

# WOMEN FOR WOMEN: STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT ACTIVISM IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

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## ABSTRACT

This article underscores the power that a handful of women have if they remain steadfast in their determination to bring justice and empowerment to the Aboriginal women of the North. The research examines the impact that the La Ronge Native Women's Council has had on their northern Saskatchewan community and more broadly to other northern Aboriginal women. It also looks at future possibilities that another group of northern Aboriginal women are engaged in. This is a story that reinforces the reality of "the personal is political." The underlying goal of these activists is for northern Aboriginal women to live balanced, happy lives; they will fight for that outcome.

**Keywords:** Northern Aboriginal Women, Empowerment, Activism

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## THE AUTHOR IN CONTEXT

I have had the good fortune to spend many years in northern Saskatchewan first as a teacher for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band and ten years later, as an instructor for a Native Women's counselling program developed by the La Ronge Native Women's Council (LRNWC).

I became keenly interested in the impact that northern Aboriginal women had on social development in the northern community of La Ronge when I was hired for their community based counsellor training program. The program was unique in that women who were natural leaders and helpers, and not necessarily highly educated, were chosen to be trained as community counsellors. I began to take note of the number of projects that this women's council had initiated and the pivotal role their members had played in changing the social landscape of the North. They were a powerful and empowering group! This research paper focuses on empowerment stories stemming from the efforts of women who have refused to give up the struggle for women's wellness and growth, and ultimately their empowerment. Empowerment in this instance "refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empowerment>).

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

After leaving the North in 1989 I became a faculty member in the School of Indian Social Work at the First Nations University of Canada, and my role included research and community involvement. After many years of admiring the achievements of

the LRNWC I decided to research the impact these northern women have had over the years. The purpose is to share the respect that I feel for them and to inspire other northern Aboriginal women to awaken their activist spirit. I felt it was important to come from several vantage points, and so multiple research methods were incorporated into this project, as follows:

- Literature and Internet research provided information on the North, Aboriginal women's reality, and the LRNWC.
- Focus groups gathered the stories of nine women who have used the services of several LRNWC projects. These participants remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. The information appears as quotes and paraphrasing of the participants' statements in pertinent sections.
- A qualitative interview was used for the director of the women's shelter, a LRNWC project. (The LRNWC members are the Board of Directors for this shelter.) There were specific questions prepared, and then a conversational interview style allowed stories to arise and additional questions to be asked. The director chose to use her own first name.
- A conversational narrative approach with a few guiding questions was captured the experiences and stories of two women who were active members of the LRNWC over the years and who have branched off in a new developmental process for women's empowerment. They chose to use their own names, Lillian Sanderson and Ina Feitz-Ray.

The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Regina in 2010. As well, feminist principles provided guidance for this information gathering, as follows:

... the assumption that women and gender would be a primary focus of examination; that there would be an intention that these stories would address women's reality and the need to overcome gender oppression; the recognition that the participants who share their stories are the experts, not the inquirer/author; that empowerment of women would be an intention and purpose of the

stories; and, lastly, that ethics be a continual consideration. (Cook and Fonow, 1986, p. 5)

As a result of these principles the most relevant process during each of the three distinct data gathering approaches was informality. The get-togethers resembled visiting and conversation for the purpose of "touching base with the variety of real life stories women provide about themselves," another feminist goal (Lugones and Spelman, 1990, p. 21). A local coffee spot was a primary gathering place for the story telling. One of the conversations raised an ethical issue that I want to address here. Issues surrounding the race or class of the researcher are important to address in ethical research. "Questions about the motivations for the researcher to study women of other races, cultures, ages, abilities and classes need to be addressed as part of the research process" (Brayton, 1997). The two women who shared so much of the information in the latter section of the paper, Lillian Sanderson and Ina Rae Fitz, spoke to me about my role in gathering their experiences as part of this research project. They are Aboriginal, as are all the other contributors; I am not. They have lived in the North all their lives; I have not. They are the experts on the issues that will be raised in this paper; I am not. If not for my years of connection to the Aboriginal community through marriage, parenting, friendships, work, and a long-term relationship with one of these women they would not have accepted my invitation to visit for the purpose of hearing their stories of empowerment. I acknowledge and respect that. I understand that my activities as an ally in the cultures of others must be as ethical supporter and that my job in a university can assist in sharing their knowledge and wisdom. My purpose is to honour these women who have given so much time, energy, hope, bravery and love to other women who need their spirit. Smith (2003, p. 41) iterates these possibilities, too:

