"Old Jenny" with rabbit she has snared, Mayo area, 1930s

Photo: Courtesy of the Yukon Archives, Claude Tidd Collection
Inuit Women
Equality and Leadership

by Martha Flaherty

Pauktuutit, le seul organisme national qui représente les femmes Inuit du Canada, a soulevé d'importantes questions politiques, sociales et économiques pour les femmes Inuit. L'article qui suit est un passage du discours présidentiel adressé aux déléguée(s) lors de la réunion générale annuelle de Pauktuutit de février 1994 tenue à Iqaluit dans les territoires du Nord-Ouest.

Since its creation in 1984, Pauktuutit, the only national Canadian organization representing Inuit women, has addressed a wide range of political, social, and economic issues of importance to Inuit women. Following are excerpts from the President's address to delegates at Pauktuutit's 1994 Annual General Meeting held in Iqaluit, Northwest Territories from February 21 to 24, 1994.

Every year, Inuit women gather to discuss the issues and problems facing us in the North. For the past five years, discussions have focused on family violence. We have tackled this problem by speaking about our pain, offering each other support and understanding, holding workshops, sharing information on how various communities are addressing family violence, and, through our resolutions, outlining the actions we wish to see taken. Pauktuutit has published a number of books and newsletters aimed at increasing public awareness of family violence and offering information on how to work towards alleviating the problem. In a sense, Pauktuutit has become the Inuit public's conscience on family violence.

This year, we will continue to address family violence through a continuation of the Healing Workshop we began last year in Goose Bay. But we are also making an effort to focus on our strengths as Inuit women. This annual general meeting includes workshops on Inuit clothing production and a fashion show to promote the work of traditional Inuit clothing producers.

The traditional clothing produced by Inuit women is unique in the world. It is a visible statement of the creativity and practicality of Inuit women. Women have clothed their families for centuries, not only keeping their loved ones warm but doing so with skill and beauty. Today, Inuit women continue to produce beautiful clothing. This is an economic activity which women can undertake from their homes, providing goods for their family or selling the products of their labour for money. We are proud of the skills of Inuit women clothing producers, artists, and craftswomen, and we believe that their work should be included in definitions of community economic development.

Unfortunately, women's work is often forgotten or discounted in the economic development arena. For example, the Wildlife Hunters Income Support Program negotiated as part of the Nunavut Land Claim provides hunters with money to finance the hunt, but it does not include money for the women who work with the skins. This is a good program for hunters and we support it, but it is also an example of how women's work can be excluded or ignored. Similar problems exist with government economic development programs which tend to support large scale projects rather than the small, home-based businesses preferred by many women.

Real barriers exist which inhibit the participation of Inuit women in the northern economy: lack of child care; difficulty in accessing start-up funds for small businesses; lack of training; and the exclusion of many Inuit women from economic development initiatives. Economic development is one of many issues that Pauktuutit deals with on an ongoing basis. Others include family violence, a wide range of health, social, and family issues, justice, and alcohol and drug abuse.

I have to speak about some of the things which are important to me personally, as well as things which I have come to feel strongly about as President of Pauktuutit. I see an urgent need to open up our organizations to Inuit youth. We are all keenly aware of the problems facing youth but if we are going to solve these problems, it is absolutely essential that young people become involved.

When I was younger, I never imagined myself in the position I am in today. I was so afraid to speak and I had so little self-esteem that if someone even looked at me I would turn my head. During my first year as President of Pauktuutit, I was very nervous every time I had to speak in public, and it is only because I had the opportunity to speak about issues I care about that I overcame my shyness. I would like to encourage young people across the North to take every available opportunity to begin speaking about the issues that concern you and the things you care about. I also encourage Inuit organizations to provide those opportunities.

Last year, at Pauktuutit's Annual General Meeting in Goose Bay, a young woman spoke to us about sexual abuse and the way communities can turn on victims who decide to report abuse to the police. She spoke about the lack of support and lack of understanding she encountered in the schools, the church, social services, and among Elders. She was not used to speaking in public, and it was only her conviction that something must be done about the problem which gave her the courage to speak. She told us how she felt compelled to speak out so that those even younger than her would not be abused and then silenced as she had...
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work. When we support day care, we are not just advocating the creation of southern-type child care facilities, we are talking about the creation of a northern child care system. The world is changing, and our culture and lifestyles have changed in order to meet the challenges the world presents us with. More and more Inuit mothers are working outside the home so there is a real need for safe, reliable, affordable child care. We have examples of daycare centres in the North which reflect the best of Inuit and southern life, which operate in both Inuktitut and English, and provide children with the care they need while their parents are at work.

To those men who believe that Pauktuutit is trying to take their rights away, I would say that equality never diminishes anyone. We do not seek power over men, but rather, equality with men. 

We often use the word culture to describe our history, yet culture is a living, changing entity. Contemporary Inuit culture reflects our deeply rooted traditions, beliefs, and practices as well as our contact with Qallunaat. We cannot blindly cling to the past. The problems we face today are so different from what our ancestors experienced that we need to search for new solutions, new methods. In many ways we are lucky, for we can choose from the best of our own traditions and those of the southern society.

