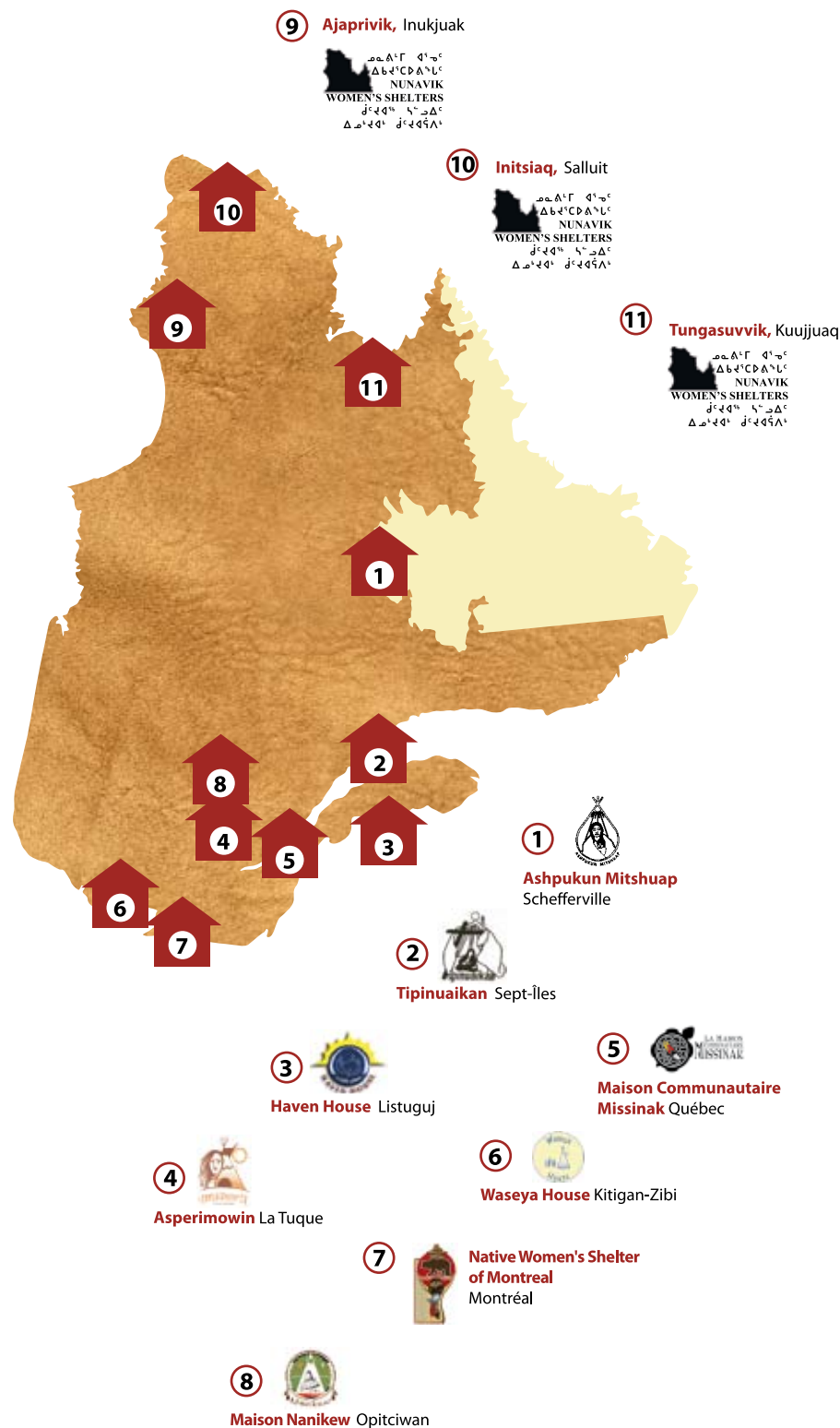




# **THE ABORIGINAL APPROACH TO FAMILY VIOLENCE**

as used by  
**the Native Women's  
Shelters Network**

**Information Booklet**



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## **An Exceptional Collaboration to Present the Approach of the Aboriginal Shelters**

Every nation, community being different (differences also with urban areas, Inuit communities), it is important to mention that this approach is not pan-Aboriginal. This document rather focuses on the specificity of the Aboriginal approach to family violence as developed by the Native Women's Shelters Network.

