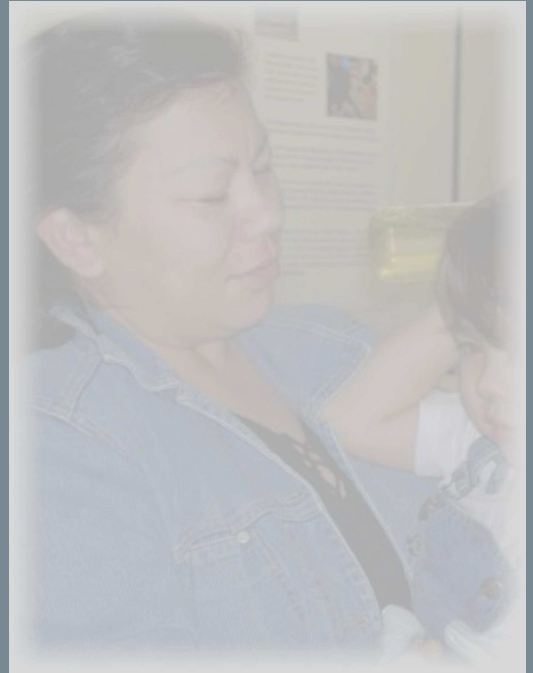


Aboriginal Female Lone Parents in Four Cities



Exploring Strengths and Challenges

Institute of Urban Studies 

About the Institute of Urban Studies

Founded in 1969 by the University of Winnipeg, the Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) was created at a time when the city's "urban university" recognized a need to address the problems and concerns of the inner city. From the outset, IUS has been both an educational and an applied research centre. The Institute has remained committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan context and has never lost sight of the demands of applied research aimed at practical, often novel, solutions to urban problems and issues.



© The Institute of Urban Studies
103-520 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg MB R3C 0G2
t: 204-982-1140
f: 204-943-4695
<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca>

This project would have not been possible without the courage and strong voices of the participating women and the contributions from the following organizations.

This report belongs to them.

- The Aboriginal Mother's Centre (Vancouver);
- The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (Edmonton);
- The First Nations University of Canada, Northern Campus at the Health Sciences Faculty, Department of Health and Community Development (Prince Albert);
 - Oyate Tipi Cumini Yape (Winnipeg); and
 - Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre Inc. (Winnipeg).



PUBLICATION DATA

Mulligan, Susan

Aboriginal Female Lone Parents in Four Cities: Exploring Strengths & Challenges
By Susan Mulligan, with much appreciated contributions from Jino Distasio and
Gina Sylvestre

Research and Working Paper # 46
ISBN: 1-894858-18-2

I. The University of Winnipeg. Institute of Urban Studies. II. Title. III. Series: Research and Working Paper (The University of Winnipeg, Institute of Urban Studies); 46.

The views expressed are the personal views of the author(s) and the Institute of Urban Studies accepts no responsibility for them.

Published by:
Institute of Urban Studies
The University of Winnipeg
103-520 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca>

