

**ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S ROUNDTABLE ON
GENDER EQUALITY**

*March 30-April 1, 2000
Ottawa, Ontario*

Roundtable Report

**This document expresses the views and opinions of the participants
and does not necessarily represent the official policy or opinion of
Status of Women Canada or the Government of Canada.**

Canada

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background	1
Roundtable Goal	
Roundtable Objectives	
Process	2
Equality for Aboriginal Women	4
Sexism and Racism	
Inappropriateness of Western models and Assumptions	
Bill C-31 and Indian Status	
Discrimination within Aboriginal communities	
Marginalization of women's organizations	
Consultation with Aboriginal Women	10
Participation	
Commitment	
Communication	
Respect	
Accountability	
Evaluation and follow-up	
Towards a Consultation Framework	15
Specific Directions and Vision Statement	19
List of Participants	22

BACKGROUND

Status of Women Canada (SWC) is the federal agency that coordinates and leads the implementation of the *Federal Plan for Gender Equality* and the *Beijing Platform for Action*. Therefore, its activities help to promote women's full participation in the country's social, economic, cultural and political life.

In December 1999, SWC held a national consultation on Gender Equality with Canadian women from across the country, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis women. During that consultation, the Aboriginal women requested a consultation dedicated to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal women, avoiding competition with the mainstream process.

In an effort to address these concerns, SWC convened an *Aboriginal Women's Roundtable on Gender Equality* in Ottawa on March 30-April 1, 2000. Prior to the meeting, organizers identified the goal and objectives of the Roundtable. These are summarized below:

Roundtable goal

- To include all Aboriginal women in decision-making in all matters affecting them and their families and to ensure their voices are heard and respected in the process.

Roundtable objectives:

- To provide a forum where First Nations, Inuit and Métis women can share their expertise on a broad range of issues.
- To foster a dialogue between Aboriginal women and the Government of Canada on key policy issues affecting Aboriginal women.
- To use the Discussion Paper as a basis for focusing attention on the principles of Aboriginal gender equality and on a consultation framework for Aboriginal women.
- To produce a document at the end of the Roundtable to be used for future consultations by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations and agencies at all levels.
- To develop a vision statement on Aboriginal women's perspectives on equality and inclusion.

More than 35 First Nations, Métis and Inuit women from a wide range of regions, organizations and life experiences participated in the Roundtable. Also present were observers from a number of federal government departments, including Status of Women Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Justice Canada, Canadian Heritage, Health Canada, the Privy Council Office and Human Resources Development Canada. This report incorporates the comments made by participants on a draft of the proceedings.

PROCESS

The Roundtable was held at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre in Ottawa, beginning with an opening ceremony and get-acquainted dinner on the evening of March 30th. During the opening ceremony, local Algonquin Elders said prayers; the Honourable Hedy Fry, Secretary of State (Multiculturalism) (Status of Women) spoke, as did the Honourable Anne MacLellan, Minister of Justice. The Honourable Ralph Goodale, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians was unable to attend but did send greetings, which were read aloud. Following the dinner, participants introduced themselves and talked of their reasons for attending the Roundtable and what they hoped to achieve out of it. Many appreciated the opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal level before the official meeting began. Participants then spent the next two full days frankly discussing a variety of issues and concerns related to equality and consultation. Four of the participants, two First Nations, one Métis and one Inuit, agreed to act as facilitators during the meeting.

At the start of the meeting on the first morning, local Algonquin Elders offered a prayer. After that, the chair presented the goal and objectives of the meeting, and summarized the findings of the discussion paper. Participants agreed to a mix of small group discussions and plenaries where each group would report on its deliberations.

Participants came to the Roundtable with a variety of hopes and expectations. These ranged from a desire to learn from others' insights and experiences to a wish to emerge from the meeting with a strong vision statement and a unified voice. A considerable amount of time was taken up in airing concerns about the meeting, including its spiritual bias, poor timing, lack of consultation, inappropriate language and the presence of government participants.

Some participants felt the spiritual practices used at the meeting added a particular spiritual bias. While participants welcomed the important role Elders played throughout the Roundtable, a number of them questioned honouring only selected traditions and values, since Elders from other communities were not also present.

On the issue of timing, a number of participants indicated that they would have liked more notice before the Roundtable so that they might have been better prepared.