This information booklet was initiated under the partnership project ISHKUTEU conducted in association with the Native Women's Shelters Network, Quebec Native Women (QNW), the Fédération de ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec (FRHFVDQ), Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM and Dialog. The Project ISHKUTEU objective was to facilitate access to services that respond to the specific needs of Aboriginal women facing the hardships of family violence, both inside and outside the communities.

This booklet therefore summarizes the process undertaken by the shelter workers of the Network with the ISHKUTEU Project team and the analysis that came out of the discussions on the basis and specificity of an Aboriginal approach to family violence.

QNW and the Network are proud to present this information booklet to help disseminate among our non-Aboriginal partners the important analysis work performed by the Network shelter workers and the team ISHKUTEU.

We hope through this booklet to sensitize all resources and services, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, who support Aboriginal families struggling with family violence.



## **The Native Women's Shelters Network**

Founded in 1974, Quebec Native Women Inc. (QNW) defends the interests of Aboriginal women from Quebec and Aboriginal women living in urban areas. QNW's mission is to advocate for the rights of Aboriginal women and their families, both collectively and individually. QNW's goal is also to support Aboriginal women in their efforts to better their living conditions through the promotion of non-violence, justice, health and equality. QNW empower women in their commitment to their communities.

In 2003, Aboriginal shelter workers in Quebec were grouped into a new structure coordinated by Quebec Native Women: the Native Women's Shelters Network. This was the culmination of several years of efforts to strengthen the capacities and power of action of these shelters. The Network currently includes eleven shelters established on Aboriginal communities' land as well as in urban areas, outside the community. Among these eleven shelters, three are Inuit.



## Why do we speak of an Aboriginal approach?

When we speak of an “approach”, we are generally referring to the way in which a problem is analysed and the intervention methods developed to deal with that problem. Several approaches in the field of Social intervention are recognized in North America. These include the holistic approach, the ecological approach, the awareness approach, the feminist approach etc., which are all important sources of theoretical explanation of social problems. In Quebec, these approaches are used by several advocacy and feminist groups. In day to day practice, social workers often forge their own approach from several different approaches which they synthesize.

The influence of these different approaches is certainly present in what we call here « the Aboriginal approach to family violence ». The approach builds on the history of Aboriginal peoples in Quebec, their history of colonization, and reflects the current context marked by constant struggles to regain control over their development and their future. Although some of its analysis and its practice can resemble those of other approaches, the Aboriginal approach differs primarily by this specific context.

The Aboriginal approach is also inspired by the foundations, the values and other elements specific to Aboriginal cultures. It is currently practiced by the shelters of the Network, who have established its objectives. In this regard, the Network shelter workers share a common vision in their analysis and their intervention in family violence that covers both the family and the community for an overall process of healing, which includes women, men and children. Indeed, shelter workers claim that the well-being of Aboriginal women is inseparable from that of their children, their couple, their families and their communities



## Domestic violence vs Family Violence

Therefore, Aboriginal shelter workers define the problem of domestic abuse in a way that is different from that of non-Aboriginal workers. They find it essential to **include the word “family”** in the designation of the problem in order to contextualize it by seeing how it is linked to the other forms of violence experienced within Aboriginal families.

The expression “family violence” directly reflects the history of colonization of Aboriginal who have constantly struggled with governmental policies that sought explicitly to break families apart.



## Analysis of the Foundations of the Problem of Family Violence

The Aboriginal workers, both Inuit and First Nations, were unanimous in affirming that family violence in Aboriginal communities find their source in the history of colonization as experienced by the Aboriginal communities with all of its consequences, as much for the communities as for each of its members.

Colonization is unfortunately not a thing of the past. It is a powerful structuring dynamic still in force in Quebec and Canadian societies against Native peoples. It can be seen in the impossibility of Native peoples to achieve real control over their social, political and economic development.

Colonization, residential schools, the transmission of trauma between generations, economic and structural violence, interiorization of the values of the oppressor, loss of social roles the phenomenon of family violence among Native peoples emanates from a specific history and a complex current context that, put altogether, becomes the starting point for the Aboriginal approach to family violence.

