

BRIEF

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**Brief on Equality:
Aboriginal Women's Perspectives**



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Brief on Equality: Aboriginal Women's Perspectives

Introduction

The following brief presents Quebec Native Women's comments on some of the "Recommended Government Policy Focuses and Areas of Intervention" as outlined in the summary document entitled "For a New Social Contract of Equality Between Women and Men" produced by the "Conseil du statut de la femme".

This brief, presented by Quebec Native Women, is not meant to be a comprehensive examination or analysis of each Policy Focus and Area of Intervention. It is, however, meant to provide a general perspective from the viewpoint of Aboriginal women on the Policy Focuses and Areas of Intervention that are of primary importance to them.

In submitting this brief, Quebec Native Women is expressing its support for structures and policies aimed at the equality of women in Quebec. Specifically, Quebec Native Women would like to see the "Conseil du statut de la femme" and the "Secrétariat à la condition féminine" remain as two separate entities so that each may retain their unique and respective roles and better serve the needs of all women in Quebec, including Aboriginal women.

Conseil du statut de la femme

The "Conseil du statut de la femme" is a governmental organization that provides consultations and carries out research that promotes and defends the status and rights of women in Quebec. Specifically, the "Conseil du statut de la femme" conducts research that highlights the inequalities experienced by women and the effects it has on their lives. The "Conseil du statut de la femme" also provides advice and recommendations with regard to policies, laws and programs affecting women in Quebec.

As outlined in the “Plan stratégique quadriennal 2001-2005”, the “Conseil du statut de la femme” aimed to focus on four main strategic orientations during that period:

- 1) To examine the impacts of demographic changes on the living conditions of women
- 2) To promote an improvement in the economic situation of women
- 3) To participate in improving health and well-being of women
- 4) To promote a place for women in leadership positions and in social participation

In addition, the “Conseil du statut de la femme” assigned priority to young women (ages 30 years and younger) in carrying out their research mandate.

Secrétariat à la condition féminine

The mission of the “Secrétariat à la condition féminine” is essentially oriented toward policies and actions developed by the government. Specifically, the “Secrétariat à la condition féminine” aims to support the development of and coordinate government actions that favour equality between women and men.

Quebec Native Women

Quebec Native Women is a non-profit organization that is representative of all Aboriginal women in Quebec and acts as an advocate on their behalf. Since 1974, Quebec Native Women has strived to achieve economic, social, legal, and political equality between Aboriginal men and women.

Given the specific missions and goals of the “Conseil du statut de la femme” and the “Secrétariat à la condition féminine”, Quebec Native Women would like to see the “Conseil” and the “Secrétariat” remain as two separate entities so that each may better serve the needs of women in Quebec, including aboriginal women. The following sections present the Policy Focuses and Areas of Intervention, presented by the “Conseil du statut de la femme” that are of primary concern to Aboriginal women, namely the 4th, 5th and 6th Policy Focuses.

4th Policy Focus

Improve health and welfare by adapting services to the differences between women and men

A recent review of health initiatives undertaken or supported by the Centres of Excellence for Women's Health identified five principal theme areas related specifically to Aboriginal women's health: 1) health status; 2) violence and sexual abuse; 3) substance abuse and maternal health; 4) health-seeking behaviour; and 5) access to services.¹

In reviewing the issues of key concern to Aboriginal women, it was found that additional work was needed in a number of areas. In particular, it was noted that in conducting Aboriginal women's health research, "steps must be taken to ensure that research methodologies are clearly articulated and respectful of Aboriginal women's multiple burdens; that attention be focussed on groups of Aboriginal women whose needs and concerns have been under-represented in previous research; and that research initiatives be reflective of Aboriginal women's linguistic and cultural diversity".²

Area 1: Commit to a gender-based approach (GBA) to planning, organizing, and assessing health and social services with a view to adapting them to the differences between men and women

According to the "Conseil du statut de la femme", there are studies that show that socialization causes women to "develop more health-conscious behavior, while men are more inclined to adopt high risk behavior" (p. 18).

The effects of high-risk behavior can be seen if we look at HIV/AIDS as an example. According to the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC), there is evidence that suggests that "Aboriginal persons are infected at a younger age than non-Aboriginal persons, that injecting drug use is the most important mode of

¹ Centres of Excellence for Women's Health, Aboriginal Women's Health Research Synthesis Project, May 2001, p.3. [Prepared for the Centres of Excellence for Women's Health Research Synthesis Group by Madeleine Dion Stout, Gregory D. Kipling, and Roberta Stout.]