Feminist researchers and academics must share their information and analysis with women in both settings [community and government] to add strength and credibility to our call for equality. It is through our continuous sharing of knowledge as women and feminists that we may affect change in the broader context.

## NORTHERN ABORIGINAL WOMEN: THE BACK STORY

Northern Aboriginal women have never had an easy existence. Even years ago, before contact with European people, their lives were hard (Wiens, 1981) but their roles were respected, and they were partners in the challenges of surviving and thriving in their community life. Child rearing, gathering and preparing food, and providing support and health care were just a start.

The Cree women had the tasks of dressing skins, cutting firewood, pitching the tent, netting snowshoes and sewing and gumming the birch bark canoes. While moving from one camp to another, the women pulled the toboggans while the men broke the trail. The women also did the decorative work such as quillwork on moccasins, beadwork, and making birch bark baskets decorated with dyed roots. (Wiens, 1981, p. 45)

Contact did not alter the fact that their lives were hard and challenging, but it eradicated much of the respect that been theirs in their precontact culture (Miller, 1997). In Canada's North the residential schools were often referred to as the "Mission School," and in northern Saskatchewan the hold that the church and the mission schools had on the people began in the early 1900s. Girls and young women in these institutions were inundated by religious teachings that contradicted the way of life they had known. Shame for their culture, language, beliefs, and sexuality became the norm, and reduced the esteem girls and women had once known. By the 1920s a devastating new struggle faced the women as their babies died at previously unseen rates (Wiens, 1988). Contact brought devastating disease to the first peoples of the North. Living off the land in extended family units became harder and harder as the mainstream patriarchal values and behaviours infiltrated the Indigenous people's reality. Smith (2003) reminds us that "we need to understand how traditional patriarchal systems have historically contributed to women's oppression. We must consider the lives of our foremothers, and acknowledge the ways in which women made a difference in families and communities despite having limited choices and op-

tions." The challenges that began with contact continue to affect northern Aboriginal women.

## THE STRUGGLES CONTINUE TODAY

In my experience northern Saskatchewan is a place of intense beauty. Huge banks of rock (the Precambrian Shield) ascend from the earth providing a sense of protection and groundedness. But they can also lay in wait underwater, and become a sudden danger for water travellers. The many lakes fluctuate between mean waves that scare even the seasoned fishermen and mirror surfaces that invite the eagles down for supper. The eagle's sky home, too, can be moody — warm and open one minute, chill and dark the next. Many times I have been struck by how the land, sky, and waterscapes reflect the polarities of so many women's lives in this northern space.

On the one extreme these northern Aboriginal women live in communities that are bound to the natural environment, and this can support mental, emotional, and spiritual balance (D. Musqua, personal communication, March, 2009). There are still people in these communities who harvest their physical surroundings for natural "medicines" that further support balance (Ida Ratt, personal communication, March, 2009). There are strong values of interconnectedness and sharing that go back to precontact times (Knight, 2008). Further, there are deep commitments to family passed from blood to blood even in the face of profound family disruption due to colonial policies, not the least of which is the legacy of residential and mission schools (Miller, 1997).

The impact of colonization can never be underestimated (Miller, 1997). Although this article will focus primarily on the celebration of how women have fought for one another and helped one another to grow and heal, the context that exemplifies the need for empowerment activism is essential. The focus groups honed in on vital information that underscores ongoing challenges. Some of the inequities and oppressions discussed by the women in this research are common to many women while some others are unique to northern Aboriginal women.

