

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

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

Community Awareness and Engagement

Victoria, British Columbia  
Victoria Native Friendship Centre  
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 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*

Victoria Native Friendship Centre

Victoria, British Columbia

The Amphitheatre

September 12, 2011 - 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

### Agenda

1. Opening Prayer by Elder Cook
2. Introductions – Lunch 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 opened with a prayer from the resident Elder Mickey Cook from the Native Friendship Centre. There were 15 participants present; all were women with one male Elder.

The facilitator from the Native Women's Association of Canada introduced herself, as did her assistant and the circle opened with participants also introducing themselves.

The women spoke openly about their lives and the multitude of struggles they faced enduring issues of violence, poverty, Indian status, and/or lack thereof, pertaining to the benefits derived from belonging to their Band. They shared stories regarding the discrimination they faced from within their communities, and from urban centres where they ended up due to either lack of housing, and/or moving to be with spouses who were off-reserve or unwelcome to reside on reserve.

The women spoke about their struggle to get status for their children, and welcomed the information regarding Bill C-3 *Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act* and were eager to learn to more about their rights. Some women about spoke about ongoing arguments with their Band (Chief and Council) regarding the condition of their housing. Some participants spoke about the fact that they live in mould infested homes and that their Band doesn't receive enough funding to fix them, and if they do, they aren't using it towards home repairs.

Also, they discussed their struggles and inability to access education on an equitable basis. Some indicated that within their Bands, some people with the same status as them would have access to more education benefits and that it was completely a discriminatory process. These issues were all raised within the context of the particular struggles that First Nations women face in participating in decision-making, citizenship, and nation-building processes.

The women also spoke about the lack of access to daycare and their lack of knowledge regarding their rights within their community so that they can return to school or work in order to improve their lives, and the lives of their families.

Some women spoke about the need to continuously be involved in community affairs so as to hold the Chiefs and Councils accountable. Other women spoke about the challenges and pain they experience or have experienced as a result of their children being apprehended by Child Protection Services simply for the fact that the women lived in poverty. The group spoke about how child apprehension from our communities is a huge impediment to re-building our Nations. They indicated that some children are apprehended directly from the hospital, when they are born. Women shared how their children faced abuse from foster parents and how they are rallying to take their children back and get our children back to our communities more generally.

The women shared how their experiences from Indian Residential Schools, loss of status and loss of status for their children, really caused them to be disconnected with their language, culture

and traditions. They also spoke about their ongoing struggles with their participation in litigation and the claims process regarding Indian Residential Schools as being further abuse and victimization by the system.

NWAC provided an overview of the history of the Indian Registration, case law, including the *McIvor Case*, and the Bill C- 3 *Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act*. The women shared how Sharon McIvor was approached by the Department and the Indian Registrar to give her, her children and grandchildren Indian status, but that she refused and decided to fight this problem with Indian Registration discrimination for all women.

The women also discussed the issue of unrecognized paternity policies by the Department and how big the problem is regarding couples who are not married, and where the man/father does not want to accept their offspring for a multitude of reasons and then the women and children bear the brunt of the improper registration and lack of benefits. They said that fathers often refuse to sign because they are afraid it will implicate them into paying child support.

Discussion took place regarding the *Canadian Human Rights Act* now applying on reserves and that this is not really implemented in communities. They also expressed their worry that it could be seen as the dilution of our Aboriginal rights by having Government interference on reserves, which could lead to more problems for our people.

Women spoke about the need to have a minimum standard of rights as laid out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and that it needs to start with Government recognizing our rights and providing us with access to the resources and economic benefits on our lands.

Finally, the discussion moved on to the topic of how best to communicate among women with little funds or access to mobility. The women suggested that the NWAC use the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network to share information, as well as social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube to improve communication amongst us. They suggested sending out electronic Newsletters, placing free adds in community papers, using radio and local television, and web lists such as the Turtle Island news, Wind Speaker, Aboriginal programs, and web sites to educate our people on their rights.

