

## **Aboriginal Women**

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## Tips for Teaching Controversial Issues

The teaching of value-laden issues has generated much controversy. There is some basic consensus on the fundamental moral and ethical values in our society and that these values can be taught in a meaningful way.

It is assumed in Canadian Studies that there are fundamental values on which there is agreement. It is also assumed that there are many disagreements and that students need to learn to deal with controversy. The social studies and history curricula provide students with learning experiences that will help them identify some of the fundamental value positions of society and how these arose. This curriculum deals with controversy, even invites it. However, it does not suggest that any belief is as good as any other belief. Therefore, this curriculum makes no attempt to be objective in the sense of being value free.

Canadian Studies gives students opportunities to examine controversial issues. Debating these issues will provide students with the opportunity to apply concepts and higher order thinking skills in organizing, interpreting and communicating information meaningfully. In this process, students can begin to understand the role of values as the basis for making inferences, that values provide us with evaluative criteria, and that we depend upon the traditions of Canadian society to provide us with guidelines. These criteria include: human dignity, basic rights and responsibilities as defined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and respect of, and tolerance for, individual differences.

There are many methods to teach controversial issues in the classroom. As these issues touch personal beliefs and trigger emotional reactions, these methods are sometimes difficult to conduct in an orderly fashion.

The following ideas may assist teachers:

- Recognize the general legitimacy of controversy as a part of society, and that students must learn to discuss the issues and problems presented.
- Establish ordered ways of proceeding: discussions, debates, take a stand, continuum, mediation, etc. Create and agree on effective rules.
- Concentrate on evidence and valid information.
- Represent the opposing positions accurately and fairly.
- Make sure to clarify the issue, so that everyone understands where there is a disagreement and where there is agreement (to avoid simultaneous monologues).
- Identify core issues.
- Avoid the use of slogans.
- Talk about concrete issues before raising the discussion to a level of abstraction.
- Allow the students to question your position.
- Admit doubts, difficulties, and weaknesses in your position.
- Teach understanding by re-stating the perspective of others. Have participants paraphrase what they hear to gain this skill.
- Demonstrate respect for all opinions.
- Establish means of closure: examine consequences and consider alternatives.

## **Overview**

This lesson has several potential uses, including:

- Grade 10 History: 1990s unit – Aboriginal Rights Movement
- Family Studies
- Psych and Anthropology
- World Issues

## **Purpose**

- To provide students with an opportunity to learn about contemporary issues involving Aboriginal Women and Aboriginal Women who are role models.
- To provide students with an understanding of issues that faces Aboriginal Women today.

## **Resources**

The following reference materials have been provided for the teacher's use:

- Aboriginal Women
- Bio Card
- Jigsaw – use this for/in a Grade 11 or Grade 12 class
- Issues for the Jigsaw
- Aboriginal Women Worksheets

## Teacher Notes

1. Introduce the topic by asking students what they see as issues facing women today. Then break it down to immigrant and indigenous women. Can do it with the whole class or in groups.
2. Hand out *Background on Aboriginal Women*. In groups discuss the hand out using the following subtitles and create a summary:
  - Role of women in traditional Aboriginal cultures – Iroquois and Ojibwa
  - What happened when the European settlers arrived?
  - Indian Act
  - Gender Discrimination
  - Speaking Out
3. After group discussion, have students write how they felt and what can be done. Have a class discussion.
4. If one does not want to use groups, this can be done individually - use the handout with chart and questions, *Aboriginal Women*.
5. Write an essay about one of the following:
  - Indian status for Aboriginal women who married non-Aboriginal men
  - Local Aboriginal control over child welfare programs
  - How the prevalence of social problems like alcoholism, family violence and unemployment in Aboriginal communities have affected Aboriginal women
  - Aboriginal contributions to society or the Women's Movement
6. Invite an Aboriginal woman to speak to the class about the role of women in the Aboriginal culture. Contact someone from the Native Women's Association, the local Native Friendship Centre, or an Aboriginal political organization (Assembly of First Nations, Union of Ontario Indians). If you live close to an Aboriginal community, ask someone from the band office or a respected woman from the community.
7. **Bio Card** – have students research an Aboriginal woman who has become a role model for other Aboriginal women.
8. **Jigsaw** – follow the instructions. This should be used in a Grade 11 or Grade 12 class. When the discussion is over, present on an overhead conclusion and recommendations that have been presented to the Aboriginal community. Compare the conclusion and recommendations presented by the students and the one the teacher presents. Discuss and choose the ones that the class thinks are important.
9. **Resources:**
  - Amnesty International Canada – [www.amnesty.ca/IndigenousPeoples](http://www.amnesty.ca/IndigenousPeoples)
  - Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom – <http://lois.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/>
  - Child and Family – [www.csc-efc.ca/docs/ccf/rs035\\_en.htm](http://www.csc-efc.ca/docs/ccf/rs035_en.htm)
  - Government of Canada: Indian & Northern Affairs – [www.aina-inac.gc.ca/index\\_e.html](http://www.aina-inac.gc.ca/index_e.html)
  - Statistics Canada – [www.statcan.ca/start.html](http://www.statcan.ca/start.html)
  - Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples – [www.ainc.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index\\_e.html](http://www.ainc.gc.ca/ch/rcap/index_e.html)
  - First Nations – <http://www.eagle.ca/%7Ematink/themes/FirstNations/natives.html>
  - First Nations – <http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/fnations.html>
  - Native American Authors – <http://www.ipl.org/div/natam/bin/browse.pl/books>

