

# Women of the Métis Nation

Traditional Knowledge  
Policy Paper

## **Acknowledgements**

The Women of the Métis Nation would like to thank Statistics Canada for providing statistical information that we used to develop this paper. We would also like to thank the Métis Centre for their analysis of the statistical information used in writing this policy paper.

The Women of the Métis Nation would like to thank the Métis National Council for its assistance and support.

The Women of the Métis Nation would also like to thank the provincial Métis women's organizations for their assistance and support.

*...And yet you know that  
love, honour, respect, courage,  
action and words can  
and shall  
must  
change the world,  
though true progress is slow -  
a healer calling for helpers on her journey to a distant vision..*

*Michelle Corneau<sup>1</sup>*

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Historical Role of Women in the Métis Nation**

Métis women have always played an important role in society. In this largely egalitarian community, women were for the most part equal partners in the development of their communities politically, socially and economically. During the fur trade era, Métis women worked beside men building buffalo pounds, scouting during the hunts, teaching, and hauling and skinning meat. Métis women prepared hides, made products, and sold goods, helping to provide for their families economically. They also acted as interpreters between European fur traders and local communities paving the way for the development of the fur trade in British North America. Métis women have always held the esteemed role as keepers of traditional knowledge. In addition to these roles, they also raised their children and provided for their families and communities socially.

Métis women played key roles in relationship building and the survival of their families and communities through challenging times. While Métis women had little direct political power, they exerted significant influence on husbands, brothers, and particularly sons—by refusing to work, making verbal appeals, and publicly admonishing or encouraging men. Many had engaged in battle, loading and repairing guns, making bullets, often standing just behind the men. Women could also be passionate advocates for peace, speaking as mothers and on behalf of the children. Their spiritual lives blended elements of traditional beliefs with Christianity: many worked tirelessly to support mission work, and devotion intensified after the 1885 resistance and collapse of traditional economies.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Historical Economic Roles***

Métis women played a prominent role in the economic stability of not only their community but the community as a whole. The Hudson's Bay Company posts

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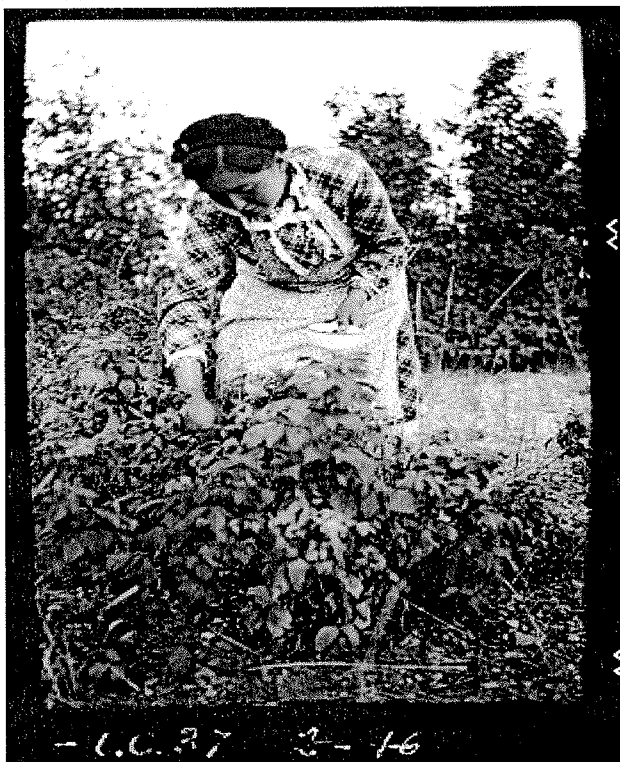
<sup>1</sup> Website: [http://www.Métiswomenscircle.com/Of\\_the\\_Wind.html](http://www.Métiswomenscircle.com/Of_the_Wind.html).

<sup>2</sup> Farrell Racette, Sherry, [http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/Métis\\_women.html](http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/Métis_women.html).

became reliant on the small farming operations that Métis women created to feed both family and community. They grew gardens in order to provision food for Hudson's Bay Company posts, which in many cases prevented starvation among fur trade workers.