## **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?
  - We need to use Social media to tell our stories: YouTube, Facebook, APTN (free TV announcements)
  - Education and learning must be supported.
  - Transportation money is very necessary to ensure women can participate.
  - We need to access the First Nation Statistical Institute for information.
  - There is a need for First Nations leadership sessions.
  - Web newsletters can be used by students write about their Nation: Turtle Island news, Haudenosaunee, yahoo, newsletters, Naipic Web List, Press Release, and Wind Speaker.
  - We need to promote and support the awareness of traditional knowledge.
  - We need to do interviews with our Elders to keep all this information.
  - Elders have come full circle around life's circle, therefore, they have wisdom, knowledge, strength and resilience to share with the rest of us.
  - Elders are to be acknowledged and respected.
  - We need to have Circles with Elders that are for:
    - a) Females
    - b) Males
    - c) Youth male
    - d) Youth female
    - e) Family circles
  - Reconciliation needs to happen at all levels—constant work in progress—we have multiple impacts of the life experiences of the Indian Residential Schools—survivors and grandparents, parents affected by the 1960s scoop of our children by the Ministry of Social Services (MSS), and continued today by what is known as the Ministry of Child and Family Services in BC.
  - We have to continue to re-unite and develop reconciliation among families and provide counseling.
  - We need to challenge the apprehension of our children and insist on family support services by Governments, as they caused the breakdown in the families to begin with.
  - We need to re-build and re-learn our language and cultural activities via seasonal ceremonies. Everyone should be involved, including students at school. The best way to reach everyone is to go to them.
  - We need to preserve language and traditional medicines for our children.

- There needs to be more willingness to participate and welcome others in activities, programming and services on reserves so that we create inclusive Nations and not exclusive ones.
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?
- Nation-Rebuilding necessities:
    - Museums, passing on life teachings to our children.
    - Medicines, rituals, and practices reclaimed and carried out more often.
    - Traditional roles returned to with respect to governance structures, the use of clan mothers, which are now often a bone of contention today.
    - Child care and Elder care needs to be provided as women are the caregivers and can't participate in events without support for childcare and Elder care.
    - Governance supports are needed for our leaders.
    - First Nations need to benefit from Economic Development and resources so that we can have the same structures, capacity, and resources that federal/provincial/territorial and municipal governments do.
    - More use of Traditional Medicine and teachings all have to be included in Nation Building and Re-building.
    - Honesty and responsibility - first for self, family, community and Nation, all need to be fulfilled.
    - We need to have supports to deal with communication challenges.
    - Many impacts and traumas have not been dealt with yet. For example, many forms of abuse and neglect from childhood, psychological bonding did not occur in the first years of life when children were removed from families. These impacts lead to the lack of self-confidence, lack of identity, learning to say “no”, and having trouble in finding their voice.
    - The Band offices and friendship centres need to have monthly newsletters to improve accountability and communication to the people.
    - We need to establish life skills training such as how to negotiate, debate, conflict management, and mediation. Then we need to learn how to apply these skills).
    - Funding is necessary to help organizations such as NWAC so that we can make sure our voices be heard and that we can come together in great numbers.

- Education and help policies/programs need to be changed. People need information on how the process works.
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?
- We need governance schools, just like the Parliamentarians have.
  - Some bands have misappropriation of funds or are forced to allocate for one area such as housing to serve all their members, even if they aren't status (such as the children) and the Government of Canada does not fund them. This needs to be rectified so our leaders can do their job properly.
  - There is a need for mediation among First Nations communities or for an Ombudsperson where Chiefs and Councils are not accountable to the people.
  - There is a need for transportation, child-minding, assistance for Elders to support the full participation of women in all sessions, events, decision-making roles, etc.
  - Women need to receive funding/honorariums for their time because we volunteer for everything, whereas the men charge fees for their services and time.
  - We need to have each Band create their own statistical information, and accounting so that it can be shared with the people.
  - All approaches to Nation-Building need to include grassroots members, on and off reserve, and people of all ages.
  - There is a need for family healing—mind, body, spirit, emotions on life circle teachings. This can be done with little to no cost to our people.
  - There is a need to supply funding to re-establish cultural practice among our people.
  - Newsletters, and meetings as forms of communication need to be ongoing and often.
  - Need to put time and resources into it in order to re-build a Nation.
  - We need more funding for post-secondary education (especially law)!
  - Recruitment of First Nations leaders, at a young age, on and off reserve, has to happen to support our future generation of leaders.
  - Money needs to go to our Elders to support their involvement in the healing and for the betterment of the communities.
  - Band members need to work together, and the community needs to be addressed as different groups in order to establish well-being among all First Nations. For instance men, women, Elders, and youth all have different issues.

