



The 5th National Indigenous Women's Summit
Empowering Indigenous Women Now and Into the Future

Women of the Métis Nation Perspectives





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INTRODUCTION

Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak – Women of the Métis Nation [WMN] is a Métis women's collective body representing the Métis Women from the Governing Members of the Métis Nation and is officially mandated by the Métis National Council. The WMN is the only recognized representative body to speak on behalf of Métis women. The WMN's objectives include:

- ❁ participating effectively in influencing public policy and decision making related to concerns and aspirations of Métis women at all levels of Aboriginal and Canadian government;
- ❁ maintaining the cultural distinctiveness and preserving the cultural identity of Métis women;
- ❁ enhancing and developing strong leadership capabilities, individual and collective skills and talents so that Métis women can play a central role in their own communities; and
- ❁ Undertaking projects that improve the social and economic conditions of the Métis community.

According to the 2011 Household Survey there are approximately 400,000 Métis living in provinces comprising the Métis National Council (Ontario to British Columbia). This represents about one-third of the Indigenous population in Canada. Eighty-five per cent of the Métis population lives in Western Canada or Ontario. One-quarter of the Métis population live in four western cities (Winnipeg 46,325; Edmonton 31,780; Vancouver 18,485; and Calgary 17,040).

Compared to non-Indigenous women, Métis women were less likely to be legally married, more likely to be lone-parent and have more children. In 2006, 35% of Métis women were legally married compared with 47% of non-Indigenous women. 14% of Métis women were lone-parent compared with 8 % of non-Indigenous women. Between 1996 and 2001, the fertility rate of Métis women was 2.2 compared with 1.5 among all Canadian women. Empowering and provided effective support are important to help Métis women to go through Life Transitions.

Métis women were the most likely of the three Indigenous groups to live in rural areas. In 2006, 28% of Métis females and 12% of First Nations women lived in rural areas (not including reserves), compared with 18% of non-Indigenous women lived in rural areas. This brings a special challenge for Métis Women to access opportunities compared to other Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous women.

The Women of the Métis Nation welcome the opportunity to share their perspectives on:



- ❁ empowering women through life transitions;
- ❁ accessing opportunities;
- ❁ developing a culturally responsive and gender-based approach to implementing the United Nations Declaration of the Indigenous People; and
- ❁ responding to the TRC's Calls to Action.

The WMN is also eager to work together with other orders of government, Indigenous Women's groups and the general society to find solutions to issues affecting the lives of Métis and other Indigenous women, girls and their families. The Women of the Métis Nation seeks to identify ways to empower Métis women, girls and Elders to give voice to their experiences and solutions.

EMPOWERING MÉTIS WOMEN THROUGH LIFE TRANSITIONS

The Women of the Métis Nation believe in holistic and coordinated approaches to addressing the unique social, cultural and economic circumstances of Métis women and girls. We recognize the central role that Métis women play in raising Métis families and value the experiential education and wisdom that results for undertaking this role. WMN believes that this requires all orders of government to work with the Métis Nation to recognize the rights, interests and jurisdictions of Métis Governing bodies and to transfer or devolve responsibility for cultural, social and economic programs and services to Métis.

There is no one-size-fits-all for Indigenous Canadians. Métis women are distinct from First Nations and Inuit women. We have different political and organizational approaches. Our life circumstances are different. While many of our women share the same levels of poverty, their circumstances stem from different socio-economic determinants and have been shaped by a long history of non-recognition by federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Métis women have participated in the democratic processes that comprise the governing structures of the Métis Nation including the Métis National Council and its Governing Members from Ontario to British Columbia. Métis women comprise about 50% of the elected leaders within the Métis Nation. Our unprecedented participation has been required because of the size and the dimension of the struggle for maintaining the existence of the Métis Nation in Canada. Recent Supreme Court cases have underscored the struggle that we have had to wage even in the face of having our rights enshrined in the Constitution in 1982. We have had to participate because we had to stand together as a people.

