

NWAC President's Report

This publication highlights the various activities the President has undertaken throughout the month of January.



LORRAINE WHITMAN

Lorraine Whitman was elected as the President of the Native Women's Association of Canada on September 14, 2019. Prior to her presidency at NWAC, Ms. Whitman served as President of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association and has been advocating for Indigenous women's rights over the past 45 years.

January President's Report

My dear friends,

It's a new year—and, hopefully, the continuation of a new beginning for the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. As I reflect on the new year and what may unfold over the next 12 months, I can't help but think about the *value of community*.

This past year has been challenging for Canadians and for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people. COVID-19 has impacted all of our lives. For Indigenous Peoples, this impact has struck at the very soul of our communities and our approach to life.

While we may not be one homogenous group—we have different histories, traditions, languages, and unique cultures—our notion of community is similar. Each band or entity celebrates their distinct culture and traditions together; multi-generations live together in a household; and many of us continue to hunt and gather food together. For myself, I had an opportunity to give a virtual presentation to Acadia University students on two communities very dear to my heart, the Glooscap and Annapolis Valley First Nations. My presentation focused on the history and culture of local Mi'kmaq bands and the work they are doing with Acadia.

The advent of COVID-19 a year ago is preventing many of us from gathering, taking part in activities, and holding our sacred festivities. However, on the flip side, the pandemic is enabling First Nations, Métis, Inuit women, and gender-diverse people to come together online. In a virtual space, they are spending time over coffee and tea, and showing their crafting work and creative skills.

They are building a new kind of community—in the most positive way.

I am so grateful for our women and the knowledge that you are passing on to younger generations. You are a constant source of inspiration to me.

Thank you, Wela'lin



President Lorraine Whitman



[@LWhitman_NWAC](https://twitter.com/LWhitman_NWAC)

My January Agenda

In my President's Message this month, I have chosen to talk about the tremendous artistry shown by Indigenous women and gender-diverse people who have responded so positively to our online workshops. It was a delight for me to host two workshops this month: one on the Ribbon Skirt, and one on the 7 Sacred Teachings.

I was also honoured to have been chosen for a documentary called "Lead With Love." This film project features local heroes who are making positive change in their communities with a goal to help make a better world for everyone. Stay tuned!

"The Stream" is a social media community with its own daily television show on the news channel Al Jazeera English. It seeks out unheard voices and new perspectives. I took part in a live discussion on the high rates of suicide among Indigenous Peoples in Canada. We talked about the major risk factors and the failure of the federal government to put this issue at the forefront of its health policies.

I also was interviewed by the host of a popular Newfoundland-based podcast called "Mi'kmaq Matters." The focus of this interview was the untimely death of Chantel Moore. Chantel was shot to death by police in Edmundston, New Brunswick, in June 2020. Six months later, Chantel's mother, Martha Martin, has still not received the autopsy results that could shed light on how her daughter was killed during a wellness check. To this end, NWAC issued a news release calling out the provincial government's neglect in "leaving a grieving family in the dark like this." NWAC is calling for the New Brunswick authorities to share the results of the investigation with Chantel's family.

And, as usual, this month I attended weekly meetings of the MMIWG Core Committee and bi-weekly meetings of NWAC's Advisory Committee and Board of Directors. I also took part in several high-level meetings.

Meeting between the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers responsible for the Status of Women and national Indigenous leaders/representatives

The Federal-Provincial-Territorial (FPT) Ministers responsible for the Status of Women met virtually on January 21–22 for their 38th annual meeting. The meeting was co-chaired by Lisa Dempster, Minister Responsible for Indigenous Affairs and Reconciliation and for the Status of Women (Newfoundland), and Maryam Monsef, Minister for Women and Gender Equality (Canada).

At the meeting, participants endorsed the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministerial Joint Declaration for a Canada free of Gender-Based Violence, to fight against gender-based violence and to help advance gender equality for people across Canada. The joint declaration represents an important step in developing a National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence in Canada.