Throughout the meeting, the women picked up on inappropriate language. For one, they did not like the over-emphasis on gender equality, because it omits Aboriginal peoples' own traditions and values. On a practical level, others faulted the organizers for not ensuring that Inuktitut simultaneous translation was available from the outset¹. One participant indicated that she could not follow the proceedings because of the lack of translation. Another was grateful that she could understand her Inuit sisters once the interpretation accommodations were made.

¹ Due to technical difficulties, simultaneous translation between English and Inuktitut was not available during the morning sessions of March 31st.

A range of views was expressed regarding the desirability of inviting government officials to the Roundtable. While one participant stated that she found it difficult to sit at the same table with non-Aboriginal people, others expressed their appreciation for the fact that the government representatives had come to the Roundtable to listen and to learn.

Overall, participants felt the Roundtable was positive. Several stated that they trusted the process and were grateful for the opportunity to meet one another and draw from each other's strength. Others found the discussions to be meaningful and productive, and expressed strong support for the view that this Roundtable should form the basis of an on-going consultative process between Aboriginal women and the Government of Canada.

EQUALITY FOR ABORIGINAL WOMEN

For the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women who participated in the Roundtable, the issue of gender equality was extremely sensitive. It caused strong reactions on the part of many of those present. In short, participants agreed that the sexual discrimination that women face on a day-to-day basis cannot be separated from the twin legacies of colonialism and racism, which continue to marginalize Aboriginal peoples and devalue their cultures and traditions.

To provide a starting point for discussion, Status of Women Canada circulated a draft paper written by Madeleine Dion Stout and Greg Kipling. The paper provided some thoughts on consultations with Aboriginal peoples and gender equality. The paper suggested that Aboriginal women tend to hold discussions wherever they gather, even in less conventional areas such as churches and bingo halls. While not meant as a stereotype of Aboriginal people, some participants found the reference offensive. Other participants noted that some Aboriginal women do meet in places such as churches and bingo halls and their experiences shouldn't be discounted. What is more important, however, is the fact that many Aboriginal women do not necessarily feel comfortable meeting in 'conventional' fora such as public meetings or Band council offices for a variety of reasons, and are seeking their own ways to meet and discuss common problems and concerns. This discussion served as a powerful symbol of Aboriginal women's individual strengths, and a reminder about the need to be careful how words are used and how they can be interpreted.

Sexism and racism

Coming to terms with gender-based discrimination against First Nations, Métis and Inuit women must be done in tandem with stopping racism from non-Aboriginal Canadians and government institutions. As one participant said,

“what we're really talking about here is not gender equality, but rather racial equality. We need to obtain racial equality in our own country.”

This view led some of the participants to argue that family violence in Aboriginal communities needs to be addressed within the broader context of institutionalized violence against all Aboriginal peoples, regardless of gender. Law enforcement agencies and the Canadian judicial system need to pay attention to this reality. Similarly, one woman noted that racism towards Aboriginal peoples in Quebec has become more severe since the Oka crisis of the early 1990s, resulting in untold pain and suffering for both women and men living in that province.

For their part, Inuit participants repeatedly stated that their history, identity and living conditions are distinct from those of other Aboriginal peoples, and as such they cannot accept the federal government position that they are a “supplementary Aboriginal race”. Rather, as one participant

put it, Inuit women should be treated as “separate from the First Nations and Métis in all government programs and funding, as the Inuit have their own treaty rights with the federal government”.

Inappropriateness of Western Models and Assumptions

Roundtable participants were also uncomfortable with many of the assumptions that concepts like feminism and gender equality are based on. Many felt that these words were grounded in an alien belief structure that shared little in common with the more holistic world-view of most Aboriginal people. Some suggested that the very notion of feminism is offensive, because it builds barriers between women and men while it erases or trivializes the commonalities that they share with one another. An Inuit participant asserted that ‘community well-being’ is a far more useful term than ‘feminism’ to describe women’s efforts to promote equality and justice for themselves and their children.

Many participants were also critical of the English language as a vehicle for discussing gender roles and relations in Aboriginal communities. In the words of one woman, “the first problem we face is language. Like gender equality, I can’t stand it ... Some of our languages don’t even have words for male and female. And that is the number one problem, and so long as we’re limited to that sort of language we’ll have this problem”.

