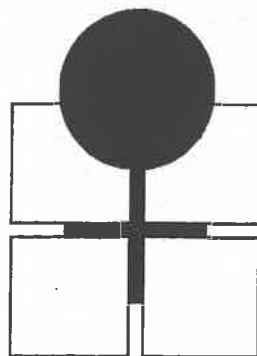


**Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action Centre**



**FREDA**

**A NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR  
AN ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S TRANSITION HOUSE**

**by**

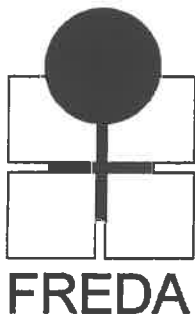
**Sharlene Frank**

**for**

**The Laichwiltach Family Life Society**

**© October 1996**

**ISBN 1-896885-04-7**



## **Feminist Research, Education, Development & Action Centre**

The Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action (FREDA) Centre is one of five violence research centres funded by Health Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Since its inception in 1992, the FREDA Centre has worked with over seventeen different groups in British Columbia on various aspects of violence against women and children. The Centre has also published a report dealing with violence against women in the Yukon.

FREDA is a collaboration of community groups, and feminist academics from Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia. The Centre's mandate is to undertake and promote action-based research on violence against women and children. As well, the FREDA Centre works with community groups to forward recommendations for action to relevant policy makers and mandated agencies.

For more information, or to order other publications, please contact the FREDA Centre at the following address:

The Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action Centre  
515 West Hastings Street, SFU Harbour Centre  
Vancouver, BC, V6B 5K3

Telephone: 604-291-5197

Fax: 604-291-5189

E-mail: [freda@sfu.ca](mailto:freda@sfu.ca)

Web Site: [www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/](http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/)

**Background Report  
Proposal for an Aboriginal Women's Transition House**

**Author:**

Sharlene Frank

**Advisors/Editors:**

**Laichwiltach Family Life Society Board/Staff**

Barbra Mitchell, President - Comox Nation  
Bonnie Wilson, Vice-President - Homalco Nation  
Audrey Wilson, Treasurer - Cape Mudge Nation  
Shirley Nelson, Secretary - Cape Mudge Nation  
Dawn Duncan - Campbell River Nation  
Pauline McCrimmon, Executive Director

**Funding provided by the Ministry of Women's Equality  
and Feminist Research, Education, Development & Action (F.R.E.D.A.)**

© 1996 Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action (FREDA) Centre

All Rights Reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

## Acknowledgments

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society wishes to acknowledge and to specially thank the following individuals:

- \* Elders' Group - We Wai Kai (Cape Mudge Village, B.C.) The group provided invaluable discussion on family values and future program changes.
- \* Comox Women's Group: For allowing us to visit and to exchange information.
- \* Women in the urban and reserve communities who shared their concerns, and their ideas for future programming.
- \* The staff of the Laichwiltach Family Life Society for their input and information referrals.
- \* The social workers and other staff of the communities who aided with the organization of meetings and who provided support from the beginning.

The Board also wishes to express appreciation to the funders of the research project:

Ministry of Women's Equality

F.R.E.D.A. (Feminist Research Education  
Development & Action Centre)

Lastly, the Board is thankful to Pauline McCrimmon, Executive Director, for her dedication and vision, and to Jane Jack for assistance with the research process.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>Page 5</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction</b>	<b>Page 7</b>
Purpose of Report	
Laichwiltach Family Life Society	
Research Methodology & Considerations	
<b>2.0 Summary of Interviews</b>	<b>Page 12</b>
a) Laichwiltach Family Life Society Staff	
b) Elders	
c) Community Discussions	
d) Aboriginal Women's Group Discussions	
<b>Summary and Observations</b>	<b>Page 17</b>
<b>2.1 Literature Review</b>	<b>Page 19</b>
Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nation's Report	
Report on Health Survey on Aboriginal Women in the Comox Valley	
Family Violence Research Report- Beyond Violence	
Hear First Nations Women Speak	
Kwakwaka'wakw Family Violence Awareness Program	
Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence	
Vancouver Island Needs Assessment Survey	
<b>Comments/Literature Review</b>	<b>Page 28</b>
<b>3.0 Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>Page 29</b>

## Executive Summary

---

Research was undertaken by the Laichwiltach Family Life Society to determine the needs of aboriginal women residing on northeast Vancouver Island, B.C., regarding the development of an aboriginal women's transition house. Specifically, research topics focused upon:

- The incidence of family violence involving four aboriginal communities: Campbell River, Cape Mudge, Comox, and Klahoose (inclusive of individuals residing off-reserve);
- Barriers that aboriginal women face in accessing services and programs;
- Planning and cost information for setting up and operating an aboriginal women's transition house.

The information was prepared into a proposal for consideration by the Ministry of Women's Equality. This report highlights research findings, and provides background information to the shelter service proposal. Research consisted of both a literature review, and discussions with aboriginal women, elders and staff, from the targeted communities. Contact for statistical data was also made with a number of mainstream service organizations in the Campbell River and surrounding districts.

### *Need for an Aboriginal Women's Transition House:*

---

- a) Incidence of Family Violence
- b) Barriers/Program Needs

#### a) Incidence of Family Violence:

National studies, such as the one by the Ontario Native Women's Association, show that family violence within aboriginal communities is disproportionately high - eight times higher than non-aboriginal Canadian society. Regional studies (Helping Spirit Lodge) are supportive of this finding. Like other social problems, the root cause of aboriginal family violence involves the impacts of historical relationships with non-aboriginal society (colonization and oppressive processes, such as the Indian Act, and residential schools).