In 1830 at Moose Factory, women were responsible for planting and harvesting the potato crop, resulting in 196 bushels.

“The women’s contribution at Fort Edmonton, in terms of gardening as well as providing other provisions and services, was so important that the chief factor, John Rowand, noted that without the women’s hard work the Company might not be able to carry on with its endeavours. At the community of St. Albert, Alberta, the harvest from the fields and gardens consisted of 700 barrels of potatoes, 200 of cabbage, 11 of carrots, 11 of onions, 150 sacks of wheat and 30 sacks of barley.”<sup>1</sup>



Harvesting berries and picking medicines was an extremely important function, not only for the sustenance of the community but also for the health and well-being of the wider community.

Métis woman harvesting berries **TITLE:** Visite Pastorale **DESCRIPTION:** Île-à-la-Crosse **CREDITS:** Oblates of Mary Immaculate **COPYRIGHT:** 2006 St. Boniface Historical Society. All Rights Reserved.

In addition to small farming practices, much of the fresh and dried meats came from the toil of Métis women. They played an essential role during the fur trade and much later to provide for their families and community.



**TITLE:** Visite Pastorale **DESCRIPTION:** Île-à-la-Crosse **CREDITS:** Oblates of Mary Immaculate **COPYRIGHT:** 2006 St. Boniface Historical Society. All Rights Reserved.

During the fur trade, pemmican, which was often the only food available to workers and travelers, sustained an industry. Making pemmican was a year-round task, and women were responsible for every step: cutting the fresh meat into long thin strips, drying them, and beating the dried meat into flakes; cutting

up fat and rendering it into tallow; gathering and drying berries; making the leather bags; and finally mixing the ingredients into the high-protein, high-calorie mixture that fuelled the voyageurs. One pound of pemmican was generally accepted to be the equivalent of eight pounds of fresh meat.<sup>3</sup>

From 1850 to 1870 there was a considerable market for Métis-style coats, jackets, saddles, and smaller items such as quirts, fire bags, watch pockets, and pouches. Trains loaded with these goods traveled to consumers, and male traders often moved beyond their family circle for suppliers. Women's production continued to be critical to Métis economies, particularly as men found it increasingly difficult to make a living. In the first half of the 20th century, Métis women in Saskatchewan produced a huge volume of hooked and braided rugs, marketing them from door to door with berries, fish, or garden produce.

### **Challenges to the Revitalization of Traditional Knowledge and the Traditional Role of Métis Women**

Métis women see a number of challenges in their quest to revitalize traditional knowledge and their role within the culture.

As the world searches for new sources of medicine and inspiration, researchers, developers, artists and even fashion designers are turning to the world's Indigenous peoples and their knowledge and resources. All too often, researchers and companies gain access to traditional medicines and plants patenting substances, components, and processes without the approval, involvement or benefit of the Indigenous people whose culture is intricately linked with these plants, medicines and knowledge. Once patented, a people who have used a plant or substance since time immemorial may find themselves afoul of western intellectual property law.

<sup>3</sup> Website: <http://www.Métismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00718.pdf>, p.3.

Turning to western intellectual property law to protect against misappropriation and misuse does not provide a satisfactory solution. Métis traditional knowledge is held collectively, for the use and benefit of all, not for the use and benefit of the individual who has that knowledge. Existing intellectual property law fails to recognize and protect the collective nature of traditional knowledge and resources.

Intellectual property law presents a number of other difficulties. The law outlines a number of criteria that must be met before protection can be granted. One of the criteria of patent law is novelty. Knowledge, resources and processes known and passed down through the generations do not meet the test for novelty thereby preventing those who received the knowledge from the Creator from protection under patent law. Intellectual property law also does not protect those aspects of traditional knowledge which are never meant to be written down or to be shared only with a small number of people.

These challenges have lead people to keep their knowledge from outsiders and even to choose deliberately not to pass on the knowledge to anyone lest it fall into the wrong hands. This is absolutely devastating because it represents a huge loss of culture not just within the Métis community but also for the world in general.