Having said that, Métis women's political empowerment within the Métis Nation does not always translate in to equal socio-economic status. There are significant socio-economic gaps between Métis men and women. Many of these can be attributed to larger societal and systemic factors flowing from the Canadian economic system and the historical treatment of women in Canada and North America. Métis women participate in the mainstream political processes but Métis representation in all other civic processes is much less than the average Canadian women.

Métis women's socio-economic status is unique requiring tailor-made Métis solutions. The current systems of support -- where they exist -- are not focused enough to address these circumstances. Child care serves as a good example. The Government of Canada recognizes that Métis require employment and training supports and has essentially transferred responsibility for those programs to Métis. However, unlike First Nations and Inuit, Métis are denied access to child care supports under the program, and this denial has a disproportionate impact on the large number of Métis single mothers. Also, the government provides direct support to First Nations women for employment and training through the Native Women's Association of Canada, while Métis women are denied similar funding.

The new Trudeau Government has placed a priority on addressing Indigenous issues and has announced the formation of a Métis Nation permanent Bi-lateral



Forum to address shared priority issues. The forum is composed of the Prime Ministers and engaged ministers with responsibility for Indigenous policy areas. This is a step in the right direction. Addressing social determinants of health will be a key to closing the gaps between Métis and other Canadians. Given the current understanding of the federal government's jurisdiction for Métis citizens, federal Aboriginal programming in areas such as employment and training housing, economic development, education, culture and health should be extended to the Métis Nation.

The new forum must address the gender and cultural biases in existing national program and services initiatives such as the Aboriginal skills Employment and Training Strategy that currently denies program delivery to Métis women and child care to the Métis Nation. Clearly, you cannot have a holistic approach or provide wrap around services with such a gaping hole in our current employment and training system. In a related area, the new early learning strategy that is to be developed this year must have a distinction-based approach recognizing and addressing the unique circumstances of Métis families. Support for Métis post-secondary assistance must also be factored into a new Strategy.

Housing is another challenging area for Métis women. The federal government transferred responsibility for housing to the provinces decades ago. In Manitoba, this has meant that not one house has been built in a Métis village since 1992. Housing is critical for the health and well-being of any family, including Métis families, yet the federal government has divested itself of the willingness and the tools to help address this issue. The Supreme Court, in the Daniels decision, removed the last argument that the federal government had to deny responsibility for Métis housing (and other policy areas). We are hopeful that the new National Housing Strategy will include a distinction-based Housing Strategy that has a gender lens for the Métis Nation. We also hope that the government will develop Métis Nation specific strategies in the poverty-reduction strategies and in the new homelessness initiatives.

Child and Family services is another area that cries out for Métis participation. Currently, the Manitoba Métis

Federation is the only Métis child and family service provider in the country. You would think that a holistic approach to delivering this service would include the participation of the people who are most affected by it.

Finally, no discussion on empowering Métis women can be had without addressing the unique health status and needs of Métis women and girls. While our people have made steady social and economic progress in many areas, health conditions stand out as a matter of grave concern. The rapid socio-cultural, environmental and lifestyle changes seen in the Métis population in the last half century have had a tremendous impact on our health and have contributed significantly to higher rates of chronic diseases. According to Statistics Canada, the poorer self-reported health among Métis people was partly a result of higher rates of chronic conditions. About 55% of Métis reported being diagnosed with one or more chronic conditions, compared with only 48% of non-Aboriginal people.

In terms of accessing health care, the Métis have been largely ignored by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health systems. First Nations and Inuit people access some of their programming through the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada. This branch of Health Canada does not have a mandate to work with the Métis. The Métis have accessed the majority of their health services through the provincial governments. As such, the Métis Nation does not have access to comparable or consistent programming within the Nation as different provinces offer different programs and services. In addition, the majority of health programming accessed, be it provincial or federal, is pan-Aboriginal and not designed to meet the unique needs or realities of Métis people. The result is non-responsive and poorly developed programs that fail to improve the health status of Métis people.

