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ABORIGINAL WOMEN: OPENING THE FUTURE TO ORGANIZE

By

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Abstract

Currently, Aboriginal women are underrepresented within all levels of Canadian organizations. The result has been that Aboriginal women continue to fall between the cracks of programs in Canada because they have not been allocated the right to speak on their own behalf. This in turn has increased spending within programs like social services and the justice systems in order to cover for those tremendous gaps. The purpose of this project is to draw out Aboriginal women's experience historically and to locate strategies through which they can secure their rights. The process began with an examination into several historical documents on how women in general have been defined in Canadian society, and how that has been reflected within contemporary Aboriginal societies over the process of colonization. Hence, a more detailed examination into contemporary Aboriginal societies was necessary in order to locate the successes and failures that have contributed to present day Aboriginal women's organizations. Three main conclusions were identified. First, Aboriginal women must organize on their own behalf if they are ever going to have their issues addressed properly. Secondly, they need the cooperation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments if they are to relearn and reclaim their traditional leadership roles within their communities. Lastly, the importance of elder mentorship cannot be stressed enough if they are going to redefine what it means to be organized Aboriginal women and if they are to move into the future with purpose and strength. Based on the research findings of this project, empowering Aboriginal women's organizations to speak on their own behalf not only benefits Aboriginal women's issues, it will ultimately benefit entire communities.

I. Introduction

An area that remains a major concern for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations is the exclusion of Aboriginal women's organizations from the negotiation table. Although during the negotiations leading up to Charlottetown Accord in 1992 Aboriginal women's organizations were able to successfully "win agreement on a proposed clause to guarantee women's equality rights under the proposed self-government amendments", the accord was never "ratified and the proposed amendments were not enacted (Cornet, 2001, p. 122). This allowed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments to refuse Aboriginal women's organizations, like the Native Women's Association of Canada, inclusion into important negotiations, negotiations which directly affected Aboriginal women's personal lives. Instead, Aboriginal women's organizations have been accused of causing division among aboriginal communities for advocating for their rights as opposed to advocating for collective rights. Furthermore, several male Aboriginal leaders have attempted to argue that upon achieving collective rights for all Aboriginal people, Aboriginal women would automatically be protected. I disagree with that conclusion. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to outline the process of colonization faced by Aboriginal women, and to draw out the continued oppression they now face from their government systems and from their male counterparts within their communities. I will argue that the oppression faced by Aboriginal women, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men, has led to a distinctive type of oppression which only they can address in order to better speak for their rights. To do so, this paper will

attempt to outline the different types of barriers presented by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal patriarchal systems for Aboriginal women's organizations, in order to understand what can be done by Aboriginal women to counteract these barriers, so that they can reclaim their voice and sit at the negotiation table.

II. Pre-colonial Aboriginal Women's Organizations

There has been a lot of debate among Aboriginal scholars as to what types of specific traditional roles Aboriginal women held prior to contact, but the overall consensus resides with the belief that the traditional gender roles of Aboriginal men and women were "complementary" as opposed to egalitarian in nature (Hoefnagels, n.d, p. 2). In other words, it was customary that "roles and responsibilities" be divided "according to people's abilities and strengths"; allowing for a more fluid concept of gender to be practiced (Ibid). With regards to Aboriginal women's organizations, Hoefnagels (n.d) mentioned that "Aboriginal societies tended to value Aboriginal women and their contributions" to community governance (p. 2). Furthermore, Darcy Leigh (2009) pointed out that Aboriginal families were "organized communally or non-hierarchically, without coercive authority"; this provided women with important roles in the "production and politics" of the communities (p. 73).