Attempts to gather incident statistics for the Campbell River and surrounding districts were not overly successful. The main source of reliance was upon local agency program or service data. Many agencies do not keep statistics due to issues of financial and human resources. Other agencies do not differentiate data according to aboriginal ancestry. Research on court files is in process.

The communities themselves have stated that family violence is a priority concern. Aboriginal and non-aboriginal service providers also prioritized family violence in a separate health survey needs assessment.

***b) Barriers/Program Needs***

Perhaps the most striking research findings are the reports on the barriers to accessing mainstream services, and the unique circumstances and needs of aboriginal women regarding family violence. Both the results of the community discussions and the literature review point to consistent and common themes:

- Aboriginal women are reluctant to seek outside assistance (fear of losing children and home; travel considerations; feeling of alienation; feeling uncomfortable; fear of spouse reprisal; pressure to remain in relationship, and personal factors related to self-esteem).
- Aboriginal women have unique cultural and community circumstances which are suggestive of unique intervention and prevention approaches. For example, there is a strong reliance on family and friends for support. Family is the basis of community, and it is stressed that the strengths of the family and community must be built upon to address the issues. There is also an emphasis upon culture, spirituality, and respecting the choices of women (ie., treating the batterer).
- Issues confronting aboriginal women in abusive relationships are complex; sometimes multi-generational. There is much personal pain involving, for example, issues with historical or present substance abuse, childhood abuse, and other life circumstances of loss (family suicides/early deaths, unemployment). Healing must be comprehensive.

It is concluded that a transition house, designed for, and by, aboriginal women is an essential step toward addressing the issue of abuse in a coordinated and comprehensive manner. Aboriginal women need an intervention and healing process which is:

- sensitive to, and supportive of, their life realities (cultures, family and community dynamics)
- sensitive to the history between First Nations and society (colonization processes and the impact of loss to self, family, and the whole community)
- holistic or comprehensive in focus
- based on promoting individual empowerment/choices
- based on educational awareness and breaking cycles of learned behavior

At the conclusion, the needs of aboriginal women are reviewed in a basic way, as well as broad policy and program considerations for establishing an aboriginal women's transition house to service the targeted communities.



# 1. Introduction

---

- a) Purpose of Report
- b) Laichwiltach Family Life Society
- c) Research Methodology

## a) Purpose of Report:

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society undertook a research project to determine:

- The incidence of family violence regarding aboriginal women in the targeted communities of Vancouver Island, B.C.: Campbell River, Cape Mudge, Comox, and Klahoose.
- What gaps existed in programs and services for aboriginal women and their children in family violence situations (eg., needs assessment).
- The type of service and/or program to be delivered by an aboriginal women's house, and subsequent planning and cost information.

The project was funded by the Ministry of Women's Equality and F.R.E.D.A. (Feminist Research Education Development & Action Centre). A proposal for an aboriginal women's transition house has been submitted to the Ministry.

This report highlights research findings which provided the framework for the transition house proposal.

## b) The Laichwiltach Family Life Society

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society is a non-profit aboriginal organization, which is located in Campbell River, B.C. The town is a coastal gateway for many northern Vancouver Island aboriginal communities, and therefore contains a diverse and fluent population.

The Society is governed by a board of community members, and it has been in operation since 1992. Programs and services of the Society are guided by the following mission:

*To empower and promote healing in our communities from a First Nations perspective for all people of aboriginal ancestry in unity.*

Services are available to all aboriginal people, regardless of residency on or off reserves or status under the *Indian Act*. The type of programs offered involve the following:

- healthy parenting program
- family support program
- healing circles
- drug and alcohol program
- youth, men and women's groups
- sex abuse and individual one-on-one counseling

The genesis of the Society was a Family Violence Needs Assessment conducted for the First Nations communities of Cape Mudge, Campbell River, and Comox. The project was sponsored through the Kwakiutl District Council in 1991/92, and it was the first of its kind for the three southern member Nations. The results of the assessment and the highlighted program priorities spurred the formation of the Society.

Programming has branched from the provision of counseling to support groups, parenting programs, family workers, and more recently, to a family development centre. The Society views the issues confronting aboriginal families, including family violence, as interconnected and rooted in history. The aim is therefore to provide comprehensive services which target 'total health'.

The Society is both community-based and community-directed. The Board sets overall program and policy direction, and it is made up of members of the aboriginal communities which it services. There are approximately ten staff, the majority of whom are of aboriginal ancestry and/or members of the serviced communities.

c) **Research Methodology**

Primary Research

Secondary Research

Process

Research Considerations

**Primary Research:**

Discussions were held with the following community groups/individuals:

- Elders' Group (Cape Mudge Nation)
- Comox Women's Group
- Laichwiltach Family Life Society Staff
- Klahoose Community
- Cape Mudge Community
- Individual aboriginal women

Contacts were also made with agencies/organizations in the Campbell River and Courtenay Districts:

- Local Hospitals/Comox Base Social Worker
- Senior Secondary School
- Comox Family Services
- RCMP
- M.S.S.
- Transition Houses
- Victim Services
- John Howard Society
- Women's Resource Centre
- Native Courtworker's & Counselling Association