² Centres of Excellence for Women's Health, Aboriginal Women's Health Research Synthesis Project, May 2001, pp. 3-4.

transmission, and that the HIV epidemic among the Aboriginal community shows no sign of abating. Furthermore, the mobility of Aboriginal persons between inner cities and rural areas may bring the risk of HIV to even the most remote Aboriginal community” (www.cssspnql.com).

While it may be true that, in general, women develop more health-seeking or health-conscious behavior relative to men, the following statistics obtained from the FNQLHSSC (www.cssspnql.com) reveal a number of health disparities suffered by Aboriginal women:

- The proportion of females and the proportion less than 30 years old among reported Aboriginal AIDS cases are higher than among non-Aboriginal AIDS cases.
- Females represent nearly half (45.3%) of all positive HIV test reports among Aboriginal persons, however females represent 19.9% of reports for non-Aboriginal persons.
- Among all pediatric centers across Canada where children and HIV infected mothers were followed between 1995-1997, 19% (n=259) were Aboriginal women.

Clearly, there is a need for more research in the area of Aboriginal women’s health; yet, there is also a “lack of sufficient funding to pursue Aboriginal women’s health research” (Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health, 2001, p. 4). Given that there is insufficient funding, Quebec Native Women can benefit from working in collaboration with the “Conseil du statut de la femme” to make Aboriginal women’s health research a priority. In addition, if the “Conseil du statut de la femme” is indeed committed to supporting research to find ways of improving health and welfare by adapting services, then it would also be necessary to work with Quebec Native Women to ensure that research related to Aboriginal women’s health issues be conducted in an appropriate way. As summarized in the Aboriginal Women’s Health Research Synthesis Project, to address gaps and weakness in Aboriginal women’s health research, it is recommended that researchers

Work with Aboriginal women’s health researchers and appropriate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations to determine when, how and why academic and community methodologies should override, intersect or co-exist with one another; identify and track positive health indicators; facilitate networking by Aboriginal women’s health researchers; exploit new information technologies to disseminate and share research findings; undertake analyses which compare and contrast local,

regional and international trends, issues and solutions; and articulate both gender- and Aboriginal-based analyses.³

By working in conjunction with the “Conseil du statut de la femme”, Quebec Native Women could ensure that research into Aboriginal women’s health would be done in using culturally-appropriate and relevant methodologies (for example, incorporating Aboriginal women’s health stories, experiences and knowledge). Such an approach would help in exploring and understanding health issues that are salient and most meaningful to Aboriginal women.

Area 2: Adopt special measures for groups facing double discrimination

The “Conseil du statut de la femme” suggests that the health and social services network “should take into consideration the difficulties that people experience when they are discriminated against, whether due to sexual orientation, ethnic origin, cultural background, age, or limitations” (p. 19). With regard to Aboriginal women, researchers have suggested that access to appropriate services is not always easy. For example, it has been noted that there are a number of “difficulties Aboriginal women face in gaining access to the mainstream health and social services system” (Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health, 2001, p.26). In fact, in discussing Aboriginal women’s interactions with health and human service professionals, “there was widespread agreement that Aboriginal women are often subjected to racism, prejudice or insensitivity when attempting to access health services” (p.26) leaving Aboriginal women “feeling isolated and marginalized, and prompts many to avoid the mainstream health system altogether” (p.26).

Quebec Native Women should also highlight that the focus on health and welfare also needs to incorporate a more holistic approach. Research suggests that a holistic approach – or integrated model – in providing health services may be more appropriate for Aboriginal women:

The integrated model is an effective approach to working with Native women. An understanding of Native traditions, such as prayer, storytelling, and ceremonies, along with an understanding of the importance of body, mind, and spirit, are integral components of treatment. We cannot separate ourselves into

³ Centres of Excellence for Women’s Health. Aboriginal Women’s Health Research Synthesis Project, May 2001, p.5.

parts; we are part of a whole and, from a health perspective, need to be treated as a whole person”.⁴

In fact, the holistic approach may also serve as a good example for addressing health issues that affect the community as a whole. For instance, the high prevalence of diabetes (especially Type 2 diabetes) is a fairly recent phenomenon in Aboriginal communities but continues to be a significant – and growing – health problem in general among all Aboriginal people. In fact, once age has been taken into account, diabetes rates among Aboriginal people are 3 to 5 times the Canadian average, with diabetes rates highest on-reserve, as compared to urban areas. It is important to understand the unique historical and socio-cultural factors that have also contributed to the growing epidemic of diabetes in Aboriginal communities. Therefore, for Aboriginal peoples, in general, it is important to study diabetes in a global fashion and understand that it is a health issue that affects not only individuals, but whole families and communities as well. However, it has also been noted that diabetes rates are higher in women than in men. As such, we must examine the issue of diabetes not only from a global perspective but also from a gender-based standpoint.