III. Colonization and Assimilation: Aboriginal Women's Organizations and Distinctive Oppression

Leigh (2009) stressed that "(i)n order to integrate and subordinate Indigenous peoples into a colonial system of power, Indigenous societies were reorganized along patriarchal lines, aligning the interests of Indigenous family and social organisation with

the interests of colonial power” (p. 76). Similarly, Wendy Cornet (2001) argued that “(t)he Indian Act has a long and well-documented history as a tool of assimilation, colonization and control of the diverse First Nations on whom it has been imposed” (p. 133). Several sections within the Indian Act specifically were designed to displace Aboriginal women from their traditional roles. Sayers and MacDonald (2001) point out the exclusion aspects, noting that “(t)antamount to any discussion of colonization is the effective denial of many First Nations women, and their offspring, to the right to membership in their respective First Nations communities and their right to enjoy Indian status” (p. 11). For example, “(u)ntil 1985, a First Nations woman who married a non-First Nations man lost her membership and identity (status) as an Indian whereas if a First Nations man married a non-First Nations woman, his partner gained First Nations membership and status” (Ibid). Although this policy was amended in 1985, Sayers and MacDonald (2001) also reveal that “discrimination against the children of reinstated First Nations women continues” (p. 11). Throughout these twin processes of colonization and patriarchal imposition, Aboriginal women’s voices also disappeared from Band governance and leadership circles; hence, their systemic removal from “government and power” in communities opened the door for “fraternal links” to be created between “Indigenous and colonial men” (Leigh, 2009, p. 76). In other words, Aboriginal men were rewarded for accepting the removal of women from leadership circles and encouraged to subordinate women to men; as Sayers and MacDonald (2001) have noted, “not only are First Nations women devalued by White men, First Nations men (and women) have arguable internalized the White devaluation of First Nations women” (p. 10).

IV. Aboriginal Women's Organizations: Importance of Re-establishment

Sayers and MacDonald (2001) suggest that “(w)hile colonialism is at the root of our learned disrespect for women, we cannot blame colonialism for our informed actions today” (p.11). Their points refer directly to the continued oppression still faced by Aboriginal women, both inside and outside of their communities. Importantly, current negotiations with Aboriginal people have outlined that self-governance is necessary for “achieving equality, human dignity and freedom from discrimination, and full enjoyment of all human rights”; however, without Aboriginal women's voices this can never be fully achieved (Ibid, p. 10). They argue that “(t)he implication of omitting women's current realities from self-government debates [ensures] that existing social problems fail to be named and therefore remain unaddressed” (Ibid, p. 12). Clearly, in terms of these current male-dominated First Nations governments, these governing bodies “do not consider women's rights as human rights issues”; meaning that women's issues have become regulated once again under sexist oppression “by not recognizing women's rights within collective rights and by violence” (Ibid).

The violence that Sayers and MacDonald (2001) are referring to which now affects many Aboriginal women in many forms was not traditional. Domestic violence which affects many Aboriginal women is now perceived as “a legacy of colonialism” which stems from internalizing “colonial violence”; thus “(i)ndigenous men themselves might be said to be continuing the process of colonial oppression in Indigenous communities” (Leigh, 2009, p. 79). Aboriginal women themselves have suggested that “one must look instead to the various environmental, social, economic and political realities which contribute to the comparatively poor health status of Aboriginal people”; more

importantly, that “the female mortality rate due to violence was far higher among status Indian women” (Dion and Kipling, 1998, p. 16). However, despite the statistics, Aboriginal leaders, such as Phil Fontaine from the Assembly of First Nations, have denied it, arguing “that First Nations governments’ objectives are one and the same as those of healing programs and, therefore, would lead to protection for women” (Fiske, Newell and George, 2001, p. 69). Therefore, he has been accused of failing to take political action against “male violence and sexual abusers” (Ibid). Interestingly, the question now being asked by scholars is “(h)ow do political leaders and theorists respond to women’s concerns that women and children need a safeguard against the abuse of power by male leaders” (Ibid)? The answer is simple. Band governments need to work with Aboriginal women’s organizations in a cooperative fashion in order to delineate the experiences of the women and develop policies for their protection prior to self-government.