Report Layout & Design by Susan Mulligan

Table of Contents

Introduction... 1

Methodological Approaches ... 4

The Literature- Aboriginal Women in Canada... 7

Demographic Characteristic... 8

Employment and Income... 10

Violence... 11

Education... 12

Health... 13

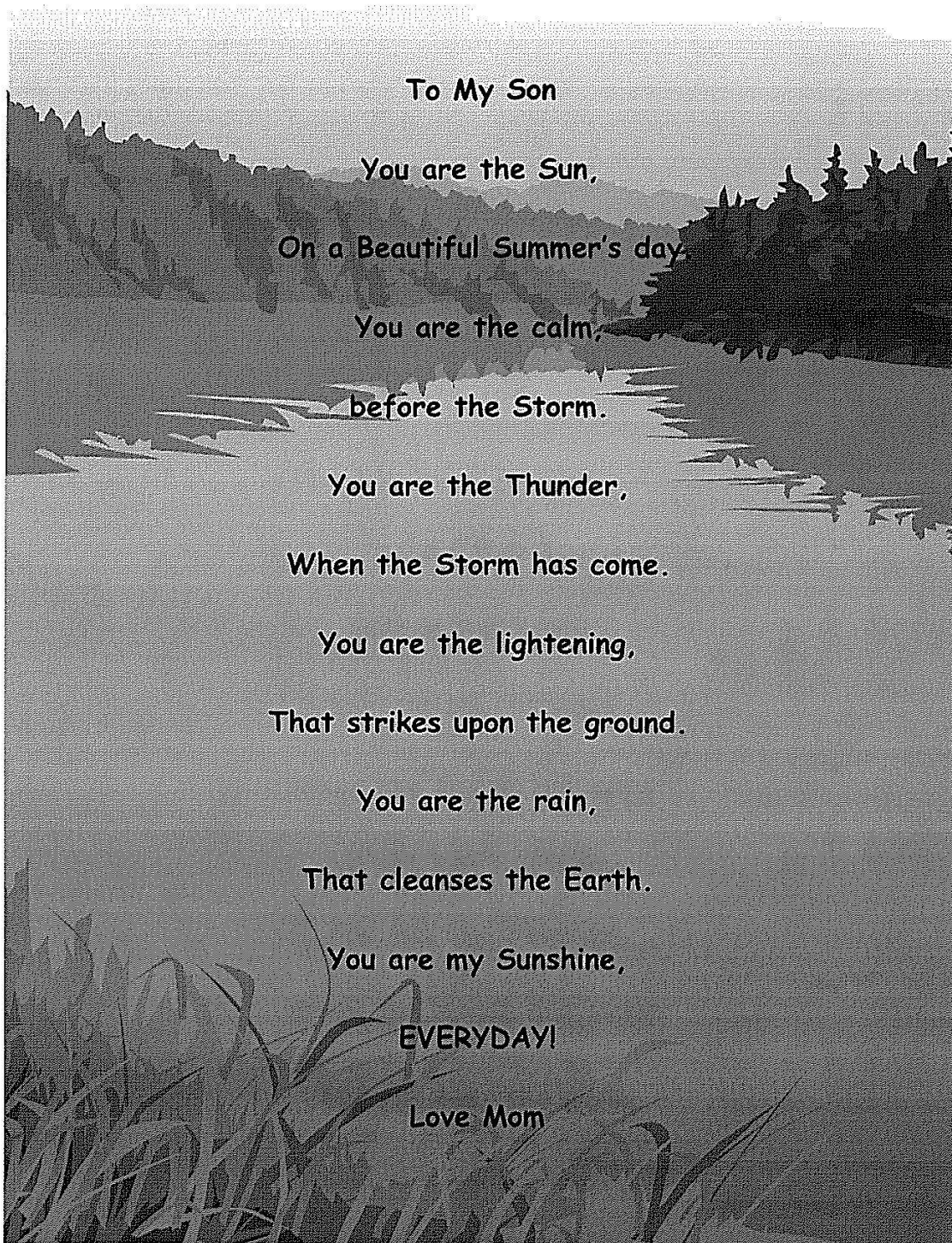
Housing... 14

Aboriginal Children... 14

The Talking Circles... 16

Conclusion... 21

Sources... 26



To My Son

You are the Sun,
On a Beautiful Summer's day
You are the calm,
before the Storm.

You are the Thunder,
When the Storm has come.

You are the lightening,
That strikes upon the ground.

You are the rain,
That cleanses the Earth.

You are my Sunshine,

EVERYDAY!

Love Mom

Submitted by a Female Lone Parent in Vancouver, British Columbia

Introduction

At the onset it is important to note that this document is by no means a comprehensive analysis on Aboriginal single female parents nor an examination of the cities in which the Talking Circles took place. Rather, this report is a synthesis of the Talking Circles coupled with a brief scan of the literature on Aboriginal female lone parent families.

This report does identify that while Aboriginal women are instrumental in the provision of care and support to their communities; their daily struggles to ensure the economic and social well-being of their families are largely ignored by policy makers.

Traditionally, Aboriginal women have shared a common legacy of marginalization and oppression created by the structural determinism of colonialism and patriarchy. One consequence of this marginalization is the discernable lack of information

about Aboriginal women in policy-oriented research literature. Most research that has been conducted has focused on a limited range of issues including health, violence and abuse and the criminal justice system. However, the issues and problems faced by Aboriginal women are far more complex and multi-faceted than portrayed in the literature. Specifically, they identify the necessity for research focused on Aboriginal single mothers because of the relatively high proportions of lone parents among Aboriginal peoples, particularly those living in urban areas. As compared to all other Canadian family households, Aboriginal female single parents are at greater risk of having low incomes, lower educational levels, higher levels of housing need and greater difficulties obtaining child care.

In addition, the children in lone parent families are more likely to experience health and educational problems, and there is also very little known about the

strategies to address their issues as well. *

The Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) at the University of Winnipeg was contacted to coordinate a study by the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to address the limited knowledge regarding urban Aboriginal single mothers and their families. The methodological approach adopted for this research project offered a balanced perspective to explore both the challenges faced by Aboriginal single mothers, as well as the strength and resolve of these individuals. As most research on Aboriginal women has a negative orientation and is problem-focused, this balanced approach is particularly significant because it allowed for the investigation of not only the problems of female-headed Aboriginal families, but also

insight into the resources and strategies used to ensure the well-being of family members.

