



**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

**Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society
1607 East Hastings Street
Vancouver, British Columbia
September 13, 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 legislation within the *Indian Act* and policies within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 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. The demands were many and quite regular from people calling NWAC for help. 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/ Reiterated at Workshops:

- **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

Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society

Chief Simon Baker Room

September 13, 2011

11:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Make Your Voice Be Heard!!

Agenda

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

Meeting Highlights

The meeting was held in the Chief Simon Baker Room and more than 30 women gathered for the roundtable discussion and presentation by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).

Elder Audrey Rivers opened the meeting for us but had to leave because she was needed back at her community for a death in the family. She helped to start us off in a good way.

The NWAC Facilitator introduced herself, went over the agenda, and then opened the discussion to the group for each of the women to introduce themselves, indicating which Nation they associated themselves with, or were a Band member of (where applicable), and what role they were currently in while at the meeting.

More than six organizations and service providers serving Aboriginal women from the Downtown East side and the greater Vancouver area were invited to attend the meeting. There were representatives from the Urban Native Youth Association, the Pacific Association of Native Women, the Helping Spirit Lodge, the Aboriginal Mothers Centre, Kla-how-eya Aboriginal Centre, the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre along with Elders and community women. There were 20 women, some of the women lived on reserve and some lived in the city.

The discussion opened with the women introducing themselves and their connection to their Nations and spoke about their current role within their workplace. The participants talked about the meanings for them when we talk about reclaiming our Nations, Nation-Building and Re-Building and what it means for them to be Aboriginal or First Nations.

The Facilitator went through the questionnaire and discussed some of the guiding principles for creating a movement for change and the women agreed that these would all be useful

Then the NWAC representative did an overview of the changes within the Indian Act over the last 50 years and the group spoke about how the many changes affected them. In some cases many Bill C-31 people were not recognized as Band members and did not have the right to land acquisition and even burial rights and still do not have them today. Returnees often have to wait until their Bands decide to take them back on the Band list.

The group talked about how difficult the current Bill C-3 application for Indian Status is and the costs associated with obtaining birth certificates in the province. Some women had five children and a low income so the financial burden was great. People also spoke

about the lack of service they received when applying for Status and how there is a standard of service for every other public service in Canada yet there is not one for natives within the Department. Some spoke about waiting for status for 10 to 20 years.

Many women suggested that the Department should have been able to use their own records to identify who qualified for status given that they already have the statistical information of how many new Status Indians will receive status with the new law.

Many women discussed how our own people should be able to determine their own membership. The role for Elders, aunts and uncles, links us to our families and our identity within our Nation and no government can determine that. Our ancestors were our teachers, but now sadly many believe that this has been lost as a result of Indian Residential Schools, and from the State intervening with the family and removing our children.

Many believed that Men don't know or don't care what their role is supposed to be anymore and they need to reclaim it. Many are M.I.A. (missing-in-action) and leave their babies without taking responsibility for the fact that they are a father and they leave their child without rights by not signing their birth certificates. The Department then claims that the father has not been identified and lists him as "father unknown", even if the mother indicates who the father is. This is a policy problem within the Department and is not based in law. The Department has no right to discriminate against women and children this way yet they do it just the same.

Some women gave specific suggestions on what NWAC needs to do when lobbying the Government to further change Indian Registration. They indicated that Bill C-3 did not go far enough and that there are still women and children excluded. They suggested that there be an amendment to the Indian Registration provision so that S. 6 (1) Indian Status to the maternal Indian grandchildren who were born between 1951 and 1985, instead of S. 6 (2) status because it does not address the concerns identified by the *McIvor* case.

Others spoke about how Restorative Justice Measures are successful, and that any Custom Membership Codes need to be inclusive of our women and children so they are not copying the Government's oppressive behavior. They went on to discuss how the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be our framework for action in pursuing the standard of rights regarding self-determination.