## ACTIVITY

### *Aboriginal Women*

#### **Background**

While women around the world speak about “feminism” or the “women’s struggle,” many Aboriginal women find it next to impossible to separate their experience as women from their experience as Aboriginal. For example, it is difficult for many Aboriginal women to talk about family violence without discussing Aboriginal healing, or equal opportunity employment without discussing Aboriginal self-government. While Aboriginal women may have difficulty separating their gender from their race, many have just as much difficulty advocating the equality of women and men. From an Aboriginal woman’s perspective, the woman’s role in Aboriginal culture was more than equal. A comparison of two Aboriginal cultures from southern Ontario- the Iroquois and the Ojibwa- illustrates how the role of women in traditional Aboriginal cultures was very different than that of women in Western traditions.

The Iroquoian people lived in sedentary agricultural villages throughout southern Ontario. In Iroquoian communities, the woman was defined as nourisher and the man as the protector/helper. Iroquoian society was matrilineal, meaning that descent was traced through the female line. While the sachems (leaders) in Iroquoian communities were men, women selected and named them and it was the women’s role to ensure that sachems exercised their responsibilities. Women were understood by the tribe as the Keepers of the Culture and they were responsible for the establishment of all the norms –whether they were political, economic, social or spiritual. In addition to the tasks of food production, preservation and preparation, and the domestic chores related to child care, hospitality and clothing making, Iroquoian women participated in many activities practiced primarily by men. They gambled; they belonged to medicine societies; they participated in ceremonies, most importantly those confirming political appointments. While Iroquoian society was far from being a female-dominated matriarchy, it is clear that Iroquoian women at the time of contact enjoyed respect and autonomy that had not yet been dreamed by European women.

By contrast, the Ojibwa were migratory hunters and gatherers. There was a clear distinction made between male and female roles in Ojibwa society. Public recognition went almost exclusively to the activities of men. Nevertheless, women were considered essential economic partners in the annual cycle of work. Women performed not only the normal domestic chores and child care, but used their skills to weave fish nets, paddle canoes during the hunt, tan hides and harvest wild rice and maple sap. An Ojibwa woman was free to shun the protection of a man, if she so desired, as long as she was prepared to follow the male pursuits which were necessary for survival. Spiritually, Ojibwa women were considered to have a direct relationship with Mother Earth and the female elements of the waters. Their spiritual role in the community as the Centre included maintaining the fires of Creation. Far from being submissive, Ojibwa women possessed significant autonomy within their own sphere of economic contribution in the life of the camp.

What can be generalized about the role of women in all pre-contact Aboriginal cultures is that while men and women had different responsibilities to creation, one was no less

important than another. Men and women were considered equals, with very different elements and very different responsibilities, and each was necessary to make life complete.

The arrival of European settlers drastically altered the lifestyle of Aboriginal women. New elements of material culture were introduced; the cycle of economic activities changed; alien laws were imposed. Perhaps the most significant change in the lives of the Aboriginal women was the introduction of new standards by which they were judged. The European settlers judged Aboriginal women by their own cultural standards, in which women were considered to be subservient to men and wives were considered to be the property of their husbands. Unable to set aside their own biases about the role of women, European historians recorded life for Aboriginal women as mere labourers, submissive and inferior to men.

The European biases had a broad effect on Aboriginal women and their role in the communities. When the Department of Indian Affairs established its administrative structure in 1868, with its assimilative policies, legislation was passed which decreed that Indian status could only be passed through the male line. This meant that Indian women who married non-Indian men lost their Indian status. Furthermore, their children lost their Indian status. To be considered a registered Indian in Canada, an individual had to have a status Indian father. This gender-based discrimination was employed as a technique of assimilation up until the 1985 amendments to the Indian Act, which permitted reinstatement to those Aboriginal women and their children who had lost their status (known as Bill C-31 amendment).

Despite the changes to the Indian Act, the after-effects of gender discrimination still plague Aboriginal communities. Band councils, the governing body on Indian reserves (which are in many cases male-dominated), opposed the amendments to the Indian Act because they feared the influx of “new” band members would increase demand for resources which were already scarce. As a result, reinstated Indian women have experienced problems returning to their communities. They include difficulties around housing, obtaining education assistance for their children and sharing in the community social services.

Many Aboriginal women also endure significant gender discrimination within their own communities, despite the traditional equality between the sexes within Aboriginal culture. The transition to a sedentary life on reserves had a shattering impact on all Aboriginal groups, but the effects were particularly disruptive for Aboriginal men. Men whose education from birth prepared them for the roles of hunter and warrior saw the opportunities to exercise these skills shrink and in many cases, finally, vanish. While the role of men underwent drastic change, women in these societies retained much of their traditional role. They cared for the children, processed the materials available for family use and added colour and beauty to the daily round of subsistence work through the creation of handicrafts.

Unfortunately, it appears that many Aboriginal men have adopted European attitudes toward women. As a result, the cultural and social degradation of Aboriginal women has been devastating. One in 10 women in Canada is abused by her partner, yet for Aboriginal women the figure is closer to one in three. Studies have shown that 80% of Aboriginal women have experienced family violence. The status of Aboriginal women in cities is disturbing. One study in Winnipeg concluded that 43% of Aboriginal families are headed by single women, compared to 10% of non-Aboriginal families. The employment rate for female status Indians age 15 or more is estimated to be as low as 24%.