One of the biggest challenges faced by our nation, and more specifically Métis women as the keepers of traditional knowledge, is the legacy of residential schools. During this dark chapter in Canadian and Métis history, generations of children were separated from their families and their culture. The effect of residential schools drove many Métis under-ground.

When children and their families were separated, the transmission of language, culture and traditional knowledge from one generation to the next was interrupted. In spite of the challenges faced by Métis culture, Métis women have fought to continue their role as the keepers of traditional knowledge.

Métis suffered a huge loss of culture, language and family due to residential schools and other government policies. Whereas traditional knowledge used to be widely held throughout the community, today fewer people hold that knowledge and are able to pass it on to new generations. Michif, once a vibrant language on the Prairies and the heart of our culture, is now at risk of becoming extinct. The Métis population is estimated between 350,000 and 400,000 people. Of that, only roughly 500 people continue to speak Michif.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Manitoba Métis Federation.

## The Role of Métis Women in the Revitalization of their Culture

There is limited statistical information available indicating the importance of traditional knowledge and culture to Métis men and women. But, from the information collected so far, a very clear and interesting pattern can be discerned: Métis women place greater importance on participating in traditional activities, and maintaining and transferring traditional knowledge than do Métis men.

Almost 43% of Métis feel it is very important or fairly important that their children learn an Aboriginal language.<sup>5</sup> More Métis women (21%) than Métis men (16%) agree with this statement. Generally older Métis compared to younger Métis believe that it is very important that their children acquire an Aboriginal language.

Passing on Métis culture and history appears to be more important than the acquisition of an Aboriginal language. Overall, 37% of Métis feel it is very important and 36% feel it is fairly important for their children to learn about Métis culture and history.<sup>6</sup> More Métis women (41%) agree this is very important compared to Métis men (33%). Younger Métis women feel it is important to pass on Métis culture and history. Forty-six per cent of Métis women between the ages of 25 and 29 feel it is very important and 34% feel it is fairly important to pass on Métis culture and history.

More Métis women (28%) than Métis men (24%) said they owned some article that is traditionally associated with Métis culture, such as a sash or shirt.<sup>7</sup> A higher proportion of Métis women between the ages of 25 and 39 (29%) and between the ages of 40 and 54 (31%) said they owned a traditional Métis article compared to Métis women in other age groups.

Métis women continue to participate in a variety of traditional Métis activities. Fifty-three per cent of Métis women responding to the Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 said they have gathered wild plants, berries, wild rice and sweet grass.<sup>8</sup> Older Métis women appear to be more involved in gathering wild plants and berries. Over 55% of Métis women older than 40 years of age said they gathered wild plants. Fewer Métis women (45%) under the age of 40 said they gather wild plants and berries.

Twenty-one percent of women who responded said they do some form of artwork or craftwork, such as leatherwork, beadwork, or weaving, in traditional Métis or Aboriginal styles or motifs. About the same percentage of Métis women across age groups do artwork and craftwork. Twenty-four percent of Métis women between the ages of 15 and 24 do traditional artwork and craftwork, 23% of

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Métis Supplement, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

women between the ages of 40 and 54 do traditional artwork and craftwork, and 19% of Métis women aged 55 and over do traditional artwork and craftwork.

These statistics indicate that Métis women continue to maintain the traditional knowledge and participate in traditional activities. They place great importance on Métis culture and language. The differences in numbers between men and women should come as no surprise when one considers the traditional role of Métis women within their culture. The fact that this has continued through many challenging times is a testament to the strength and resilience of Métis women to protect and transmit traditional Métis knowledge and culture.

Métis women want to move beyond the status quo; they want to reclaim their traditional role, pass on traditional knowledge, revitalize their culture and communities and empower future generations. Language, culture and traditional knowledge are integral to the life and functioning of the community.

The major practical issue facing Métis women is time. Fewer elders remain who are able to transmit traditional knowledge to the young members of the community. Métis women want to develop appropriate tools and programs to assist in the transmission of traditional knowledge from Métis elders to Métis youth. The Women of the Métis Nation is committed to developing partnerships with governments and Métis educational institutions to create the best atmosphere possible for transmitting and protecting traditional knowledge.