Education, programs and services, and the lack thereof, were also topics that were discussed at length. This included cultural education; such as language, traditions, crafts

and stories. The women stated that those who want to attend, along with their children should be able to, despite whether they are registered with the Government.

Women spoke about how we need to use communication as a way to convey information to one another. People should be able to go to Facebook or any other social media outlet to find out what's going on. People could also come to the Friendship Centres for information as they are often a great wealth of information and a great resource to connect with our culture and identity.

Seminars or workshops such as this one are great. Many of the women, who attended the meeting, stated that they felt that it was very important that the women in the room were sharing their experiences and discussing important problems they encountered relating to Indian Registration and benefits.

The women also spoke about we need to work on finding and reconnecting siblings that have been fostered and the importance of teaching them about their culture, their identity, and language, wherever possible. Elders and women at native organizations and within service providing organizations can play a role and helping these children reclaim their identity and to take pride in their culture. Healing and the importance of their getting healthy emotionally, physically and spiritually must be a major priority. We must accept that we are no longer victims.

One Elder shared the Goose story and why Geese fly in a V formation. They honk to support the one in front. This is encouragement. She said that the moral of the story is to help one another to succeed and to not belittle anyone. There are no bosses in that instance. Everyone has the potential to be a leader. Teamwork and protection for the flock are key principles in Nation-Building.

Participants spoke about how we need to acknowledge strong women and the power of sisterhood how sisters can give us a sense of belonging. A woman in the group talked about the fact that she had spent time in foster-care because her parents were not role models and that this taught her a valuable lesson. She committed to herself that when she had her own children she would always be with them and would do what it takes to be a good parent so no one could take her kids away. The women spoke about how important it is to have a supportive family and the need to model healthy relationships.

The women worked through the NWAC Questionnaire together and the next section of the Report contains their answers. The meeting came to an end at 4:00 p.m. and many of the women expressed that they hoped that NWAC could come back and give another seminar at a later date on the same issue. The Executive Director of the Friendship Center invited NWAC to come back anytime.

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 in the implementation?

- Villages must unit together.
- Off reserve citizens of Nations must have a voice.
- One old ways that was used by the Haida was that aunts and uncles taught children lessons but now there is a disconnection with men/male roles to be present and taught their role, especially because there are so many single moms now.
- Off reserve Aboriginals (urban Aboriginals) have lost connection to their home communities. The 7th generation lost the culture, traditions, ceremonies, and roles. This needs to change.
- We need to rebuild relationships in order to establish our Nations.

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

- Need for accountability from Bands to take action against people who have committed crimes rather than jails.
- Need for reserves and families off reserves to come together in one week camps with traditional dances, hunting and fishing skills (transfer skills and teachings, shared from one generation to another)
- Need for support/intervention for off reserves to support families and life skills.
- Need for school curriculum to support our native languages with our different cultures and traditions.
- Need to address children being apprehended from children's aid and community service, taking children in care from families.
- Need for educating children from kindergarten up about identity.

- Need for higher education completion for our populations, need for support and pride in culture and connection to their community (foster children)
- On reserve governments must start working toward recognizing the rights of urban Aboriginal people.
- The federal government must start taking the lead to reconnect and create ways to build the bridge so all generations can meet and understand each other by funding projects and programs regularly.

3. What would be the most important resource that you would need for Nation Re-Building? How would you make sure that you have them available to you? Would these be different for women/men/Elders/youth?

- Need to help parents raise their children and families as a result of residential school, to help them parent properly and aid them with life skills. Foster children do not know the results of residential schools and why they were taken out of their home.
- It is important to build self-esteem at a young age.
- Need to nurture our children and teach them about culture.
- Need for Elders to teach youth the stories, language and culture.
- Have a central resource centre in every major city—available to all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada to educate people.

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 you track your progress?

- Culture, pride, language and connection to community are essential.
- The government always questions why culture is important.
- Need for more funding to celebrate our culture and events. Centres are already struggling with limited funds being received. Children and families that attend cultural events might take pride in their life. West Coast Night is family gathering where networking can happen and people can come together in an urban celebration.