Aboriginal women have suffered double discrimination: as women and as Aboriginal people. However, Aboriginal women are beginning to speak out about the racism, sexism and violence which plague their lives in Aboriginal communities and beyond. Aboriginal women are pioneering models of holistic healing in their communities that designed to break the cycle of abuse and restore Aboriginal methods of healing. While the immediate need is for Aboriginal women to heal from the decades of denigration they suffered, the key to resolving many of the problems of Aboriginal women lies in restoring their traditional responsibility and position of equality in the family and the community. Only then will Aboriginal women regain and occupy their rightful place as equal partners in Aboriginal society.

## **ABORIGINAL WOMEN**

Fill in the chart below after reading the background, *Aboriginal Women*:

Role of women in Iroquois culture	
Role of women in Ojibway culture	
Europeans Arrive	
Indian Act	
Gender Discrimination	
Speaking Out	

## Aboriginal Women

1. Racist and sexist stereotypes not only hurt Aboriginal women and their self-esteem, but actually encourage abuse - both by Aboriginal men and others. Consider the following quotation by Aboriginal author Paula Gunn Allen:

***For the past 40 or 50 years, American popular media have depicted American Indian men as bloodthirsty savages devoted to treating women cruelly. While traditional Indian men seldom did any such thing- and in fact among most tribes abuse of women was unthinkable, as was abuse of children or the aged- the lie about "usual" Indian male behaviour seems to have taken root and now bears it s brutal and bitter fruit.***

***The colonizer's revisions of our lives, values and histories have devastated us at the most critical level of all-that our own minds, our own sense of who we are.***

***Image casting and image control constitute the central process that American Indian women must come to terms with, for on that control rests our sense of self, our claim to a past and to a future that we define and that we build....images that must be changed before Indian women will see much relief from the violence that destroys so many lives.....***

How does the author think that Aboriginal women will change the images of themselves and their people? Can you give any examples where Aboriginal women are taking control of their own images?



4. Consider the following quote from Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman*, in which she challenges the refusal of dominant feminism to recognize the claims of aboriginal women:

***No one makes the mistake of referring to us as women either. White women invite us to speak if the issue is racism or native people in general. We are there to "teach," to "sensitize them," or to serve them in some other way. We are expected to retain our position well below them as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of "their movement"- the women's movement.***

What do you think of the author's opinion?

**Bio Card**

1. Research an Aboriginal woman who is a role model for other Aboriginal women.
2. Research your woman to find out about her life, include the following information about her:
  - Birth date- where she was born
  - Family Life
  - Education/Career
  - Any other information that you think is important
  - Why she is a role model for Aboriginal women. **(10)**
3. Include a picture of the woman.
4. Gather information from encyclopedias, biographies, Who's Who Collections, the internet or other sources. If you use the internet, make sure your information is from a reputable source.
5. The picture of the woman should be placed on front of the card with her name either on the top of the card or under the picture and the written material on the back. **(5)**
6. The written part must be neatly handwritten or typed in your own words.
7. Accuracy, neatness and creativity are important. **(5)**
8. **You will be doing two (2) Bio Cards.**

**Person #1:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Person #2:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Total Marks: 20 per person x 2 = 40 marks**

## Jigsaw

1. Create 7 Home Groups: Each Home Group will be responsible for presenting one of the issues and a written report.
2. Each member of the Home Group will be responsible for researching, note taking and teaching other members in the Home Group about a specific assignment regarding an issue on Aboriginal women.
3. Research and note-taking will take place in Work Groups in which one member from each Home Group will participate.

All members of the Work Group will be working on the same topic/issue.

Members of the Work Group are encouraged to cooperate with each other to obtain the best and most complete information. Members of the Work Group will evaluate each other based on the overall participation in the group's efforts.

4. After completing the Work Group assignment, each student will return to the Home Group. Each student will report/teaching the other students of the Home Group on the assigned topic.
5. Each Home Group is responsible for presenting one of the issues assigned to them and preparing a written report which will include material collected, a conclusion, and recommendations on what can be done to improve the position of Aboriginal women in Canadian society.

### Resources:

- Student Worksheets
- Issue Sheets
- Library

**Jigsaw**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Home Group</b>
1. Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society	
2. The Attack on Aboriginal Culture	
3. Cultural Changes- The Impact Upon Aboriginal Women	
4. The Changing Image of Aboriginal Women	
5. The Abuse of Aboriginal Women and Children	
6. Spousal Abuse	
7. Alcohol, Crime and Abuse	

**Issue:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Home Group Members</b>	<b>Evaluation Complete (5)</b>	<b>Evaluation Effective (5)</b>	<b>Total</b>

## **1. Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society**

**Read – Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society**

- **What does it involve**
- **What are the traditions?**

## **2. The Attack on Aboriginal Culture**

**Read the issue and describe what you have read.**

### **3. Cultural Changes – The Impact Upon Aboriginal Women**

Read the issue.

- **Make notes on how cultural changes have had an effect upon Aboriginal Women.**

### **4. The Changing Image of Aboriginal Women**

Read the issue.