Understanding how Métis people understand health or well-being can help to build a policy framework that more effectively target programs and services to Métis people and communities. Research has been conducted on key principles or beliefs of the Métis people relevant to building a distinct Métis health policy framework.¹ Common cultural principles identified from both literature reviews and consultations include: holistic,



intertwined and fluid; wellbeing-driven; and culturally & contextually relevant.

- ❁ Holistic means using an approach that is not individualistic. Health and wellbeing can include that of the individual, family, community, neighbourhood, and nation, across many population segments: Elder, adult, youth, child and infant. Any adequate Métis health determinants framework must account for all segments of society.
- ❁ Intertwined refers to the interplay between all variables. None are static and none can stand alone.
- ❁ Fluid explains the malleability of determinants or indicators. They must be able to change to adequately reflect the reality for the Métis. For example, typical variables of education will prove inadequate if such variables do not also include informal education and lifelong learning.
- ❁ Wellbeing-driven is a principle often heard within Indigenous communities, and very often from Métis. Too often research is deficits-driven, ignoring both progress made and successes achieved.
- ❁ Culturally and contextually relevant is a common-sense principle. Any determinants used must be deemed relevant to Métis and be in keeping with their needs and priorities.
- ❁ Other key components of a Métis cultural framework include: self-determination, colonization, spirituality, land, and culture and tradition.

Increased Métis involvement in the health and wellness area will ensure the provision of culturally grounded and "holistic well-being" approaches to health. The establishment of unique Métis health promotion initiatives will enable the current health care systems to respond more quickly and effectively to meet the growing health care needs of the Métis population.

This approach must be distinctions-based and nation-to-nation based. Pan-Aboriginal / Pan-Indigenous approaches will not work for the Métis Nation. Thus, all parties believe that a forward-looking agenda on prevention and health promotion has the potential to achieve long-term transformative changes to the health conditions of Métis. The establishment of an innovative, forward-thinking "Métis Health Promotion Framework" integrated within the current Canadian health care systems will be a shining international example of Canadian ingenuity and adaptability. Métis people seek parity of services to those provided to First Nations and Inuit as well as parity with those accessible to other Canadians.

ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Within the Métis Nation, women are less likely to participate in the paid and formal economy, they are largely concentrated in vulnerable and low-paying jobs and sectors, they are more likely to work part-time, they generally earn less than men for the same jobs and skill levels, they have fewer assets, they hold fewer top management and leadership positions, they often face outright discrimination and implicit biases that favour men, and they disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid household (family) work and care. Many were required to leave the educational system early to raise families but have acquired several skills and experiential skills that are often not recognized.

Following extensive cross-country consultations, Métis women identified the need to recognize that many Métis women who left school early have obtained life and other skills that need to be recognized. They also recognized that many of these women were successful in their own rights and had much to offer other women who were seeking to establish businesses and otherwise get ahead in life. Through these grass-roots consultations, the women also focused on the need for leadership development and the role that each of the respective Métis women organizations can play in furthering the common good of Métis women.



Our approach seeks to advance women's career interests by recognizing their prior learning and providing leadership and awareness training so that they can overcome some of the institutional barriers present in many public governments and in mainstream society organizations. Métis women are underrepresented in each province in the school and hospital boards, are marginalized in political institutions at the local, provincial and federal levels. Their underrepresentation in these institutions and in political parties also means they are less often called upon to sit on boards and committees.

While some Métis Women's organizations have access to more capacity funding, many of the Métis women's organizations are volunteer-based, so it was recommended that the national Métis Women's organization pursue initiatives to support regional Métis women organizations while focusing on leadership development. WMN support initiatives such as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) tools that helps adult learners to identify, articulate and demonstrate relevant learning acquired through life and work experiences and translate this learning into college credit. WMN would like to expand PLAR-type initiatives and support enhanced Métis awareness of leadership opportunities in the public and civic society organizations. A secondary need is to provide some support for Métis women's organizations at the provincial level.