**Secondary Research:**

Reports highlighted as helpful to the research project include:

Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities, Frank, S., 1992 Published by the Ministry of Women's Equality

Family Violence Research Report, Kiyoshk, R., 1990 Helping Spirit Lodge

Hear First Nations Women Speak, Leask, E., 1993 Coordinated by the Aboriginal Women's Council/Sponsored by the Association of First Nations' Women

'Kwakwaka'wakw Family Violence Awareness Program, McCrimmon, P. 1992  
Report to the Kwakiutl District Council

Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence 1989  
Ontario Native Women's Association

Vancouver Island Needs Assessment Survey, 1995 Tillicum Haus Native Friendship  
Centre

Report on a Health Survey on Aboriginal Women in the Comox Valley, 1995  
Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry

Process:

Research involved a variety of processes:

1. First Nation social workers from each of the communities were contacted for their thoughts on a process for community discussion of the issues. It was decided that a Victim Awareness Workshop would be set up in each community wherein the issue of a transition house would be raised. Four such meetings were held: Klahoose, Cape Mudge, Laichwiltach Family Life Office, and the Comox Women's Group. The meetings took place from October through December of 1995, and in January 1996. Primary research concluded in January, 1996.
2. The project was introduced at an Elders' luncheon for the elders of Cape Mudge and a discussion was subsequently held with the group in January, 1996. There were approximately a dozen elders at the initial meeting, and a slightly smaller group participated in the follow-up session.
3. Telephone calls, on-site visits, and/or letters, were undertaken regarding other organizations from September through December 1995. The majority of the contacts involved telephone discussions with administrators, program directors or coordinators of the service organizations.
4. Staff of the Laichwiltach Family Life Society were interviewed separately at the main office.

Community meetings involved informal small groups of women (range of three to approximately twelve women). In one instance, the researcher went to a woman's home for discussion. The women represented various facets of the community: Band staff, student, worker in the home, grandmothers, and single mothers.

An open-ended question format was used; discussions were not structured. Participants were encouraged to freely express their thoughts on family violence; access to existing services, and a need for an aboriginal women's transition house.

In regard to the literature review, the focus was upon local research and materials which would have some meaning to the targeted communities. One national report, and a few regional studies, were used to ascertain broad issues and program parameters.

### **Research Considerations**

*Sample Sizes:* For the most part, discussion groups were small, and a question may be raised about the applicability of the data to the larger targeted aboriginal community. For example, do those aboriginal women who were not participating in the project share similar needs and concerns regarding family violence?

The Society attempted to address this methodological question by complimenting community discussions with secondary research and information gathered through staff interviews. The Board believes this is the most viable methodological process given the sensitivity to the topic of family violence, and the subsequent need to begin with small group environments.

Although not comprehensive in sampling size, the research project results do provide strong messages and policy themes about a need for alternative community-based programming.

## **2.0 Interviews/Community Meetings**

---

- a) Laichwiltach Family Life Staff
- b) Elders' Group
- c) Community Meetings
- d) Women's Smaller Group Discussions
- e) Service Organizations

Section 2.0 highlights the main points that were derived from interviews and community meetings regarding the incidence and needs of aboriginal women and their children in family violence situations.

### **a) Interviews with Laichwiltach Family Life Staff**

#### ***Sexual Abuse Counselor:***

- \* The majority of the clients are women, many of whom are facing abuse in their present lives.
- \* All of the women who are being abused are facing repeat situations of violence. Many have experienced sexual abuse as a child.
- \* The women resist seeking outside intervention or assistance. Some of the reasons involve: reluctance to uproot their children; dislike of, or uncomfortableness with, the atmosphere of mainstream services, and personal attitude about the possibility of change due to a variety of circumstances (eg., economic situation).

#### ***Family Support Worker:***

- \* Notes that the majority of women she refers to a transition house either do not go, or they do not stay.
- \* Some of the reasons for this include: feeling of no support nor protection after hours (eg., staff were not on full 24 hour shifts); staff are not aboriginal and there is apprehension of not being understood, and a fear of losing children and the home.
- \* The worker emphasized a need for increased aboriginal staff, counseling, and cultural awareness.

#### ***Drug and Alcohol Worker:***

- \* The majority of his clients are women; the majority of whom are being abused by their husband or partner.

- \* Most of the women have children, the average number of which is three.
- \* A great number of the women are likely facing repeat abuse situations, especially if addiction is involved.
- \* Major issues with seeking outside intervention include: fear of reprisal from spouse; pressure from family to remain in relationship; fear of racism/societal attitude; feeling that the justice/court system will not help, and a personal attitude of 'what good will it do'; that is, 'where are the women going to go once they get out of a transition house'?
- \* The worker emphasized a need for a longer period of stay in a transition house so that women can plan/prepare; second stage housing; a great deal of personal support, and a program which allows them to have a spiritual/cultural focus (healing inward and then working outwards).

*Family Support Worker:*

- \* The worker 'sees a lot of family violence' and concludes that alcohol is usually always involved. The majority of her clients are victims facing repeat violence.
- \* There are many inter and intra cultural differences which detract from aboriginal women utilizing mainstream services. For example, there are cultural differences in diet/food, and food preparation.
- \* Apart from cultural differences, deterrents to using mainstream services are the historical impacts of colonization (ie., residential school impact on self-esteem).
- \* Self-esteem has to be specially considered in order to know how to help women facing abuse issues.