V. Aboriginal Women’s Organizations and Current Setbacks

In 1992 negotiations began involving the direction of the Canadian Constitution with regards to Aboriginal people. Several Aboriginal women organized together and began to discuss the exclusion of women within these important negotiations (Eberts, McIvor, and Nahanee, 2006, p. 69). This informal organization became known as the Native Women’s Association of Canada, or NWAC. In demanding answers from the Assembly of First Nations, Eberts, McIvor and Nahanee (2006) described the atmosphere of the room when the NWAC leader spoke: “amid stillness you could cut with a knife...she demanded Aboriginal women be given a seat at the constitutional table alongside their brothers, uncles, and fathers” (p. 69). The NWAC also approached the

national meeting of chiefs, but the chiefs instead invited the NWAC membership “to a wine-and-cheese party with the premier of British Columbia” (Ibid, p. 70). Nevertheless, the NWAC persisted forward and they approached the Canadian legal system to assist in the matter.

Using the modeling of the Metis and Yukon Territory governments, the NWAC decided to take their exclusion case to court (Ibid, p. 69). The NWAC’s belief was that, win or lose in the court case, like the Metis and Territory governments, they too will have a chance to earn a seat at the constitutional negotiation table (Ibid). However, the male dominated leadership on both sides of the negotiation table reacted harshly as the court case went forward; hence, the “NWAC leadership was blocked from every constitutional meeting in twenty-one cities stretching from Vancouver to Charlottetown” (Ibid, p. 70). In addition, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the decision to exclude the women. At this point, the NWAC were forced to include the Women’s Court of Canada.

The Women’s Court of Canada concluded that the decision to exclude the NWAC represented not only a violation to their constitutional rights, but was also an essential system in helping to highlight past Aboriginal female inclusion rights in traditional governance (Ibid, p. 77). In highlighting women’s traditional leadership roles, the court also pointed out that these have “been eroded by Canadian legislation and policy, in which the patriarchal structure and discrimination imposed by the Indian Act continues to influence the activities of Indian bands” (Ibid). Importantly, the decision made by the Women’s Court of Canada was the first time that Aboriginal women’s oppressions, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders, were officially recorded.

The exclusion of the NWAC at constitutional negotiations was “a great source of distress” for Aboriginal women (Sayers and MacDonald, 2001, p. 16). It was a reminder of how they are continually being expected to set aside their own individual rights in favour of supporting collective rights (Ibid). However, an important realization emerged from the NWAC’s exclusion in constitutional negotiations: “if group rights are exercised in a manner that does not protect the security of individual Aboriginal persons, such as Aboriginal women, the justification for protecting group rights is questionable” (Ibid, p. 17). Jo-Anne Fiske, Melanie Newell and Evelyn George (2001) state that “(m)any First Nations women worry that greater power through self-government could lead to gender discrimination without any rights of appeal” (p. 65). In addition to lack of appeal, women were still noticing that under the current systems of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governance, funding allocated to address violence against Aboriginal women goes “to the government rather than women’s groups”, and it is “these groups which are left to deal with the impacts of colonization” (Leigh, 2009, p. 79). Aboriginal women therefore had to acknowledge the urgency of the situation; they had to address Aboriginal women’s rights as organized groups.

However, there were competing views of how to best do this. Given the “repatriation of the Canadian constitution in 1982, when the then Prime Minister, the Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau, committed Canada to accepting the notion of Aboriginal self-government” (Fiske, Newell and George, 2001, p. 64), what did that mean in terms of organizing? How should Aboriginal women secure their rights prior to self-government? Should they advocate for constitutional protection? Should they

exclude entirely non-Aboriginal governments? Should they continue to advocate for collective rights?

