

"Our voices must be heard."

By The Native Women's Association of Canada

A boriginal women have been discriminated against on the basis of sex by governments of Canada for over 100 years. Their struggle to end the sexual discrimination began after the enactment of the Canadian Bill of Rights, and continues despite the advent of section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. With amendments to the Indian Act, aboriginal women were among the first women to benefit legislatively from the Charter.

Despite this, aboriginal women still have not achieved sexual equality. The struggle continues, and has expanded today to involve a recognition of aboriginal women's rights to represent themselves in the ongoing constitutional discussions.

The ongoing legal and political struggle by aboriginal women is not only against an insensitive federal government, it is also against the aboriginal male establishment created under the Indian Act. Some legal writers argue that it was the federal government alone, and not aboriginal governments, which discriminated against women. In fact, the aboriginal male governments and organizations were part of the wall of resistance encountered by aboriginal women in their struggle to end discrimination as they continue to ignore women's concerns and their rights.

Aboriginal women want to live within their communities, but they are excluded because there is no land and no housing. They have been shut out from



their communities because the governments do not wish to bear the costs of programs and services to which aboriginal women are entitled.

Aboriginal women live in the slums. Aboriginal children prostitute themselves in Canadian cities. Aboriginal women, young people and children are killing themselves with drug and alcohol abuse on Indian lands and in Canadian cities.

This tragic situation will not change without aboriginal women's involvement in negotiating and defining self-government and without their participation in the Constitutional discussions. So far, aboriginal men and male organizations have not represented women's interests, and they are not taking the initiative to ensure that women are represented.

Aboriginal women want to take their rightful place at the constitutional table. They want to reiterate that the majority of women they represent suffer under this continuing discrimination. When the women are relegated to living in cities instead of among their own peoples, that is discrimination. It is denial of their fundamental rights guaranteed in international instruments signed by Canada.

Some aboriginal women have said no to self-government. Some of them do not want more power, money and control in the hands of men in their communities. They do not have confidence in the men in power in their communities. They do not want the creation of aboriginal governments with white powers and white philosophies in their communities. They do not want the western hierarchical power structure which has been forced upon them. They do not want the Chieftains overlords which have been created by the Indian Act. Aboriginal women must be part of the constitutional negotiation process at all stages so that they can participate in the definition of the structures and powers of their governments, and end the discrimination.

There are also many important issues affecting native women living on reserves. They are living in chaos in their communities. They have a disproportionately high rate of child sexual abuse and incest. They encounter wife battering, gang rapes, suicides and substance abuse as elements of their daily lives. The development of programs, services, and policies for handling domestic violence has been placed in the hands of men, and this has not resulted in a reduction in this kind of violence. Another issue specific to women on reserves is the need for family and matrimonial property laws to provide substantive equality rights to women living in reserves.

After 400 years of colonization, aboriginal communities, aboriginal families and aboriginal structures have been devastated, and a change in the system must occur. Self-government in their communities can only take place with the support of aboriginal women. The male aboriginal leaders must realize that they cannot

negotiate self-government without the women, anymore than they can leave out the elders, the young people and the people living in urban centers.

Women are keepers of the culture. They want to raise healthy children. They want community decision making. They want consent powers. They want all people in the communities to decide upon their form of government. They want those aboriginal women who are still banished from their communities to have a vote, some land, and a house in their homeland, in the community in which they were born. Some Chiefs would still deny a place for aboriginal women and others wish they would simply go away until the men have settled this political business. Aboriginal women are not going to go away. Their male leaders must make a place for them at the bargaining table.

Native women must be fully involved in the negotiations on self-government. Their voices must be heard.

About the authors: The Native Women's Association of Canada was created in 1974 to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of aboriginal women. NWAC is the national representative of thirteen provincial and territorial organizations. It has always been NWAC's objective to provide a national voice for aboriginal women, and to address issues of importance to aboriginal women.

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