

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is founded on a collective goal to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of First Nations and Metis women within Aboriginal and Canadian societies. The NWAC has been solidly grounded by community-based representation since its inception in the early 1970s, in accordance with the objectives of its founding members.

As a non-profit organization, incorporated in 1974, the NWAC is an aggregate of Native women's organizations, collectives and/or communities across Canada. Representative of the unique and distinct reality of Aboriginal peoples, our self-identification as an association is that of a "Grandmother's Lodge." In this "Grandmother's Lodge," we, as Aunties, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers and Relatives, collectively recognize, respect, promote, defend and enhance our Native ancestral laws. We acknowledge the Creator as one being — one who gave us our spiritual beliefs, language and traditions, and we fully acknowledge and empower ourselves by accepting our responsibilities as Aboriginal women.

The NWAC is structured according to the Four Directions, which also entrenches our way of governing ourselves. In working towards the accomplishment of our goals, the four universal principles of TRUST, SHARING, STRENGTH and KINDNESS are inherent in all that we say and do. Everything revolves around ensuring a future home for our children, and for the next seven generations.

PRINCIPLES

The Principles or objectives of the Native Women's Association of Canada are as follows:

- to address issues in a manner which appropriately reflects the continuously changing needs of Native women in communities across Canada;
- to assist and promote common efforts towards self-determination and self-sufficiency for Native peoples in our role as mothers and leaders;
- to promote equal opportunities for Native women in programs and activities

that meet their social, economic, political, spiritual and cultural needs;

- to serve as a resource among our Native women's organizations and communities through which they can share and exchange ideas and research in areas of common goals;
- to cultivate and teach the characteristics that are unique aspects of our cultural and historical traditions;
- to assist Native women's organizations, as well as community initiatives in the development of their local projects;
- to ensure that the national body is accountable to regional and local groups;
- to advance issues and concerns of Native women; and to link with other Native organizations with common goals;
- to be the national voice for Native women; and,
- to evaluate annually the constitution and goals of the NWAC so that they are realistic, attainable, specific, coordinated and meaningful.

NWAC STRUCTURE

For the first fourteen years of NWAC's existence, our structure was similar to most non-governmental organizations. It was a hierarchical system — a system that was based on "power" and the individuals who held that power; it was also a system that is ultimately alien to our concept of the universe.

As Native people, we have a unique concept of the universe — one which recognizes and respects the gifts and teachings of the Creator. Among the gifts of the Creator are the Four Directions, each with its own teachings. These teachings were given to Native people and have been in existence since time immemorial. Among the many different Nations of our people, interpretation of the teachings and symbols may vary, but the basics remain the same:

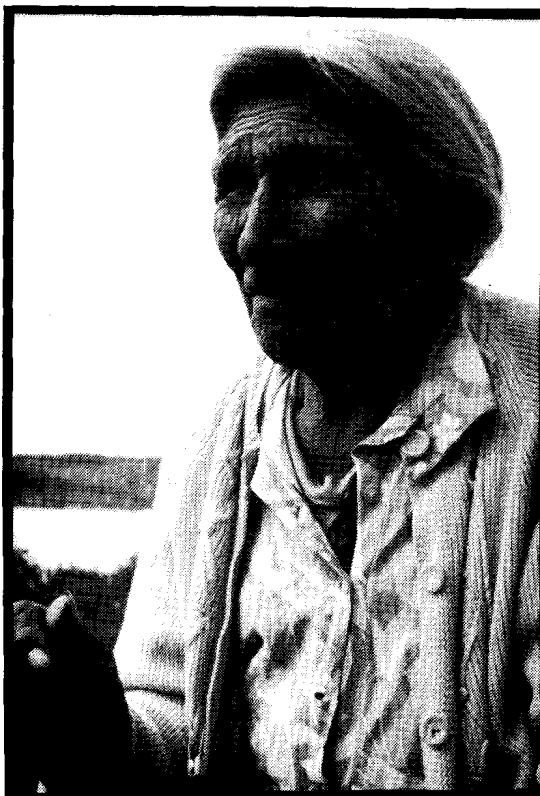
The East comes with the teaching of **KINDNESS** and is symbolized by the Sweetgrass and the colour yellow;

The South comes with the teaching of **HONESTY** and is symbolized by the tree which always stands straight, and by the colour green;

The West comes with the teaching of **SHARING** and is symbolized by the animals who give their life so that we may live, and by the colour red;

The North comes with the teaching of **STRENGTH** and is symbolized by the rock which shows endurance and the colour white;

We are in the middle of the Circle — which also represents Life. Our way of life depends on the inter-relationships of everything in the Circle, and it is this way of life that needed to be reflected in our organizational structure.



At NWAC's 14th Annual General Assembly, and following a comprehensive research and evaluation exercise, we adopted an organizational structure that is truly reflective of our way of life. We worked with our Elders and Traditional people, our members, our youth, and some of our men, to develop a Four Directions Council for NWAC.

The NWAC is now comprised of members from the Four Directions which sees the Provinces and Territories of Canada organized as follows:

Eastern Region: Newfoundland,

Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island

Southern Region: Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba

Western Region: Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia

Northern Region: Yukon, Northwest Territories and Labrador

Within each Province and Territory, regional Native women's associations or collectives exist, each of which are represented at Annual General Meetings of the NWAC. At the Annual Meeting, the NWAC Board of Directors, comprised of 22 Native women, are selected as follows: 4 Regional Executive Leaders; 13 Regional representatives, 3 from each region except the East which selects 4; 4 Regional Youth representatives; and 1 Speaker (selected/elected by all delegates).