- **What types of changes have occurred?**

## **5. The Abuse of Aboriginal Women and Children**

**Read the issue.**

- **What type of Abuse is taking place?**
- **How is it being addressed?**

## **6. Spousal Abuse**

**Read the issue.**

- **Types of abuse**
- **How this happens?**
- **How is it handled?**

## **7. Alcohol, Crime and Abuse**

**Read the issue.**

- **What are the factors?**
- **How can it be fixed?**
- **Factors**

## RESOURCES

### Section 1: Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society

Women traditionally played a central role within the Aboriginal family, within Aboriginal government and in spiritual ceremonies. Men and women enjoyed considerable personal autonomy and both performed functions vital to the survival of Aboriginal communities. The men were responsible for providing food, shelter and clothing. Women were responsible for the domestic sphere and were viewed as both life-givers and the caretakers of life. As a result, women were responsible for the early socialization of children.

Traditional Aboriginal society experienced very little family breakdown. Husbands and wives were expected to respect and honour one another, and to care for one another with honesty and kindness. In matriarchal societies, such as of the Mohawk, women were honoured for their wisdom and vision. Aboriginal men also respected women for the sacred gifts which they believed the Creator had given to them. In Aboriginal teachings, passed on through the oral histories of the Aboriginal people of this province from generation to generation, Aboriginal men and women were equal in power and each had autonomy within their personal lives.

Women figured centrally in almost all Aboriginal creation legends. In Ojibway and Cree legends, it was a woman who came to earth through a hole in the sky to care for the earth. It was a woman, Nokomis (grandmother), who taught Original Man (Anishinabe, an Ojibway word meaning “human being”) about the medicines of the earth and about technology. When a traditional Ojibway person prays, thanks is given and the pipe is raised in each of the four directions, then to Mother Earth as well as to Grandfather, Mishomis, in the sky.

To the Ojibway, the earth is woman, the Mother of the people, and her hair, the sweet grass, is braided and used in ceremonies. The Dakota and Lakota (Sioux) people of Manitoba and the Dakotas tell how a woman—White Buffalo Calf Woman—brought the pipe to their people. It is through the pipe that prayer is carried by its smoke upwards to the Creator in their most sacred ceremonies.

The strength that Aboriginal peoples gain today from their traditional teachings and their cultures comes from centuries of oral tradition and Aboriginal teachings, which emphasized the equality of man and woman and the balanced roles of both in the continuation of life. Such teachings hold promise for the future of the Aboriginal community as a whole. We have been told that more and more young Aboriginal people are turning to the beliefs and values of Aboriginal traditions to find answers for the problems which they are facing in this day and age.

Aboriginal author Paula Gunn Allen points out:

*Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital: it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past.*

This revival is necessitated, in large measure, by the assault that Aboriginal culture has experienced during the last century.

## **Section 2: The Attack on Aboriginal Culture**

Women were never considered inferior in Aboriginal society until Europeans arrived. Women had few rights in European society at the time of first contact with Aboriginal people. Men were considered their social, legal and political masters. Any rights which women had were those derived through their husbands. The law of England, for example, held that women did not have the right to vote, to own property or to enter into contracts. This attitude was ultimately reflected in the *Indian Act*, which blatantly discriminated against women.

This attitude toward women continued until relatively recently in Canada. Women had to fight battles in this century to win the right to vote and to be recognized as legal persons, and it was only within the past few decades that the final legal restrictions upon their right to contract and own property were lifted.

The imposition of new values and cultural standards brought about tremendous historical, social and economic changes which, for the most part, were destructive to Aboriginal communities. Dr. Sally Longstaffe of the Child Protection Centre has written:

*The razing of Indian societies and their traditions is well-documented. Symptoms of this dislocation are evident in high rates of unemployment, suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, and other social problems. This loss of tradition has seriously damaged the oral means of preserving cultural norms, and the values which prohibit deviant behaviours have been obscured and often forgotten. Native peoples often appear reluctant to adopt “white” solutions to problems that stem from the latter’s apparent destruction of their societies.*

Economic factors served as the initial catalyst for change within Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal people were first directed away from hunting into the economic order of the fur trade society. Gradually, more and more of them became removed from the land and went into settlements with a welfare economy. These changes to Aboriginal lifestyle distorted the traditional Aboriginal male and female roles.

*With the loss of Indian male roles and as a result of being reduced to a state of powerlessness and vulnerability which their own culture deemed highly inappropriate, Indian men came to experience severe role strain.*

Cultural changes resulting from the economic factors at play had their greatest impact on the role of Aboriginal women.

### **Section 3: Cultural Changes—The Impact Upon Aboriginal Women**

For Aboriginal women, European economic and cultural expansion was especially destructive. Their value as equal partners in tribal society was undermined completely. The Aboriginal inmates in Kingston Prison for Women described the result this way:

*The critical difference is racism. We are born to it and spend our lives facing it. Racism lies at the root of our life experiences. The effect is violence, violence against us, and in turn our own violence.*

It is only in the past decade that writers have acknowledged the very important role Aboriginal women played in the first centuries of contact with Europeans and their descendants. Yet, while their role within Aboriginal society remained relatively stable for some time after contact, all that changed completely with the advent of the residential school system.

The victimization of Aboriginal women accelerated with the introduction after Confederation of residential schools for Aboriginal children. Children were removed from their families and homes at a young age, some to return eight to 10 years later, some never to return. The ability to speak Aboriginal languages and the motivation to do so were severely undermined. Aboriginal students were taught to devalue everything Aboriginal and value anything Euro-Canadian.