Those in favor of constitutional protection were described in the research of Carolyn Kenny (2002) and her use of Aboriginal women focus groups. She noted that there were a significant number of women who “expressed fears about the implementation of self-governance in their communities” since “community governments were not being regulated and were permitted by current policies to make decisions” which did not benefit women (Kenny, 2002, p. 12). The solution suggested by the women Kenny interviewed rested on the fact that “constitutional protection for the rights of Aboriginal peoples must be clear, unambiguous and adequately secured” prior to the move toward Aboriginal self-government (Ibid). Furthermore, Linda Archibald and Mary Crnkovich (1999) mentioned that “(s)ection 35(4) of the *Constitution Act, 1982* guarantees land claim agreement rights equally to men and women” (p. 15). In fact, the NWAC attempted to use the Constitution Act to argue that the “federal government decision to exclude NWAC from constitutional consultations surrounding the 1992 Charlottetown Accord” was a violation to those very rights (Froc, 2010, p. 30). By exposing constitutional rights violations, the NWAC was essential in drawing “links between intimate violence experienced by women on reserve and reserve leadership: the bias displayed by mostly male chiefs and council members in favour of male abusers; and how this could “effectively chase the woman from her home and community” (Ibid, p. 33). Joyce Green (2008) stated that “(t)ogether with the Aboriginal sections 25 and 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982, the Charter frames rights recognition and provides grounds for legal remedies” (pg. 1). However, there exists a major risk when it comes to using the

constitution to secure rights for Aboriginal women: the deep pockets of the federal government, something Aboriginal women's organizations just do not possess.

Nevertheless, those in favor of constitutional protection, such as Aboriginal scholar Teresa Nahanee, argue that "constitutional protection is necessary for First Nations women. She saw the struggle for sexual equality as a way for women to regain their place in their communities (Fiske, Newell and George, 2001, p. 67).

Conversely, Aboriginal scholars such as Patricia Monture-Angus have "argued that application of the constitution would violate First Nations sovereignty" because the role of the Canadian government has been to oppress, never to protect Aboriginal people (Ibid). Another Aboriginal scholar, Mary Ellen Turpel, equally emphasized "the role of the Canadian government in oppressing First Nations women and expressed her distrust in its ability to protect the collective rights of First Nations governments" (Ibid). Sayers and MacDonald (2001) shared their skepticism, stating that "(p)olicy making must derive from a place that acknowledges the impact of colonization and embraces decolonization" (p. 21). They suggest that if decolonization of policies is not embraced rather than the continued use of colonial policies, then no attention will be paid toward the "lateral violence" that imprisons Aboriginal people in maintaining and reinforcing colonial practices, like violence toward women (Ibid, p. 23). Lateral violence, according to Sayers and MacDonald (2001) "can be described as people, who have been colonized, continuing to colonize themselves using methods that do not promote progress, but rather bring others down. This includes intimidation, anger, control, put downs, threats, name-calling and embarrassment" (p. 23).

In an argument which intertwines with the previous two, Beverly Hungry Wolf has elaborated on the idea that Aboriginal women should “speak out to reclaim the equality they knew in the past. She called on them to become more self-sufficient and to develop the resources of their reserve lands to regain traditions of the past” (Fiske, Newell and George, 2001, p. 67-68). An interesting aspect to the argument of returning to the traditional past is that “(m)any aboriginal people believe that if the aboriginal worldview is embraced, women and men will return to an idyllic form of reality where gender hierarchies do not exist” (Sayers and MacDonald, 2001, p. 14). However, there is another side to this argument. Harmony will never be achieved, Sayers and MacDonald (2001) argue, until communities “undergo a process of decolonization that strives to remove the shackles of sexist ideologies, a pervasive element of their colonial baggage” (Ibid). In this regard, they argue, the issue of ‘traditional roles’ also poses a problem as these ideals were eroded through colonialism. Therefore “although it is important to be cognizant of how women have been affected by the cultural devastation wrought by colonization, it is equally important to acknowledge...that returning to what was tradition may not mean returning to a utopian egalitarian society” (Ibid, p. 10). Hence, there is a need for Aboriginal communities to modernize “perspectives on tradition and equality” if there is any hope of proper implementation of what it means to be traditional (Ibid).