*Youth Worker:*

- \* Notes that aboriginal women are afraid of agencies in that their children might be taken away. Instead of receiving help, the women feel they may have added problems.
- \* Generally, the women feel powerless and alone. The worker states that agencies have to be more culturally sensitive and accommodating.

**b) Elders' Discussion:**

- \* Individuals need to understand 'learned behavior' so they can understand their choices. There was some discussion about how historical processes (Indian Act, residential school, and so on) have eroded family structures, and how some of the negative consequences are 'passed down' through learned behaviors. Part of breaking the cycle of violence is educational awareness.
- \* Spirituality should be an important part to healing/addressing the issues.
- \* Traditional values of the family should be emphasized and role modeled by elder women. Values can be taught to young parents as they are raising their children.
- \* One elder discussed that historically, in his community, the whole community would be witnesses to the wrongdoing of the offender who would be sent away from the village. The elder felt strongly that there needs to be strengthened traditional values to address the negative impacts to family structures.
- \* The role of the family is important. If it is a choice of a woman to return to her partner, intervention must deal with the whole family.
- \* Self-esteem is a major issue for many women. Healing should include teaching and counseling.
- \* For elder participation on any governing board/structure, it is important that are opportunities for training. Training should include learning about the issues, and about how boards/committees operate.

**c) Cape Mudge & Klahoose Community Meetings:**

- \* The period of allowable stay in a transition house has to be extended. A short time frame is not realistic.
- \* Older male children have to be allowed an opportunity to attend a transition home with their mother. Separation of family is a form of further victimization.
- \* Counseling is necessary; merely attending a transition shelter is not good enough.
- \* An aboriginal women's transition house is important - feeling that staff are familiar and knowledgeable about your circumstances. An aboriginal women's transition house would provide a greater feeling of being accepted.



- \* One woman stated that a very hurtful part was not being able to 'go to' her friend who was at a transition house. Participants of both meetings stress that it is necessary to use the family strength and support that does exist in healing processes. Individuals should not be forced to be isolated from such strengths.
- \* A transition shelter should provide some opportunity for sharing/healing, and some time for privacy.
- \* It is essential that the shelter provide educational awareness as well as counseling. Educational awareness was discussed in the context of learned behaviors and impacts to self-esteem.
- \* Most of the women participants indicated that staffing on a 24 hour basis in a transition house was important for them and other women to feel secure.
- \* In the smaller semi-isolated community of Klahoose, family violence is complicated by travel (requires 2 ferry trips), and lack of services/resources. Educational awareness and safety plans are necessary (plans for intervention and community safe homes).
- \* Follow-up is equally important. Participants of both meetings agreed that healing and assistance cannot stop with departure from a transition house. Women should be assisted after they leave a shelter. Healing cannot or does not occur in an isolated vacuum; it involves a more comprehensive approach.
- \* Childcare was also discussed as an important part to a transition house service, re: assessing the needs of the child and the needs of the child/mother relationship.
- \* Due to cultural differences and differing circumstances of community life, there should be a transition house designed for and by aboriginal women.

d) Women's Smaller Group Discussions:

- \* After review of Victim Services, the women discussed their perception that the legal system, and particularly the police, are not generally of assistance to aboriginal women in family violence situations (eg., attending emergency calls).
- \* Similar sentiments were expressed that they would feel more comfortable in an aboriginal women's house (feeling of familiarity, acceptance).
- \* One woman discussed how she and her friends help each other informally now in family violence situations. They go to one another for shelter and support, and refer other friends to these identified 'safe' places.

It was suggested that this type of 'buddy system' be implemented community-wide. Furthermore, it was recommended that there could be a similar approach created which supports the ability of women to telephone other women freely in times of need.

- \* One woman stated that it is essential that women in abusive relationships are able to feel a sense of accomplishment, whether that be in job training or academic education. She noted what abuse does to self-esteem, and how low self-esteem can be a major obstacle to seeking help.
- \* Another barrier mentioned was fear of further or increased abuse when a woman leaves the shelter and returns home (spouse reprisal).
- \* Women should be provided an opportunity for learning who they are, and about how they were raised impacts upon them. There was discussion on the benefit of positive assertive communication skills and understanding of rights to freedom against violence.
- \* Educational awareness and counseling are also important for men. Men are part of the family/community and many women return to their partners.

e) Service Organizations

Service organizations were contacted to determine the incidence of family violence regarding aboriginal women in the target communities. None of the agencies contacted had data which was useable. Issues with statistics include the following:

1. Some agencies do not keep statistics (ie., Comox hospital) due to the lack of human and other resources.
2. Some agencies keep statistics, but they do not differentiate according to aboriginal ancestry.
3. In some cases, aboriginal people do not attend the agency, and therefore there are no formal records or reports.

In many instances there were informal comments such as, 'very few aboriginal women enter our program'; 'I do not notice or keep track of cultural differences'. One organization kept records of assaults but did not have a category for spousal assault. A couple of organizations did have some available data, but given the overall lack of it, this information is not helpful to ascertaining the true picture.

Court records (K files) were also examined for the target area. This review is still in process. To date court records which were both opened and closed involving family violence in 1995 show that 7% were aboriginal men (n=41). Research is on-going regarding open (unresolved) 1995 files. The data does not give information on the victims, such as whether they are aboriginal women.