Many Aboriginal grandparents and parents today are products of the residential school system. The development of parenting skills, normally a significant aspect of their training as children within Aboriginal families, was denied to them by the fact that they were removed from their families and communities, and by the lack of attention paid to the issue by residential schools. Parenting skills neither were observed nor taught in those institutions. Aboriginal children traditionally learned their parenting skills from their parents through example and daily direction. That learning process was denied to several generations of Aboriginal parents. In addition to the physical and sexual abuse that Canadians are now hearing took place in residential schools, emotional abuse was the most prevalent and the most severe.

Not only did residential schools not support the development of traditional parental roles among the children, but they taught the children that they were “pagan”—an inferior state of being—and should never use their language or honour their religious beliefs. These messages were imparted to Aboriginal children in a sometimes brutal manner. Several presenters also pointed out residential schools not only removed children from their families, but they also prevented any closeness, even contact, from occurring between siblings and relatives at the same school.

The damage done by residential schools is evident today as Aboriginal people, long deprived of parenting skills, struggle with family responsibilities and attempt to recapture cultural practices and beliefs so long denied.

Grand Chief Dave Courchene Sr. put the experience succinctly:

*Residential schools taught self-hate. That is child abuse.... Too many of our people got the message and passed it on. It is their younger generations that appear before you (in court).*

We believe the breakdown of Aboriginal cultural values and the abuse suffered by Aboriginal children in the schools contributed to family breakdown. This began a cycle of abuse in Aboriginal communities, with women and children being the primary victims.

The Canadian government also undermined equality between Aboriginal men and women with the legalization of sexist and racist discrimination in successive pieces of legislation. In 1869 it introduced the concept of enfranchisement, whereby Indian people would lose their status as Indians and be treated the same as other Canadians. For Aboriginal women, this process of enfranchisement had particularly devastating consequences, because the role assigned to Canadian women was one of inferiority and subjugation to the male.

Upon becoming enfranchised, Aboriginal people lost their status under the *Indian Act*. An Indian woman lost her status automatically upon marrying a man who was not a status Indian.

This was not true for Indian men, whose non-Indian wives gained status as Indians upon marriage. Under subsequent *Indian Acts*, Indian agents could enfranchise an Indian if he were deemed “progressive”. In cases where a man became enfranchised, his wife and children automatically lost their status, as well.

While Bill C-31 (1985) addressed many of these problems, it created new ones in terms of the differential treatment of male and female children of Aboriginal people. Under the new Act, anomalies can develop where the children of a status Indian woman can pass on status to their children only if they marry registered Indians, whereas the grandchildren of a status male will have full status, despite the fact that one of their parents does not have status. Chapter 5, on treaty and Aboriginal rights, discusses this problem in detail and outlines steps that must be taken to remedy it.

Aboriginal women traditionally played a prominent role in the consensual decision-making process of their communities. The *Indian Act* created the chief and council system of local government. The local Indian agent chaired the meetings of the chief and council and had the power to remove the chief and council from office. Aboriginal women were denied any vote in the new system imposed by the Indian Affairs administration. As a result, they were stripped of any formal involvement in the political process.

The segregation of Aboriginal women, both from wider society and from their traditional role as equal and strong members of tribal society, continues to the present day. This is due partly to the fact that the effects of past discrimination have resulted in the poor socio-economic situation applicable to most Aboriginal women, but it is also attributable to the demeaning image of Aboriginal women that has developed over the years. North American society has adopted a destructive and stereotypical view of Aboriginal women.

## **Section 4: The Changing Image of Aboriginal Women**

The demeaning image of Aboriginal women is rampant in North American culture. School textbooks have portrayed Aboriginal woman as ill-treated at the hands of Aboriginal men, almost a “beast of burden.” These images are more than symbolic—they have helped to facilitate the physical and sexual abuse of Aboriginal women in contemporary society. Emma LaRocque, a Metis woman and professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, wrote to the Inquiry about such demeaning images.

*The portrayal of the squaw is one of the most degraded, most despised and most dehumanized anywhere in the world. The ‘squaw’ is the female counterpart to the Indian male ‘savage’ and as such she has no human face; she is lustful, immoral, unfeeling and dirty. Such grotesque dehumanization has rendered all Native women and girls vulnerable to gross physical, psychological and sexual violence.... I believe that there is a direct relationship between these horrible racist/sexist stereotypes and violence against Native women and girls. I believe, for example, that Helen Betty Osborne was murdered in 1972 by four young men from The Pas because these youths grew up with twisted notions of “Indian girls” as “squaws” ... Osborne’s attempts to fight off these men’s sexual advances challenged their racist expectations that an “Indian squaw” should show subservience ... (causing) the whites ... to go into a rage and proceed to brutalize the victim.*

Racist and sexist stereotypes not only hurt Aboriginal women and their sense of self-esteem, but actually encourage abuse—both by Aboriginal men and by others. The Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre’s Family Violence Program attempts to help both victims and offenders to see beyond the stereotypes. In a book used by the program, Paula Gunn Allen explains about “recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions”:

*For the past 40 or 50 years, American popular media have depicted American Indian men as bloodthirsty savages devoted to treating women cruelly. While traditional Indian men seldom did any such thing—and in fact among most tribes abuse of women was simply unthinkable, as was abuse of children or the aged—the lie about “usual” male Indian behaviour seems to have taken root and now bears its brutal and bitter fruit.*

*The colonizers’ revisions of our lives, values, and histories have devastated us at the most critical level of all—that of our own minds, our own sense of who we are.*

*Image casting and image control constitute the central process that American Indian women must come to terms with, for on that control rests our sense of self, our claim to a past and to a future that we define and that we build... images must be changed before Indian women will see much relief from the violence that destroys so many lives....*

Our Inquiry was told by the Canadian Coalition for Equality and by the Manitoba Women’s Directorate that the media today continue to employ stereotypical images of women. Both presentations compared lurid newspaper coverage of the Helen Betty Osborne murder in The Pas to the more straightforward and sympathetic coverage of the killing of a young non-Aboriginal woman in Winnipeg.