Leigh (2009) attempted to shed some light on what might occur in attempting to relearn traditional complementary gender roles with the involvement of Band politics and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal feminist groups. First of all, Leigh exposes the fact that “Indigenous women have argued for a ‘tribal feminism’, involving the restoration of the

pre-colonial role and status of women” (p. 83). Leigh then expands on the idea, suggesting “(t)his often takes the form of a focus on women’s peaceful and nurturing roles as central to post-colonial Indigenous healing, and the practical difference they can make as mothers by addressing gender issues through the socialisation of children” (Ibid). In other words, Leigh suggests a form of “Indigenous strategy of traditionalism that attempts to resist assimilation, and thus colonial power, by a return to pre-colonial Indigenous customs” through the socialization of children (Ibid). Interestingly, Leigh also sees a strong role being played by non-Aboriginal feminism in order to locate a contemporary progressive definition of complementary traditional gender roles. On the other hand, it remains a fact that non-Aboriginal feminism does have the foremost responsibility to acknowledge the “role of some women in colonialism, and the resulting legacy of privilege”; but in sharing knowledge about Aboriginal politics, a connection is made through the revelation that “(b)oth Indigenous and feminist communities have been involved in many related battles – over difference, equality, discrimination and marginalisation, for example – and may be able to share both conceptual and practical strategies” in relocating traditional complementary gender roles (Ibid, p. 84).

VI. Aboriginal Women’s Organizations: Forcing Policy Change

Overall, Aboriginal women’s organizations remain in agreement that there needs to be a continued push for changes to the Indian Act of Canada. Teressa Nahanee mentioned that “(i)t is the Indian Act that has resulted in mainly men being elected to Indian Act Chiefs and Councils”; and “(i)t is mainly the Indian Act that has ensured that property on reserves is held by men and not by women” (Cornet, 2001, p. 142). Therefore, despite past changes to the Indian Act, it is still “a central source of women’s

oppression in a governance context” (Ibid). Monture (2002) argues that if changes are made to the Indian Act, these changes would have to be dramatic, because “(t)here is little reason to believe that tinkering with individual provisions of the Act will secure real change for First Nations governments and their citizens” (p. 4). The fact remains that the Canadian government’s mandate has been to continue bargaining in the “narrowest” manner as to what form of colonial administration communities could adopt as opposed to allowing communities to decide on their own future governance systems (Ibid, p. 2). That said, however, patriarchal Aboriginal governments also pose a challenge for women’s organizations, because groups like the NWAC “were opposed by the AFN...and individual First Nations leaders” when they attempted to advocated changes to the sexual discrimination within the Indian Act (Fiske, Newell, George, 2001, p. 66).

Despite these twin challenges, Aboriginal women’s organizations are moving forward by seeking guidance from the International community. In 1995 China hosted the United Nations Women’s Conference in Beijing in order to discuss women’s issues from across the globe. Aboriginal women were front and centre at this conference as they proposed an alliance with non-Aboriginal women in support of the “assurance for the political participation of Indigenous women in governance” (Sayers and MacDonald, 2001, p. 20). Very positive outcomes came from this conference when Aboriginal women tabled article 44 demanding “equal political participation in the indigenous and modern socio-political structures and systems at all levels”. This section was successfully ratified and is now known as the “Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women” (Ibid). It was a significant milestone for Aboriginal women’s organizations, because the numbers that participated in the conference equaled those of other countries

participation, which meant that this was the first time that Aboriginal women formally stood together in significant numbers to voice their issues internationally (Ibid).

In September of 2007, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People [DRIP] was finally tabled at the United Nation's General Assembly, mainly because Indigenous people believed there was a need to bring to the world's attention various treaty violations by Canada and New Zealand (Moreton-Robinson, 2011, p. 642). Not surprisingly, Canada was one of the countries to argue against the declaration because they wanted Canadian Aboriginal treaties to remain a domestic issue (Ibid, p. 643). Nevertheless, the declaration outlined an "array of tailor-made collective rights, such as the right to maintain and develop....distinct political, economic, social and cultural identities and characteristics as well as.... legal systems" in which all should participate (Ibid). In relation to Aboriginal women, the declaration stated that all members of communities should participate "in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the state" (Ibid).