*The paragraphs in italics present some of the answers of the First Nations and Inuit shelter workers in response to questions asked by the Ishkuteu Project team on the approach they had developed in their shelters.*

*(TRANSLATION) Historically, there have been centuries of oppression. It is colonization; it has repercussions that put us into situations of poverty and dependence. It is a form of violence an economic and structural violence.*

*(TRANSLATION) The history of the violence of the residential schools is still there. The repercussions are there in the communities because the children, now parents, are there.*

*(TRANSLATION) In a sharing circle, I listened to a woman who was crying because she had not passed her language on to her children. It was interiorized. We had to learn a system that was not adapted to us. Religion is founded on guilt. To be a good Aboriginal, you have to believe in religion, otherwise you are excluded.*

*(TRANSLATION) When the men were the hunters, they were proud of themselves. These days, there are supermarkets. We blame our men, but they have been victimized as well.*



## Analysis of the Foundations: Five Broad Themes

### 1. Colonization, the Indian Act, Sedentarization and the Reduction of Territories

Colonization refers to a process whereby a given territory and the people who live there are placed under the domination of another foreign society. The Aboriginal peoples of Quebec and of Canada once occupied vast territories, each of them distinguished by a sophisticated social organization that responded to their needs and was based on a rich and millennia-old history. The arrival of the Europeans with the imposition of their laws and their seizure of control be it economic, political or religious, turned the situation of Aboriginal peoples upside down in every aspect.

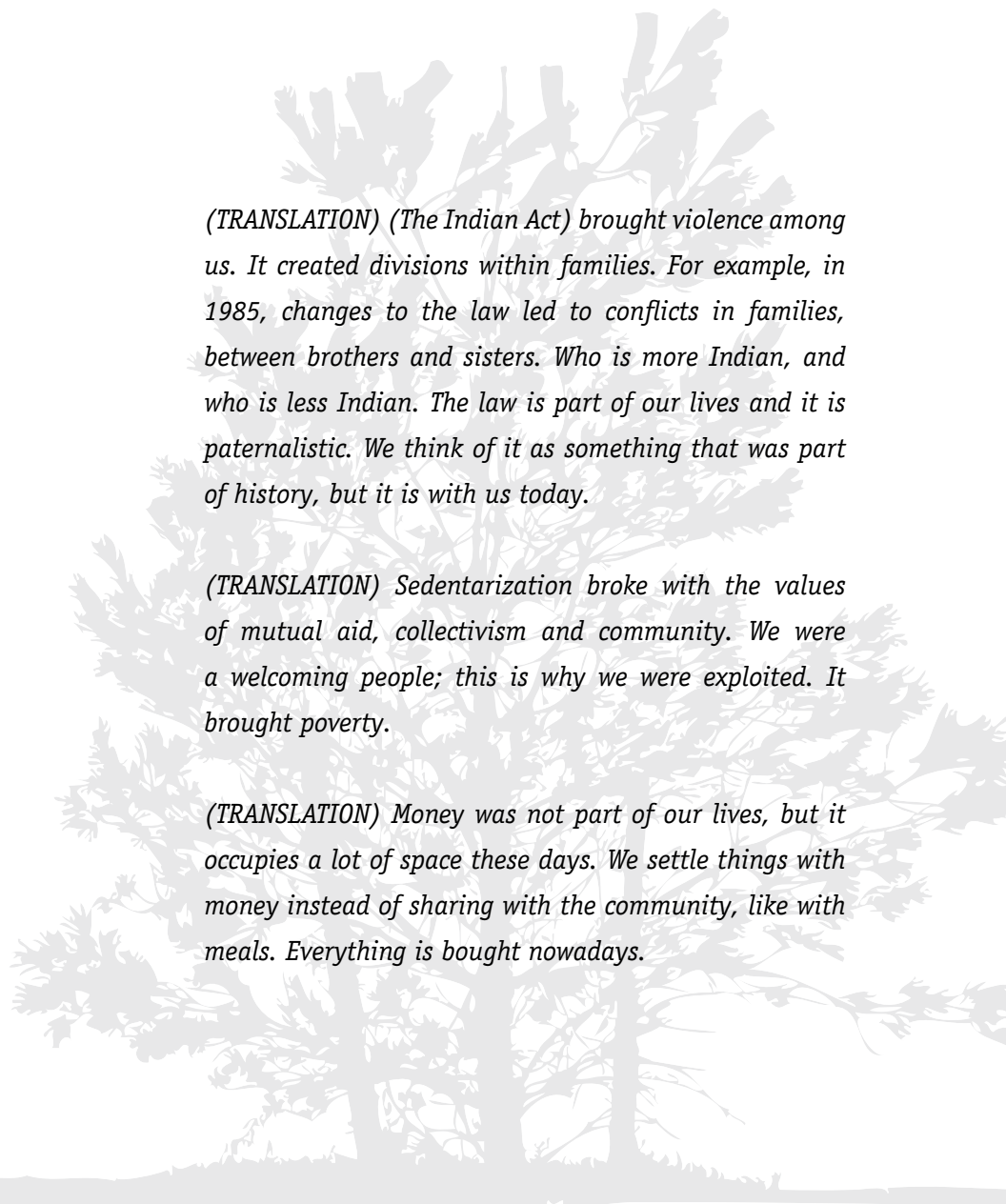
In legal terms, the Indian Act is the main tool of domination and wardship of Aboriginal peoples. The explicit purpose of this law, when it was first adopted, was the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples in order to make them disappear into Canadian society.

