



**Native Women's  
Association of Canada**

***NWAC Workshop on Reclaiming Our Nations  
Initiative:  
Nation-Building and Re-Building – Gathering  
Women's Wisdom***

Community Awareness and Engagement

Edmonton, Alberta  
Ramada Conference Center  
June 17, 2011

**Background:**

Through activism, policy analysis and advocacy, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) works to advance the well-being of Aboriginal women and girls, as well as, their families and communities. This work includes identifying gaps in the equal enjoyment of human rights by Aboriginal women and mobilizing action to address these gaps. A fundamental premise of NWAC's work is that the civil, political, cultural, social and economic rights of Aboriginal peoples cannot be realized without identifying the gender impacts of laws and policies applied to Aboriginal peoples and addressing the needs of Aboriginal women, in a culturally relevant way.

Prior to first contact, many Aboriginal societies were matriarchal and matrilineal in nature and focused on family, community and the continuity of tradition, culture and language. Aboriginal women were central to all of this as the first teachers in the home, as the healers, and as the givers of life.

While Aboriginal men and women had distinct roles, their roles were equally valued. The need to restore the value of Aboriginal gendered roles has motivated the development of culturally relevant gender-based analysis (CRGBA). CRGBA is a tool for use by anyone to assess policy, programs, projects, and/or legislation towards achieving more equitable outcomes for women and men and their families.

NWAC applies a gender perspective to human rights issues to ensure that decision-makers of all kinds - political leaders, judges, officials in all governments at all levels - are aware of equality gaps and issues that affect Aboriginal women and girls and have continued to do so with respect to the nation-building and re-building process.

NWAC and our Provincial/Territorial Member Associations have established positive reputations and have thorough structures in place to reach many women and their communities across Canada. NWAC has engaged and informed women, youth and Elders and their communities in discussions on nation-building, citizenship, and the relationships between our members, communities and Nations. Given that NWAC is also familiar with cultural practices, governance issues, protocols and traditions while dealing with First Nations, we were well placed to build on these established respectful relationships and have successful sessions with women on this important issue.

NWAC has facilitated a national dialogue on First Nations citizenship and membership. The dialogue was funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada as part of the Exploratory Process to respond to the range of issues related to Indian Registration, membership and First Nation Citizenship.

In addition to holding Workshops, and asking women to identify issues that they have experienced regarding Indian Registration within the Indian Act, we have asked women to fill out Questionnaires to provide us with their views on Nation-Building for our future generations.

## **NWAC Workshops on Citizenship and Nation-Building and Re-Building – Common Remarks**

First Nations were organized on the basis of Indigenous Nations with distinct structures of government. These structures included Hereditary Systems, Clan Systems, Federations, Confederacies and Military Systems, Economic and Cultural relationships and alliances among all Nations. The current Indian Act structure of reserves and the governance on reserves that have resulted from the imposition of the *Indian Act* does not reflect First Nations political, legal, or traditional governance. There is general consensus among First Nations that this situation must change.

At every session that was held, our participants have indicated that this process was only one small step in the process that needs to continue to happen among First Nations Peoples in discussing the issue of citizenship, membership, identity and Nationhood.

Participants at every session expressed concern with an Exploratory Process that lasts from April to November 2011, and stated that it was insufficient time to reflect on how we can move from the systemic barriers within current Indian Registration within the Indian Act, to true methods of Nation-Building among our communities across the country.

Women repeatedly indicated that there needs to be a one-year, two-year, five-year, ten-year workplan and ongoing process for collaboration and meetings between the Government of Canada and First Nations' Governments and among First Nations' women both on and off reserves, their families and communities and for our leadership to continue to gather information, discuss options and to strategize on how to move forward.

Our women have indicated that we need to focus on rebuilding and supporting our governance structures, supporting women's participation in decision-making and increasing women's participation and inclusion in any consultations that occur to strengthen our Nations. They have also acknowledged that there are best practices across the country for inclusive approaches to citizenship and we need to continue to build on these positive efforts.

We have been told that in order for further positive change to take place, there needs to be full engagement of our people, our communities, and our Nations. First Nations must be able to determine the tools they need to develop inclusive and healthy Nations, based on the fulfillment of our rights to self-determination and by affirming effective, efficient and successful First Nations governments.