Thus, the findings which stemmed from these international platforms finally recognized "the deleterious legacy of colonialism" and verified "that states should guarantee the human rights and collective rights of indigenous peoples" (Green, 2008, pg. 1). DRIP also condemned "all doctrines, policies and practices that are racist, false, unlawful, immoral and unjust" (Ibid). Regarding Aboriginal women's issues, the international agreement outlined "the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples, and its provisions are to be interpreted in accordance with the principles of justice, democracy, respect for human rights, equality, non-discrimination, good governance and good faith" (Green, 2008, pg. 2). However, to date,

Canada has yet to sign the DRIP agreement. Moreover, there is a major setback for Aboriginal women's groups when it comes to utilizing the international community. Sayers and MacDonald (2001) stress that unless Band governments can incorporate these declarations and decisions into their own constitutions as they move toward self-governance, then women's rights are not guaranteed at any level (p. 20). The fact remains that because of Canada's failure to protect Aboriginal people and women in the past, the state can no longer be trusted to advocate for Aboriginal women's rights as Band governments move into the future.

VII. The Inclusion of Aboriginal Women's Organizations: Collective Rights as Benefit or Hindrance

As noted earlier in this paper, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal negotiations in Canada are pressing forward. However, the decisions to exclude Aboriginal women's organizations have led to the following issues. First and foremost, the decision to exclude Aboriginal women's organizations represents and reinforces "the predominantly Euro-Canadian" attitude that negotiations are for the male heads of family only (Archibald and Crnkovich, 1999, p. 11). The end result has been that negotiations now largely involve land and resource mandates, which have neglected to include the wider scope of the major social and cultural issues present among communities, especially violence (Ibid). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples commented on Aboriginal women's exclusion and mentioned "that a greater role for women in negotiations would heighten the contribution of agreements not only to social and cultural matters, but also to the promotion of sustainable development" (Ibid). Importantly, Archibald and Crnkovich (1999) stated that "(a)s long as the focus remains on land and

resources and the primarily male, non-Aboriginal culture dominates the negotiation process and its outcome, women and issues traditionally viewed as important to women, such as community development (as opposed to large-scale economic development), education, public and private safety, health and social issues are more easily overlooked” (Ibid). In other words, the predominate focus on land and resource development has not only excluded sustainable development importance; it also fails to take into consideration “the socio-economic and cultural implications” of such a direction (Ibid). A prime example of this type of male dominated negotiation is currently reflected within the Nisga’a Final Agreement, which has been presented as a framework for other agreements presently in negotiation in Canada (Sayers and MacDonald, 2001, p. 18).

The Federal Government of Canada recently stated that they were committed to addressing the needs of First Nation’s communities, but their focus, as we have seen, is quite narrow. For example, no solutions have been discussed as to how to address the “problems of housing, including the lack of a matrimonial property regime on reserve, wills and estates, child welfare or membership” (Monture, 2002, pg. 1). The fact is that the Indian Act of Canada still remains as an assimilative policy directed toward the children of Aboriginal women. Although amendments have been made in the past to address the loss of membership women faced for marrying non-Aboriginal men, Michelle Man (2005) located several sections within the Indian Act, still in existence, that are meant to displace the membership of second generation Aboriginal children. In sections 6(1) of the Act, children are registered with full membership as long as both parents are members; and as long as the father signs for the membership of the child (Man, 2005, p. 1). If the child is not eligible for section

6(1) membership, they are signed under section 6(2) which ensures that their future children are ineligible for membership into the community (Ibid). The controversy behind section 6(1) and 6(2) membership is that sometimes women do not want to disclose who the father is; this is especially apparent if the child was conceived through rape or incest. Therefore, it is still the men who control membership rights (Ibid). Not surprisingly, this very attack on Aboriginal membership was first voiced by the Alberta Native Women's Association, who stated that "(t)his will lead to generations of our people being denied their rightful heritage and rights", ultimately forcing assimilation upon section 6(2) second generation children (Ibid, p. 11).