One common theme that came out of the focus groups' data was poverty. Some of the women I

spoke with have overcome this insidious condition, others have not. All participants agreed that there are too many women across the North that feel the effects of poverty every day. Their comments included:

How many days can you eat macaroni, and not threaten your own and your kids health? *Brenda*

I have had to decide between milk or hamburger too many times to mention. *Jill*

Some people are OK about being on welfare. I hated it. I just hated it. *Amanda*

I go sit on a rock that is hidden from view just so I can have some privacy. So many people stay in our house, and sometimes I just can't breathe. *Jocelyn*

We see what other people have. It gets so you just day dream about the stuff you'd like to have. *Christine*

Trying to get my kids ready for the new school year is so stressful. There just isn't enough money for all the needs. The stress of not having enough money leads to all kinds of problems. *Carrie*

Poverty is not the only contributor to northern Aboriginal women's struggles. This level of entrenched poverty is linked to social policy, and perhaps the most devastating colonial policy that profoundly affects northern Aboriginal women (and all Canada's first people) was the implementation of the residential school system (Miller, 1997). The legacy of these prison-like institutions is well documented, and the devastation acknowledged, but the amends fall short, for the anguish still moves from person to person and generation to generation (Duran, 2006).

Activists Lillian Sanderson and **Ina Fietz Ray** (in-depth data later in the paper) emphasized that the effects of poverty and racism as well as the legacy of residential schools are extensive, and they gave these examples: limited educational achievements; recurrent health problems; serious addictions to alcohol, drugs, and bingo; and sexual abuse as girls and as women including molestation, rape, domination, and battering by men who are also wounded by poverty and patriarchy. These experiences lead to squelched self-esteem and, in extreme cases, suicide. These issues, raised by Lillian and Ina, are mirrored by another source. Marlene (2006, p. 11) says, There

are mental health disorders, eating disorders and sleeping disorders. There is rage, internal pain, depression, lateral violence and the list goes on and on.

Marlene shared a story about herself, and it exemplified how so much of the pain starts in childhood. She said,

When I was a foster child my first visit home to my family was a painful experience for me. When the visit was over, and it was time to go back to the foster home, I really caused a scene. I kicked and screamed, and refused to get in the car. After that, I was not allowed to go home on any visits. That was so painful to me as it kept me from keeping that bond with my mother, siblings and with the community itself. I felt that I was just a visitor in my community when I was finally allowed to go home for good. It took years for me to believe that it was where I came from. I moved a lot for a while trying to find my 'home'.

This is a snap shot of part of the context of northern Aboriginal women's lives. It is not my intent to "portray Aboriginal women as victims and to pathologize their lives" (Dion Stout et al., 2001, p. 24). The other side of this contextual coin is these women's ability to challenge injustice and their great capacity for healing one another — women for women.

## EMPOWERMENT ACTIVISM IN SASKATCHEWAN'S NORTH: WOMEN FOR WOMEN

THE LA RONGE NATIVE WOMEN'S COUNCIL  
The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1974. As an aggregate of thirteen Native women's organizations it

is founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well being of First Nations and Métis women within First Nation, Métis and Canadian societies. <http://www.nwac-hq.org/en/index.html>

This national body provides a valuable source for health initiatives and information specific to Aboriginal women in Canada. The First Nations and Métis women in the La Ronge area were ready

for this development, as they had already begun to exhibit the empowerment activism that has so impressed me over the years. Karen, the current director of Piwapan and a founder of the LRNW, pointed out that a group of “moms” successfully organized child care services for the community of La Ronge. Once this successful community development project was underway there was no denying that women working together were a powerful force for their community. This was the daycare that my own kids attended from 1978–1980 when I taught for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band; it was a wonderful community centred organization that still thrives today. This empowering experience of community development and activism was the impetus for these northern Aboriginal women to address other serious issues affecting their counterparts in the North.