Of those present, many rejected outside attempts by governments or non-Aboriginal feminists to impose labels on Aboriginal peoples. One participant was critical of the tendency to characterize Aboriginal men as ‘abusers’, and asked how inter-personal conflicts can be dealt with when women and men are already being labelled as either the victims or perpetrators of violence.

Such questions led to discussions on the extent to which women and men complement each other, and it prompted support for working in partnership **with** men rather than **against** them. This is not to say that First Nations, Métis and Inuit women are willing to accept anything less than full equality. In one woman’s words, “I don’t want to turn into a man, but I do want equal pay and equal rights. I’ve got skills he doesn’t have, and he’s got skills I don’t have”. Besides agreeing with the principle of ‘equal pay for work of equal value’, participants also stressed the importance of equality with men in such areas as hiring, training, economic development, decision making and policy development.

Bill C-31 and Indian status

Few issues aroused greater passion than the unequal treatment First Nations women experience as a result of the *Indian Act*. In short, affected First Nations women have been able to regain Indian status following the passage of Bill C-31 in 1985, but they continue to experience discrimination. This stems from *Indian Act* provisions that effectively deny their grandchildren Indian status if and when their children marry non-Aboriginal partners. As well, many First Nations have refused to give women the right to return to their communities, or have forced their non-status children to move off-reserve upon reaching the age of majority.

Participants at the Roundtable spoke eloquently of the problems they have faced in their own lives dealing with this sort of discrimination. They ended with a clear consensus that both the federal government and the male-dominated First Nations leadership have to move quickly to address the problems that have arisen around the status issue.

Participants called upon the government to eliminate all discriminatory practices related to status determination. This includes the current demand to prove paternity from First Nations women who have children of unknown status. Several participants also argued that male leaders have to be educated if they are to take women's concerns seriously. To quote:

“Our biggest problem is our men who are our leaders. They have never lost status, so they need to be educated about this. However, the challenge is how are we going to educate them? This fight has to have the Chiefs' support. Our job is to protect the next seven generations and we can start the education process right in our own homes.”

One of the basic questions for the women was why the male leadership supports exclusionary Band membership codes. For the women, this position only serves to restrict the future growth of the status Indian population.

To address these and other concerns, the women wanted sustained funding for research, advocacy and networking in areas related to status determination and Band membership. They felt that education was particularly important in this regard. Future generations risk losing status altogether and others who may forget that their Aboriginal identity comes from within themselves rather than from a piece of paper or government-imposed label were seen to be most in need of education.

Even as the participants criticized First Nations leaders for failing to provide adequate support to those women who have lost status, at no time did they lose sight of the fact that the Canadian government bears ultimate responsibility for the present state of affairs. In the words of one participant,

“Fundamentally, the basic issue is the refusal of the government to recognize and fulfill its responsibilities”.

Discrimination within Aboriginal communities

Still, all forms of discrimination that prevent Aboriginal women from participating fully in the economic, political and spiritual spheres of their communities were firmly condemned. As one woman said,

“It tires me sometimes to talk about gender equality when we Aboriginal women are not equal in our communities. There is still discrimination within our communities. We have to address this issue first. We need to do this for our children and grandchildren.”

Another argued that Aboriginal organizations and leaders do not always act in the best interests of community members:

“There is still a great deal of racism and nepotism within our organizations. We have to start with ourselves and have a collective voice, and to show respect for the sake of our children and each other.”

Notably, Aboriginal women living in urban areas were seen to be more likely to suffer discrimination from the general population and from their own communities. This prompted a call for activities and interventions that are broad-based enough to address the challenges facing urban Aboriginal women.

Women also wanted an independent body with a mandate to investigate human rights abuses committed against Aboriginal peoples, whether by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal agencies and organizations. As a participant said,

“We want to push for an ombudswoman because a lot of our sisters are very isolated, because of the refusal of the *Indian Act* Chiefs to deal with the problems, and also because of the institutional racism of the so-called Royal Canadian Mounted Police and our judicial system.”

Making sure that such a body is completely independent of existing leadership bodies and structures was also stressed. A woman summed up this feeling as follows:

“We felt that existing human rights legislation is way out there and doesn't speak to our communities, so we wanted some system, some body that is at arm's length. We don't want human rights to be addressed by groups within our communities, so there's no interference from the existing leadership.”