WMN intends to pursue an experiential learning approach which will focus on the learning process itself: providing concrete experience, observation and reflection, formulation of abstract conceptions, and testing of the knowledge gained in new situations. The approach will be to focus on self-efficacy by valuing and recognizing prior learning. It will seek to promote visioning by engendering confidence in Métis women to develop their ability to formulate clear images of an aspired future and their ability to achieve that future. It will focus on the importance of attitude in developing their leadership potential.

Métis women have played a major role in the re-emergence of the Métis Nation in Canada. The Governing Member organizations of the Métis National Council have demonstrated at the political

level that gender parity is possible. While there is always room for improvement, gender parity is common across the Métis Nation governance system. However, Métis women's participation in non-Métis public institutions is almost non-existent. Apart from some of the northern community councils, Métis women are underrepresented on school and health boards, municipal councils in larger towns, and in the provincial or federal legislatures. The WMN is seeking to change this by enhancing Métis women's awareness of how they can participate in these public institutions.

The WMN supports the advancement of an Indigenous woman-led, culturally relevant gender-based analysis to ensure initiatives do not continue to have negative impacts on Indigenous women and girls. This applies to the Canadian implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The government's endorsement of the Declaration and its commitment to implement the Declaration is an important step in the reconciliation process.

The Declaration recognizes that Indigenous peoples possess the right of self-determination and affirms that Indigenous people are equal to all other peoples. It recognizes that historic injustices have been imposed upon Indigenous people including the Métis Nation. It recognizes that Indigenous people including the Métis Nation have been disposed of their lands and that there is a need for governments to do something about it.

The Declaration also recognizes in Article 46 that the rights of Indigenous peoples are "equally guaranteed to male and female Indigenous individuals." And that unique measures need to be put in place to address the special needs of Indigenous peoples including women, youth, Elders and people with disabilities in a variety of socio-economic areas. A critical component in the Declaration is Article 22, which calls on States to "take measures, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, to ensure that Indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination."

The Declaration is not a self-implementing document and requires states to establish implementation



approaches to ensure that States comply with the Articles of the Declaration. Minister Bennett's official endorsement of the Declaration in May 2016 was welcomed by the WMN. However, there needs to be a clear plan as to how they intend to implement the declaration and ensure that a gender-based lens is employed in developing the implementation strategy. So, there needs to be a law and policy review as well as a review of governmental decision-making practices in several critical areas.

The WMN believes that there should be substantial engagement with the Government of Canada on defining the implementation approach and any new machinery of government that may be required to monitor the Declarations implementation, including the development of Culturally Based Gender Based Analysis (CBGBA) tools and processes. As Erin Wolski has written, when it comes to dealing with Indigenous women, traditional gender-based analysis tools only take you so far.

CRGBA development has been motivated by the total failure within current policy and decision-making processes to meet Aboriginal women's needs. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies are guilty of not only marginalizing, but completely discounting the value Aboriginal women bring to these processes. It is our goal to see that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission equally value Aboriginal women's roles and meet their needs, from beginning to end. We have witnessed the outcomes of devaluation and imbalance, such as poorer overall health status, disproportionate incarceration rates, suicide, addiction, chronic disease, violence, and death among Aboriginal people, especially among Aboriginal women. The pursuit of truth and reconciliation must strive to impact these outcomes.

Taking culture into account is of critical importance for the Métis Nation who have in many cases fallen victim to Pan-Aboriginal / Pan-Indigenous approaches. Many times, these approaches completely fail to deal with the Métis as Métis or to deal with Métis at all. The national Off-Reserve Head Starts Program is a good case study. It claims to include Métis, but by and large, the program is administered by Friendship centres who implement a First Nations cultural focus.

The same can be said of the National Urban Aboriginal strategy that has operated for the last decade. We do not begrudge First Nations themes and approaches but ask why the Métis are excluded. It is not just an isolated instance; most pan-Canadian Aboriginal national initiatives come to the same result. The new Nation-to-Nation approach of the new government is a step in the right direction, but it needs to be infused in all national initiatives affecting Métis women.