During this meeting, the Ministers reiterated the importance of their collective work on gender equality and the use of gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) to guide initiatives through the pandemic, taking into account the perspectives of national Indigenous leaders and representatives and the 2SLGBTQQIA communities.

NWAC is the second largest national Indigenous organization in Canada representing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women. As NWAC's representative, I was pleased to take part in this important two-day meeting, where I emphasized our disappointment with the delay in the federal government's development of a national action plan as a response to the National Inquiry's 231 Calls for Justice.

While the FPT Ministers are developing a separate national action plan on gender-based violence, it's not clear how the two national action plans will complement one another, especially in light of the Inquiry's findings that systemic violence against Indigenous women is a reflection of cultural genocide. In my remarks I reiterated: "Stopping the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women is an imperative. Canada has both an international and a moral obligation to end the genocide. If the creation of a national action plan against gender-based violence can take us further down the road to safety, then NWAC is all for it. But it must be written in concert with the national action plan to prevent violence against Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people. The two plans must complement each other."

In my remarks on the second day of the virtual meeting, I had a chance to delve further into the impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous women. The pandemic has increased the rates of domestic and family violence (and fears)—a fact that has been borne out of a survey that NWAC conducted in May of 2020, which found that the numbers are especially high among those under the age of 35. Tied to the violence is the economic insecurity of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people. They're vulnerable and underpaid. Many are living near the poverty line.

To this end, I asked the Ministers to help NWAC create jobs that women can do in their homes; help us put in place more counselling services; and help us address the health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in your jurisdictions.

Meeting with Indigenous Women’s Circle to discuss gender-based violence

The Indigenous Women’s Circle (IWC) was set up by Status of Women Canada to address systemic inequalities that disproportionately impact Indigenous women and girls. In an advisory capacity, the IWC provides an opportunity for Status of Women Canada to consult with leaders in Indigenous communities on the challenges they face and their priorities related to advancing gender equality.

In a virtual meeting held with the IWC, I took the opportunity to discuss ways of ensuring that an Indigenous lens is included throughout the national action plan being developed by the FPT Ministers responsible for the Status of Women. In addition to stating that the two national action plans should not duplicate or contradict one another, I also pointed out the need for:

- a clearly defined role for Indigenous groups in shaping the national action plan
- a clear monitory and evaluation framework, with consideration given to the role of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in the national action plan
- a plan that is culturally appropriate and distinctions-based, with recognition of the unique needs of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women and gender-diverse people
- inclusion of four “basket of rights”: right to culture, right to health, right to security, and right to justice

Interview with the CBC on forced sterilization

As more stories surface of Indigenous women who have experienced forced sterilization in public hospitals, NWAC has created a toolkit to help educate on consent and rights in the health care system. The “Knowing Your Rights” toolkit contains valuable information on informed consent, informed choice and decision-making, birth control options, patient rights and responsibilities, and how to take action if your rights have been violated.

CBC and other media have covered this topic over the years. Once again, I was pleased to have an opportunity to sit down with the national broadcaster to talk about this important issue. I stressed the link between this practice—which was a recognized policy within some sections of the health care establishment in a number of provinces—and the deliberate attempt to wipe out a people based on their race. “The United Nations says forced sterilization is cruel, inhuman, and degrading. For

Indigenous women, it is more than that,” I pointed out. “Women are the life givers in Indigenous society. It is cutting out part of who we are.”

Working meeting on addressing anti-Indigenous racism in Canada’s health care systems

Representatives from the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, First Nations, Inuit, Métis Nation, and health system partners gathered to discuss and confirm actions planned to address anti-Indigenous racism in Canada’s health care system.

As a leader in raising awareness around this systemic issue, NWAC was instrumental in identifying the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada and lobbied the government to hold a national inquiry. This inquiry subsequently cited the discriminatory delivery of health care—including forced sterilization, negative child welfare policies, racism, and misogynistic stereotypes—in contributing to genocide.

