



FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU QUÉBEC INC.
QUEBEC NATIVE WOMEN INC.

Quebec Native Women's issues

in the context of

the 2022 provincial elections

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Quebec Native Women Inc.

Business Complex, River Road, C.P. 1989, Kahnawake, Quebec J0L 1B0

T.: 450-632-0088 F.: 450-632-9280 C.: info@faq-qnw.org Website: www.faq-qnw.org

Quebec Native Women Presentation

Quebec Native Women (hereafter QNW) is a non-profit organization founded in 1974 that uses both of Canada's official languages, French and English. Since July 2009, QNW has been in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). QNW is a representative organization of Indigenous women from all ten (10) First Nations of Quebec: the Abenaki, Anishnabe, Atikamekw, Innu, Eeyou Istchee, Hurons-Wendat, Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk, Mig'maq, Mohawk and Naskapi. We represent community women as well as urban Indigenous women. Since 2015, QNW was recognized by the Department of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada as an Aboriginal Representative Organization (ARO).

For more than 47 years, QNW has been contributing to the restoration of balance between women and men, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, by giving a strong voice to the needs and priorities of women. QNW's mission is to represent and defend the interests of all Indigenous women throughout Quebec in order to improve their living conditions through the struggle for equality, justice, non-violence, education, health and economic and social security. In this context, we play a role in education, awareness and research, and we provide a structure for women to be active in their community.

QNW's mission is to advocate for the human rights of Indigenous women and their families, both collectively and individually, and to advocate for the needs and priorities of its members to various levels of government, civil society and decision-makers in all areas of activity that have an impact on the rights of Indigenous people. Our organization also works to encourage and enable Indigenous women and girls to grow, to shine as leaders and to become inspiring role models for others.

Setting the context

An election period will mark the end of summer and fall 2022 in Quebec. Indigenous issues, particularly those of Indigenous women and girls, are increasingly calling attention in the public arena and among Quebecers. While building bridges and encounters with First Nations and Inuit are encouraged, an increasing number of people are becoming aware that colonization and its policies have had catastrophic impacts on Indigenous people. However, it goes without saying that these issues should have been of concern to our society and public leaders for many years.

Our organization is taking advantage of this momentum to inform leaders of the different political parties in Quebec of Quebec Native Women's priorities. First of all, it is important to mention that QNW is an apolitical organization; therefore, we will not take sides in this election period. We only intend to be heard as an organization representing Indigenous women and girls from all the First Nations individuals in Quebec, including those who live in urban areas.

Quebec Native Women's priorities for the well-being of Indigenous women and girls

First of all, the issues presented here are in evolution: they adapt with time and the constant evolution of the issues involved. It is impossible to cast them in a fixed framework that would not yield to changes in the various factors and events surrounding issues.

Also, issues put forward here are all interrelated in one way or another. Even if they are presented in detail individually, intrinsic links between them mean that they must be taken as a whole. More often than not, they become each other's cause or consequence. Addressing one issue only without taking concrete action on the others will only result in a small change that is not holistic. For significant change to happen, concerted action on all issues is therefore required. Finally, QNW would like to stress the fact that the following issues are not listed in any order of importance. Since action is needed on all, they are all equally important.

1. Acknowledging systemic racism and discrimination

In light of recent events that have particularly affected relations between Indigenous people and the Quebec state, the issue of recognizing systemic racism and discrimination has been the subject of much discussion. The events experienced and denounced by Indigenous women in Val-d'Or and the tragic death of Joyce Echaquan are just two examples that demonstrate the systematic nature of racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women and girls. It is important to remember that many people experience systemic racism and discrimination but do not speak out.

Systemic racism and discrimination are at the root of all issues that Indigenous people face. It is imperative that this be recognized by the Quebec government in order to begin the long march to reconciliation. QNW believes that unless systemic racism and discrimination are acknowledged, it will be hard to work and go forward towards a common goal of reconciliation and to take action in order to right the wrongs of the past.

This is a long-term issue that must absolutely be addressed by public decision-makers. Our organization also believes that the systemic racism and discrimination disproportionately experienced by Indigenous women and girls widens the institutional gap between Indigenous people and the public system. Acknowledging this evidence would be a step in the right direction. There is also a need for the full and immediate implementation of *Joyce's Principle*.

2. Implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (hereafter UNDRIP) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly after many years of negotiations and hard work by Indigenous Peoples. Canada adopted *Bill C-15, An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, on June 16, 2021. Canada's obligations are therefore binding and it must respect the principles recognized under UNDRIP, which are clear on Indigenous peoples' rights.