We consider societal attitudes to be an issue that this Inquiry must address. There is a perception among women’s groups, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that abuse of Aboriginal women is more acceptable to the courts than abuse of non-Aboriginal women.

While we do not subscribe to the view that there is differential treatment, we are disturbed enough by the perception to suggest that it needs to be addressed. At the heart of the problem is the belief that, fundamentally, justice authorities do not understand, and do not wish to understand, the unique issues facing Aboriginal women.

In order to address the underlying problems that give rise to this perception, the public generally, and those within the justice system specifically, need to be educated about those issues by Aboriginal women. Elsewhere in this report we have recommended that cross-cultural training be provided to a variety of individuals involved in the justice system. We would like to make it clear that Aboriginal women must play a central role in the development and delivery of those programs.

Unfortunately, Aboriginal men, over the centuries, have adopted the same attitude toward women as the European. As a result, the cultural and social degradation of Aboriginal women has been devastating.

According to the Manitoba Women's Directorate, the average annual income for Manitoba's Aboriginal women is less than 75% of that for other women. The labour force participation rate for Aboriginal women is 40%, while 72% of Aboriginal women do not have a high school diploma.

The status of Aboriginal women in the city of Winnipeg is particularly disturbing. Forty-three per cent of Aboriginal families are headed by single women, compared to 10% of non-Aboriginal families. In her presentation on behalf of the Women's Directorate, Janet Fontaine said:

Poverty is an unmistakable factor in the lives of Manitoba Native women and children. Poverty has been shown to be positively correlated with conflict with the law, low levels of education, decreased opportunity for employment, and a low level of health.

While the "official" unemployment rate has been estimated at 16.5% for Aboriginal women, official statistics typically do not count those who are not actively looking for work. Many Aboriginal women do not actively seek work because there is no employment available to them, or because it is impossible for them to work, due to their family circumstances or for other reasons. The actual employment rate for female status Indians age 15 or more has been estimated as low as 24%. These numbers appear to be due, in part, to an absence of educational and employment opportunities for Aboriginal women.

This history of social, economic and cultural oppression should be seen as the backdrop for our discussion of Aboriginal women as both victims and offenders in the Manitoba justice system.

## **Section 5: The Abuse of Aboriginal Women & Children**

The presentations of Aboriginal women were blunt and direct. Violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities has reached epidemic proportions.

This violence takes a number of forms. Sometimes it involves physical assaults between adult males. More often—and more disturbingly—it involves the victimization of the least powerful members of the community: women and children.

The Manitoba Women's Directorate submitted to our Inquiry a document entitled "Native Perspective on Rape." According to one of the women interviewed for the study:

- Rape is a common and widespread experience.
- Rape extends back many generations.
- People treat rape as a personal, private pain and do not talk about it unless there is an unavoidable crisis.
- The individual who is raped comes to view violence as the norm.

Josie Hill, the director of the Native Women's Transition Centre, told us:

*It is no less than the absolute disrespect of a human being, our own grandmothers state that when a child is sexually abused, 'the spirit leaves; the spirit can hide; the spirit can die', as a result of the great shock. The ultimate effect is that people become unable to function in home and community.*

Professor LaRocque wrote:

*People violate persons and laws, not because of "cultural differences" but because of the human potential for evil which is perhaps influenced by socio-economic conditions. I believe sexual violence is best explained by sexism and misogyny which is nurtured and inherent in patriarchy. Rape in any culture and by any standards is warfare against women.*

Finally, she commented on the difficulty Aboriginal women experience in addressing this issue: "I know we have shied away from dealing with the [Native community abuse] issue partly because we had to fend off racism and stereotypes."

The victimization of Aboriginal women has not only been manifested in their abuse, but also in the manner in which Aboriginal female victims are treated. Women victims often suffer unsympathetic treatment from those who should be there to help them. We heard one example of such treatment from the Aboriginal mother of a 16-year-old rape victim. She told of how the police came to her home after her daughter had reported being raped and had undergone hospital examination and police questioning. The police told the mother that her daughter was lying and should be charged with public mischief. According to the mother, the officer added, "Didn't you want it when you were 16?"

In past times it was the abusers who were shunned; now it is the complainant who is shunned. The Manitoba Women's Directorate made the point that colonization has brought "many kinds and levels of abuse" to Aboriginal people. The directorate told us of one woman who

*Had been abused by being deprived of her history, her family and her language. In her adult life, she had all the signs of an abused person although she had not been physically abused. She suffers from low self-esteem and being unable to believe she is loveable.*

## **Section 6: Spousal Abuse**

One in ten women in Canada is abused by her partner, for Aboriginal women the figure is closer to one in three.