- The education of First Nations regarding our cultures must come from the Band Offices or the Friendship Centres so that people have a stronger sense of identity.
  - We need to discuss our shared values and teachings more often.
  - We need more medical centres to treat our physical and mental problems.
  - We need more extra-curricular activities for children, such as sports.
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?
- Museums with First Nation oral histories and artifacts need to preserve everything.
  - Native Friendship Centres are the urban facilities that provided some urban natives with a connection to their heritage.
  - Preservation of our own artifacts needs to happen within our own communities.
  - Native specific programs, sports and recreation games need to be supported to help create pride in our youth, teaching language, teaching them about leaving a legacy, and that it is an honour to take care of siblings and to hold responsibilities.
  - Not all First Nation governments include community members. This has to change.
  - The teachings of life can guide and direct us to embrace responsibility to live a good life.
  - At the all levels, the leaders must make the commitment to embrace this change into all segments of their procedures and duties (traditional teachings).
  - We must create measures, and monitor them to meet our goals.
  - Progress must be tracked through the development of infrastructures resulting in the healing of our people—good relationships, language, and culture.
  - Our languages need to be taught on and off reserves.
  - We need to continue to support First Nations Olympics.
  - Museums with First Nations oral histories and the environment all need to be protected.
  - Accountability needs to happen from all Governments – Federal, Provincial and First Nations.
  - We need to move forward by educating our Band members.

- We need to create healthy families (emotionally, physically, and spiritually); and model what these look like and how to make them happen.
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?
- Prevention of violence and respectful relationships need to be created-power of example by men to the boys.
  - Role of clan mothers, Six Nations longhouse teachings, advise to Chiefs to work together and elected Chiefs need to be reminded of traditional ways of life.
  - Traditional teachings off reserve will result in more democracy and more options available to First Nations.
  - Now, we have a new generation of kids, and some of them do not have to opportunity to fish and hunt or attend traditional ceremonies. Other youth are as interested in Aboriginal rights and traditional ways and practices and we need to support and for these interests.
  - Women's roles played an important part in families—now they are not respected within all First Nations governments because money is involved.
  - With renewal of teachings, within each circle that we have, male and females will have the knowledge to respect themselves and each other.
  - Resources and support systems will be required to strengthen teachings among our people.
  - The Elders would be more readily available to provide advice, if we could pay them for their wisdom and time. Most live in poverty now.
  - We need good role models in our communities. Elders/men/women, which practice our traditional customs (hunting, fishing, respect for the land, ceremonies) can help teach others our traditional ways of being.
  - We must always try to show respect for each other.
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 or model that is being used by a Nation that may be useful to others?
- Treaty processes are one way that is used to govern with multiple Bands coming together for common interests to benefit all peoples.
  - Constant need for community support, circles, support for one another, events to bring people together in a positive way.
  - Traditional knowledge/ceremonies must always be used.
  - Leadership training needs to be provided for our people.

- Balance in life's circle—eating well, respect for the land, exercise
- Many nations across Canada have varied levels to role model for our nation building; we need to look at them as best practices and copy what is working.
- Native art (craft and culture) can be used in re-building and strengthening our people and our Nations.
- Family rehabilitation (drug and alcohol) needs to be available for our people.
- Environmental websites or shows need to share information on what is happening to Mother Earth such as American Native TV.
- Community activities—developing our own best practices/models instead of something done for us by another group. “Anishinaabe helping Anishinaabe”.

*What has helped you succeed?*

- Children are our biggest teachers
- Healing circles, and hanging out with Elders, talking circles
- Reconnecting with children and grandchildren
- Educate people
- Non-Aboriginal supporters, allies
- Friends who are loving and supportive to First Nation issues
- Continuing to educate, learn, and share information with one another
- Pride in life and who we are as First Nations
- Single parent resource centre is essential as a support
- Sexual assault health centres—talking about solutions and moving on
- Band offices have been helpful
- In obtaining an education, we need to develop a plan, secure funding, make use of our education and what we learned
- Native friendship centres, websites, Métis settlement information, environmental information, American Native channel, 3 programs learning about affects of colonization and impacts on generations, parenting supports, recovery from alcohol and drug addiction, mother daughter ceremonies and programs
- Dealing with co-dependency, self-advocacy, networking, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Arts programs, medicine wheel teachings, our cultures and languages can all help us to find balance and to heal and to thrive in our lives and to take pride in our identity.

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

- They should be our allies and advocate for us to make up for all the years of racism and oppression from generations of abuse. This would make up, or at least start the healing for generations of First Nations.
- Other Canadians and governments need to improve our entire lives and Turtle Island, to explore and come back to share what we have learned.
- There is a need for equality programs in governments.
- They need to respect and understand our way of life.
- Listen, support and provide necessary assistance as we advance in our healing journey.
- We can speak from our hearts and they need to listen with theirs.
- Funding from all levels to assist, develop, and train our young people as mentors to become more successful.
- Resources towards economic development, with First Nations getting their share.
- We need an official languages status to get protection to preserve First Nations language.
- Support in any way (education, volunteer help) would all be useful.
- Need for more Nation Re-building sessions on a regular basis, funded by the Government of Canada and with our own Governments.
- 630 communities need to group together as whole Nations.
- Native and non-native groups must try to understand and get along with each other.

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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)