The Quebec National Assembly unanimously adopted a motion on October 8, 2019, supporting the principles of the UNDRIP. However, this simple motion does not bring binding obligations to Quebec's public decision makers. QNW therefore believes that it is essential that Quebec follow suit and comply with all of the principles set out in UNDRIP, as requested by Indigenous peoples and the various commissions of inquiry in Quebec.

Quebec must not only engage in serious negotiations to implement UNDRIP, but must make it an election promise that will eventually be fulfilled. UNDRIP absolutely has to be part of Quebec's legislative framework.

3. Encourage leadership and empowerment of Indigenous women and girls

To date, in Quebec, only 11 women are chiefs in their respective communities. Out of a total of 55 First Nations and Inuit communities, only 20% are led by women. Therefore, QNW supports all initiatives to promote the potential of Indigenous women and girls, who must be able to develop their leadership capacity in all areas, especially in decision-making positions, in politics and in all

areas where they wish to break through. Their traditional knowledge must be recognized and they have to be able to use it to inspire others and make them shine. Therefore, government must support all such initiatives and projects.

Indigenous youths represent the future of healthy communities. The government must also take concrete action to help young Indigenous women be proud of their identity.

4. *Consultation with indigenous bodies and organizations to ensure that their opinions are truly representative*

It is imperative that QNW, as well as all Indigenous organizations, be consulted when dealing with issues, realities and topics that directly affect them. Far too many major decisions have been made without even the participation of Indigenous people, let alone Indigenous women. The time for Indigenous peoples to be left out of decision-making is over.

Moreover, since our organization represents Indigenous women and girls from the ten (10) First Nations in Quebec, who live in urban areas as well as Indigenous communities, we carry opinions and voices that must absolutely be heard. More specifically, Indigenous women and girls are under-represented in decision-making processes and this is why we want to make sure that they are heard. Public decision-makers have to be aware of realities on the ground to ensure that Indigenous people are involved in decision-making.

In this way, consulting with Indigenous women and girls will foster a bottom-up approach. The ensuing sense of real participation may help to restore the trust that has been broken since colonisation. Projects and decisions will be made in co-construction and co-collaboration with Indigenous people. This has to be done "for and by" Indigenous people, especially women and girls.

5. *Cultural safety in all environments*

As the events surrounding the tragic death of Joyce Echaquan clearly illustrate, the need

for cultural safety is very real in all services, both public and private, in communities as well as urban environments. There is no need to go into the history of Indigenous people's distrust of services provided by non-Indigenous people to demonstrate the need for Indigenous-specific service delivery. We do not only mean services prescribed by non-Indigenous people, this is also about a colonial system that does not provide a secure environment or even a sense of safety for Indigenous women and girls. Moreover, the provision of services is clearly not sufficient in urban areas, making it even more complex to obtain culturally safe services that Indigenous clients can truly trust.

The need for cultural safety does not apply only to the health and social services system, but to all public sectors that provide direct services to the population as well, including the justice system, education, policing and correctional services, etc. Culturally safe services must be achieved through a process of co-collaboration with Indigenous organisations and partners. The ultimate goal is to improve Indigenous people's holistic health conditions and to enrich protocols and service delivery to actually integrate Indigenous traditional knowledge and practices.

Services must also be easily accessible. They have to be more visible so that Indigenous women are not constantly redirected and subsequently lose a hard-won confidence in the healthcare services system. For Indigenous women, feeling safe in their environment and comfortable going to different public systems will not happen overnight. Several additional actions need to be taken to reach this goal. For example, more Indigenous people need to join public and private sector establishments in various job categories for Indigenous women to feel they are taken care of by people they can trust.

In addition to having more Indigenous people in all job categories, it is important that all workers be trained regarding multiple Indigenous issues. Training must not only be made available in the health and social services system, but in all public and private services. All workers, without exception, must receive training to be able to adapt their services and be equipped to act accordingly. Training must be done with and for Indigenous people.

Testimonies of indigenous people are numerous and very clear. QNW therefore calls on the next

elected government to place a strong emphasis on the need for cultural safety in the various public and private services.

6. *A commitment to better socio-economic conditions for Indigenous women and girls*

Indigenous women have a very important traditional role in their communities. Colonisation and its assimilative and paternalistic policies have minimised the role of women, resulting in significantly less participation and representation. The fact that, initially, they were largely responsible for the welfare of their families combined with these colonisation policies resulted in catastrophic socio-economic conditions.