5th Policy Focus

Eliminate all gender-based violence or violation of dignity or integrity

Area 1: Develop and consolidate services to eliminate conjugal violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse

High rates of family violence affect Aboriginal women throughout North America. In Aboriginal communities, family violence takes many forms: physical abuse; psychological violence; sexual abuse; child sexual abuse; incest; financial abuse; and spiritual abuse.⁵

Aboriginal women (and their children) seeking refuge from abuse need access to safe, supportive alternatives, such as shelters. Working together, Quebec Native Women and the “Conseil du

⁴ Napoli, Maria. Holistic Health Care for Native Women: An Integrated Model. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2002; 92:1573-1575.

⁵ Public Health Agency of Canada. Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: An Aboriginal Perspective. Available online at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/html/fvabor_e.html. [Last Updated: 2004-10-08.]

statut de la femme” can help Aboriginal women in accessing appropriate support and services throughout Quebec.

In addition, the “Conseil du statut de la femme” can also help by supporting culturally-sensitive research on violence in Aboriginal communities, so as to better understand the various types of abuse experienced by Aboriginal women. Finally, in terms of prevention, the “Conseil du statut de la femme” and Quebec Native Women can increase awareness about family violence. Increasing awareness may help in breaking the cycle of violence and reducing its tolerance in Aboriginal communities, both on and off-reserve.

Area 2: Fight sexual exploitation

The “Conseil du statut de la femme” has noted that the “findings of research on the sex industry ... show that more and more young people – generally women – are selling sexual services to make a living.”⁶ Researchers have also noted that, in particular, young Aboriginal women and girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation due to a number of factors

... more than gender differences, the most critical factor underlying the ways in which differences are communicated and differences get played out within this whole arena of sexual exploitation is power and hierarchy. Certain groups are more exploitable than others, and that has to do with the hierarchy within this country. It is not surprising then that when one begins to look at this hierarchy and crosses it with a gender access, one begins to see the groups that are the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. I'm talking here about the First Nations, I'm talking here about Aboriginal girls because not only are Aboriginal people, within this nation state that we call Canada, at the very bottom, but being at the very bottom, they are constructed as those that are not only rejected and dispossessed, but the disposable ones. That's why it's not surprising to see the number of deaths as a result of sexual exploitation, as a result of the violence of the sex trade, among Aboriginal girls. It is not surprising that street involved girls, who are mostly Aboriginal, have a mortality rate that is 40 times the national average.⁷

⁶ Conseil de statut de la femme. For a New Social Contract of Equality Between Women and Men, 2004, p. 20.

⁷ Yasmin Jiwani, Ph.D., “Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth: National and International Perspectives”. Presented at IT'S A CRIME! An Act Local - Think Global Conference on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth. April 30 - May 1, 1999. Vancouver, BC. [Available online at http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/articles/traff.htm#N_5_]

It is clear that to protect Aboriginal women and girls, Quebec Native Women and the “Conseil du statut de la femme” need to work together to persuade the government to put mechanisms in place to fight sexual exploitation in all its forms.

6th Policy Focus

Support full gender equality in the exercise of power and social participation at the Québec-wide, regional, and local levels.

Area 1: Achieving equal participation of men and women in the political sphere.

Among Aboriginal communities, it is quite common for the voices of Aboriginal women to be ignored by the male-dominated Aboriginal leadership and political organizations. In fact, it has been noted that “many Aboriginal women do not necessarily feel comfortable meeting in ‘conventional’ fora such as public meetings or Band council offices for a variety of reasons, and are seeking their own ways to meet and discuss common problems and concerns.”⁸

For their part, Quebec Native Women has brought together Aboriginal women from all over Quebec to discuss issues of importance to them. In recent years, Quebec Native Women has had to fight to be heard by Aboriginal leadership groups such as the Assembly of First Nations. This situation is very different from traditional Aboriginal societies of the past, where women were respected for their equally valued contributions. In seeking to restore that balance, Aboriginal women now encouraging their families and communities to return to the basic values of respect and equality.

If equality, as stated by the “Conseil du statut de la femme”, “requires that women be able to take equal part in collective decision making and raise all issues they consider of prime importance to the development of society,”⁹ then it is important for Quebec Native Women to continue to have the opportunity to work with entities such as the “Conseil du statut de la femme” to strive for equal participation and increased balance of men and women in the political sphere and, in particular, within Aboriginal communities, both on and off-reserve.

⁸ Aboriginal Women’s Roundtable on Gender Equality, Roundtable Report, March 2000, p. 4

⁹ Conseil du statut de la femme. For a New Social Contract of Equality Between Women and Men, 2004, p. 22.