The Indian Act does not apply to the Inuit as they are expressly excluded from this law. Thus, the history of colonization occurred differently for them and much more recently than for Indigenous communities further south due to the remoteness and isolation of the territories of Nunavik. The effects of colonization, however, were as devastating.

*(TRANSLATION) (The Indian Act) brought violence among us. It created divisions within families. For example, in 1985, changes to the law led to conflicts in families, between brothers and sisters. Who is more Indian, and who is less Indian. The law is part of our lives and it is paternalistic. We think of it as something that was part of history, but it is with us today.*

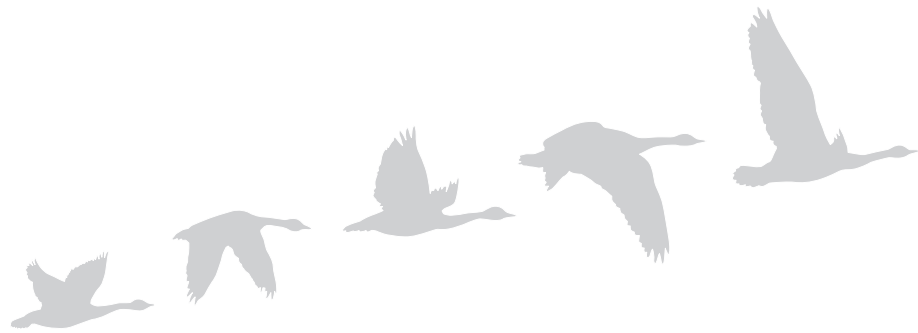
*(TRANSLATION) Sedentarization broke with the values of mutual aid, collectivism and community. We were a welcoming people; this is why we were exploited. It brought poverty.*

*(TRANSLATION) Money was not part of our lives, but it occupies a lot of space these days. We settle things with money instead of sharing with the community, like with meals. Everything is bought nowadays.*





For example, the relocation of hunting camps to force the Inuit into permanent settlements, combined with the slaughter of sled dogs imposing new mode of transportation such as snowmobiles, have drastically changed the traditional lifestyle of the Inuit based on the autonomy of small nomadic groups, now forced to live in larger sedentary communities. These rapid changes (in less than one century) causing the loss of culture, traditions, land, way of life, self-worth (especially for men who were traditionally hunters and providers) and control over their future have generated their share of social problems such as violence, addictions (alcohol, drugs), powerlessness, suicide, among Inuit families and communities.



## 2. The Residential Schools and the Role of Religion

The role of the residential schools and the influence of Western religion as tools of assimilation for Native peoples, as well as their devastating effects on family connection, have been covered extensively in the media. According to the workers, the wound is far from being healed. The workers are regularly confronted in their work with the consequences of the lack of parenting skills inherited by the children of the residential schools victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. It is a point on which they must constantly work.



*(TRANSLATION) For us, before colonization, what we did was right. We did not question ourselves. We were in equilibrium with nature and good and evil coexisted. But religion brought in anxiety and fear. Everything was bad.*

*(TRANSLATION) The priests said many catastrophic things to their faithful: we marry for better or for worse, while the women were being sequestered (by violent husbands).*



Even if shelter workers are well aware of the role religion has had in the situation of inferiority that women often feel in their communities and the perpetuation of violence within families, they recognize that religion still has its place in Aboriginal communities if only to help people feel stronger when facing trials. Shelter workers thus stress the importance of always respecting the beliefs of each woman.