Whereas previous research has focused on predetermined issues that may have little relevance for many Aboriginal women during the course of their daily lives, this project consisted of a consultation process that encouraged Aboriginal women to identify their own priorities and issues.

The first phase of this consultation process consisted of the selection of the participating cities and sponsoring organizations by the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The organizations included the Aboriginal Mother's Centre (Vancouver), the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (Edmonton), the First Nations University of Canada, Northern Campus at the Health Sciences Faculty, Department of Health and Community Development

* An exception is the work of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg who has released *Child Poverty Report Cards* and may be reviewed at <http://www.spew.mb.ca/search.asp>

(Prince Albert) and Oyate Tipi Cumini Yape (Winnipeg).

To further facilitate the consultation process, the sponsoring organizations held a Talking Circle in each of the four Canadian cities. The organizations then summarized the discussions that were held to explore the strengths and challenges of Aboriginal female lone parent households. IUS integrated this information and presented the findings at the Aboriginal Policy Conference (APC) held in Ottawa in 2006.

This presentation was an important component of the project as it provided a vehicle to disseminate the findings in a timely fashion and, most importantly to encourage dialogue and greater awareness of the issues relevant to female-headed Aboriginal households.

The methodological approach adopted for this research project offered a balanced perspective to explore both the challenges faced by Aboriginal single mothers, as well as the strength and resolve of these individuals

This report represents a final document for the research project in which the consultation process is described and the findings are presented. In the following section, the methodology of the project is discussed, in particular the utility of the Talking Circles which helped to establish the priorities of Aboriginal single mothers. This is followed by a section that provides a brief scan of the literature on Aboriginal lone parent households.

This literature review illuminates that only broad indicators from census data is available to illustrate the circumstances of Aboriginal women who are single parents. In contrast, the present research project has succeeded in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by Aboriginal single mothers and the final section of the report reviews the strengths and challenges identified by the Talking Circle participants.

Methodological Approaches

Originally the Institute of Urban Studies was approached by the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, to coordinate a research project that would examine the circumstances of Aboriginal female lone parent households in Canadian urban centres. The objective of the project was to explore the issues and challenges facing single Aboriginal women in their struggle to obtain an acceptable quality of life for themselves and their children. The study was comprised of a three step process. The first step consisted of relationship building with participating Aboriginal organizations and the second step - a consultation process with Aboriginal single mothers. Finally, IUS supplemented the project with a review of literature on households headed by lone Aboriginal parents so that comparisons could be made with the research findings.

As the members of the steering committee were located in four Western Canadian cities, the establishment of the parameters of the research project was achieved through e-mail discussions and conference calls amongst the committee members. It was decided by the Steering Committee that Talking Circles would be organized by each participating organization to capture the voices of Aboriginal women who are lone parents. Of particular significance, the committee emphasized that it was paramount to encourage these women to speak not only about their hardships, but also to value the resilience and fortitude they have experienced in overcoming substantive barriers.

It was paramount to encourage these women to speak not only about their hardships, but also to value the resilience and fortitude they have experienced in overcoming substantive barriers

Traditional Indigenous Talking Circles are used to offer an opportunity to listen and respect the views of others. In this setting, only one person speaks at a time and should feel free to express themselves in any way that is comfortable: by sharing a story, a personal experience, by using examples or metaphors, and so on.

The first Talking Circle was held at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre Inc. (meaning...“We all help one another”) in Winnipeg. This centre provides support services to Aboriginal children and families in the urban community. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata was viewed as an ideal location for this exercise given that the organization was established in 1984 by committed community members who sought an Aboriginal solution to support and rebuild families.

As it is important to offer food, the Circle was catered by Neechi Foods which is a worker co-operative located in Winnipeg. The word Neechi means “friend” in Cree and Ojibway.

Ten women participated in and contributed to this discussion. The Circle began with a round of introductions. The group spent a half hour on each topic, in addition to introductions and closing remarks. The Talking Circle consisted of two themes, the *strengths and challenges* of heading a lone parent household. The information was recorded on an easel board so that the words of the participants may be summarized at a later date. Participants were asked to sign a consent form. Finally, the women were given an honorarium of \$20.00 each to thank them for sharing their time and their knowledge.

The first Talking Circle was deemed a success as it allowed participants to speak of their experiences and identify the issues that were most pressing to them as single parents. The Steering Committee agreed that the same methodological approach was to be used for the three remaining cities. IUS provided the participating organizations

with direction and instructions on identifying potential participants and conducting the Talking Circles.

As in Winnipeg, the Talking Circles in Vancouver, Edmonton and Prince Albert focused on the strengths and challenges facing Aboriginal female lone parents. The participating organizations were asked to document the Talking Circles and provide summaries to IUS to ensure that those who participated were represented in a respectful and accurate manner. IUS assembled the information and documentation of the four Talking Circles in order to develop a presentation of the findings for the Aboriginal Policy Conference that was held in March, 2006, in Ottawa.

