricia, *Vision of the Heart*, Canadian Aboriginal Issues 2nd Edition, Copyright © 2000 Harcourt Canada, Ltd.

NWAC, *Alternative Report: Follow Up to the Sectoral Sessions*, Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable

Peoples' Roundtable, May 2005, Overview of Sisters in Spirit, Abstract

Native Women's Association of Canada. *Reclaiming Our Way of Being – Matrimonial Real Property Solutions Position Paper*, January 2007,

Native Women's Association of Canada. *Aboriginal Women's Rights are Human Rights*

Report Of The Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples, *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, v. 1, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1996

Report Of The Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples, *Restructuring the Relationship*, v. 2, Part One, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1996

Report Of The Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples, *Gathering Strength*, v. 3, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1996

Report Of The Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples, *Perspectives and Realities*, v. 4, © Minister of Supply and Services Canada 1996

Status of Women Canada. *Seeking Alternatives to Bill C-31: From Cultural Trauma to Cultural Revitalization through Customary Law* www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubspubspr/066243773X/200609-066243

Violations of Indigenous Human Rights: Special Rapporteur: Investigation
An NWAC Submission, December 2002