Participants repeatedly reiterated that the Government of Canada needs to take a broader and more inclusive approach to Indian Registration, expanding on the scope, beyond Bill C- 3 *Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act*, which was identified as a narrow interpretation to the *McIvor* decision. They also stated that the Government needs to

commit to an in depth process to explore the complex and broader issues related to citizenship, membership and identity.

Comments were routinely made criticizing the current limiting exclusions from Indian Registration by the double mother rule and with the problematic policies that are currently implemented with the Unstated and Unrecognized Paternity that require a father to sign the birth registration where the couple is not married, in order for the child to receive full or accurate registration.

NWAC spoke about the need for a process that must include adequate funding for National Aboriginal Organizations in order to respond to the numerous requests, complaints, and emails that came in to the organization about the problems women are facing. Often people expressed their preference to call NWAC rather than the Department because they would be assured that their requests would be responded to, whereas, they had been waiting for months to hear back from the Manitoba Registration Office.

Our Provincial/Territorial members also requested that more funding should go to them to empower provincial and territorial organizations, and First Nations generally, to engage fully with the grassroots communities in exploring all possible solutions given the complexities of the issues. They would require additional funds to help them to come to a consensus on as many issues as possible over the coming years and not simply for an eight-month Exploratory Process.

Many women referred specifically to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the standard for a principled framework for partnership between First Nations and the Government of Canada. The Declaration's principles of partnership and respect can guide this work.

Participants affirmed that Article 3 of the UN Declaration: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By Virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development." There are numerous articles that affirm the right of self-determination, including related rights to lands, resources and territories and to indigenous cultural traditions and customs and systems of governance in all aspects of life. One of the general provisions of the Declaration sums up the vision of the advocates who fought for the adoption of the Declaration. It is Article 43, which states that, "The rights recognized herein constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world."

The women, men and Elders repeatedly reminded us that it is our right to determine our own membership according to traditional and historical practices, and which are affirmed in our Treaties, and is a fundamental right of every one of our Nations. Our citizenship and identity must be enforced and maintained by our own Peoples and not determined by the Government of Canada.

## **Creating a Movement for Change – Guiding Principles Established for Nation-Building:**

- **Establish a Vision for the Future:** Create a shared vision and establish a mandate for change, backed by the people, the Council and the Chief, and all leaders, making sure it is inclusive of women, youth, Elders and families.
- **Map Your Journey:** Identify how you intend to achieve your community's vision, adjust the plan when needed to overcome challenges.
- **Exercise Your Rights and Live Your Culture:** Learn your rights and responsibilities, your inherent and Treaty rights and exercise your rights by living your culture, understanding women and men, Elders and youth all have important roles.
- **Moving Away from the *Indian Act*:** Take the time to choose and develop your own governance structures, that are community-based and community-paced, inclusive and not exclusive of our women, children and grand-children.
- **Strengthening Governance at all Levels:** Make laws that benefit all citizens and reflect culture, and establish government to government relationships based on respect.
- **Make Progress and Achieve Outcomes:** By being engaged in the economy and having control of our traditional lands, while governing according to our traditions and customs we can achieve outcomes, establish nation-to-nation relations and restore our nations to the thriving communities they once were.



**NWAC Workshop on the Reclaiming Our Nations Initiative**

*Nation-Building and Rebuilding – Gathering Women's Wisdom*

Edmonton, Alberta

June 17, 2011

5:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Introductions – Dinner will be provided.
3. Presentation by the Native Women's Association of Canada on Indian Registration, Citizenship and Nation-Building
4. Discussion
5. Questionnaires Completed and submitted by Participants
6. Wrap-Up/Next Steps

### Meeting Highlights

The meeting was held at the Ramada Conference Center in Edmonton, Alberta in the Vernon Room between 5 pm and 8 pm. The room was not too large, set up with roundtables of six, and created a safe and intimate environment. There were more than 30 participants at the meeting.

Given that our Provincial Member Association is located outside of a central area, NWAC hosted the workshop in Edmonton in order to reach participants from more than five First Nations communities, and women, youth and Elders living in the Edmonton area.

It was a diverse group, comprised of a few Elders, some students, and young, single women with children. There were several professionals, single mothers, people who lived both on and off reserve and several generations of family members attending, which included a Grandmother, her daughter, son and grandson.

Elder Maisie Cardinal conducted the Opening Prayer to start the meeting in a good way.