VIII. Aboriginal Women's Organizations: Navigating into the Future

As I have emphasized in this paper, Aboriginal women's organizations must advocate on their own behalf. Non-Aboriginal governments have framed their struggles with Aboriginal people through a patriarchal, white lens which has affected their systems and governance in general. In addition, those same patriarchal beliefs, which have been imposed within Aboriginal governments, contribute to the idea that women's issues are unimportant. Nevertheless, Aboriginal women's organizations must continue to put pressure on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments in order to achieve "policy that acknowledges Aboriginal women's experiences", given that it is acknowledged that "(g)ood governance, as stipulated by the Institute on Governance, is effected through strong legal and policy-making mechanisms" (Sayers and MacDonald, 2001, p. 21). However, Sayers and MacDonald (2001) also argue that in addition to strong policy creation in Aboriginal governance, "(p)olicy making must derive from a place that acknowledges the impact of colonization and embraces

decolonization”; therefore, “the debate needs to transcend self-government pragmatics to focus upon wider human rights issues if Aboriginal women are to have a stronger base from which to address their concerns” (Ibid). They stress that “First Nations self-government must include the contemporary lived realities of First Nations women and children because in order to address problems they must be named”; for example, violence toward women and child abuse (Ibid, p. 22). Therefore, Aboriginal female leaders must also play a major role in exposing these realities.

There is no denying that a lot of healing must occur among Aboriginal people. Sayers and MacDonald (2001) mention that “(y)ears of colonization, residential schools, demoralization by the *Indian Act*, stripping away traditional governments, languages and ceremonies...all have severely impaired the First Nations’ ability to govern” (p. 23). There still exists extensive “(d)ysfunction, anger and a feeling of helplessness or lack of control which does impair any government that is trying to function and achieve things for the community” (Ibid). In this regard, Aboriginal women’s leadership organizations must be the pre-eminent example by ensuring that there is “zero tolerance of violence in any form” (Ibid, p. 24). As I stated earlier in this paper, lateral violence occurs at all levels within the community, reinforcing dysfunction, and lack of healing increases the impact of lateral violence. Therefore, proper role modeling should address issues such as lateral violence; and this must begin by modeling self-healing. Through self-healing methods, healthy leaders are able to create communities that “prosper under proper decision making and in an atmosphere where people are able to contribute ideas and suggestions without fear of reprisal” (Ibid). In their research Fiske, Newell and George (2001) found that there is

a strong need “to strengthen community life through women’s leadership and the incorporation of women’s traditional caring roles” (p. 82). However, I would like to point out that none of this can be properly achieved without the approval and guidance of community elders.

Importantly, Aboriginal women’s organizations require the mentorship of their elders. Fiske, Newell and George (2001) interviewed many community members of the Lake Babine First Nation community. All participating members concluded that elders not only link the past with the future, but guide the enabling of “the traditional system of political training to work alongside contemporary training for political leaders. . . ., seen as key to the successful participation of women in governance” (Ibid, p. 82).

Decolonization has already been determined to be a major issue in the success of women taking back their traditional roles within communities. Therefore, “educational seminars” with elders are essential in teaching women “to reach back into their history to rediscover their roles as decision makers” (Ibid, p. 87). In addition, elders would also aid male leaders in “understanding of the impact of colonization” and would provide “a clear vision for the future” that is necessary for Aboriginal women’s organizations to succeed (Ibid, p. 87-88). In this regard, learning and healing would not only occur with the women, but also with the men.