Prior to the consultation process with single Aboriginal mothers, IUS developed a review of literature pertaining to issues of lone parent households amongst the Aboriginal population in Canada. This literature review illustrates the limitations of current knowledge regarding the circumstances of Aboriginal single mothers. More importantly, the review illustrates the predominance of literature on broad social and economic issues and the complete absence of research that provides the perspective of Aboriginal women. The literature review presented in the following section provides a background to consider the findings of this research project.

The literature review illustrates the limitations of current knowledge regarding the circumstances of Aboriginal single mothers

The Literature- Aboriginal Women in Canada

Aboriginal peoples* have lived on lands now known as Canada for thousands of years and are bound together by a sacred tie to the land, a value of communal independence and a holistic worldview. The Assembly of First Nations submitted to Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples their description of this way of knowing:

“Our lives were dominated by the need to fulfill our duties to our families, communities and nations. This way of life imposed an obligation on individuals to place other people’s needs first. As a result, two distinctive features- sharing and cooperation became a central focus of First Nations’ life. The people of the First Nation willingly sacrificed some individual freedom to common good, because that way of life ensured the comfort, well being, safety and survival of the nation” (Assembly of First Nations:1993).

Changes to Indigenous Canadian societies began approximately 500 years ago with the advent of French and British colonization of North America which precipitated the disruption of Aboriginal culture, language and socio-political structures. In particular, the patriarchal system of euro-colonial values altered the egalitarian system of Aboriginal peoples, which was effective for the functioning of their communities and their members (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 1998).

Aboriginal women, in general, continue to be under-represented or ignored within policy literature on Aboriginal peoples. Matters relating to health and healing, violence, abuse and the criminal system dominate research that tends to be “problem-focused” allowing for little knowledge and understanding of complexities and insights to strategies that work for Aboriginal women (Stout & Kipling 1998).

* The definition used in this report is taken from the Census Canada Aboriginal Population Profile and refers to those persons who reported being North American Indian, Métis or Inuit, and/or those who reported being a Treaty Indian or a Registered Indian as defined by the Indian Act of Canada and/or those who were members of an Indian Band or First Nation, see <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/Profil01ab/PlaceSearchForm1.cfm>.

Aboriginal women do face multiple burdens, including poor health status, poverty violence, substance abuse, and lack of child care (Stout et al., 2001). The following section provides information on lone parent female headed households in Canada where more specific information on Aboriginal lone parents would be preferred.

In 2001, twice the proportion of Aboriginal children lived with a lone parent than non-Aboriginal children

Demographic Characteristics

In 2001, there were just under a half million Aboriginal women in Canada or 3% of the total female population. In relation to the distribution of Aboriginal women, 17% resided in British Columbia, 16% in Alberta, while 15% lived in Manitoba and 13% in Saskatchewan. The majority (72%) lived in off-reserve areas with 30% of all Aboriginal women living in a Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA)* and 23% in other urban areas.

In 2003, 63% of Aboriginal women were self-identified as North American Indian, while 29% reported Métis identity and 5% Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2006).

* CMA's are geographical areas where the urban population exceeds 100,000 persons.

The following points are national figures regarding Aboriginal lone female parent households:

- in 2001, twice the proportion of Aboriginal children lived with a lone parent than non-Aboriginal children;
- In 2001, more than 50% of First Nations Aboriginal children lived in a lone parent family;
- In 2001, National Council of Welfare reported that the largest age category for Canadian single parent mothers was the 35-44 age group;
- 54,735 or 17% of the total Métis children lived with a lone parent in 2001; and
- For Inuit children, 4,280 or 25% of the total lived with a lone parent (Statistics Canada 2003).

Aboriginal Identity Female Lone Parent Households 2001				
	Winnipeg (CMA)*	Prince Albert (CA)**	Edmonton (CMA)	Vancouver (CMA)
Total Population	322,135	39,890	927,020	1,967,475
Total Aboriginal Identity Population	55,760	11,640	40,930	36,855
Total Female Aboriginal Identity Population	29,715	6,140	21,640	19,315
Total Aboriginal Identity Lone Parent Family Households	5,865	1,240	3,915	3,200
Total Female Aboriginal Identity Lone Parent Family Household	5,105	1,095	3,335	2,755
Percentage of Total Aboriginal Identity Lone Parent Households: Headed by Females	87%	88%	85%	86%

Source: Aboriginal Population Profile, Statistics Canada: 2001

** CMA's refers to geographical areas where the urban population exceeds 100,000 persons.

* CA's refers to Census Amalgamation.