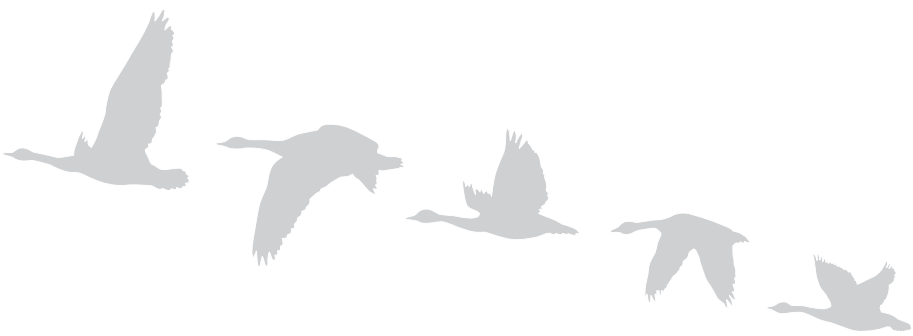
### 3. The Connection Between Social Problems, Normalized Violence and Silence

The shelter workers insisted on highlighting the connection that exist between all of the social problems experienced in Aboriginal communities including that of family violence. The common roots of all these problems are situated **in a deep sense of dispossession, powerlessness, loss of culture and control over the future** brought about by the upheavals that have taken place in their value system and in their ancestral traditions. The problems of family violence added to those of addiction and suicide, among others, produce a cycle of violence that is particularly difficult to break.

*In terms of the problem of trivializing violence, there is so much to do that people are overwhelmed. Many people try to numb (themselves) through alcohol, drugs and other things. When you don't know how to eradicate the source of the pain, violence can become normalized. Native people then become their own worst enemies, there is so much hurt and pain and loss. The pain that men endure makes them revictimize. These are learned behaviours. So the lateral violence keeps rolling on. And it is difficult for us to get out of the cycle of violence.*







#### **4. Structural Violence, Racism and the Impact of the *Youth Protection Act***

Structural violence refers as much to economic violence and the poverty of the Aboriginal families and communities, as it does to racism, to discrimination, and to the impact of the *Youth Protection Act*. All of these phenomena create contexts where the fight against violence becomes very difficult because the individuals find themselves without means to change the structures that create social problems and that exacerbate the violence.

The poverty of the families and of the communities constitutes in itself a form of economic violence. In addition, many Aboriginal communities are encountering a serious shortage of housing problem. Lastly, the *Youth Protection Act* is responsible for a multitude of new problems for Aboriginal peoples and is completely unadapted to the reality lived by Aboriginal families and communities. Indeed, the time given to parents by the *Youth Protection Act* to get back on their feet was greatly reduced and the professional resources available within communities are not sufficient to help parents who are experiencing serious difficulties with their children.



*It starts with the children and it starts by talking and teaching about things which for so long were repressed in communities where it was “don’t talk, don’t feel, don’t trust”. It involves role-modeling of a healthy couple and showing children that couples can have differences without being violent.*





## 5. The Family, the Community and the Healing Process

If it is true that the disintegration of the Aboriginal families was the express goal of the governments' policies of colonization, the Aboriginal shelter workers are convinced that it is only by giving **aid directed explicitly towards the families** that true healing can be achieved. To reach this goal, it is therefore necessary to extend the objective of healing as much to the families as to the community as a whole.

Grappling with enormous historical and structural problems, the road ahead risks being long, but the shelter workers concur in affirming that it is in **taking responsibility and spreading awareness** that they must begin. It means as well breaking the law of silence and beginning to talk openly about the problems. Finally, the shelter workers believe **it to be essential that the men should also benefit from resources**. They are of the opinion that it is important for the men to undergo a healing process due to the serious traumas that they have suffered. The shelters seek in this way to support changes in behaviour and to **re-establish a balance** in the role each person plays in the family.



## The Values Advocated by the Aboriginal Shelters

All the First Nations and Inuit shelters have in common a broad range of values that, in addition to inspiring their intervention practices, serve as their compass in their fight against family violence.

The values identified by the shelter workers can be grouped under two main themes. First there are the values that are related to culture and to political and social struggles. Here workers acknowledge the pre-eminent importance accorded to the family and the community, traditional Aboriginal values, Native pride, solidarity and faith in social change.

In this regard, shelter workers are working to help women rebuild their pride and dignity as individuals but also those of their communities through a revalorization of traditional knowledge and practices (craft workshops offered in several houses; involvement of elders in activities and decision making, traditional healing practice etc).



The second theme addresses the values that guide their daily practices of intervention with the women and children at the shelter. Mentioned first was respect and a profound conviction in the power of resilience. Next are added “authentic caring”, humour and accessibility. Such a climate of intervention allows women at the shelter to share their painful and sometimes humiliating experiences that would otherwise be extremely difficult to uncover.