### Summary and Observations of Interview/Community Research

---

There are common themes which are derived from the discussion process:

- ⇒ Aboriginal women resist seeking outside assistance. The reasons range from fear of losing children and the home; feeling uncomfortable (feeling not accepted/racism); economic situation; fear of reprisal from partner; family pressure to remain in relationship; short length of stay in transition house/inadequate preparation time; lack of knowledge about rights and issues on the cycle of violence, and issues impacting on self-esteem.
- ⇒ The discussion of the above issues is couched in the context of history where colonization processes eroded aboriginal family, socio-economic, political, and cultural structures. The impacts can never be underestimated. Understanding history and the resulting impacts is essential for individuals to understand their choices and opportunities for change.
- ⇒ The needs of aboriginal women have to be addressed in a holistic or comprehensive way (include education, counseling, follow-up, and support). To be meaningful, the period of stay in a shelter has to be extended. Serious consideration also has to be given to second stage housing.
- ⇒ While family dynamics may in some cases be a barrier to seeking help, it is also the family unit which has positive strengths. The positive strengths need to be built upon in the healing processes. Women therefore cannot be automatically severed from community and family support.

The extended family, and the fact that the family unit is the basis of community, are significant cultural factors in addressing aboriginal women and family violence.

- ⇒ The choices of women in dealing with the offender should be respected. The offender is part of the family/community.
- ⇒ Abuse, whether it is historical or occurring within present relationships, impacts upon self and the belief in self. True healing means more than intervention; women must be supported in their work towards health.

### *Aboriginal Women's Issues*

Community and individual discussions were not formally structured with a set agenda of questions. There was no particular focus on a comparison of needs between aboriginal and non-aboriginal women. However, family violence was a stated concern, and issues raised involving aboriginal women include:

- ⇒ self-esteem and communication (socialization and learned passivity) and how this impacts on seeking assistance
- ⇒ protection/concern of children, and the impact of fear of losing children
- ⇒ little economic power which is a major barrier to seeking assistance

Aboriginal women share the above concerns with non-aboriginal women. There are undoubtedly more similarities, particularly related to society and socialization processes. However, while this is noted from the discussions, a comparison was not formally conducted. Aboriginal women also have concerns unique to their cultures, history, and communities. These considerations include the impacts of colonization on self, family and community; racism; role of family/family unit as basis of community; emphasis generally upon spirituality, and the structure of families (extended family and greater average number of children).

The lack of overall formal statistics on the incidence of aboriginal family violence is suggestive of the following: 1) aboriginal women are not extensively seeking assistance and/or utilizing mainstream services; 2) formal statistical records are not kept.

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society concludes:

The basic lack of formal statistics, coupled with the comments by aboriginal women on their discomfort with mainstream agencies, suggests that mainstream approaches are not working overall to meet the needs of aboriginal women. There is no coordinated nor comprehensive approach to dealing with aboriginal women and their children in abusive relationships.

## 2.1 Summary of Literature Review

---

Provided below are narratives of the reports that were used as a framework to the proposal for an aboriginal women's transition house. The reports are listed in alphabetical order of the author.

1) **"Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nation's Report"**  
Frank, Sharlene Published by the Ministry of Women's Equality, 1992

The report is a minority report to the one that was published by the Provincial Task Force on Family Violence. The author wanted to ensure that the self-determination of aboriginal communities in addressing matters of family violence was acknowledged and respected.

The report provides an overview of the incidence of family violence within aboriginal communities generally, and concludes that there is a dearth of information. Given the history of colonization and the abuse inflicted upon whole communities, some behaviors have been mislabeled and regarded as 'normal'. Therefore, individual circumstances of pain do not show up on formal records.

The author acknowledges the unique situation of aboriginal women; how historical impacts have eroded their traditional roles, and ultimately, their health and safety. The report stresses that solutions lie, and must come from, within the communities themselves. Imposition of 'solutions' has led to the current conflicts or problems.

The report examines barriers to individuals receiving assistance, and to communities in developing intervention, prevention, and healing approaches. These barriers are summarized as follows:

Individual Barriers	Community Barriers
Racism	Lack of financial, human, and other resources.
Fear of losing one's children	Intergovernmental issues, re: jurisdiction and authority
Lack of resources	Nature of funding processes (spend more time seeking funds and writing proposals)
Power Imbalances between worker and individual; feeling of powerlessness	Need for training/human resource development
Cultural differences and feeling needs are not being understood/met.	Government driven programs; not flexible to accommodate needs of communities

Recommendations to the Provincial Government emphasize the empowerment of aboriginal communities to plan and implement their own solutions.

2) Hart, Catherine "Report on a Health Survey on Aboriginal Women in the Comox Valley", 1995 Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry

The health status of aboriginal women residing in the Comox Valley was surveyed. The basic demographics of the respondents involve the following:

- Average age - 37 years
- Majority registered as 'status Indians'
- Almost an equal division between married and single status
- An equal division between employed and unemployed (48% respectively); 4% are pursuing post-secondary education
- The majority (61%) have children living at home

*Accessing Organizations/Services*

In requesting help in an emergency situation, 60% stated they used a government or community service, and 40% indicated they had not. The survey details questions on whether respondents 'Heard About' and are 'Using/Used' a list of specified services. Responses to the service questions related to family violence include:

	Heard About	Used/Using
Victim Services	52%	4%
Crisis Centre	57%	13%
Mental Health Centre	52%	17%
Comox Valley Family Services	48%	0%
Women's Resource Centre	61%	13%
Transition Society	52%	9%

As the survey indicates, less than half of the women who heard about a particular organization/service are using it. At the same time, 17% stated they are experiencing problems with personal protection/violence.