Employment and Income

Between 1991 and 1996, the number of self-employed Aboriginal people grew significantly (Eagles Eye View 2004). Census statistics show that labour participation rates among Aboriginal populations increased from 43.3% in 1996 to 55.1% in 2001 (Statistics Canada 1996, 2001). Despite apparent improvements Aboriginal females had relatively high rates of low income. The 2003 statistics show that 38% had incomes which fell below the after-tax LICO* compared to 7% of under 65 years of age two-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Recent trends indicate that the poverty rate for families headed by lone parent females, under age 65 dropped to 42.4% in 2001 from a high of 62.3% in 1984. The rate was 44.2% in 2000 (Poverty Profile 2001). In 2001, more than 85% of all single parent families in Canada were mothers and encompassed 90% of “poor single parent families” (Ibid.).

* LICO refers to low-income cut-off lines. For more information see <http://www.ccsd.ca/pr/lico00aj.htm>

Not surprisingly, two parent households have an advantage in avoiding persistently low incomes. More than any other family type, those lone parents with a dependent child under the age of 5 and those who were not with a partner in marriage or in a common-law union at the time of their child’s birth were more likely to experience persistently low incomes. However, the introduction of the National Child Benefit Supplement in 1996 helped to reduce the low income rate from 54.2% in 1980 to 46.6% in 2000 (Hatfield 2004).

It is notable that marriage breakdown and not teenage pregnancy is the main cause of high rates of poverty for single parent mothers (Poverty Profile 2001). This is particularly significant for Aboriginal women who experience marriage breakdown while residing on a reserve. Unlike other women in Canada, First Nations women have no right to certain assets when their marriage breaks down. Provincial and territorial matrimonial laws do not apply

to *real property* on reserves resulting from The Indian Act*, which gives the federal government exclusive law making authority over “Indians, and Lands reserved for Indians.” *Real property* refers to land or things attached to it, such as a house. Women and children may be forced to leave their matrimonial homes, and the reserve, because they have no legal claim to occupy the family residence. Many First Nations women relocate to urban centres where they are confronted with hardships, especially if they have no support of extended family or friends (Distasio *et al.*, 2006). For some, remaining in a home where violence is occurring is often the only choice because of the lack of alternatives (Mann 2005).

Participants at the Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable (Housing Sectoral Session 2004) in Ottawa overwhelmingly stated that matrimonial rights on reserve must be resolved.

*See http://ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/ma2006/02766bka_e.html for more information.

Violence

Aboriginal women are more likely to report that they experienced some form of violence brought on by their spouse than non-Aboriginal women. In 25% of assault cases, the former spouse was the perpetrator, which is three times the rate for non-Aboriginal women (The General Social Survey of Canada 1999). In addition, Aboriginal women often do not report incidences to the police because of high degrees of suspicion of the legal system.

In cities, Aboriginal women between 25-44 years of age are five times more likely to die of violence than non-Aboriginal women. In the document, *Canada: Stolen Sisters*** it was revealed that more than five hundred Aboriginal women have gone missing or have been murdered in the past thirty years in Canada. Contributing factors include poverty, the matrimonial laws on reserves, and overcrowding in homes both on and off reserves.

**See http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php for more information.

Education

There are numerous motivations compelling single mothers to attend formal schooling, such as entering the competitive knowledge-based economy in order to provide financially for their families after graduation. However, extreme material poverty plays a dramatic role in determining their access. As social assistance is the primary source of income for single mother families in Canada (National Council of Welfare 2001), it is particularly difficult for women to participate in the labour force or attend formal schooling with pre-school children as daycare is an expensive and unattainable luxury (ibid.). Without safe, affordable housing, subsidized day care, and adequate social assistance, a university education is clearly out of reach for impoverished single mother-led families. Without adequate housing and incomes, their poverty will likely deepen over time.

Evidence suggests that higher levels of achievement are more likely if Aboriginal cultures are taken more seriously within the education system (Kehoe & Echols 1994). Those who positively identify with their heritage, even in the face of the dominant society's devaluation, are likely to do better with their studies than those minority people who identify less positively with their heritage (Ryan 1995).

The Native Women's Association of Canada asserts that education must be culturally appropriate and controlled by First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in order to respect, protect and fulfill the rights for all Aboriginal peoples with lifelong learning goals (Native Women's Association of Canada 2004). In particular, the concept of "*From the Womb to the Tomb*" must be imbedded into all life long learning activities. This is particularly the case for single parent women, low-income families and those who are living in rural or remote communities.

“*From the Womb to the Tomb*” includes skills training programs involving affordable housing, adequate funding for school supplies, safe, reliable and accessible daycare facilities, culturally appropriate gender specific sexual health education (and adequate, accessible, confidential provision of reproductive health supplies and services) transportation, access to telephone lines, internet connection/hardware and resources such as mentoring and coaching for learning at home and in the community (Ibid.).