The meeting opened with introductions, first from the Facilitator and her assistant from NWAC, followed by self-introductions by the participants, letting everyone know where they were from and what their expectations were for the meeting.

Afterward, NWAC did an overview on the history of Indian Registration, a brief summary of relevant caselaw on the issue, and highlighted major changes to the Indian Act, including a review of the most recent Bill C- 3 *Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act*.

Participants discussed a number of issues relating to all the topics previously identified as problematic, by First Nations women over the years such as residual discrimination and second generation cut-off within current Indian Registration; the current system of Indian registration under the Indian Act whereby women who were re-instated in 1985 still do not have the same status as their male counterparts; First Nations citizenship that limits women's rights to citizenship and membership benefits; and the ongoing underfunding to First Nations for programs and services for those who have Indian status and Band membership; as well as the existing policies within the Department, and the discretionary powers of the Indian Registrar to decide who is and who isn't an Indian under the Indian Act, in cases where there are no policies in place.

Discussions also took place regarding the traditional roles that Aboriginal men and women held in the past and how the Indian Act has disrupted many of those relationships and values. People talked about how in the past, that although the roles were different they were equally valued and that women were the heart and soul of their families. These women had been the first teachers, the healers and the givers of life.

Now, because of the Indian Act, the impacts of Indian Residential Schools, and colonization generally, we have to try and rebuild our Nations based on our collective traditions.

Many participants indicated that NWAC was providing an opportunity for women who never really had the opportunity before to discuss these issues, strategize for solutions or to ask questions previously on these issues and have their views considered regarding what they think should be done about creating a change.

Time was allotted for the participants to discuss issues amongst themselves and to report back on the highlights of their discussion with the larger group. Participants were also asked to fill out Questionnaires, and told that if they were unsure about what was being asked in the Questionnaires, they were encouraged to discuss the questions among themselves and to feel free to ask the moderator for clarification or to indicate other issues they would like to write about on the topic instead.

Afterward, there was additional time for Questions and Answers, and people talked about their individual situations regarding Indian Registration. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses were exchanged so that the women could keep in contact to continue the discussion and so that they could receive the Report afterward. The Elder closed the meeting for the group and the meeting ended.

### **Questionnaire Answers**

1. What role do you see for Elders, youth, women, men and families in the re-building of your Nation? How will/should the diverse voices be heard in the process? How will everyone be involved?
  - Developing a Chief, Council, student representation along with Elders in a monthly Band meetings, where everyone can hear what is being proposed and everyone can offer suggestions so it can be put to a vote would be truly democratic.
  - For those currently living off-reserve, perhaps they can be reached in the social media sites and can participate that way, rather than in person.
  - Elders should be the keepers of our language and tell our stories in our language which should be told to everyone. Keep the language and traditions alive. Youth should respect their Elders but should learn to also respect themselves.
  - Men must show their children that he cares for his wife and children and he will be a model that his sons could emulate.
  - Women and mothers must nurture their children and their husbands in a respectful, kind and loving manner and make their kids and husbands proud.

- Chief and Council should be more open to allowing information, such as the exchange at this workshop, so it can also be available to more on-reserve women.
- It is everyone's responsibility, Chief and Council among them, to get informed and to inform others and share information.
- I believe that we need urban Aboriginal voices (Friendship Centers) to become educated about these issues and pass the information on to people living in cities. This would be at a grassroots level.
- Elders should be the teachers of their children and grandchildren.
- Families need to love, care, and respect and support each other.
- I feel the need to separate culture and family values. There is a place for spirituality and parenting. There is a need to start a Parenting Society as a means of recording parent-teacher dialogue. Youth has constantly been asked to voice their concerns but the leaders choose not to hear. Why?
- There should be more gatherings where all groups could come together and discuss what's really going on.
- We need better leaders who are accountable to the people. There must be involvement. Nation building requires better leaders.
- Urban Aboriginal voices need to be heard at a Federal level.
- Grassroots approach would be best through Friendship Centres.
- All of the above-mentioned groups have to go back to traditional values of respect for each other and relearn the significance of our ceremonies, our feasts, and our festivals. We need to learn what our culture is including language and relearn it. Otherwise our culture could be lost.
- I see no role for Elders, youth, women, or men on my reserve. The Chief and Council are not listening to anyone. We'd have to gather outside their offices for our voices to be heard.
- Everyone would have to be contacted using radio, newspapers, social media and start talking about our issues and not just at one meeting or opportunity.
- The Elders and their knowledge of their history and culture need to be respected as leaders to guide us forward. We all need to work together and recognize that we are working to create a better future for our children and grandchildren.
- There is hope for our Elders and children? What about our grandchildren? If this is not resolved what about our grandchildren, will they be lost to us?