The most used services are the Upper Island Health Unit (30%), Ministry of Social Services (22%); the Comox Valley Nursing Centre (17%); Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry (17%), Mental Health Centre (17%) and Family Doctor/Dentist (17%).

The survey notes that 74% of the respondents look to their family and friends for emotional support, 43% for financial support, and 39% in emergency situations. *The reliance on family and friends coincides with the Laichwiltach Family Life Society project results (re: community discussions about the role of the family and the strengths that it may provide).*

The health survey does not detail the reasons for service utilization or under-utilization. It is assumed that part of the rationale may involve looking to family and friends for assistance, coupled with distrust or discomfort with mainstream services.

There are some methodological limitations with the data (eg., relatively small respondent group), but it does provide some indication of the health status of aboriginal women in part of the targeted service area. The survey findings also reinforce other reports on the under-utilization of mainstream services.

3) Family Violence Research Report-'Beyond Violence'  
Kiyoshk, Robert Helping Spirit Lodge, 1990

The report reviews the results of a study undertaken to determine the needs of aboriginal women regarding a transition house in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia.

The study consisted of questionnaires aimed at three target groups: 1) victims/witnesses (male and female) of aboriginal ancestry; 2) agency/service providers; 3) elders. The study also involved a literature review, on-site visits to aboriginal transition houses in other provinces, and informational workshops.

The following highlights some of the major findings of the questionnaires.

**VICTIM/WITNESS QUESTIONNAIRE:**

\* Type of Abuse/Frequency of Response

mental/emotional abuse	physical abuse	sexual abuse
99%	84%	75%

\* Response to Question of Who is Most Often Abused:

wife - 83%	children - 80%	elderly - 23%	husband - 12%	'other' - 6%
------------	----------------	---------------	---------------	--------------

\* Response to Question of Who is Most Often the Abuser:

husband-	wife -	relatives & acquaintances	elders -	children-
89%	31%	16%	7%	7%

\* Contributing Factors/Causes of Physical Violence:

Raised in dysfunctional environment (abused as a child)	41%
Financial problems	16%
Alcohol/drug abuse	12%
other	15%

\* Family Member Most Likely to Seek Help:

wife- 80%	children- 39%	husband - 2%	elder - 12%	other - 8%
-----------	---------------	--------------	-------------	------------

### ***ELDERS' SURVEY***

There were 50 elders surveyed. The report discusses prevalent themes which arose from the questionnaire. These themes range in topic from the collective silence on family violence, especially sexual abuse, to the necessity of reviving traditional values.

There were mixed responses as to how an abuser should be treated ( approximately 20% suggested that therapy or traditional healing was appropriate for an abuser; 36% suggested jail, and 24% were uncertain).

### ***AGENCY RESPONSES:***

The report concludes that agency responses were largely indicative of support and acknowledgment of the need for the proposed aboriginal women's transition house. Comments to the question on barriers which a transition house faces in delivering a service to the aboriginal community include:

- 'Sometimes mainstream transition houses just can't understand the needs of Natives. Judgementalism and over-reaction too often fills the gap'
- 'They are condescended (sic) and treated with racism/patronization in the system and when looking for housing'



- 'We don't have anyone on staff who is really knowledgeable about Native culture and traditions and can empathize with their feelings about treatment by white communities and people'.

The report states that the completed questionnaires represent a good cross-section of aboriginal experience with family violence in the East Vancouver area, but does note some research and methodological limitations. Several recommendations are provided, some of the highlights of which include:

- ⇒ The need for an aboriginal transition house/family violence centre is evident.
- ⇒ The focus of a transition house will not be lost, but the need to deal with domestic violence as a family problem will be stressed.
- ⇒ Aftercare and follow-up support will be a strong programming feature.
- ⇒ There must be recognition and acceptance of a cultural and spiritual based healing program for family violence victims.
- ⇒ In the new transition home the women and children will be exposed to an integrated method of treatment for abuse victims. Integrated because family violence involves a dysfunctional situation for the entire family, therefore all family members require healing.

It is interesting to note that while the Laichwiltach Family Life Society did not engage in a survey process, the Society did obtain similar expressions and comments, particularly regarding the emphasis upon culture, family, follow-up/aftercare, types of service barriers.

- 4) Leask, Edna. 'Hear First Nations Women Speak Profiles -- Zero Tolerance to Violence', 1993. Coordinated by the Aboriginal Women's Council/Sponsored by the Association of First Nations' Women

The report profiles the story of fifteen aboriginal women. In their own words, the women tell how they have survived family violence and how they are healing themselves.

In the foreword, the author shares common themes from the stories of the women:

- *Definitions of Family Violence*

The stories indicate that family violence includes abusive childhood experiences, sexual abuse, spousal assault, emotional and mental abuse, and racism. The stories also show contributing factors such as: lack of positive aboriginal identity; residential school, loss of traditional ways and values, economic problems, generational abusers, and alcohol and drugs. The author explains:

Some of the women said they didn't realize that abuse and violence wasn't normal behaviour. Most of the women said that alcohol had been a part of their lives; either they drank or their parents or partner did and the violent behaviour usually followed a bout of drinking alcohol. The violence seemed to come from anger, frustration and despair.

