

# CULTURALLY RELEVANT GENDER RESPONSIVE MODELS OF RECONCILIATION

*".... merely adding a few cultural practices here and there is clearly not enough. What is needed is a framework that addresses the negative impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples and emphasizes our strengths."*

(Sinclair, Hart and Bruyere, 2009: 147)

## GENDERING RECONCILIATION

Gendering reconciliation is a challenging task. Too often Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) have been gender neutral. Aboriginal women/Peoples risk further marginalization when dominant groups seek to use reconciliation processes to legitimize control.

In its 2010 paper, NWAC put forth the five following indicators of culturally relevant gender responsive reconciliation processes focusing on ending violence against Aboriginal women and girls; while ensuring institutional and systemic change address gendered impacts especially in governance and justice<sup>1</sup>:

**Gender responsive reconciliation should<sup>2</sup>:**

- 1. Restore and respect Aboriginal women's agency, authority, leadership and decision-making capacity**
- 2. Restore safety and the human right to security of the person for Aboriginal women and girls-physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and economically**

- 3. Reclaim and revitalize Aboriginal knowledge, worldviews, and traditions of gender balance in ways that are relevant to the contemporary context.**
- 4. Share the truth about the gendered impacts of colonization, human rights violations, and ethnocide/genocides such as tragically high levels of violence against Aboriginal women and girls, and exclusion of women from leadership and decision-making.**
- 5. Promote personal and social responsibility for ending neo-colonial attitudes and practices that devalue Aboriginal women and create social conditions that put women and girls in harm's way.**

Culturally relevant, gender responsive reconciliation (CRGB) also works to:

- Increase trust and respectful relating
- Uphold principles of self-determination and cultural continuity, in full respect of internationally recognized human rights
- Ensure a key role for elders, ceremonies and diverse traditions

1. Chansonneuve, D. Culturally Relevant Gender Based Models of Reconciliation, 2010. Native Women's Association of Canada

2. Ibid



- Include contributions of all community and family members; women, men, two-spirit people, seniors, Elders, girls and boys, and seeks to understand the impact of trauma on each of these groups, and the resulting needs for individual and collective healing and redress.
- Facilitate opportunities for reflection and personal transformation
- Support practices of deep listening and authentic inquiry.
- Encourage diverse modalities of creative expression in the process.

Culturally relevant, gender responsive models of reconciliation are action-oriented and seek to:

- Develop strategic alliances to create change in attitudes and behaviours
- Identify gender specific goals, outcomes, and strategies to achieve them
- Allow recommendations to emerge from the truth telling process
- Address root causes and systemic change needs
- Promote measures to ensure implementation monitoring and evaluation of their recommendations.

## **TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION- LIMITS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Canada's TRC, notwithstanding its challenges and limitations, is significant in at least two ways: it is the first truth commission to focus exclusively on violations stemming from a specific State policy targeted against Aboriginal Peoples, it also marks the first time a class action suit against the human rights violations of a State's has resulted in a court ordered national truth and reconciliation commission.

The truth telling aspect of Canada's TRC can provide an opportunity to bring both domestic and international attention to the violations against Canada's First Nations, Metis and Inuit Peoples, and importantly the TRCs final report will call for implementation of its final recommendations.

Truth and Reconciliation commissions around the globe also suffer many weaknesses, including: limited mandates or scope which prevent root causes from being addressed, controversial amnesty provisions; promotion of individualized reconciliation initiatives, at the expense of more systemic changes, which demand shifts in power structures. TRCs also have historically been invested with limited mechanisms to ensure their recommendations for substantive change are implemented.



As moral voices, however, TRCs can and have played essential roles in raising awareness on a national scale, and galvanizing public engagement in meaningful transformative initiatives. They can often accomplish what courts cannot, and when political and other optimal conditions are present can have significant influence in post conflict nation renewal.

The Canadian reconciliation process must work to create a national sense of unity which at the same time restores respectful nation to nation relationships, with Aboriginal Peoples. Whether and how long it will take to move to a post conflict period, will depend a lot on this factor.



### *Truth and Transformation: the case of the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa*

The Children's Aid Society of Ottawa (CAS) embarked on an important reconciliation process, to transform historic relations particularly in the area of child apprehensions. The reconciliation process was guided by the principles of self-determination and cultural continuity: recognizing that it is a basic human right of Inuit, Métis and First Nation families and communities to provide, care for and transmit their cultural values to their children.

The process was based on a four-phase model for reconciliation in child welfare: truth-telling, affirming, restoring, and relating (Blackstock, Brown and Bennett, 2006). Both service providers and families who were CAS involved came together for two days of truth telling, and dialogue aimed at reducing the negative impact of apprehensions.



The recommendations for change emerged from the truth telling process. Over time as recommendations began to be implemented trust levels increased, anger and hostilities diminished, and longer term results began to emerge. Recruitment of Aboriginal foster and adoptive families has improved significantly; the number of cases proceeding into the court system has been reduced; and inter-agency cooperation has increased toward strengthening families and reducing CAS involvement.<sup>3</sup> While there is still much work to do, the process represents an important step forward.

3. For a fuller description of this case study and the lessons learned see: Chansonneuve, D. Culturally Relevant Gender Based Models of Reconciliation, 2010. Native Women's Association of Canada

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What does reconciliation mean to you?  
How might lessons drawn from the example of the reconciliation process with the Ottawa CAS be applied to select institutions within the criminal justice system. What limitations do you see, how can opportunities be harnessed?*
- 2. What steps should be taken to ensure transformative initiatives involving the criminal justice system/public safety are culturally relevant, and gender responsive?*
- 3. How can Gladue reporting for Aboriginal women and girls be better implemented across Canada?*