Current federal Gender-Based Analysis (GBA) initiatives have been under development since Canada's ratification of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Following the 2009 report by the Auditor General of Canada, the Government of Canada adopted a government-wide Departmental Action Plan on Gender-Based Analysis applying to all federal departments and agencies. In the fall of 2015 the Auditor General tabled its findings on the progress made from four departments including Aboriginal and Northern Affairs and Employment and Social Development Canada.

The Auditor General noted that the analysis that each department or agency must undertake when developing policy, legislative or program initiatives is to ask the following fundamental questions:

- ❁ Does the initiative affect women and men differently according to age, education, culture or other identity factors?
- ❁ Does the initiative support the full participation and equal treatment of women and men in all their diversity?
- ❁ Does the initiative have unintended impacts on, or create barriers for, specific groups of women or men?

The 2015 Auditor General report did not pull any punches, concluding that "Overall, we found that in the 20 years since the government committed to applying a gender-based analysis (GBA) to its policy decisions, a GBA framework has been implemented in only some federal departments and agencies. In the Departments and agencies that have implemented a GBA Framework, we found that the analysis performed



were not always completed and that the quality of the analysis were not consistent." He further noted that "when gender-based analysis is missing or incomplete, gender-specific impacts might not be fully factored into government decisions about policy, legislative, and program initiatives."

If the Government of Canada cannot come up with a consistent application of its approach to implementing GBA in its federal departments and agencies after 20 years, how much larger will be the challenge in injecting the Indigenous lens that includes an Indigenous gender lens? The rhetorical question speaks to the need for engagement of Indigenous peoples at the front end of the implementation process and extending into how it is monitored and reported on down the road. The Auditor General was impressed that central agencies were now getting involved in promoting the GBA process, however he noted that "Despite these efforts, there are barriers to conducting gender-based analysis and integrating gender considerations into policy decision making, including the absence of any mandatory requirement for departments and agencies to conduct gender-based analysis to inform policy, legislative, and program initiatives" (emphasis added). This speaks to the need to examine whether the government should develop a mandatory requirement directed at departments and agencies to implement the Declaration and its GBA.

The Government of Canada should commence an intensive process of engagement to discuss the metrics, reporting requirements, dispute mechanisms and processes to implement the Declaration. It should also reach out to Indigenous peoples to discuss what type of machinery of government needs to be put in place to support the implementation of the Declaration. Canada has a long and storied history of creating institutions in place to support other rights frameworks, most notably the human rights frameworks at the federal and provincial levels. These institutional models and the powers they possess need to be explored to see if they can form part of an implementation strategy to implement and enforce the Declaration.

IMPLEMENTING THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION CALLS TO ACTION

The WMN are somewhat ambivalent to the work being undertaken by the Government of Canada to implement the 94 Calls to Action. While the WMN support the calls to action, the calls do not impact the Métis Nation as the terms of reference for the work of the TRC largely excluded the Métis residential school experience. The Métis National Council and the WMN acknowledge the work undertaken by the Commission to address one of most tragic chapters in the history of Canada's relations with Indigenous / Aboriginal People. However, only a relatively small number of Métis who attended Indian residential schools were included in the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlements Agreement.

The WMN was extremely disappointed in the total absence of any meaningful or corrective recommendations in the Commission report for dealing with the vast majority of the citizens of the Métis Nation who attended Métis-specific residential/boarding schools operating under the same assimilationist policies. We were stunned that with the exception of one reference to the Métis within the context of "Who are the Aboriginal peoples in Canada," there wasn't a specific mention of the exclusion of the Métis residential schools and the need for Canada to deal with the Métis survivors.

On December 15, 2016, the Prime Minister informed us of the establishment of a National Council for Reconciliation. An Interim Board of Directors will make recommendations on the creation of the National Council and will begin an engagement process to develop recommendations on its scope and mandate. In addition, \$10 million has been identified to support the work of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation located at the University of Manitoba. The Prime Minister indicated that with this undertaking, Canada has now fulfilled 41 of the Calls to Action outlined in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The WMN has not been consulted on the individuals who are to sit on the interim board.

