

Breaking Free

A Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence

Woman is the centre of the wheel of life. She is the heartbeat of the people. She is not just in the home, but she is the community, she is the Nation.

One of our grandmothers.

The woman is the foundation on which Nations are built. She is the heart of her Nation. If that heart is weak the people are weak. If that heart is strong and her mind is clear then the Nation is strong and knows its purpose. The woman is the centre of everything.

— from *The Woman's Part* by Art Soloman, Ojibwa Elder

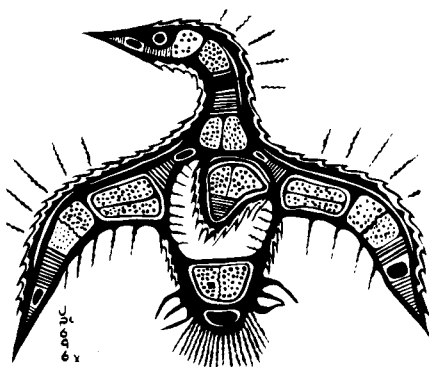
This is a report on the workshop given by Susan Hare at "Women in a Violent Society," Canadian Mental Health Association Conference, Banff, Alberta, May 1991. The content is based on the material provided in this workshop and on the Ontario Native Women's Association Report, "Breaking Free."

Making public their report on violence against women and children in the Native community took a painful year of discussion by the Ontario Native Women's Association. Susan Hare explains it in the following way: "I was a member of the Board of the Association at the time. I sat on the Committee as the results came in. It was devastating because in many cases it was our own communities that were being discussed... It was really hard on our staff. Aboriginal women were calling from all over the place and they wanted to talk to someone. Our staff were office staff; they were not social workers of any hue or colour, but they dealt with it, so I have great respect for them. Many women, especially in the isolated Northern communities were afraid to send the questionnaires back, but they wanted to keep the questions."

The results of this Province wide study show that *eight out of ten* Aboriginal women, and *four out of ten* children have been abused or assaulted. The batterer is identified as the husband in eighty-four per cent of the cases; and yet in eighty-two per cent of the cases it is the woman who leaves and loses the home. There are no culturally appropriate services in Ontario directed at the batterer, and only a few Native-run crisis shelters for Native women and their children. There is also a serious lack of specially trained personnel and resources in the area of incest, sexual and physical abuse counseling, especially at the community level.

According to Hare there were two reasons for the year-long struggle over whether or not to release the report. The first was that the women knew there would be a backlash from the male-dominated leadership in Ontario. There was also the concern that the report would add further support to the "hostile savage" cultural stereotype. According to Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred Hoop*:

In contemporary times those who view Indians as hostile savages, paint modern Indian people as worthless, alcoholic and lazy, unwilling to join in the general progressiveness and prosperity that is the final index of the righteousness of the American or Canadian dreams. Allied with the view of the Indian as hostile savage is the common practice of proving that Indians mistreat their women brutally — at every level and in every way, the implication being that civilized people revere women and that savages who do not revere them deserve extermination. This unstated but compelling rationale for genocide is at the bottom of the academic, political and popular attempts to paint Native American cultures as patriarchal when they are not.



In the end, the Native women decided to release the report on the grounds that protection of the women and children was more important than anything else. They wanted to make it public because they needed the support of all people in Ontario to help address the issue. As Hare says, "we needed the support of Government, women's groups, the churches, the organizations — we needed everyone's support because the problem was so extensive."

The difference with the Aboriginal women's report on family

violence is the broader context in which Canadian and Aboriginal relations are placed. Included in this context is the need to heal the community as well as the individual. "We decided that you can not divorce family violence from any of the other social, legal or political problems that Aboriginal people have. You can not separate it, nor can you deal with it alone. Those fundamental relations have provided the environ-



Photo by Bernice Morrison

ment for family violence to take root. The imposition of other people's government, beliefs and value systems has been at the cost of Aboriginal government, spiritual beliefs and values. Some of our men have assumed the patriarchal tendencies of the larger society. From their perspective, it must have been beguiling." What is being seen within the Native community is a response to imposed patriarchal culture, to generations of systemized abuse and oppression, internalized and recycled through the family. It is a response to cultural and spiritual confusion and loss. Part of this loss comes from the imposition of a residential school system and the adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Native families.

The immediate result of the report was a dialogue, albeit forced, with the male leadership of Native communities. Susan describes part of this process as follows: "We had a Chief and an Elder in Northern Ontario going on the radio and deriding our report. There was another Chief around the North Bay area saying that this report must certainly be wrong because abuse did not happen on his reserve..." However, at a recent Chiefs of Ontario Planning and Priorities meeting it was decided to establish a healing with the Native women in Ontario. Now when people call about family violence to any of the Aboriginal Offices, they are sometimes referred to the Ontario Native Women's As-

sociation. On the other hand, government response to the report has been agonizingly slow. Of the thirteen recommendations made, only one part of one recommendation has been acted upon.