Health

In 2004, Health Canada launched the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. It focuses on improving the health status of all Aboriginal Canadians and takes a collaborative approach by integrating its activities with the Aboriginal community, researchers, health professionals and government departments at many levels when

developing priorities for research, evaluation and knowledge translation (Beijing +10).*

In terms of health status and despite the above initiative, Aboriginal women in Canada, compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, are not faring well. Aboriginal women have higher incidences of diabetes, tobacco addiction, and substance abuse which are often related to problems concerning fetal alcohol syndrome, family dysfunction, and violence.

In 2000, Aboriginal women had the highest proportion of HIV/AIDS diagnoses representing 18% as compared to 6% of non-aboriginal women, with well over 50% of these cases related to injection drug use (Health Canada 2000). Aboriginal women have higher suicide rates than non-Aboriginal women (Stout *et al.*, 2001). Statistics show they have suicide rates up to eight times higher than other Canadian women, depending on age (Mann, 2005).

* See http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/resources/beijing10/index_e.html

In terms of accessing mainstream health and social services, Aboriginal women are subjected to racism and cultural insensitivity leaving women feeling marginalized and isolated (Stout *et al.*, 2001). Services must respect, be sensitive to and reflect cultural, geographical and linguistic diversity of Aboriginal peoples.

Housing

There is a critical and immediate housing crisis for Aboriginal people that affects the safety, health and well-being of this population. In 1997, The Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation (CMHC) released two reports on Aboriginal peoples related to housing, *Housing and Socio-Economic Conditions of Lone Parent Families* and *Housing needs among Off-reserve Lone Parents in Canada*. These reports highlighted that Aboriginal lone parent families headed by either a female or male are half as likely to own their own dwelling as Aboriginal two parent families. Aboriginal female lone parent families' fall outside the economic

reach of homeownership: 69.1% lived in rental units while 71.8 % lived in apartments (CMHC (a) 1997).

Also in 1997, the core housing need for Aboriginal lone parents registered at 75% for those residing in Winnipeg and Vancouver, 65% for Edmonton, and 74% in Prince Albert (CMHC (b) 1997). A household is said to be in core need if its housing falls below at least one of the adequacy, suitability or affordability standards, and spends 30 percent or more of its before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three standards). Since the two CMHC reports were released in 1997, very little has changed or been documented.

Aboriginal Children

Aboriginal children represent a precious resource for the sustainment of Aboriginal cultures into the future. Prior to colonization, First Nations people had worldviews that ensured the holistic health and well-being of the

children. As Blackstock (2003) states, “the holistic worldview held that in order for that child, family or environment to achieve an optimal level of functioning, the physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive must be in balance.”

In relation to today’s standards, Aboriginal children are four times as likely to encounter hunger and experience more health problems than non-Aboriginal children. 52.1% Aboriginal children are “poor” in contrast to the total number of Canadian children at 23.4% (Anderson 2003).

In terms of demographics, in 2001, Aboriginal children under the age of 14 represented one-third of the Aboriginal population, compared to only 19% of the non-Aboriginal population. In addition, fewer Aboriginal children (14 years and younger) lived with two parent families than non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The delivery of child welfare services to First Nations children, families and communities is as diverse as Aboriginal peoples in Canada. There is no explicit reference to Child Welfare in either the *Indian Act* or *The Constitution Act* of 1872, 1982. As such, provincial jurisdiction is accepted as an interim arrangement until specific First Nations legislation is developed and enacted through the self-government process (Bennett 2006).

“the holistic worldview held that in order for that child, family or environment to achieve an optimal level of functioning, the physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive must be in balance.”

The Talking Circles

“I don’t feel like I am being a parent, it feels like I am winging it”

“Adjusting to parenting is hard being a kid yourself”

“Having to live in and out of shelters while pregnant”

“I am paying 90% of my cheque for rent”

“My Challenge is having to stay with family or friend (on sofas), or shelters”

The women expressed in the Talking Circles that basic needs such as accessing food, shelter and clothing are their biggest challenges. They also highlighted that they face systematic barriers related to financial assistance programs and lacked local support agencies. These barriers are a direct response to living in poverty. This condition contributes to low levels of self-esteem, leading some to question their parenting skills.

Ultimately, each of these women are concerned about the welfare and happiness of their children who bring them much joy, hope and strength for the future. Despite this condition, the women are extremely resilient and ironically the challenges that they face are also the strengths that they share.

