



National Aboriginal Women's Summit – *Strong Women, Strong Communities*

June 20 – 22, 2007 Corner Brook, NL

Theme: Empowering Aboriginal Women

Issue Paper: *Equality and Empowerment*

Inuit Perspective

Traditional Inuit culture is patriarchal in nature. As part of a semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer existence, women occupied the traditional role of childbearing and child-rearing, while preparing the food and clothing that came from the hunting of animals such as seal, caribou and whale, which was the role of Inuit men. While women had very little official voice within the community, women did have influence over family decisions, especially elder Inuit women, who occupied the role of listener, advisor and director of the family camp, the hub of Inuit family life.

While the role of women within Inuit society may have been limited, gender roles in general were clearly defined and well understood by all members of that society. In the years since European contact, these roles have begun to shift and are still very much in a state of flux. This leaves the Inuit woman in a precarious position. While her culture may be an important part of her identity, it is difficult to know where she fits within that culture, and therefore, to have a clear understanding of her rights as an Inuk, a Canadian and a human being.

In the last fifty years, the traditional Inuit ways have been assaulted through forced assimilation in the form of disease, forced relocation, residential schooling, removal of children, the introduction of drugs, alcohol and non-traditional foods, sexual assault and oppression, and systemic racism, to name a few. These factors, coupled with culturally inappropriate strategies to 'help' Inuit have better lives, have disempowered Inuit in general and have sent the women of this society to its margins.

The legacy of the above-mentioned events has largely disempowered Inuit society and as a result, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence are rampant in Inuit communities. A recent Statistics Canada survey shows use of shelters for abused women and their children has grown dramatically in Nunavut. Between 2001 and 2004, use of the shelters went up by 54 per cent, compared to a 4.6 per cent increase in the rest of the country (the Nuluq Project – National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities, Pauktuutit 2006). Women and their children are most often the victims of the abuse that results in large measure from the feeling that Inuit do not have the power of self-determination.



Inuit stand out from other Canadians in that they have by far the highest rates of poverty, the highest rates of unemployment, the lowest levels of formal education, the highest cost of living, the lowest levels of housing quality and availability, and one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Many of the problems in Inuit communities are impacted by the cross-cutting issue of gender fairness and the need to empower Inuit women.

The past 25 years has seen Canada take major steps towards improving gender equity in most of the country. Gender equity is a fundamental human right and is expected to guide all federal policies and legislation (Charter of Rights and Freedoms).

What is Pauktuutit doing about it?

As the national voice of Inuit women, Pauktuutit works to ensure we are able to enjoy all the rights and benefits afforded to women as Canadian citizens. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women are recognized for our wisdom, perspective, and insight regarding regional, national, and global issues and for our powerful influence on community social issues, health, and wellness. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women are recognized as equals, are empowered, and have an independent voice. Through Pauktuutit, the Government of Canada can fulfill its Inuit-specific gender equity priorities in a consistent, coherent, culturally appropriate, and cost-effective manner.

Pauktuutit develops and implements a range of policies, programs, and strategies in partnership with Canada's public and private sectors. Through Pauktuutit, Inuit women are becoming empowered and their participation in relevant decision-making is increasing. Inevitably, this enhances the strength and vitality of all Inuit, their families, and communities.

Since its inception, Pauktuutit has developed and distributed practical and timely community-level tools:

- on basic counselling skills;
- on child sexual abuse;
- on abused and battered women and
- on the link between the housing crisis and family violence.



ABUSE PREVENTION

Abuse is a critical factor in any discussion regarding equity and empowerment. Pauktuutit has developed and is now implementing the first ever **National Strategy for Abuse Prevention in Inuit Communities**.

With primary funding from the National Crime Prevention Strategy, the Strategy is a three-year Pauktuutit initiative (2003-06) to improve the coordination of abuse prevention services and resources in Inuit communities. It is an action-oriented Inuit Abuse Prevention Strategy to promote best practices and to support increased collaboration on abuse issues.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT – PAUKTUUTIT 2006

- Inuit Women in Business Economic Development Initiative;
- Inuit Families Caregivers Respite Strategy;
- *Keepers of the Light* - The Inuit Women's Action Plan;
- *The Inuit Way* publication – describes the traditional culture of Canada's Inuit;

Recommendations

- Recognition by Federal Government that Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada is a National Aboriginal Organization: In order to fulfill its commitment to gender equity, the Government of Canada makes it a priority to provide Pauktuutit recognition and resources commensurate with that provided to the other five National Aboriginal Organizations (NAOs). Pauktuutit must at last, be recognised for the independent national voice of Inuit women that it is, and supported to contribute optimally to the creation of solutions to the critical issues facing Inuit women, their families and communities, with the same stature, resources, responsibilities and influence afforded the other NAOs.
- Training and knowledge transfer in order to sustain front-line workers and community services.
- Programs that build on Inuit strengths and prevent abuse be promoted. The focus must be on delivering culturally-relevant services that heal — services that recognize healing as a process rather than a single act or event or a compensation payment.
- Clear and unequivocal support for initiatives that address the multi-faceted dimensions of violence within Inuit communities.