The following is a summary of the recommendations of the Ontario Native Women's Association's report on violence against women and children. Susan Hare comments that "The concepts of healing and culturally appropriate services flow through every recommendation." The first is that provincial and federal governments must ensure equality of access in the provision of services and financial resources be continually adhered to for all Aboriginal women regardless of residence or status; this refers specifically to Metis and off-reserve women. Secondly, though most important, is that a network of at least twelve healing lodges be established to provide shelter support and healing for battered women and their children. An Aboriginal treatment program for male batterers based on the model proposed by Tikinagan Child and Family Services is necessary province wide. There is a need to provide culturally appropriate services for children that attempt to keep the child united with at least one parent or relative in a familiar setting. Services addressing addiction need to be intensified, and integrated into other services for batterers and victims. Community response teams need to be instituted in every Aboriginal community, whether reserve, urban, rural or isolated.

Education programs for the communities on the causes and nature of violence, developed by the Ontario Native Women's Association to encourage communities to initiate their own healing approaches are necessary; education programs for the children in the elementary schools are equally important.

The creation of an Aboriginal justice system to effect property laws which discriminate against Aboriginal women must occur. There must be mandatory, culturally sensitive counseling and treatment for batterers. Medical services available to Aboriginal families need to be increased, particularly in northern and isolated communities, along with a training package to teach physicians and nurses how to identify cases of violence and to enable them to assist families in a culturally sensitive manner while informing them of Aboriginal services. A clearinghouse specifically on Aboriginal family violence is necessary to encourage research, needs assessment and the development of models for healing lodges and other community-based treatment approaches. Last but not least, is the call for a toll-free province-wide hotline specifically to provide victims of Aboriginal family violence with information about local services.

The full text of "Breaking Free — a Proposal for Change to Aboriginal Family Violence," is available from the Ontario Native Women's Association, 101-

115 N. May Street, Thunder Bay, Ontario P7C 3N8, Phone (807) 623-3442; Fax (807) 623-1104.

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This article was prepared with Eimear O'Neill, CWS/cf editorial board liaison, with the help of Virginia E. Joe from British Columbia.



Photo by Bernice Morrison

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CALLS FOR PAPERS

"Gender Equity & Institutional Change" Spring 1992

CWS/cf plans to commit the Spring 1992 issue to an inquiry into equity issues and how these issues are being addressed in government policy, in the workplace, in educational settings and within our different communities.

List of topics:

- Equity — what does it mean?
- Systemic discrimination: analyzing the problem.
- Circumscribed lives: experiential articles about the human costs of discrimination.
- Combatting systemic discrimination through legislation, education and social change.
- Affirmative Action: strengths and limitations.
- Employment and pay equity legislation: How are they different? What are their objectives, successes and limitations? What are their historical and legal origins/precedents?
- Attaining equity: how are governments, corporations and the labour movement dealing with equity issues.
- International models: how does Canadian equity legislation compare?
- Making the links: the importance of education, health care and child care for the attainment of equity.
- Feminist pedagogy: how it is being introduced into and affecting our educational systems?
- Introducing the feminine into the body politic; making politics an arena in which women can work.
- Equity for native women.
- Equity for immigrant women, refugee women, women of colour.
- Equity for differently abled women.
- Reasonable accommodation — what does it mean?
- Compulsory heterosexuality and equity.
- **Your ideas for additional topics are welcome.**

Deadline: 31 December 1991

"The Feminization of Poverty" Summer 1992

This issue, investigating the feminization of poverty, will be divided into three parts.

The first section will incorporate articles on:

- Historical definitions of poverty.
- National and global economic trends and social conditions accelerating poverty.
- Plant closures, dual labour markets, de-skilling, inflation and tax increases, free trade and structural adjustment.
- Evaluation of state responses in the form of welfare policies, educational training programs and tax subsidies.
- Special focus on the major constituents of poverty: single mothers, teenage mothers, elderly women, the disabled, refugees, immigrants, native women, women of colour, the underemployed and unemployed and their children.

The second section of the issue describes the consequences of poverty both for its victims and society.

- Social costs — increased rates of medical illness, psychological deterioration, incarceration, lost productivity, family breakdown, child poverty and economic dislocation.
- The lived experiences of the poor.
- Poor children's views of the future, as well as their flagging senses of efficacy and self-esteem.

In the final section, structural and community responses are explored.

- An analysis of various provincial responses.
- International comparisons .
- Community food sharing programs, the self-help movement, child care advocates, skill training and pay and employment equity programs.
- **Your ideas for additional topics are welcome.**

Deadline: 31 March 1992

Articles should be typed and double-spaced, 7-12 pages long (1500-2000 words), with notes following the article. A short (50 word) abstract of the article and a brief biographical note must accompany each submission. If your manuscript has been word-processed, please include a computer-disk copy and indicate the program used. The disk will be returned to you. We give preference to previously unpublished material. If possible, please submit photographs or graphics to illustrate your work.

Write to us as soon as possible indicating your intention to submit an article to either of these forthcoming issues.

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