The Four Directions model also incorporates a "Council of Elders" who will determine their role and in what manner they will assist the association. A "Youth Council" also exists, and as made known by them, they will also determine their own role and in what manner they will assist the Association. In terms of their responsibilities, they have identified the need to identify, maintain and focus on issues affecting youth, and to act as the political voice for the youth in their regions.

In accordance with the Four Directions model, each Region has responsibility for certain portfolios. After a period of time, the responsibilities will rotate, so that all members within a Region may acquire the knowledge and experience, as well as to ensure the sharing of our workload. The following illustrates regional responsibilities for the next year:

EAST REGION: responsibility for the **EDUCATION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PORTFOLIO** (which includes education, curriculum design, language, traditional knowledge, sacred ways, native history, research, library/resource centre, cultural workshops, etc.);

SOUTH REGION: responsibility for the **FAMILY PORTFOLIO** (which includes child welfare, child care, family violence, nutrition, youth, family shelters, children's programs, fund raising, think-tanks, life skills, etc.);

WEST REGION: responsibility for the **JUSTICE AND RIGHTS PORTFOLIO** (which includes political/legal issues, community development, fourth world relations, self-determination, justice issues, self-government, external/foreign relations, constitutional law, federal government relations, etc.); and

NORTH REGION: responsibility for the **COMMUNITY PORTFOLIO** (which includes Elders, health care, healing, Native medicine, alcohol and drug abuse, wisdom and good advice, environment, economic development, employment, housing, etc.).

The issues, concerns and interests described above represent only a partial listing of the matters addressed by the NWAC Board of Directors. Our National office, established in 1980, is charged with the responsibility of facilitating our work, and is supervised by our Speaker. The Speaker is also the one who must present the views of NWAC upon the direction of the Executive Council and/or full Board of Directors.

DECISION MAKING

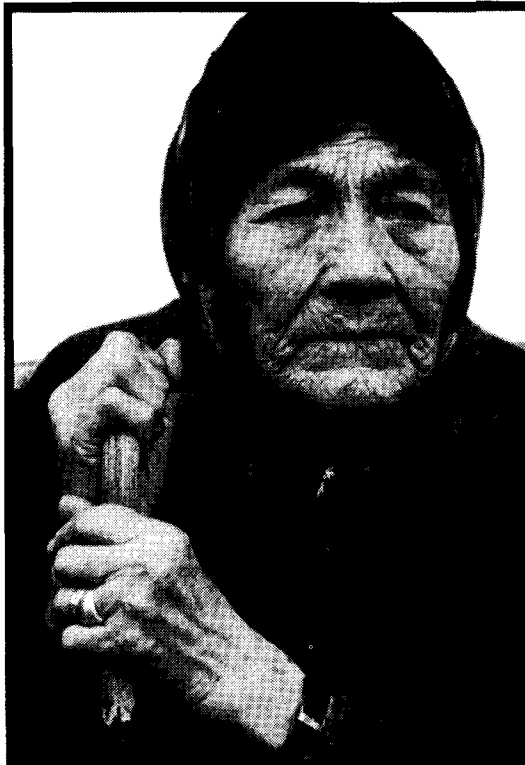
In accordance with the teachings of our people, along with our respective values, concepts and way of doing things, the preferred process necessitates thorough discussion, debate and compromise until agreement is reached. Issues, concerns and aspirations of Native women and our families are first discussed in regional meetings, with recommendations brought to the full Board of Directors for ratification. The process also necessitates and encourages the decision-makers to keep in mind, at all times, the teachings of **KINDNESS, HONESTY, SHARING and STRENGTH**. We have built these principles into every aspect of our organization; in doing so, we are acknowledging and assuming our roles and responsibilities as Native women.

FUNDING

The NWAC receives core-funding through the Aboriginal Women's Program, administered by the Department of the Secretary of State. This funding provides for the basic operation of a national office and enables our members to meet. The matter of funding is always an important concern to us as we work towards accomplishing our goals.

ISSUES, CONCERNS & INTERESTS

Since its inception, the Native Women's Association of Canada has been involved



in many issues respecting Aboriginal peoples generally, and Native women and our families specifically. In recent years, our efforts concentrated on effecting amendments to the Indian Act, attaining guaranteed equality rights in the Canadian Constitution, and increasing our participation in the movement towards re-establishment of Aboriginal governments. Toward that end, the NWAC took active part in both the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on Indian Women, and the Indian Act and the Special Committee on Indian Self-Government. NWAC representatives have also been present and speaking at the

First Ministers Conferences on Aboriginal and Constitutional matters, although our participation was limited.

THE INDIAN ACT

With the 1985 amendments to the Indian Act, the NWAC National Office and Provincial/Territorial Member Associations (PTMAs) undertook extensive advocacy work in terms of the provision of information and assistance to those of our people wishing to apply for official Indian Status from the Federal Government. The work of the National Office and PTMAs represents a major effort by Native women to assist our grassroots people in achieving some recognition and some redress for past discrimination.

It has been over three years since the Indian Act was amended and it continues to be a major area of concern to us. The Amended Indian Act remains an oppressive piece of Canadian legislation that only further entrenches discrimination and, in fact, threatens our future generations.

The issues and concerns of NWAC and our member Associations regarding the Amended Indian Act are well-documented. Over the next few months, we shall again make a concerted effort to address our concerns. Suffice it to say for now, this legislation affects every aspect of our lives, from birth to death, and we are acutely aware of its negative effects and influences.

Native people continue to be the most socially, economically, culturally and politically oppressed people in this country — Native women are even more so. The existence of the Indian Act, with all of its current deficiencies, and the lack of any real recognition of our rights as Aboriginal people, are two major concerns which must be addressed to our collective satisfaction. The NWAC will continue to play a major role in achieving our rightful place in society — it is our responsibility.