The support offered by Native shelter workers goes well beyond the strictly professional support which requires detachment. Native shelter workers have confessed that they often worry about the women who seek help and they must demonstrate a real empathy to bring them some comfort. They need to create an atmosphere imbued with calm understanding for the shelter residents, since for the shelter workers it is an historical and systemic problem that transcends the situations experienced by individual women.

*(TRANSLATION) When a woman arrives at the shelter, in terms of identity, she is lost. Slowly, some women rediscover the elements of their identity. They are no longer lost. They regain a certain pride.*

*(TRANSLATION) We have been dispossessed and there is shame. We work to give back and to reinforce a cultural pride. For example, we use sharing circles and the talking stick. That is “empowerment”.*

*(TRANSLATION) Change comes through our engagement. We work with the person, for sure, but we work to change things as well. We must inform the women. If we believe in change, when we are talking of politics, it is because in some way we want to change things. If we are speaking of Bill 125 (the law modifying the Youth Protection Act), the people need to know that it is a law and we have a right to question it. It is a manner of being and of working.*



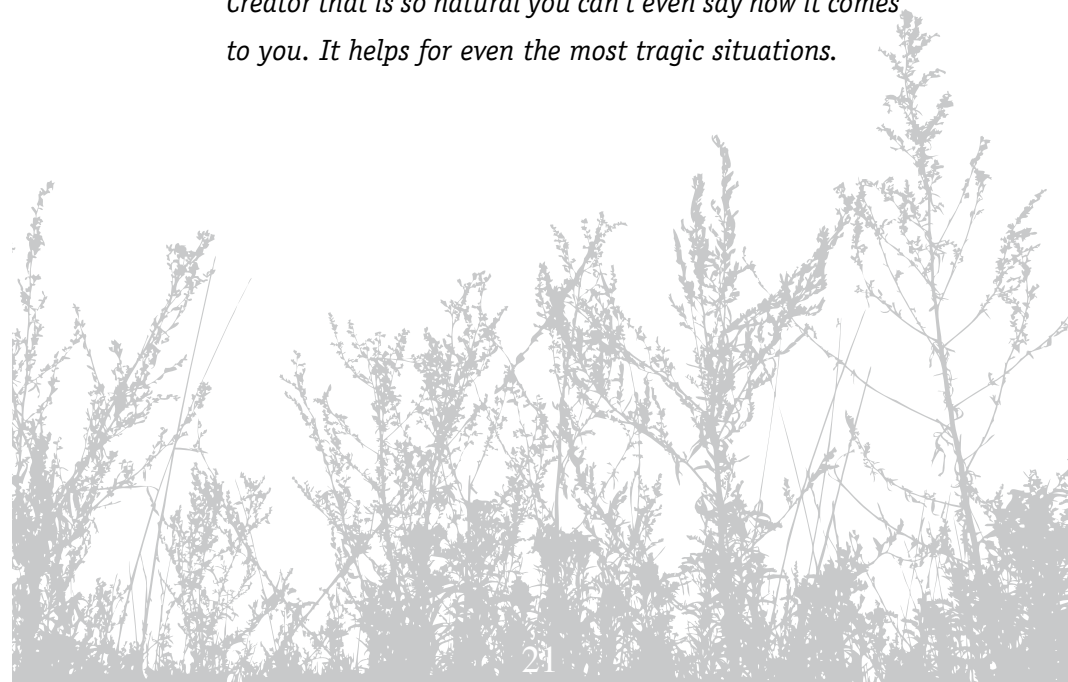
## Humour or Resilience through Laughter

Humour has always been present during the reunions and discussions between the workers of the Network. Many Aboriginal cultures cultivate humour in spite of difficult social conditions. The workers believe as well that it is in this type of humour, the natural medicine of Aboriginal peoples, that strength resides. Humour is very present in the Native women's shelters. They have witnessed the fact that laughter allows us to distance ourselves from a difficult situation through which we may have lived and, through this, to free us in some part from the hold that situation has.