Representatives of the Saskatchewan aggregate of NWAC came north to share their goals and to recruit interested women to organize a branch in La Ronge. Lillian Sanderson, who was seventeen at the time, remembers that meeting and the efforts of local women who made certain that women of all ages and circumstances were in attendance. Those early years and early activists need to be honoured for the commitment of time, energy, and hope that they gave to so many. This strong group of women were determined to find new ways to address the inequities that northern Aboriginal women in La Ronge and other northern communities faced. The La Ronge Native Women’s Organization (now the La Ronge Native Women’s Council, LRNWC) became a registered nonprofit charity in 1977 with its overarching purpose being advocates for the needs of Aboriginal women.

A momentum was created; Native women were affirming themselves and each other through their many accomplishments, which brought hundreds of proud Aboriginal women together — united in realizing the aspirations of political and social empowerment, articulated at public meetings. We are a group of proud women! A group with a unique history within northern Saskatchewan. Piwapan Women’s Centre, n.d.

Anita ([piwapan@shelternet.ca](mailto:piwapan@shelternet.ca), n.d.) states that this organization is rich with grassroots development. She shares an inspiring picture of women’s

ideas of community being

born in a warm kitchen, sipping tea, discussing issues and concerns well into the early hours of the morning. As the organization grew, so did the concrete and sustainable ideas, generating even more excitement, vigour and interest. The circle began growing. The need for office space became a priority.

The organization was formalized, but maintains its informal grassroots foundation.

Over the thirty plus years that this group has been “moving and shaking” their community an inspiring story of true development unfolds. Karen stated that more than a dozen projects have resulted in new service agencies, boards to ensure community participation, supports for women’s employment ventures and encouragement for women’s empowerment in even more remote communities. The “detox” centre, the soup kitchen, the used clothing/household goods depot are other examples of community supports that are still in operation, but under different umbrellas now.

What makes so many of their ventures sustainable is that the LRNWC, the creative force that fleshed out the needs of the women and children, envisioned the type of service that would meet the need, found funding to implement programming, and then found ways for the project/organizations/agency to be taken over by others. One example is the day care centre, which became a parent cooperative. Another is the Family Service Centre that provided parenting training for young moms; this training has moved to prevention programming through the Indian Child and Family Services and the Teen/Young Parents program at the Friendship Centre. I was fortunate to have women share how some of the projects affected them personally.

The following names are pseudonyms, but I remember clearly the focus group where these women enthusiastically praised the LRNWC and its contributions to the development of their lives. Each woman was empowered by a program that was developed by the LRNWC, and they shared some of their story in response to my questions. They didn’t use the word “empowerment” but they expressed it in so many other ways.

Judy talked about the one-year counsellor/co-ordinator training program for Aboriginal women that she attended. The LRNWC created the program, and then it was delivered, under their direction, through the community college. Judy said that it was the beginning of her own healing path. Before the program she knew she had problems, but they were all balled up inside, and she didn't know how to begin to address them. The counsellor/coordinator training program

helped me to know that if you don't deal with your own issues you can only help people as far as your own development has gone. I've always wanted to help others, so now I stay committed to my own healing.

When asked about a favourite story or memory about the LRNWC Cindy remembered being honoured at one of the LRNWC's annual awards events. She said that doing things for her community and for other Aboriginal women was just something that she had to do, but when she received an award for her contributions she was overwhelmed. It was that moment that helped her to really raise her self-esteem. She thought,

If other people see what I do and think it's useful, helpful or whatever, I need to see it the same way. I don't want a big ego for helping out, but I want a strong spirit that I can really feel.

She said that when things get hard for her that moment of being honoured by other women comes back to her, and she knows she can find her way again.