These and other points were raised in a letter directed to Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health, a week in advance of this working meeting—a meeting at which NWAC was only given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the second day of the two-day meeting. NWAC has led the effort to bring the scourge of racism in health care to the public’s attention, yet we were not permitted to give more broadly based opening remarks along with our male-led Indigenous counterparts.

In a press release delivered at the same time as the meeting, I pointed out: “Had NWAC been permitted to speak at the meeting’s opening, we would have explained that Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people are disproportionately affected by systemic racism and violence in health care.”

In the release I stressed that the experiences of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people in the health care system are not the same as those of men.

“Meet-and-greet” with Canadian Heritage Minister

An environmental activist and human rights advocate, Minister of Canadian Heritage Steven Guilbeault has stated that the most important relationship to him and to Canada is the one with Indigenous Peoples. He has declared a commitment to supporting self-determination, improving service delivery, and advancing reconciliation.

To this end, it was a pleasure to connect with Mr. Guilbeault as a first step in building a relationship.

In our first “meet-and-greet” chat, I talked about NWAC’s environmental and climate change work and stressed that we want to be an ally of the federal government. To that end, I told him about the Canada–NWAC Accord signed in 2019, whose purpose it is to work together on common interests. These include preserving, promoting, and revitalizing Indigenous languages (which is a NWAC focus); and promoting and maintaining the connection that Indigenous women have with their language and culture.

A key part of our culture is tied to artistic expression. The gifting of a basket of artisan crafts to Minister Guilbeault was used to highlight how making crafts and other items at the “kitchen table” is, in fact, an important avenue for ending the social and economic marginalization of Indigenous women. Through online crafting workshops and our Makers Space program, NWAC is providing a route out of poverty.

Congratulations to Commissioner Michèle Taïna Audette

Commissioner Michèle Taïna Audette is senior advisor for reconciliation and Indigenous education at Université Laval. A Native Canadian activist, she has witnessed and heard the painful stories and truths of Indigenous families across Canada, serving as one of the five commissioners who conducted the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Michèle has also served as president of Femmes autochtones du Québec and of NWAC, and as Associate Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Relations with Citizens and Immigration of the Quebec government.

On behalf of NWAC and all Indigenous women across Canada, I was pleased to send a message of congratulations to Michèle for her many contributions to advancing our cause and for being a role model.

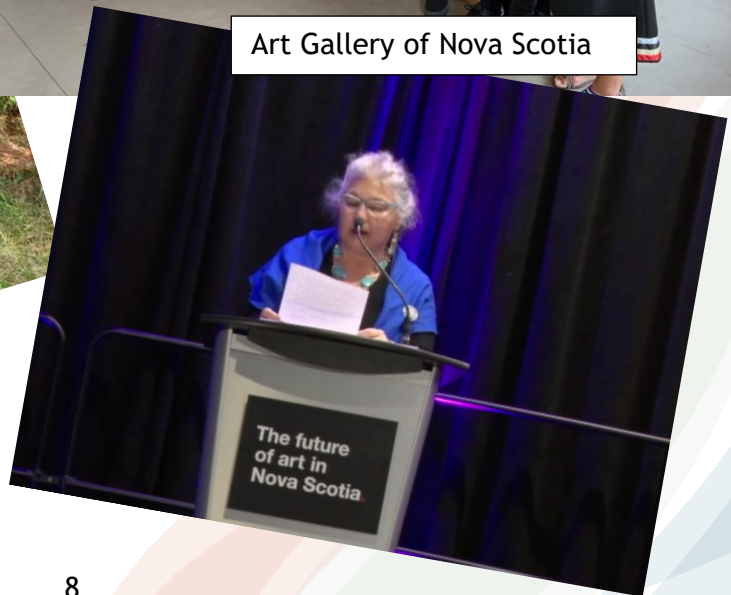
Highlights of 2020 in photos



Highway of Tears interview and drum for justice in support of Chantel Moore and all missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls



Art Gallery of Nova Scotia



White Sea Turtle creation at the BIO



On Treaty Day



Remembrance Day in Nova Scotia





Native Women's
Association of Canada



L'Association des
femmes autochtones
du Canada

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