Shelter is one of the greatest challenges these participating women experienced. For many, locating and maintaining safe and affordable housing is difficult. Most feel that available housing is found in unsafe neighbourhoods and that the quality of housing is generally poor. Many have temporarily stayed with friends, family or in temporary shelters. Most have experienced absolute homelessness. For these women, the main challenges of finding and maintaining shelter are:

- Discrimination from the landlord
- Unsafe neighbourhoods
- Unaffordable housing
- Large waiting lists for subsidized housing
- Poor housing conditions
- Difficulty in maintaining utility payments

“Parenting skill workshops often come with fees”

“Alone no matter how hard I try, nothing changes”

“Sometimes it’s: choose child or choose boyfriend”

“We need an Aboriginal dating service”

“Loneliness – staying home and being afraid”

“Feeling alone, isolated, no support, depression, it can happen to anyone”

Support organizations available to these women are at a great distance to travel to, and many of the single mothers lack transportation. Some stated that many places that offer support, such as parenting workshops are closing down. Affordability also remains a concern as the fees are too high for parenting skill workshops. Yet others stated that many of these workshops are imposed upon them as a condition of receiving financial support from government agencies. Some women expressed that often the organization advertised that they had Aboriginal programming only to find that the agency did not have Aboriginal staff. Challenges relating to support include:

- Not culturally appropriate
- Lack of availability
- Lack of Aboriginal staff
- Lack of transportation
- Affordability
- Shyness

Isolation is a predominate feeling for these mothers because they feel that they have little or no support. These feelings of isolation may be the result of:

- Lack of recreational activities
- Long distances to family and friends
- Not being in a supportive relationship
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of support from the father of the children

“Ministry harasses you for getting outside assistance, if you get help from the family.”

“Ministry threatens to take away your child.”

“Seems like you have to beg in order to get help from the Ministry”

“I was forced to stay in a shelter while pregnant because the house was deemed unsafe and worker threatened to take child away at birth if I didn’t stay at a shelter”

“Gas is expensive, there is no money for schooling”

Systematic barriers include difficulties with governmental assistance. Some claimed that if they seek outside assistance they fear a penalty will be imposed. These barriers greatly affect the women’s’ levels of self-worth. Some systematic barriers include:

- Threatening comments from agency staff
- Fear of losing children
- Difficult criteria
- Difficult application processes
- Inflexible guidelines
- Lack of resources
- Unsuitability of assistance
- Discrimination
- Lack of cultural awareness

Education and child care issues are other challenges facing the single mothers. The women talked about their own experiences and those of their children. It is important to note that their personal education was not a priority. The future of the children is undoubtedly the main concern for these women. Difficulties in accessing education for the women had the following characteristics:

- Limited time
- Affordability
- Limited support
- Not culturally appropriate

**“Your children,
children are your
strength”**

**“Lack of family
support, no one to
ask for child care”**

**“There is no
teaching to our
children about
our culture:
medicine wheel,
smudging,
drumming, what
happened to it?
In rare instances
there is 1 hour limit
in some cases,
per week”**

**“Language
pathologist wants
to know what’s
wrong with
our kids”**

The lack of culturally appropriate settings in both day cares and the public school system is a major concern for these participating women. For those whose children are in day care the following barriers were expressed:

- Lack of day care spaces
- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Limited family support
- Transportation

Moreover, when either the parent or the child becomes ill there is a critical gap in available child care. This is also similar for events such as school in-service days. The women agreed that if there were more before-and-after school programs for their children this would alleviate some of the burden.

The major concerns for those whose children are in primary schools are:

- Children are not challenged
- Discrimination
- Lack of cultural programs
- Receiving insufficient education
- Over assessing children in schools
- Poor treatment

“Got up and did something on my own”

“Everyday is a learning and teaching day, my daughter teaches me, I learn from her”

“I have a say in what influences my child”

“Children, overwhelming love!”

“Couldn't imagine life without them”

“Culture. Following what my family follows”

“Living in Canada, not a war torn country”

Strengths

The women expressed that their children are their greatest source of strength. Their tremendous resilience in coping with the daily challenges of poverty and the resourcefulness in locating supports are vital so that they may continue to raise their children. Being acknowledged by others and the ability to be a strong role model for their children is a source of inspiration for these women. Other sources of strengths are categorized as:

- Good budgeting skills
- Taking time out for self
- Finding resources
- Sense of accomplishment
- Determination
- Support networks
- Sobriety
- Independence
- Being an example for their children
- Culture

Other sources of strength for the participating women are:

- New domestic dispute laws (Zero Tolerance)
- Programs with childcare
- Internet access
- Increases in Maternity Benefits
- Increases in Child Tax Credit
- Positive changes in banking system
- Family friendly work environments

Conclusion

The research project pertaining to the exploration of the strengths and challenges facing Aboriginal single mothers in four Western Canadian Cities has achieved two goals. First, it has documented the development of the research project and illustrated that any future research pertaining to Aboriginal women must recognize the need to adopt a holistic approach that includes the voices of Aboriginal women.