Janet told a story that still runs through her life. She talked about years ago getting basic training about finding a job from a LRNWC project. The facilitators helped her to write a resume, and she remembers she was so surprised to feel like she had skills to put in it. Since that time she has rewritten her resume many times, and has had jobs that made her want to get more training. She's gone back to school, and now feels secure with a career that is very satisfying,

and it all started with writing my first resume. I still remember the feeling that came over me when I looked it over. I felt so alive and like I could have a life.

"The Family Service Centre (FCS) kept me a mom." Miranda says that when she got pregnant her boyfriend abandoned her, and she was very depressed through her pregnancy. She didn't talk to anybody about how bad she felt, and when her son was born, she felt completely numb and lost. She decided she wasn't good enough to be a mom, and was trying to figure out how to give her baby up.

I thought maybe the FCS could help me to get him adopted, but instead I became a mom. At first I just found out about other mothers' struggles and how they got better at being a mom. They made me think I might be able to do it too. I began to feel better and better, and I remember the first time I really looked at my boy, and felt so full of love. Then there was no turning back.

Today Miranda's boy is in school, and she has a two year old, and a good relationship. Sometimes as helpers we don't know how much we have affected people's lives!

One of the women gave me a tour of Kikinahk Friendship Centre where she works (partly as a result of having taken one of the LRNWC's programs). This community centre got its start years earlier through the LRNWC's efforts, and is now part of the National Association of Friendship Centres. The centre offers many programs some of which started as LRNWC's "babies" — for example: the Family Service Program, the Teen/Young Parent Program and a catering service that began as a training program and employment program for Aboriginal women. This centre has a life of its own, of course, but without the LRNWC visionaries and founders it would not be what it is today.

Brenda remembers how nervous she was about a job interview. She hadn't worked for years since her two kids were born, and she felt ill prepared. She was excited to share her story.

I ran into one of the LRNWC members, and was telling her about how nervous I was. She took me to the Native women's clothing depot, and treated me to two outfits. I felt weird at first, but she seemed so happy to be helping me out. We went for coffee and practiced interview questions with lots of laughs and giggles. It was such a lift for me.

Brenda got the job. She felt so ready, so cared about, and so brave that she aced her interview.

Amanda and Jocelyn were part of a training program centered on a catering project. They were young and inexperienced and pretty unsure of the working world. They actually met at the training, and became lifelong friends.

Amanda: Jocelyn became my anchor. She seemed so keen, and she brought me out of my shell.

Jocelyn: The best thing about the experience was being with women. I had lots of women relatives, but never hung out with women as kind of a support group. My memories of that time are about being treated with respect and being supported.

One of the most critical issues that the LRNWC took on was family violence. Abuse directed at women by their intimate partner was (and is) a reality faced by too many northern Aboriginal women. With limited resources to deal with this violence against women, only women themselves can fight for an antioppression framework and ensure that shelters focus on equity and protection (Nguyen, 2008, p. 1). The supports for intervention when women are faced with family violence were negligible in northern Saskatchewan at that time. The LRNWC stepped up and developed Piwapan Women's Centre.

The Piwapan Women's Centre is a project of the La Ronge Native Women's Council Inc. The Centre is a temporary shelter for women and children who are unable to remain in their home for a variety of reasons. We are located in La Ronge, Sk and our Centre has a staff of 12 individuals occupying the positions of Executive Director, Shelter Worker, Accountant/Clerical, Childcare Worker and Outreach Worker. Piwapan Women's Centre, n.d.

The shelter's mission follows:

We, the staff of the Piwapan Women's Centre, pledge to empower our communities through education, intervention and prevention of violence in all its forms. Piwapan Women's Centre, n.d.

Karen, the director of Piwapan, told me about the centre, starting with the meaning of the name,

New Dawn, and that she has been witness to many new beginnings for women from all over the North. The seven members of the LRNWC also serve as board members for Piwapan. Empowerment is a core purpose of the shelter, and their programming reflects this. For example, some of their programming for children goes beyond crafts and play with modules on feelings and family roles. These modules are shared with the moms, and they can choose what their kids will participate in. This is part of the shelter staff's focus on developing "choice making" as part of personal empowerment.