*(TRANSLATION) Humour is very important for me. In my encounters with the women, when we talk about the things which have been very hard for them, where there is a lot of emotion, I always try to end the encounter with the woman on a humorous note. So that things are a little less heavy, for me as well.*

*(TRANSLATION) When a woman passes through difficult moments, laughter is a life preserver that permits the woman to breathe and then to continue on.*

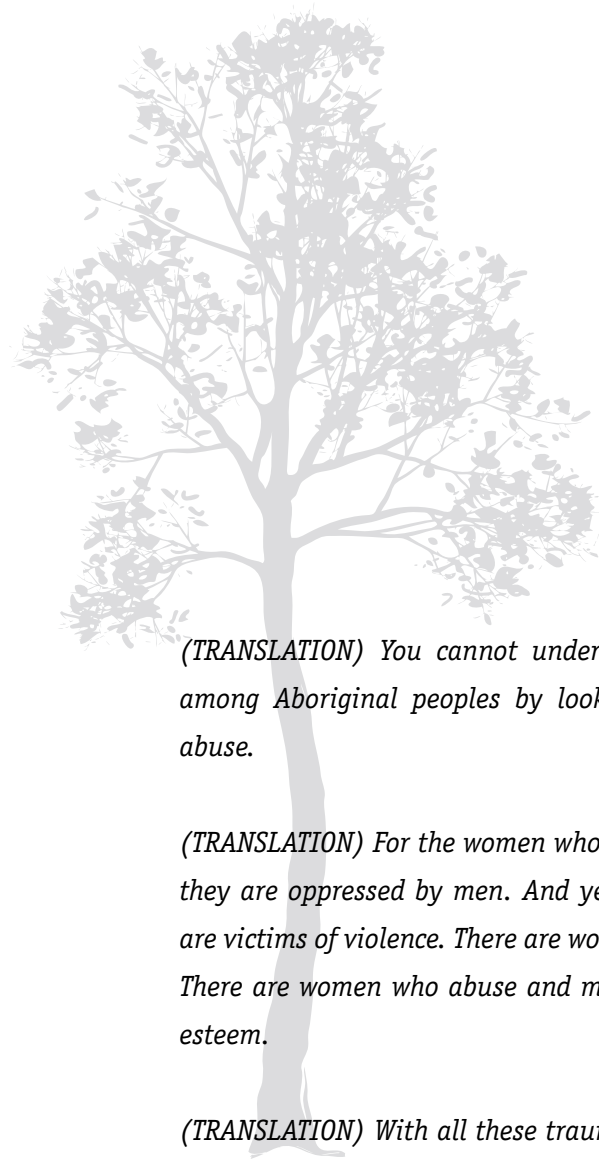
*We say laughter is a gift. It's medicine we take from the Creator that is so natural you can't even say how it comes to you. It helps for even the most tragic situations.*





## The Aboriginal Workers' Analysis of the Relationship between Patriarchy and Domestic Violence

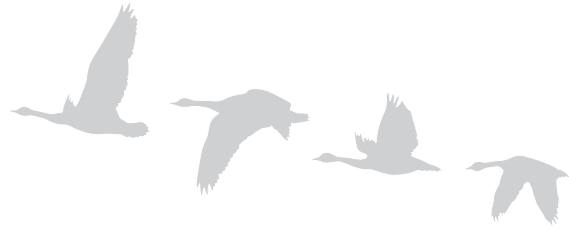
The Native shelter workers, particularly those from First Nations, were unanimous in their analysis; they are convinced that Aboriginal societies were not patriarchal before the arrival of Europeans. Patriarchal power and the structures on which it stands were introduced through colonization, through religion as well as through the judicial system, the Indian Act and the capitalist system. If the violence experienced by women in Aboriginal communities can be understood as the expression of pain brought about by the loss of fundamental references and social roles, to which can be added profound feelings of shame and powerlessness, it is also an instrument of domination of men over women. From this comes the importance for the Native shelter workers of linking their analysis of domestic violence on an enlarged approach which includes all forms of violence.



*(TRANSLATION) You cannot understand spousal abuse among Aboriginal peoples by looking only at spousal abuse.*

*(TRANSLATION) For the women who come to the shelters, they are oppressed by men. And yet there are men who are victims of violence. There are women who are abusive. There are women who abuse and men who have low self esteem.*

*(TRANSLATION) With all these traumas, it is particularly important for men to start the healing process.*



## The Role of Spirituality

In the understanding of many Quebec Native cultures, life manifests itself in four fundamental aspects: the mental aspect, the spiritual aspect, the emotional aspect and the physical aspect. Each of these aspects corresponds to one of the four cardinal directions and, as well, to one of the four colours of the earth, whether it is white, red, yellow and black. Spirituality thus constitutes an inseparable component of Native cultures.