- 80% of Aboriginal women had personally experienced family violence;
- 53% of Aboriginal women indicated they had been physically abused;
- 74% of those women indicated they did not seek help;
- It is estimated that between 75% and 90% of women in some northern Aboriginal communities are abused.
- 40% of children in northern communities have been physically abused by a family member.
- A study by the Ontario Native Women's Association found that 8 out of 10 Aboriginal women in Ontario (compared to the national statistics report 1 out of 10 women are victims of spousal abuse) had personally experienced family violence, 87% had experienced physical injury and 57% had been sexually abused.
- A national study by the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada indicates that Aboriginal women and children under 1 years of age are most frequently physically abused.
- Aboriginal women experience higher rates of spousal abuse.
- Aboriginal children witness violence at a higher rate.
- Aboriginal peoples experience higher rate of victimization.
- Aboriginal victims experience more severe forms of violence.
- Over the past 20 years, approximately 500 Aboriginal women have gone missing in communities across Canada.
- Women between the ages of 25-34 have the highest rate of spousal abuse.
- 1 in 4 women seeking care of the emergency room for any reason is a victim of violence.

In northern, isolated reserve communities, the abused woman is placed in a more difficult situation when the question of calling the police arises. If she calls the police, it may take a day or longer for them to arrive. If they arrive while a party is going on, they may refuse to remove the offender or may simply drive him down the road, from where he can return again, only angrier. There is a lack of housing for families in isolated communities and no "safe house" available for women and children trying to escape an abusive man. They may be forced to spend the night in the bush, or be forced to leave the reserve entirely.

Professor LaRocque points out that women move to urban centres to escape family or community problems. Men, on the other hand, cite employment as the reason for moving. In the new setting Aboriginal women experience personal, systemic, subtle and overt racial discrimination. What they are forced to run to is often as bad as what they had to run from. Why they feel they have to leave is a matter worthy of comment.

Most chiefs and council members are male and often exhibit bias in favour of the male partner in a domestic abuse situation. This can effectively chase the woman from her home and community.

The unwillingness of chiefs and councils to address the plight of women and children suffering abuse at the hands of husbands and fathers is quite alarming. We are concerned enough about it to state that we believe that the failure of Aboriginal government leaders to deal at all with the problem of domestic abuse is unconscionable. We believe that there is a heavy responsibility on Aboriginal leaders to recognize the significance of the problem within

their own communities. They must begin to recognize, as well, how much their silence and failure to act actually contribute to the problem.

Aboriginal leaders must speak out against abuse within their communities to their own community members, and they must take steps within their own spheres of community influence to assist the true victims. Women and children who report abuse should never feel they have to leave their communities in order to feel safe. Aboriginal communities and their leaders must do what is possible to make the home communities of abused women and children havens from abuse. The problem of abuse is dealt with presently by women either staying on the reserves and putting up with the abuse, or leaving their communities to live elsewhere, just to escape from it. It is clear, however, that most would prefer to stay in their home communities if they could be protected.

Aboriginal women would like to see arbitration and community support systems in place in their communities. This is another area in which the development of local resources is badly needed. Aboriginal leadership must ensure that it is sought and governments must ensure that it is provided.

There is no equal division of property upon marriage breakdown recognized under the *Indian Act*. This has to be rectified. While we recognize that amending the *Indian Act* is not a high priority for either the federal government or the Aboriginal leadership of Canada, we do believe that this matter warrants immediate attention. The Act's failure to deal fairly and equitably with Aboriginal women is not only quite probably unconstitutional, but also appears to encourage administrative discrimination in the provision of housing and other services to Aboriginal women by the Department of Indian Affairs and local governments.

## **Section 7: Alcohol, Crime, and Abuse**

It was generally Aboriginal women who spoke to us of the effect of alcohol on crime in general and on family violence in particular. It is a fact established by a long line of studies that Aboriginal involvement in crime includes as a factor the abuse of alcohol. It is also the case that the consumption of alcohol contributes to the incidents of domestic violence and child abuse which occur on Indian reserves.

Women at God's Lake Narrows (a dry reserve) told us that, in their opinion, 95% of crime in their communities is related to the consumption of alcohol. Most of the many inmates and former inmates who spoke to us attribute their offence to the over-consumption of alcohol. A substantial number of those involved in causing the death of another did not even remember the event, due to alcohol consumption.

As is the case with the illegal use of drugs, we believe that attacking the illegal providers of the substance, rather than the addict, makes sense. However, in one respect, alcoholism represents a problem that requires solutions which the justice system cannot adequately provide. It is not sufficient simply to lock up people for being intoxicated. The consumption of alcohol is not, on its own, illegal. Locking up people who have committed crimes while intoxicated also has questionable benefits. People must be held to account for their crimes and the principle of punishment is designed to accomplish that, but punishment has questionable benefits when the one being punished has no recollection of what he or she did.

Punishment is, as well, only one consideration in sentencing. Rehabilitation of the offender and deterrence from committing the offence in the future, either by the offender or by others, are equally important considerations. When an offender commits a crime while intoxicated—an act which many people might be prepared to assert is totally out of character for the accused—courts have to struggle with the issue of deterring someone who needs to be deterred more from the consumption of alcohol than from breaking the law.

Rehabilitation sometimes takes precedence as a factor in sentencing, but sending someone to jail simply so he or she can deal with a drinking problem seems an improper use of incarceration. However, incarceration for abusing alcohol appears to be happening with Aboriginal offenders. Frankly, as long as the justice system is saddled with the problem, we expect that it will continue to deal with the issue in this admittedly inadequate manner.