- *Healing First Nations Communities*

Most of the women agree that the healing process means recognizing the pain and realizing that healing comes from within. The author states that healing means letting the pain go, sometimes asking for help, learning to trust again, forgiving, and learning about and recovering their cultural ways and values. It also means "recognizing and acknowledging their special gifts from the Creator and using these gifts in a good way". Lastly, the author notes that healing family violence means healing for all the people and not just the victims because the whole community is affected by violence.

As outlined in the preface, from the women there is a conviction that the victim and perpetrator must both participate in healing, and the faith that this can be accomplished.

- *Cultural Identity and Healing*

Many of the women agree it is important to know family history and to sustain a positive identity. The author notes that the women agree that recovering positive images and identity of our people is a necessary part of the healing process because it strengthens traditional ways and cultural values:

"Despite the diversity of life histories, and the differences in the degree of abuse the women experienced, the healing path described by each woman in the study is strikingly similar. At the core of each person's healing is a renewed sense of spirituality based on the discovery, or rediscovery, of their native traditional values".

The profiles provide powerful opportunities for learning. The Laichwiltach Family Life Society included the report in the study to exemplify how comprehensive the issues facing aboriginal women are in family violence situations, and how essential holistic and cultural healing is.

The profiles reinforce the comments made in the community discussion process that the mere provision of a shelter service is not sufficient; women require healing/counseling, educational awareness, follow-up, and support.

5) **McCrimmon, Pauline. 'Kwakwaka'wakw Family Violence Awareness Program, 1992 Report to the Kwakiutl District Council**

The report details the results of a family violence needs assessment regarding three of the presently targeted communities: Cape Mudge, Comox, and Campbell River.

The needs assessment consisted of a survey which was distributed door-to-door. A Steering Committee was also formed to oversee the process. Main topic areas of the survey were:

- **Services/Programs:** The types of services and programs that members would like to see delivered.
- **Justice System:** Whether respondents or anyone known by respondents had difficulty in dealing with the justice system.
- **Respondent Awareness:** Degree of awareness of the services available to victims of family violence.

The survey was administered to both females and males sixteen years of age and older. The completed return rate was an approximate average of 40% for the three communities (just over half were women).

From the Comox survey it was concluded that the "majority are not using public services due to being uncomfortable and feeling a fair amount of racism... There is a need for more services to be offered by the community itself".

The need for a family violence group was among the top five listed priorities across all three communities. Highlights of the recommendations include the following:

1. Intensive efforts be made to continue informing and educating our communities on issues related to family violence and child sexual abuse.
2. Service delivery and related cultural issues be an integral part of program development.
3. Need for further research regarding a Native Victim Service Program and a Native Transition Home for battered women.
4. Elders must play a real and meaningful role to integrate our values and customs.
5. Program initiatives should focus on strengthening the family unit.

The needs assessment results reinforce the community discussions on barriers and concern for community-based programming.

6) Ontario Native Women's Association **"Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence"** 1989

The report discusses the findings of a project undertaken to assess, from an aboriginal women's perspective, the situation of abused women in Ontario. The assessment included the incidence of family violence, the availability and adequacy of services, and an exploration of aboriginal solutions to these problems.

The report provides data on the incidence of aboriginal family violence, which at the time was groundbreaking:

Our study has found that 84% of respondents felt family violence occurs in their community with nearly 24% surveyed individuals indicating they personally know cases of family violence which had led to death - most frequently, to the women.

The data translates into an overall picture of family violence in aboriginal communities being eight times higher than the average for Canadian society as a whole.

Strongly emphasized throughout the report is a First Nation and Metis women's viewpoint. As the author states, "In the past, aboriginal women's needs in the family violence area have been poorly served by non-aboriginal studies. Either our interests have been lumped-in with 'ethnic minorities', misunderstood or ignored". The situation and needs of aboriginal women are culturally unique and require a distinct response.

At the onset the report explains that the problem of family violence cannot be separated from the larger problem within Aboriginal society because it has arisen from and is a response to these larger problems. Specifically, the larger problems deal with the oppressive historical relations with Canadian Governments and society:

For much of the past century we have been living under bureaucratic control, with no real self-government. This has meant we did not control much of our everyday affairs, including family life, and as a result, the level of social problems within our families is frequently severe. Alcohol, drugs, and solvent abuse, family violence and other crimes are uniform tragedies in Aboriginal society.

Family violence touches the life of everyone in the community.

In reviewing existing services, the study found that there is not a high degree of contentment/satisfaction of the services available. It is mostly aboriginal women who are likely to seek outside help, but generally not until their injuries are severe.

The report provides statistics on the types of assistance sought, and concludes that community education and awareness are desperately needed since people's top choice is to first turn to their own community. Further, "the fact that only 14% turn to the police once again testifies to the lack of faith aboriginal people have for police protection".

Barriers to utilizing mainstream services are discussed. Some examples which are raised include feelings of alienation, travel considerations, racism, and lack of use of elders and extended families in mainstream shelters. Discussion of services available to battered aboriginal women highlights both reserve and urban based services, emergency and shelter services, medical services, rehabilitation for the batterer, and the Canadian criminal justice system.