Karen believes her own sense of personal empowerment was fostered by her dad and grandfather who involved her in hunting and trapping as a young girl. She said she was a bit embarrassed that her role models were men, but that comment took our conversation to the importance of the whole family, and everyone's role in ensuring empowerment for all members of the family. This focus also got us talking about healing for the men that were part of the cycle of violence. Karen spoke about programming that is currently being developed through a partnership with an agency at Besnard Lake dealing with men who have used violence against their wives. The purpose is to have a more holistic approach to family violence, and to give partners a chance to understand each other's perspectives and to learn the information that is part of each one's healing process. She said that from a northern Aboriginal perspective family is the central fire, and building a stronger family is an essential aspect of the work that the shelter does.

Karen felt that younger women seem to be getting out of violent relationships more often. Women of an older generation (40+) — not so much. This indicates to her that the information/awareness and empowerment campaigns are changing patterns. However, she emphasized that there is no judgement about women coming to the shelter and then returning home more than once. Many of the women who come to the shelter for safety and support go back to their husband, but Karen states,

It needs to be understood that women who live in small, remote communities often go home because they're going home to a community, to

neighbours, not just to their partner. I wouldn't want to be out of my element to start over. Rather than seeing it as going back to a bad situation we see it as going back with new tools, and we are supporting the family and community.

Karen made it clear in our conversation that she feels that the founders of the LRNWC are pretty special women. In fact there was a conference in March 2008 to recognize the thirty years that the council has been making a difference in La Ronge and the North. The early participants were particularly honoured at this gathering, which was

a three-day family wellness conference organized in partnership between the La Ronge Native Women's Council and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band... The conference ended with an honouring of two of the women, who supported the La Ronge Native Women's Council throughout its 30-year history, Louisa Sanderson and Anita Jackson. (Barnes-Connell, 2008)

I bring this homage to the LRNWC to a close by reporting the latest programming development that these women have created. A press release (Status of Women Canada, 2010) announced the most recent addition to the LRNWC's list of projects aimed at empowering northern Aboriginal women, the Piwapan Sexual Assault Program.

### THE NORTHERN WOMEN'S NETWORK

Conversation, with a few strategic questions, guided the next process of this research; eliciting the stories of the two women activists who were forging yet another path for northern Aboriginal women's empowerment. Their words represent a connected succession of happenings and relay stories of their personal involvement in changing lives.

Lillian Sanderson, a social worker with Victim Services, had been active in LRNWC for many years; she felt it was time for an additional approach to Aboriginal women's empowerment in the North. Her good friend, *Ina Fietz Ray*, worked for Northern Affairs at that time, and she wanted to see a broader approach as well. (Ina is the mayor of Sandy Bay at the time of this writing and is also an alumnus of the LRNWC). Lillian told me she had a very clear look at the reality for people in the North adding,

I saw who the decision makers were, and it was the old boys who had been there forever, and as an Aboriginal woman sitting there I thought, "They don't represent me or the needs of our women in economic development." I remember after one meeting going home just so pissed off wondering where are the women.

From that point she was determined to find a way to inform the various systems of "our needs, Aboriginal women's needs, and for the systems to respond to our needs."

She called Ina to strategize. They talked about women in the North who had been involved in their various communities and who would be good leaders —

and as it turned out there were six of us who ended up representing the east side, west side, north, central and the southern part [of the North]. When we asked if they would be interested in organizing they all said 'Yes, lets do this'."

The initial working group consisted of Rosa Tinker from Pinehouse (who is also the Elder for the group), Nancy Roy from Beauval, Bella Caisse from Stanley Mission, Terry Daniels from Wollaston Lake and, of course, *Ina Fietz Ray* from Sandy Bay and Lillian Sanderson from La Ronge. The name they chose for this group with its broader approach to northern women's empowerment is the Northern Women's Network (NWN).