The basis of spirituality among Native peoples resides in the notion that we are all intrinsically linked to the sacred, to something which is greater than us though we are nevertheless a part of it, something whose existence is not material. It is remarkable to note to what extent Native spiritual traditions are still profoundly integrated into daily life and that they still confer a sense to life in all its forms. According to some shelter workers, human existence cannot be understood by Native peoples without this relationship with the sacred.

Many Native cultures have kept alive their beliefs and their spiritual practices, developing and adapting them. Moreover, many Native cultures have achieved an organic fusion between Western religions and their own traditional spirituality.

*(TRANSLATION) Our spirituality teaches us respect. Today we can have both, the eagle feather and the cross. To dig in one's heels could be too violent. It limits dialogue. If we are working on a path of non-violence, we must respect the women's religion.*

*(TRANSLATION) We offer spiritual activities that are important to us. We don't say to the woman that she has no choice, but she can learn from them. When we say that we work with the whole person, the holistic approach, that is part of our approach. We always do it with respect for the woman. We always have our cross and our sage. It is part of our ancestral traditions. It is part of our reappropriation of our history as well, of our knowledge.*



## The Missions of the Shelters

What stands out is a very broad vision of the objective of well-being as it is directed towards the whole community as well as to all Native peoples. The missions that the shelters have given themselves are ambitious. They seek no more, no less **than real changes in society** as well as the well-being of all the members of their communities.

The missions of many shelters try to promote Native cultures as an integral part of the women's development and of the communities' healing.



## Intervention Practices

The intervention practices as they have been described by the Native shelter workers are inspired as much by their analysis of family violence as by their values and their missions. At first sight, these practices resemble those of other women's shelters. There is a broad accessibility and great simplicity in the approach that is characteristic of most community resources. However, the simple fact that these services intended for Aboriginal women are provided by women who are themselves Aboriginal necessarily colours these practices in a different way.

The shelters do not necessarily offer all the types of intervention listed here. Rather this is an overview of the broad range of practices in use in the shelters who are members of the Network. Four broad themes have been identified:

• **Language and the culture of intervention:** to intervene in the Native language of the woman who seeks help is paramount in all shelters. Offering services in Native language not only indicates that the language used in counselling is different, but it also means that the culture of intervention, too, is different. Language being intrinsically linked to culture, women seeking help see themselves in the culture of the shelter.



• **The family and community approach :** several shelters are working hand in hand with other organizations that provide assistance to families or they themselves offer activities for all family members and the community. One shelter worker summed up the approach this way: «We need men to be part of the solution”.

• **Shelter procedures:** where Native intervention practices differ from those of non native shelters is in the accessibility of Native shelters and their greater flexibility in hose rules. For example, the location of the seven shelters on Native communities land are generally well and therefore easily accessible. Regarding Native shelters in urban areas, management of security issues is more rigid. Their location are mostly confidential.



• **Intervention:** practices in common with other resources and practices that are specifically Aboriginal. In this regard, a great deal of respect is giving to the emotional health and spirituality of each woman by offering support services and external referencing resources in order to help women in the steps they should undertake. The empowerment of women, particularly through the promotion of their cultural pride, is also an important aspect of intervention as is the positive reinforcement of their capacities.

Similarly, the six guiding principles of Inuit Qaujimajangit (Inuit knowledge) form the basis of Inuit counselling and healing practices. These includes:

1. **Piliriqatigiinnngniq-** working together for the common good;
2. **Avatikmik Kamattiarniq-** environmental wellness;
3. **Pijittsirarniq-** services to others and leadership;
4. **Pilimmaksarniq-** empowerment;
5. **Qanuqtuurunarniq-** resourcefulness and adaptability;
6. **Aajiiqatigiinnngniq-** cooperation and consensus.

*Everything we have is translated into Inuktitut. We're different. The way we live, the food we eat. White people are more strict, more uptight than the Inuit. We are told our country food is more healthy for us and that we should eat more of it.*

*We help each other a lot more than non-Natives. It's our traditional way of helping. Non-Natives say we spoil the women, but that's just our way. Also, we have much fewer rules in our shelter. In non-Native shelters, the children often have to go to bed at a certain time. We're not like that. They can stay with their mum and go to bed when they want. Also the women can cook for themselves. There is less structure around meals. So the women will bring their own moose meat, deer meat, fish, and cook it for themselves.*