Area 4: The importance of social participation must be recognized and conditions conducive to participation must be developed.

According to the “Conseil du statut de la femme”, “social participation refers to the responsibility of staying informed, defending one’s point of view, taking part in public debates, and contributing to the best of one’s ability to the continual improvement of one’s environment and quality of life.”¹⁰ As an organization that acts as an advocate for Aboriginal women, Quebec Native Women has exemplified the definition of social participation. For example, Quebec Native Women continues to advocate on behalf of Aboriginal women by challenging the many examples of discrimination against them, which include:

... the discriminatory provisions of the Indian Act such as the restrictions on Indian status entitlement; the discriminatory policy of the Indian Registrar which requires identification of a child’s father; the difficulty in transferring to another band such as the birth band because of the requirements of consent of the other band; the denial of band membership by some band councils even though the right to membership is protected under the Indian Act; by-laws preventing non-members from residing on the reserve which affect non-aboriginal spouses and, as a consequence, the children of such marriages; land allotments being subject to the Band Council’s will; the silence of the Indian Act with respect to division of property upon divorce when historically, lands and houses are registered in the male spouse’s name; difficulties in obtaining orders for the temporary use of the matrimonial house in situations of family violence, or to have the order enforced on reserve; and the application of the Charter to Aboriginal Governments so as to attain balance between Aboriginal community interests and individuals rights.¹¹

Since the “Conseil du statut de la femme” supports gender equality by promoting a place for women in social participation, Quebec Native Women should continue to work collaboratively with the “Conseil du statut de la femme” to share information and raise awareness about women’s issues, in the economic, political, legal and social spheres, and to promote social participation of women within Aboriginal communities and organizations.

¹⁰ Conseil du statut de la femme. For a New Social Contract of Equality Between Women and Men, 2004, p. 23.

¹¹ Native Women’s Association of Canada. Quebec Native Women and Bill C-7. p.5

Summary and Conclusion

As described throughout this brief, Aboriginal women in Quebec face a number of unique issues related to gender and racial inequality. For this reason, it is important that the “Conseil du statut de la femme” and the “Secrétariat à la condition féminine” remain as two separate entities so that each may better serve the needs aboriginal women.

For women in Quebec, the “Conseil du statut de la femme” serves as an important organization in that it supports research on issues that affect women’s lives. This type of research is also significant for Aboriginal women, since they are also affected by many of the same issues faced by other women in Quebec. Combining the efforts of the “Conseil du statut de la femme” and Quebec Native Women would help facilitate research into additional areas of interest that can help provide insight into the lives and unique experiences of Aboriginal women.

The “Conseil du statut de la femme” also serves to provide information and awareness to the public about the situation of women in Quebec. Again, by working in partnership with the “Conseil du statut de la femme”, Quebec Native Women can continue to increase public awareness about Aboriginal women’s issues. This is important since, for the most part, these issues are not given the priority they deserve and are often ignored by the Aboriginal leadership and male-dominated political organizations.

The type of information and public awareness generated by the “Conseil du statut de la femme” not only aids in providing a more complete picture of the situation of women in Quebec as whole, but it also inspires and encourages Aboriginal women, as well as other women’s groups, to develop long-term, action-oriented solutions to the unique challenges that they encounter.

Above all, it is important to avoid cutting funds to organizations that specifically promote equality for women. For Quebec Native Women, allocating sufficient funding specifically to address Aboriginal women’s issues is of utmost importance. In doing so, the Quebec Native Women can continue to advocate for themselves and progress towards the advancement of positive community-based activities. According to one report, Aboriginal women

... want core funding to continue community-based activities like research, capacity building and advocacy. They do not like the fact that women's organizations have been forced to compete with each other for limited and ad hoc funding for far too long. This is over and above their ongoing competition with men.¹²

In seeking to restore balance in their lives and in their respective communities, Aboriginal women are placing more emphasis on being "action-oriented". In other words, Aboriginal women are recognizing that "...concrete steps need to be taken immediately to address Aboriginal women's marginalization."¹³ By supporting research and public awareness, the "Conseil du statut de la femme" serves a key role in developing action-oriented solutions to the challenges faced by Aboriginal women. In addition, Quebec Native Women, as advocates for Aboriginal women, should also continue to work in collaboration with the "Conseil du statut de la femme" to help develop culturally-appropriate and relevant research and information so as to establish a more comprehensive picture of the state of Aboriginal women in Quebec.

¹² Aboriginal Women's Roundtable on Gender Equality, Roundtable Report, March 2000, p.8

¹³ Aboriginal Women's Roundtable on Gender Equality, Roundtable Report, March 2000, p. 9