Lastly, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC] also has a role to play. As mentioned earlier, most of the funding allocated for Aboriginal women’s issues never reaches its intended destination. Thus, INAC should be the contributor to decolonization projects, like community educational seminars with elders and women’s leadership programs (Fiske, Newell and George, 2001, p. 88). Fiske, Newell and George

(2001) found that a large portion of current government employees need to be trained around self-governance issues, especially those wishing to seek elected officer positions; this would involve interpersonal skills training and learning to involve both on and off reserve members (Ibid, p. 88). INAC has also been largely responsible for the confusion Band governments face when it comes to the roles and responsibilities of elected members and employees (Ibid, p. 90). In order to support healthy governance on communities, the women of Lake Babine suggested the implementation of a Code of Ethics by INAC, which would outline and separate government roles (Ibid, p. 91). Hence, “(c)learly identifying the roles of the chief and council would allow female leaders to present themselves as stronger leaders because their roles would be clearly delineated” (Ibid, p. 91).

IX. Conclusion

Canadian policy has had a tremendous impact upon Aboriginal women, historically and at present. As I have pointed out in this paper, “(t)he realities faced by indigenous women in Canada is a testament to a continued legacy of racism and colonialism” (Maynard, 2010, pg 1). These realities include the fact that Aboriginal women’s organizations have faced a lack of funding for programs, and extensive sexual and racial discrimination from both inside and outside of their communities. In this regard, as Maynard (2010) mentioned, “(w)e need to support the voices of women on the ground, and support them in ways that work with their own visions of self-determination” (p. 1) As I have also argued in this paper, “(w)omen do not need , and have not ever needed to be saved, but rather need to be supported in efforts to liberate themselves” (Maynard, 2010, pg.2). Thus Aboriginal women’s organizations, like the NWAC, have

been essential in raising such issues as the “removal of discrimination and the protection of the equality rights of women and their children” before power is “handed back to First Nations governments” through self-government initiatives (Cornet, 2001, p.126).

Furthermore, Aboriginal women’s organizations are strongly involved with advocating for “women who were estranged from their communities as a result of the discriminatory Indian Act provision” and on “other issues of general concern to Indigenous women, such as male violence” (Froc, 2010, p. 33). As a result of Aboriginal women’s organizations voicing their concerns, some recommendations on securing women’s rights prior to self-government have been produced; these include constitutional protection, changes to the Indian Act of Canada, and the return to traditional complementary gender roles.

However, Aboriginal women’s groups are underfunded and cannot afford expensive court battles with the Canadian government; and the return to traditional complementary roles may need to be contemporized and re-learned. More importantly, most Aboriginal women’s organizations engage in rights disputes without the support of Aboriginal patriarchal organizations, like the Assembly of First Nations. Nevertheless, progress has still managed to occur at the international level, through the Beijing United Nations Women’s Conference in 1995 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2007. The problem with utilizing international platforms is constrained by the fact that these decisions must be incorporated into Band governments first if they are to have any effect nationally.

In the end, Aboriginal women need to organize if they are to have any influence upon current patriarchal Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations. The consensus among community members, as discussed in this paper, is that traditional

complementary gender roles are required and wanted. Therefore, according to traditional complementary gender roles, it is essential for Aboriginal women's organizations to be included in the planning and execution of the decolonization process. In this regard, securing women's rights must occur as a community that is inclusive of men and women. As I have pointed out in this paper, the notion of advocating for Aboriginal women's rights as destructive to collective rights is false. In fact, advocating for Aboriginal women's rights and including them in leadership positions would only serve to enhance the wellbeing of the community. They not only address current issues on land and resources, but take into consideration self-sustainability, culture and social issues also. Lastly, the major facilitative role must be assumed by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Their role would involve traditional education programs, women's leadership programs, and clearly defining government roles within the Band governments they helped to create. Thus, Aboriginal women's organizations must occupy an important and essential place in Canada, but the research for this paper stresses that they cannot succeed on their own.

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