The NWN's application for funding to hold meetings in remote northern communities was supported by The Status of Women. The team of six women shared the job of facilitating these women's gatherings. One purpose of the gatherings was to talk about the concept of the NWN to see if a critical mass of women were behind it, and another was to engage in an empowerment process that would remain a fundamental goal of this group.

Ina stated,

I know there are a lot of women who got so excited about what we want to do in the communities, and when we began to meet with them it was wonderful. Miracles started happening.

Lillian shared her impression of the Southend workshop:



We had nearly 60 women out of all ages. It was on a weekend. It was just beautiful. When we were there and did the workshop the women just felt safe in that circle. We had a mother there who had gone to residential school; she was with her two daughters, and she is an elderly lady now. She shared stuff that she had never told anybody before, but she felt so safe even meeting us for the first time and taking a risk in front of all these women. I think of all the women who take that crap to their graves. Except for the really young women there, just about everyone else had gone to residential school. I think about forty-five out of the sixty women there had been to residential school, and for the first time they were able to talk about things. It was incredible. We certainly did a lot of praying because it was like, 'holy crap — what have we started.' There was one woman sharing, and you could see another woman over there getting to feel her stuff, and then another, you know. We just had to trust that this was the way it was supposed to be what ever is happening we'll just get through this. We have to provide more opportunity to feel and share these hard experiences.

One possibility that Ina feels will assist in the process of empowerment is facilitating learning opportunities.

I have a presentation on the cycle of colonization and how to break out of it. I think part of the work that we're doing is breaking that cycle and allowing people to understand and believe that they can do whatever they want with their life, and we encourage them to do what they need to do to be happy.

Ina then shifted to some pragmatic thoughts.

We need to go to the next step now and find some funding and a coordinator. I think there is lots of funding out there but we don't have the time yet to work at our regular jobs and do the proposal writing.

And then she added another thought,

If we had a camp to start the organization formally there would be hundreds of women who would come, because we've met them through this initial stage and they're all interested in the network; they too are ready to move to get us organized.

Lillian added that before they take the next formal step toward broader development they want to take

time to look at organizational structures so that they create an organization that is not hierarchical, eliminating some of the power issues that occur in so many systems.

These women understand that day-to-day life is supremely important, and that the big picture is as well. As my traditionally adopted father has said,

The eagle sees the big picture as they soar higher than all the other birds, but they see the tiny mouse in the brush as well. People need to see both the big possibilities *and* tend to the details. (Danny Musqua, personal communication, January, 2008)

These women have eagle spirit. They want to provide empowerment opportunities so that northern women can improve not only their daily lives but the future of their children and their communities.

## LAST THOUGHTS ON MAINTAINING EMPOWERMENT ENERGY

Empowerment is not a destination, as the saying goes; it is a process — a lifelong process. We gain some ground as women and that new vantage point helps us to see what still needs to be done. We win justice for some, but more clearly understand the injustices against Aboriginal women that are rampant. Being part of changing the world for the better is part of the reward that empowerment activists will garner, but it can be gruelling and difficult to remain engaged in the battle for gender and racial equality. A continuing part of women's empowerment activism is the support we provide for one another when we are tired of the fight. Lillian Sanderson sums this up beautifully.

It is certainly important to have that connection to other women. As we develop the network it is important to know that Ina is over on the other end of the phone or Rosa is there to encourage and support to help me keep going. Sometime you feel like you just want to focus on 'me,' time to deal with my own stuff. Then I talk to one of them and I remember why we are doing this. It's so easy to get depressed when you think of what goes on. A lot of our women in the North are depressed. Lots are on prescription drugs, a lot are in bad relationships, and the way you deal with that is to go

to the doctor and get medication and then often are kind of zoned out and even more isolated. The issues can make you feel overwhelmed, and its so good to just connect to other women to debrief all that in a healthy way, as opposed to being isolated being stuck there, feeling like I'm going to go crazy. Other women bring me back from that dark place, and I can carry on.

Women for women.

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