- It seems that people are scared to say anything or do anything.
- It seems like no one cares. I would like to see everyone involved but how will it be done and who will even listen?
- Because I am a youth I would like to see more youth programs; art and our culture. Community values need to be implemented and we require a grass-roots leadership approach so that we have awareness on rebuilding our Nation and what that means.

2. What are the key steps and activities you deem necessary for Nation Re-Building? What actions must be taken? What would be the outcomes?

- The Necessities are:
  - Leadership: Voices that know of the troubles that exist in our communities, and they should be listened to. Eg. Youth Violence, Women Abuse, should be dealt with. Our leaders should address these issues and stop them before we can deal with matters such as Nation-Building.
  - Language renewal – we must re-learn our languages.
  - More funding for those First Nations and non- status living off-reserve and who want to go to school.
  - Learning the basics of reconnecting to the reserves. Language classes, learning our culture so it won't be lost.
  - Unify Indigenous Peoples around the world and have them establish governance models using traditional structures.
  - Focus should be at a grass-roots level.
  - Education is an absolute must if we are to have a future. The outcome is the missing part of Nation-building.
  - Self-motivation and the knowledge of our culture are very important, if we are going to rebuild our Nation.
  - Instructors need to keep leading brain-storming sessions and working with groups, so that everyone can have a say at meetings.
  - Nothing will change until the system we currently have changes.
  - Freedom to practice traditional culture and role modeling healthy behaviors.
  - Workshops on reserves so that Chiefs and Councils can be educated on these issues.
  - Honesty, trust, and sobriety are the important steps to assist in rebuilding our communities.

- We need to reach consensus on what the issues are, and on the Plan to make the changes. Then we need to implement the purposed changes and keep them. These are the first steps towards nation-building
  - A leader who is motivated and a strong team builder must also be honest and trustworthy. The outcomes to having great leaders would be greater, stronger and better communities. This would allow everyone to have a voice.
3. What would be the most important resource that you would need to for Nation Re-building? How would you make sure that you have them available to you?
- Elders who know their language and culture. ie. stories, feasts festivals, and ceremonies. We need someone who we respect. This is where it starts with responsibility and respect.
  - Team building, education and skills, motivation and someone to guide us towards community resources.
  - Provide programs to inform and train others in the skills needed for Nation-Building to work.
  - Everyone needs to participate in this change. It would be good for everyone if they felt they were being heard and let the Governments know that things have to change.
  - We need to have an Open Door policy about our community's finances. Issues regarding funding education, medical transport, the Cree Language and something organized for our youth and to prevent youth from joining gangs and getting involved in gang violence.
  - Elders and their guidance need to be available for advice.
  - Resources for women, men and Elders may be different, but generally consist of education, health, proper housing and clean water.
  - Come together as one.
  - The most important resource is the preservation of our language and culture. The only way to get these things available to you is to get involved with the community and keep asking.
  - People, a population that is educated aware and knowledgeable.
  - Land, cultural identity and governance. The strength of it, will make or break a nation. Our land base cannot be sold or given away. We must fight for the environment.

- Educate the masses and let them know what is happening in our community.
- Language inculcated, as soon as possible. Obviously more funding for schools and why are we funded lower than non-native schools?
- We want the chance for change.
- Centres for Seniors and Single mothers would help to share knowledge and build partnerships with each other. This would create a better sense of community too.
- I am a single, teen mom and I want the chance to go to school. I'm motivated to learn and it's not easy to get funded. Education is so important.
- For families who have lots of trouble, family healing circles might help restore harmony.
- Proper housing with clean water is essential.
- Elders, educated people, financial resources.
- Self-determination from my community.

4. How can we use our culture, traditions, and inherent rights to advance our efforts? What accountability mechanisms have been put into place to ensure equality and benefits to everyone, over the long-term? How and who will track your progress?