Thirteen major recommendations are provided as a proposed plan of action. An important feature underlying all the solutions is an honoring of the four directions (honesty, kindness, sharing, and strength). Further, the "most far reaching development, in the context of family violence, would be the recognition and implementation of self-government arrangements for Aboriginal people". The implementation of self-government would enable aboriginal communities to address the issues according to their vision of the family and community.

The historical and philosophical beliefs on the origins of family violence, the emphasis upon family/community, the nature of service barriers, and the belief in spirituality, are all examples of issues also raised by participants in the Laichwiltach Family Life Society project. The extensive details of the report by the Ontario Native Women's Association reinforced to the Society what we know as aboriginal women's reality in family violence. The report provided a useful framework for analyzing and gathering information.

7) Tillcum Haus Native Friendship Centre, "Vancouver Island Needs Assessment Survey, 1995

As part of an agreement with Health and Welfare Canada, the report describes the training needs of five Island aboriginal communities. A workshop, coupled with a survey, was conducted in the following areas:

- \* Port Alberni
- \* Duncan and Nanaimo
- \* Courtenay and Campbell River
- \* Powell River
- \* Alert Bay

The needs assessment for the Courtenay and Campbell River area consisted of four workshop sessions. In Courtenay, two workshops were facilitated through the Upper Island Women of Native Ancestry : 1) agency staff and front line community workers, and 2) open community workshop for aboriginal women.

In Campbell River, workshops were held with the Campbell River Youth and Family Services, and the Laichwiltach Family Life Society.

Spousal battering and family conflict were identified as serious issues by the survey participants. The top five issues of concern include:

- |                                 |        |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Spousal Battering            | 61.76% |
| 2. Family Conflict              | 61.76% |
| 3. Adult Male Alcohol Abuse     | 55.88% |
| 4. Unemployment                 | 64.7%  |
| 5. Youth Dropping out of School | 55.88% |

Responses are inclusive of both aboriginal and non-aboriginal service providers working with the aboriginal communities.

The author notes that while the study is not conclusive, it provides a good indication of what issues are impacting front line workers on Vancouver Island.

The serious rating of family violence issues in the Courtenay and Campbell River district is supportive of the needs assessment conducted by the Laichwiltach Family Life Society three years earlier.

## **Comments/Literature Review**

---

Literature reports contain prevalent and consistent messages on the incidence of aboriginal family violence; etiology; description of service barriers, and the importance of culture and the family. Specifically, mainstream services are under-utilized, and aboriginal women usually turn to their friends and family. Community based solutions are emphasized. Aboriginal communities must be able to develop and refine their own visions of healthy families.

The literature reveals that it is aboriginal women who are likely to be abused, but that abuse is a concern of the whole family and community. While a formal comparison was not conducted, aboriginal women share concerns with non-aboriginal women, particularly dealing with socialization processes, sexism, and economic displacement.

The need for an aboriginal women's transition house is discussed as 'evident' in some reports and studies directly, and indirectly through service use data. In all reports, there is a focus upon the unique needs of aboriginal women and upon solutions which come from the community.

### **3.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

---

The impacts of colonization over the last century are still being felt by all members of aboriginal communities. The impacts are witnessed on all levels - economic and political displacement of First Nation Governments; economic and political displacement of aboriginal individuals; a host of interrelated social problems, such as substance abuse, unemployment, poverty, and crime, and many personal losses resulting in pain. This historical process has been, and is described, as 'abuse of whole communities'.

Community discussions and literature reviews stress that mainstream approaches are not working for aboriginal women in family violence situations:

- violence in aboriginal communities remains disproportionately high
- services and programs in wider society are under-utilized
- aboriginal women are generally reluctant to seek outside assistance

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society feels confident that the current research: 1) establishes a need for an aboriginal women's transition house, and 2) provides broad program and service delivery considerations.

#### **Aboriginal Women NEED:**

- To feel and to be safe
- To be accepted and non-judged
- To know they will not be further victimized
- To have choices about their lives/empowerment
- To be able to obtain support from their family/friends
- To have an opportunity to be connected culturally and/or spiritually

These needs roughly translate into the following program/policy considerations:

1. community-based aboriginal women's shelter
2. operation of a shelter on a 24 hour basis
3. educational awareness for individuals and whole communities
4. counseling
5. follow-up/aftercare
6. familiar diet
7. childcare workers
8. use of elders and the extended family
9. appropriate or realistic length of stay in shelter
10. allowing older male children to remain with the mother
11. use of community processes for promotion, education and discussion
12. offering opportunities for learning traditional family/cultural values
13. allowing the women an opportunity to discover or rediscover spirituality
14. assisting with processes for employment/education and related resources
15. examining ways to support women and their children in building or re-building health and positive self-esteem.

While it is undoubtedly beneficial for mainstream services to become more culturally sensitive, the cultural realities are difficult to articulate. Culture is much more than ceremonial activities. Culture is a living expression of a worldview - a way of experiencing, seeing, and feeling life. Aboriginal women in the community discussion process expressed it in these ways: "I would feel more comfortable in an aboriginal women's transition house"; "It would be more familiar"; "I would feel more accepted".

The Laichwiltach Family Life Society has determined broad policy and program parameters, and intends to carry out data collection, including details with the community on specific program delivery considerations, through the guidance of a community-based board.