- Cultural Centres would like to do more but funds are limited.
- Canadian culture for Aboriginal youth- lack of funding and recognition of the importance of our culture in all areas of parenting.
- Need for Aboriginal cultural teachers who can rebuild our Nations.
- Aboriginal history taught, First Nations studies mandatory in schools- similar to Roots of Empathy, support should be from kindergarten up
- Post secondary education- the need for programs and representative for an Aboriginal support worker at every school daily.
- Need for Aboriginal person available to kids in school every day as a guidance counselor.
- Schools asking what supports can be given to children daily to see them succeed in school and later in life.

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?

- Clan aunties and mothers-women who look at people in communities and identify potential chieftainship. (Just like we can nurture and mentor youth today)
- Chiefs could be appointed and later demoted if they were not doing the right job
- Long house- practices, feasts, culture—distinct in their way.
- Traditional teachings
- In the past if there was stealing, the person would have to go back to the person and chief and explain what you did wrong. If you do it a second time you have to apologize in front of the chief and more people. There was a sense of responsibility imposed.
- When we parent, if we disrespect in front of a group, then we need to apologize in front of a group too to show that we can be humble.
- Many people lost knowledge in Indian residential schools; and from the impacts of child welfare/foster care system. We need to do what we can to prevent this from continuing to happen to future generations.

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 are being used by a Nation that may be useful to others?

- Need for more proposal writing, networking, and partnerships to come together to claim what healthy mothers and families look like.
- There is a need to support children with fetal alcohol syndrome and we need more funding and research to teach them about healthy relationships and life skills.
- Residential school survivors- many of them are alive today and did do a lot of good in their life despite their dysfunctional upbringing.
- National monument to survivors and those who died while away at Indian Residential Schools.
- As grandmothers, women work to keep family together for birthdays, celebrations. Communications and connection with families keep family together (or children in foster homes reunited when she can).
- Relying on teaching and cultures to get through struggles. Aboriginal support workers in schools, connection to the land, this can help us all unite as one giant Nation together.
- Grandmother making baskets, picking berries, uses for cedar, death ceremonies, support for families after someone passed away. Everyone came together for four days, cooking, talking, grieving and laughing.
- Need for completion of education; education is essential to understanding and learning in life, even if it is a General Equivalency Diploma.
- Important to foster children in need to recoup children lost from our community.
- Joining a youth First Nations dance group or any program/ group because it is encouraging and supportive and helps us to achieve our goals and feel successful.
- Teachings passed down from one mother to another (mother to daughter) help as a resource. Quilting and crafts are essential to having a sense of belonging, purpose, and productivity.

7. What role do you deem appropriate for other governments (federal and provincial) and with the private industry in advancing your goals?

- Governments should pay for people to get their Indian status.
- Provincial and Territorial governments should pay for Aboriginal educational support workers, proper Aboriginal education, secondary school supports and self esteem programs and funding for programs for boys to learn respectful and healthy relationships.
- Government funding should be allocated to bring together adult birth siblings, and to reunite families. Our part is to be in recovery today working to be whole and healthy together, as much as possible, restoring a sense of family and connection, having a birth family and having re-created a sense of love and connection with their aunts to foster children.
- The Government can fund sports, programs in community and friendship centres for youth.
- There is a need for continued funding to healing centres and First Nation studies in the centres along with cultural counseling once a week even with cultural appropriate counselors with knowledge of residential schools and impacts on our people.
- Need for an on-purpose gathering coming together from all nations off and on reserve with booths for each Nation and booths for those looking for family and welcome them back to their communities. Such as the Turtle Island Peoples celebrating culture—dance with blanket inside out, crying for loss, then turn the blanket around and dance in joy accepting ourselves, and forgiveness and love.
- Funding to support culture, education, alcohol and drug counseling, traditions and language classes.

Thank you for your input; it will be included into a final report and posted on our website at www.nwac.ca