- Maintaining the old fashioned oral tradition of our Elders.
- Tracking what is done with what has been promised.
- Study the ways things were done and handled in the past and learn from our mistakes.
- Many of our cultures promote the use of equality as a basis for the right to land and creating business opportunities. There has to be a way to see if funding dollars are being tracked properly.
- We would need an auditor.
- Allow the traditional roles that men and women, Elders and youth had in the decision-making process to be restored.
- We will track our progress. If we are relearning our culture and traditions, it won't take long to notice the difference.
- Our language needs to be taught in our schools
- Implementation of language programs in our schools must be tracked.
- Using history and the knowledge of our Elders to learn our culture.

- Internal audits of how money is spent on cultural requirements ie. language and cultural events. We have always had the right to self-government but it has rarely been respected. Accountability is still being developed.
- A little bit of both.
- We could always ask our Elders for advice.
- Practice respect for each other

5. Do you know of any traditional roles that women and men held in relation to governance and decision-making within your nation? Could they be useful today?

- If all things work the way they are supposed to then Elders, their children and their grandchildren should be practicing respect for each other.
- Allow traditional roles of women and men in the process of decision-making within the nation.
- Reclaiming our traditions will provide a positive attitude towards life.
- Men and women in many of our cultures had traditional roles. Women were considered equal to men as men did the hunting and women planted and ensured that there was food for everyone.
- Because of the role of nurturer, women were given the power to choose the Chief. Women could also remove the Chief if he did not listen to the requests of the clan mothers who spoke for the community. In some places where the Longhouse exists it is still the same. Clan mothers continue to delegate to the Chiefs.
- The language is taught at all levels of schooling on the reserve and while not perfect the consensus is that it works and brings people together
- Spirituality is needed on all levels and it is difficult if many do not believe in the old ways.
- Women were the mothers and the backbones of the community.
- Women have little or no respect from men. We would require a woman who could be an inspirational speaker. This would be a key necessity for our community's renewal.
- In the past the Chief consulted men, women, and Elders were consulted for their wisdom

- Women made many decisions but consulted with her husband or other male relatives.
- Yes, our Chiefs and Council should be the ones to lead us in the right direction; if not then we must find people who will listen to band members.
- Embracing our ceremonies. Passing on the knowledge to the younger people.
- Reclaiming our nation includes the need to re-teach the culture and teachings.
- A return to past traditions might be a good thing.
- Chief and Council should share their decision-making with everyone to see if what they are choosing is right for the community.
- We need an Ambassador, Ombudsperson or at least someone who could let the Government know what is needed for the reserves.
- Chiefs were accountable to clan mothers for their decisions in the old days, and today they are supposed to be accountable to the Government but it's not working very well! Do the words Forensic Audit mean anything to anyone?

6. In the past, what resources were the most important in helping you achieve success in your challenge? Do you know of any best practices Model that is being used by a Nation that may be useful to others?

- Training and Education
- Belief in myself
- Low income Housing
- AA and ceremonies
- Self-esteem building practices
- Learning how to use a computer and internet
- No drinking and no drugs
- Funding or Grants
- Letters to Government
- Staying in school
- Having someone to talk to
- Treating your inner child
- Our people can pull through by re-building
- Listening to Elders for answers

- Learning to paint
- My parents provided me with discipline
- Some of my teachers
- Inspiration to write poetry
- Family support
- Went to a shelter got help and advice got milk tickets, bus tickets, diapers, food bank, kid's toys and clothes. Thanks!
- The web and access to information
- The strength to carry more than one job and the friends who looked after my daughter while I did this
- The life skills programs I attended
- Talking to Elders

7. What role do you deem appropriate for other governments (Federal or Provincial) and with private industry in advancing your goals?

- Funding education from Headstart to post-secondary.
- Achieve some balance with these governments. This will help us to achieve independence as a nation.
- We need to help each other.
- The treaty relationship speaks to a partnership where the Crown has obligations to support. This does not happen unless it benefits the Crown.
- Guidance.
- Skills that can make us grow stronger such as accountants, bankers, and lawyers.
- Send some doctors and nurses to ensure we have reasonable access to medical attention.
- We are part of this country and this province; please remember this.
- Right now it seems like no one cares.
- Try to get private enterprise to help. Sure!
- If we get money from any level, we are responsible to move forward with it.
- Use it to find creative ways to bring in economic development.

---

Thank you for your input: it will be included into a final report and posted on our website at [www.nwac.ca](http://www.nwac.ca)