As studies and reports from various commissions of inquiry have shown, the overall socio-economic conditions of Indigenous people demonstrate a systemic problem, based on racism and discrimination¹. Among other things, the 2020 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty shows that the rates of poverty, homelessness and food insecurity are blatant². Difficulty in accessing housing and education for Indigenous women and girls are also factors that significantly affect the well-being of Indigenous people. In addition, the aberrant number of Indigenous women and girls who are incarcerated in penitentiaries and provincial jails is also an example of poor socio-economic conditions³.

All of these intimately interconnected factors significantly diminish the quality of life of Indigenous women and girls. Indeed, an improvement in the overall socio-economic conditions will result in long-term, multi-faceted outcomes, leading to better health and holistic well-being. We therefore call for action to be taken.

¹ National Advisory Council on Poverty, 2020, "Building Understanding", Employment and Social Development Canada - Government of Canada https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/programs/poverty-reduction/national-advisory-council/reports/2020-annual/Building_understanding_FINAL_Jan_15.pdf, accessed on September 6, 2022.

² *Ibid.*

³ For more information, refer to the recent study in which QNW collaborated which illustrates that the number of Indigenous women and girls in provincial prisons in Quebec is grossly disproportionate to its population rate. Here is the link: <http://collective-healing.net/>

7. *Disproportionate violence in all its forms*

One of the key mandates that QNW has always carried is fighting violence against Indigenous women and girls. Indigenous women disproportionately experience violence in all its forms, including in domestic, family, cultural, linguistic, political and systemic context, etc. The *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (hereafter MMIWG) clearly demonstrated that Indigenous women and girls are disproportionately victims of violence compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts⁴. This violence is unfortunately trivialised in communities and sometimes even ignored.

The issue of the trafficking of women is not discussed enough and this scourge must be brought to the forefront in fighting violence against Indigenous women and girls. QNW wants to put more emphasis on this issue and make it central to our platform.

8. *A child welfare system by and for Indigenous people*

Taking into consideration that Indigenous women often face problems with the discriminatory legal system, they are more likely to lose custody of their children and these children end up in the Quebec youth protection system. Children in the care of this system are most often placed in non-Indigenous families, losing all ties to their family and culture.

The over-representation of Indigenous youth in the current State youth protection system demonstrates that it is clearly not adapted to their realities and needs. Currently, the Quebec youth protection system recreates the colonial and traumatic experiences of residential schools.

⁴ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, “Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Supplementary Report – Quebec”, [EXEC cover \(mmiwg-ffada.ca\)](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/), accessed on September 13, 2022.

As QNW proposed in its brief to the *Special Commission on Children's Rights and Youth Welfare* (hereafter Laurent Commission) there must be a transfer of jurisdiction in youth matters to Indigenous people. They must be able to decide for themselves on the fate of their own children: they are in the best position to identify the needs and associated solutions according to their culture. Our organization therefore calls on the next government to implement the recommendations of Chapter 9 of the *Laurent Commission* to allow Indigenous people to determine their own youth protection.

9. Key actions in the field of justice

Many actions need to be taken to promote equitable access to justice for Indigenous people, especially Indigenous women and girls. They are discriminated against because of their dual identity, being both women and Indigenous. It is therefore necessary that safe legal services be created by and for Indigenous people and made easily accessible, especially for Indigenous women and girls.

Furthermore, QNW is of the opinion that there must be a constant follow-up to the recommendations and calls to action of the various commissions of inquiry, including *MMIWG*, the *Viens Commission*, the *Laurent Commission*, the *report of Quebec's Committee of Experts on Support for Victims of Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence*, etc. Our organization demands that the government be transparent and accountable and that it implement concrete actions that meet the real needs of Indigenous women and girls.

10. The preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures

Finally, our organisation wishes to emphasize the importance of conversation and the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures. As the core of their identity, Indigenous languages must be valued and also accepted by the different levels of government.

Since Indigenous women have a responsibility to transmit the culture and traditions of their nations, QNW believes that Indigenous people should not be discriminated against on the basis of

language use. *Bill 96* declares French to be the only official language of Quebec, which undermines the use and enhancement of Indigenous languages, and by extension, Indigenous cultures. It violates not only the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, but the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* as well.

The next government must work in co-collaboration to enhance the use of Indigenous languages and partner with Indigenous communities and organisations to stop violating the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women and girls.

Nia:wen, Migwetc, Tshinashkumitin, Wela'lin, Wli Wni, Tiawenhk, Merci, Thank you!