



# Violence Against Women in the NWT A Way Forward

## Introduction

The Northwest Territories (NWT) is a land of great promise and potential, with a rich diversity of people. We have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents who have inhabited this territory for many many years and those who have more recently adopted the North as their home. Residents of the NWT have hopes and aspirations that are intended to make their home, their territory, a place to fulfill their dreams.

The three Northern Premiers have recently released *A Northern Vision: a Stronger North and a Better Canada*, which outlines the type of North we are striving to realize. One goal of great significance to the Northwest Territories is:

### **To build a North where self-reliant individuals live in healthy, viable communities**

When we consider healthy sustainable communities, with self-reliant individuals, we need to ensure that all residents of those communities are safe and freely able to pursue their dreams. This includes the Aboriginal women in the NWT, who make up 25% of the population. More specifically, we must ensure that the challenges facing the Aboriginal women in our territory are addressed: family violence matters, the need for employment, training and services such as day care, housing issues and the lack of women in leadership positions in the territory. Statistics collected with respect to these issues indicate that there is substantial room to improve the quality of life of Aboriginal women in the NWT.

Unfortunately, family violence is a significant issue in the NWT. Although both men and women can be violent, and both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal individuals can be subject to abuse within the family environment, spousal violence and sexual assault directed at women is more frequent and more severe. This violence more often results in serious physical injury and emotional harm than spousal violence directed toward men. Dual marginalization of Aboriginal women in society, as both women and as Aboriginal people, makes them one of the most vulnerable populations.

The history, geography and demographics of the Northwest Territories give family violence in the North a distinctive face. Historical traumas, including those arising from residential schools, have resulted in the breakdown of family and community life. Within communities, there are issues that may include alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, physical and sexual abuse, depression, rage, increased levels of interpersonal violence and suicide. As a result family violence in the NWT takes on many forms and has become a widespread and complex community problem that affects everyone.



## Magnitude of the problem

In the Statistics Canada *Measuring Violence Against Women Statistical Trends 2006*<sup>1</sup> it was reported that twelve percent of adult residents of the Northwest Territories had experienced violence by a spousal partner as compared to seven percent in other jurisdictions. This document also noted that violence against Aboriginal women in Canada is three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal women. Shelter statistics in the NWT show that 80% of the clients that use the shelter services are of Aboriginal descent.

Coupled with these alarming statistics, the NWT has some unique challenges in offering programming to Aboriginal women affected by violence. The Northwest Territories encompasses 33 communities across a landmass of 1,171,918 square kilometers. Many of these communities do not have road access for part of the year. Communities range in size from 80 residents to 18,695 residents. These challenges mean that some communities have social, psychological and medical services readily available and other communities have sporadic, perhaps monthly, fly-in services.

There are five shelters in the NWT to service all 33 communities. Many women have to leave their home communities to access shelter services and with the lack of housing, trauma treatment programs and other supports to leave an abusive relationship permanently, many end up returning to their home community and their relationships.

Although approximately 50% of the NWT population is Aboriginal, and many of the small communities' populations are over 80% Aboriginal, the NWT cannot access federal funding allocated for shelter programming because most federal funding is for on-reserve programming. The NWT is essentially an "off-reserve" jurisdiction because there are only two small reserves in the entire territory. The lack of access to federal monies means that services are largely unavailable to many Aboriginal women in particular, who so desperately require services.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, *Measuring Violence Against Women Statistical Trends 2006*, Minister responsible for Statistics Canada 2006. Some survey data contained in this document relating to the Northwest Territories should be considered with caution as sample sizes were limited. The 2004 General Social Survey was completed by telephone interviews, which could impact results due to lower telephone coverage in smaller NWT communities.



## We are making progress

Solutions to violence against Aboriginal women should be holistic, culturally and spiritually appropriate and consider the individual in the context of the family, the family in the context of the community, and the community in the context of the larger society. To ensure that solutions to address the needs of NWT women meet this principle, the Coalition Against Family Violence and the GNWT have partnered to develop solutions that work for Aboriginal women in the territory.

The NWT believes that partnership with communities and community organizations is the only way that incidents of violence against women can effectively be reduced and that awareness about the issue is raised.

Actions implemented through this partnership include:

- Establishment of an equal partnership with the Coalition Against Family Violence to develop and implement programs to reduce incidents of family violence in the NWT;
- First response protocols in Yellowknife and tool-kits to provide other communities with the information and support to implement first response protocols in their community;
- Implementation of the Protection Against Family Violence Act. There have been 222 emergency protection orders requested originating from twenty-two communities since April 1, 2005;
- The development of a second Action Plan on Family Violence in partnership with the Coalition Against Family Violence;
- Funding for four actions from the second action plan for 2007/2008. Actions funded during this year include:
  - enhancing programming for children who witness violence;
  - enhancing training for shelter workers;
  - delivery of an NWT-wide Attitudes Survey on Family Violence; and
  - hosting of a territorial conference on family violence to solicit feedback on the implementation of the second action plan.
- The direction to develop a detailed proposal in partnership with the Coalition for consideration by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) with a potential goal of \$5.1 million dollars over four years, if approved by the Legislative Assembly.
  - one of the priorities of this proposal will be developing community programming for perpetrators of violence.

The Government of the Northwest Territories believes in zero tolerance of violence against women. By working together, in partnership, the NWT has developed a road map for reducing such incidents of violence. To ensure that the NWT can meet this goal, the road map involves communities, community organizations, government and non-government groups and individuals. Everyone has a role and a responsibility for making positive change happen.

<sup>2</sup> The Coalition Against Family Violence is a group of community service organizations, individuals, GNWT government departments and federal government departments. The Coalition's purpose is: to increase awareness of family violence issues for NWT residents; to work collectively to reduce the incidence of family violence and to more effectively respond to family violence in the Northwest Territories; to undertake specific actions or initiatives to address family violence issues and the needs of those people affected by family violence.



## A way forward

The NWT is committed to providing culturally and spiritually appropriate programming to Aboriginal women in the NWT. Partnerships are important to the success of programs designed to meet the needs of the Aboriginal women in the NWT who are affected by violence. These partnerships can be varied and diverse and, in the best of all worlds, have individuals and groups pulling together toward the goal of reducing violence against women and, in the process, reinforcing the concept that this violence is not to be tolerated nor accepted in any form. The Coalition Against Family Violence is a solid example of one such partnership.

We invite others to assist us, to partner with us, in order to provide programming to meet the unique needs of all our communities. Specifically, we require an enhanced partnership with the Government of Canada in the struggle to end violence against Aboriginal women. At the outset, this could take the form of access to funding that is currently targeted at on-reserve communities. This funding is essential in order to effectively deliver programming in our jurisdiction. Additional funding would provide much needed resources for the establishment and enhancement of women's shelters in the NWT. These services, where they do exist in communities, are chronically under-funded and require adequate and ongoing base funding.