Efforts must be increased to deal with the alcohol abuser within Aboriginal communities. This requires resources to increase the availability of treatment programs that are culturally appropriate, Aboriginally run and community-based.

As is the case with other programs designed to “help” people, we believe that programs that are based upon the cultures and traditions of Aboriginal people, and that involve Aboriginal methods of healing and personal conflict resolution, have a much greater chance of succeeding than do programs developed and managed by non-Aboriginal institutions. This is true in both urban and Aboriginal communities, and, therefore, calls for the establishment of more Aboriginally based resources and treatment programs in both areas.

As well, correctional institutions must also enhance the availability of culturally appropriate treatment programs within their institutions on an ongoing and regular basis.

Ultimately, it must be recognized that the presence and influence of alcohol and substance abuse in Aboriginal communities and among Aboriginal people are a direct reflection of the nature and level of despair which permeates that population. We have spent a considerable amount of time and space in this report detailing the basis for that despair.

It is our view that beginning to address the causes of Aboriginal despair in an appropriate and adequate manner will have a fundamentally more significant impact on Aboriginal alcoholism than will the efforts of police, the judiciary or treatment programs.

## **Section 8: Conclusion & Recommendations**

- Shelters and safe homes for abused women and children be established in Aboriginal communities and in urban centres. These shelters should be controlled by Aboriginal women who can provide culturally appropriate services.
- Police forces establish family abuse teams which include police officers and social workers trained in dealing with domestic disputes. Such teams should make extensive use of electronic record-keeping and community resources.
- Aboriginal leaders establish a local government portfolio for women and children, with responsibility to develop educational and support programs in the area of spousal and child abuse.
- The *Indian Act* be amended to provide for the equal division of property upon marriage breakdown.
- Alternatives to incarceration appropriate to Aboriginal cultures be developed for Aboriginal women.
- Aboriginal women be appointed to the National Parole Board.
- Funding be provided to Aboriginal women to establish a halfway house for Aboriginal female inmates.
- The National Parole Board give direction that release plans for female inmates with children pay close attention to the need for family reintegration, and in particular to living and income security arrangements required for family reintegration. We further recommend that the federal and provincial governments ensure that income and housing support programs be developed for released female offenders with young children, designed to facilitate family reintegration.
- Several themes were presented to us regarding Aboriginal women and the criminal justice system. There was an overall picture presented of racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal women in Aboriginal communities, in wider society and in the justice system. There is a need to address the underlying causes of Aboriginal women coming into conflict with the law.
- As the victims of childhood sexual abuse and adult domestic violence, they have borne the brunt of the breakdown of social controls within Aboriginal societies. There was substantial support for an entirely new system, to break the cycle of abuse and to restore Aboriginal methods of healing designed to return balance to the community, rather than punish the offender.
- Aboriginal women come to the justice system with unique problems that arise from, or are related to, the fact that they face double discrimination in their lives. It is important that Aboriginal women be given positions of responsibility in the justice system. They should be involved as clerks, administrators, lawyers, judges, and so forth. They should be involved in the same way as men in law enforcement, in the administration of the courts, as probation officers and parole officers, and in the legal profession. Aboriginal women should be involved in substantial numbers in the RCMP and the City police forces, as well as in Aboriginal police forces. There is also a need for Aboriginal child welfare workers. Training programs will have to be developed and large numbers of Aboriginal women will have to be attracted to this important work.

- The immediate need is for Aboriginal women to begin to heal from the decades of denigration they have experienced. But the ultimate objective is to encourage and assist Aboriginal women to regain and occupy their rightful place as equal partners in Aboriginal society.
- The situation of Aboriginal women is that they suffer double discrimination: as women and as Aboriginal people; as victims and as offenders. We were convinced by arguments of Aboriginal women that a restoration of their traditional responsibility and position of equality in the family and community holds the key to resolving many of the problems we have identified.

**“Aboriginal people experience disproportionately high rates of crime, victimization; are over-represented in the court and the correctional system; and further, feel a deep alienation from a justice system that is foreign to them and inaccessible, and reflects both overt and systemic racism.”**

**- *Canadian Criminal Justice Association, Aboriginal Peoples and Justice System (2000) –***

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## WEBSITES:

- **Aboriginal Canada Portal** [www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en-frames/ao28010.html](http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en-frames/ao28010.html)
- **Prince Albert Grand Council Women's Commission** <http://www.wbm.ca/users/pagc5/wc.htm>
- **The Original Women's Network** <http://Alpha.Remcan.Ca/abinfohwy/aboorg/own.html>
- **Buffy Salute-Marie** <http://www.web.apc.org/bsm/bsm.html>
- **Native Women's Health Education Resource** [gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:70/11/orgs/nawherc](http://gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:70/11/orgs/nawherc)
- **Pauline Johnson Home Page** <http://www.rescol.ca/collections/epj/epjhome.htm>
- **Jeannette Armstrong's Slash And Native Education In Canada** [http://andreae.unbc.edu/luke\\_html/slash.html](http://andreae.unbc.edu/luke_html/slash.html)
- **First Nation Reports: Table of Contents** <http://www.est.gov.bc.ca:80/abed/abedtoc.html>
- **Women's Exhibition - Celebrating Women's Achievements: 21 Pioneers** <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/digiproj/women/ewomen.htm>
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- **Resources for Feminist Research** <http://www.oise.on.ca/rfr/index.html>