Secondly, the project has highlighted that the daily struggles of Aboriginal single mothers relate to the basic survival of them and their children, and not exclusively to the institutional and systematic causes of poverty that predominates in the literature.



It is hoped that the time spent and knowledge shared by these resilient women will offer a springboard for more relevant research in the future that is ultimately driven by those who honour their children and see them as their strength.

Sources

Assembly of First Nations (1993) *Reclaiming our Nationhood: Strengthening our Heritage*. Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations.

Anderson, John. (2003) *Aboriginal Children in Poverty in Urban Communities: Social Exclusion and Growing Racialization of Poverty in Canada*. Canadian Council on Social Development.

Beijing + 10 Fact Sheets. Status of Women Canada. Available on line at http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/resources/beijing10/index_e.html

Bennett, Marlyn. (2006) *First Nations Fact Sheet: A general Profile on First Nations Child Welfare in Canada*. First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada.

Blackstock, C. (2003) “*First Nations Child and Family Services: Restoring Peace and Harmony in First Nations Communities.*” In *Connecting Research, Policy and Practice*. (Eds.), B. McKenzie & K. Kufeldt Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Burns, George. (2000) *Inclusiveness and Relevance in First Nations/Public Education Schooling: It's All About Praxis of Aboriginal Self-Determination in the Tuition Agreement Education Field*.

CMHC (a). (1997) *The Housing and Socio-Economic Conditions of Lone Parent Families: 1991 Census Profile*. Socio-Economic Series. Issue 31.

CMHC (b). (1997) *Housing Needs among Off-reserve Aboriginal Lone Parents in Canada*. Socio-Economic Series. Issue 34.

CMHC. (2004) *The Role of Housing in Aboriginal Student Success- Post Secondary Institutions in Vancouver*.

Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP). (1998) *Overview of the Status of Indigenous Women in Canada: Pre-Contact, British Colonialism, and the Post-Colonial Debate*. Congress of Aboriginal Peoples Indigenous Women of the Americas.

Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. (2002) *Frequently Asked Questions about Aboriginal peoples*. Available on line at http://www.ainc-inac.gc/pr/info/info125_e.html

Distasio, Sylvestre & Mulligan. (2006) *Home is Where the Heart is and Right now that is Nowhere: An Examination of Hidden Homelessness Among Aboriginal peoples in Prairie Cities*. The Institute of Urban Studies. Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Eagles Eye View, An Environmental Scan of the Aboriginal Community in Winnipeg. (2004). Prepared for the Aboriginal Task Group, United Way Winnipeg.

Indian Country. (2004) *Indigenous Women in Crisis*. <http://www.fncfnc.com/pubs/factsheets/html>
Date Accessed: 1-24-06.

Hatfield, Michael. (2004) *Vulnerability to Persistent Low Income*. Social Development Canada. Government of Canada

Health Canada. (2000). *Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada*. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/pubs/gen/stats_profil_e.html Facts and Figures.

Kehoe, J. and F. Echols. (1994) *Improving Achievement and Other Outcomes Among Urban Native Students*. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14 (1).

National Council of Welfare (NCW). (2004). *Poverty Profile 2001*. http://www.ncwcnbes.net/htmldocument/reportpovertypro01/PP2001_e.pdf. (Retrieved August 5, 2005)

Mann, Michelle. (2005). *Aboriginal Women: An Issues Background*. Prepared for the Status of Women Canada.

Native Women's Association of Canada. (2004). *Background Paper: Life long Learning, "From the Womb to the Tomb."*

Native Women's Association of Canada. (2006). *Native Women's Association Response to Canada's Fourth and Fifth Reports on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights covering the period of September 1999-December 2004.*

Canada- Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable. (2004). *Housing Sectoral Session, Facilitators Report.* Ottawa, Ontario.

Ryan, James. (1995) *Experiencing Urban Schooling: The Adjustment of Native Student to the Extra-Curricular Demands of a Post-Secondary Education Program.* Department of Educational Administration, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Maureen Johns Simpson. (1996) Regina Public Schools. Supplemental Information. http://www.saskschools.ca/~aboriginal_res/supplem.htm#talk

Statistics Canada. (2002) *The General Social Survey: Family History.* Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division. Ottawa, Ontario.

Statistics Canada. (2003) *Census: Analysis Series Aboriginal Peoples of Canada: A Demographic Profile.* Ottawa, Ontario.

Statistics Canada. (2006 a) *Women in Canada.* The Daily. Ottawa, Ontario.

Statistics Canada. (2006 b) *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report.* Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division. Ottawa, Ontario.

The Government Canada and the Government of Manitoba. (2005) *Moving Forward on Early Learning and Child Care.*