Without question, we live in two worlds: we still hunt for our food but when we get home, we can cook it in a microwave oven and eat in front of the television. On our stereos, we can listen to rock and roll music or throat singing depending on our mood or our preference. Even rap music is not entirely new to our culture; we had our own kind of rapping in drum dancing songs. Each generation has its own stories to tell and they tell them in their own way. We must be willing to learn from our Elders and our young people for they both have something to teach us about life. Our Elders remind us of our rich culture, traditions, and history while our youth can teach us what it is like to live in the modern world.

Finally, I would like to speak about leadership. Two years ago, in Kuujjuuaq, delegates to Pauktuutit’s 1992 annual meeting passed a resolution directing us to develop a “code of conduct” for Inuit leaders. Following the annual general meeting, we sent the resolution to all Inuit organizations asking for information and input into the development of this code. A code of conduct for Inuit leaders, once passed by an organization, sets the standards of leadership that members of the organization wish to uphold. It sends a clear message regarding the expectations placed on Inuit leaders. In effect, a code of conduct describes our collective vision of what a leader should be. It also sets limits by describing conduct we wish our leaders to avoid.

The following code of conduct is presented for discussion. Delegates are asked to consider whether it reflects their expectations of Inuit leaders and to add to it or suggest changes over the course of the annual general meeting. The Resolutions Committee will meet to prepare a revised code of conduct based on the discussions which take place, and a resolution will be presented for a vote on the final day. Once passed, it will be distributed to Inuit organizations and to hamlet and community councils throughout the North as a clearly articulated statement of what Inuit women expect of their leaders.

Code of Conduct for Inuit Leaders

Inuit traditions and values include a respect for individuals and a concern for the collectivity, including the family, extended family, community, and Inuit society. Inuit leaders must work on behalf of their people in a way which reflects this tradition of respect and concern. This means putting the good of the people before personal gain, listening to and acting upon the will of the people, and respecting democratic practices by including as many people as possible in decision-making. In giving our leaders the right to speak on our behalf, we urge them not to abuse the trust we place in them.

Inuit society includes women and men of all ages, yet women, youth, and Elders are under-represented in leadership and decision-making roles. Inuit organizations should take positive steps to encourage the participation of women, youth, and Elders and to address issues of particular concern to women, youth, and Elders. Inuit leaders should be responsible for ensuring that women, youth, and Elders are adequately represented in their organizations.

Women, in particular, are confronted with barriers which inhibit their participation in leadership positions. These may include sexual harassment at meetings or on the job, being subjected to negative comments when they raise sensitive issues such as family violence, or not being invited to participate in meetings and organizations dealing with particular issues (for example, economic development, or lands and resources). Inuit leaders must make a commitment to actively represent all of their people—women as well as men—by working to remove the barriers to women’s participation in all areas of public life.

Leadership is an honour and a responsibility. There are qualities and skills that a leader must develop in order to fulfill the responsibility and be worthy of the honour. These include commitment, sensitivity, kindness, a sense of fairness, honesty, integrity, accountability, the willingness to listen, the courage to stand up for what is right, and an understanding of Inuit culture, values, traditions, and history.

Inuit leaders have additional responsibilities as public figures and role models. These include not engaging in conduct which hurts other people, breaks laws, or is harmful to Inuit society. Alcohol and drug abuse is a serious and ongoing social problem and consequently,
Inuit leaders should not abuse these substances. Acts of violence against women and children, including sexual assault, child abuse, child sexual abuse, and wife battering are absolutely unacceptable, and any leader who engages in such conduct should immediately step aside.

Pauktuutit encourages all organizations and bodies with elected leaders to adopt this code of conduct or to develop their own code. Elected leaders, including members of Boards of Directors, and municipal, provincial, and federal politicians should agree, in writing, to abide by an ethical code by signing a copy of the code of conduct. In addition, the code of conduct should be posted in the offices of Inuit organizations, as well as in municipal offices and other public areas.

I would like to thank all of the people in Iqaluit who worked so hard to help us organize this annual meeting. I am also grateful that there has been so much interest among women in the communities, and I sincerely wish we had the funds to bring more women to our annual meetings.

This presentation was made in Inuktitut. Simultaneous translation into English was available at the meeting.

Martha Flaherty has been the President of Pauktuutit, the Inuit Women’s Association of Canada, since March 1991. She has also been an active member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Ms. Flaherty was born in Inukjuak, Quebec (formerly Port Harrison) and was relocated with her family to Grise Ford, Northwest Territories at the age of five. She was at the forefront in seeking compensation and an official apology from the government of Canada for this forced relocation. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has recently confirmed that the government’s primary motivation was to assert Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic, and that Inuit are entitled compensation and an official apology. Ms. Flaherty is a popular speaker, who is frequently asked to address family violence, health and social issues. As a result of her tireless work on behalf of Inuit women, she has become one of the most well-respected Inuit leaders in Canada.