Marginalization of women's organizations

One of the most important ways in which Aboriginal women's rights have been safeguarded in recent decades is through the untiring efforts of organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada, Métis National Council of Women (MNCW) and Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association.

Roundtable participants acknowledged the success with which these organizations have defended Aboriginal women's interests. But they also criticized the government's refusal to give women's groups the tools and resources they need to carry out their work. Some Inuit participants were particularly forceful in condemning the federal government's failure to recognize Pauktuutit as the national voice for Inuit women; to consult and to support it on an equal basis with other national organizations.

To drive home this point of inclusion, the Métis National Council of Women refuses to call the Assembly of First Nations, Métis National Council and Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, Aboriginal government organizations. They argued that the United Nations classifies them as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and that this is what they should be called. They underlined that there are seven national Aboriginal NGOs representing a diversity of Aboriginal people in Canada.²

Whether they speak from national, regional or local levels, First Nations, Métis and Inuit women want recognition, not assimilation and integration. Further, they want core funding to continue community-based activities like research, capacity building and advocacy. They do not like the fact that women's organizations have been forced to compete with each other for limited and ad hoc funding for far too long. This is over and above their ongoing competition with men.

These tensions have had exceedingly negative effects on the morale of staff and members, and on the organizations' abilities to fulfill their respective mandates and objectives. Aboriginal women's organizations are vital precisely because they offer a means of "reflecting and speaking about [their] own concerns, instead of relying on anyone in government or other bodies to make representations on [their] behalf," as one participant explained.

² The seven Aboriginal organizations referenced include the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), Métis National Council (MNC), Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP), the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association and the Métis National Council of Women (MNCW). Indian and Northern Affairs Canada includes Native Friendship Centres Association of Canada (NFCAC) in their list of national Aboriginal organizations.

In sum, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women who participated in the Roundtable spoke honestly and forcefully on a broad range of issues related to gender and racial equality. While participants did not agree with each other on every point, they raised one recurring theme throughout the discussion: the importance of being action-oriented. The consensus was that concrete steps need to be taken immediately to address Aboriginal women's marginalization. What is *not* needed, according to the participants, is yet another government-funded report whose recommendations are acknowledged but never acted on.

CONSULTATION WITH ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Roundtable participants were equally loud about calling for action on consultation matters. In recent decades, many commissioned studies made some effort to 'consult' with Aboriginal peoples. Despite this, participants felt that in all too many cases their recommendations have gone unheeded by governments and organizations. This was because the latter groups were intent on pursuing pre-determined agendas. For this reason, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women at the Roundtable placed great emphasis on accountability in decision-making when it comes to discussing approaches to Aboriginal consultation.

Participation

Roundtable participants made clear that Aboriginal women's input be sought on all matters that affect them. Also, they want to be active participants from the beginning until the end of the process. In other words, women like to be given every opportunity to play a meaningful role in all aspects of consultation design and implementation. This ranges from participant selection to approval of the contents of the final report.

In this regard, a number of participants saw the merits of making more frequent use of participatory action research (PAR) tools. Organizers of consultations need to keep this in mind. As one woman argued, citing her research experience on the impact of Bill C-31 in British Columbia, PAR provides a means of adapting research to community needs, and of giving individuals a real stake in, and control over, the outcome.

Equally important in the eyes of many, was that women need special measures to support their participation in consultation exercises. In light of this, the following observation was made:

“The question that must be asked is who is invited to the table? In this regard self-esteem is often an issue. I know there's many people who would not speak in public because of low self-esteem. For this reason the government has to consider the very basic issues and barriers that prevent women from participating.”

Of particular concern were those groups of women who are most often made invisible and inaudible within conventional consultation frameworks. First Nations, Métis and Inuit women living in urban areas are such a group. As one participant stated, “we need a broad enough brush stroke that considers the urban component”. The women also identified a number of other populations that must be given equal access to decision-making and consultative fora. These include disabled women, the youth, lesbians, Elders, front-line service providers and women who “don't necessarily represent any particular group”.

Commitment

Participants argued for a commitment by all concerned to adopt a realistic, respectful approach and avoid superficial consultation. Accordingly, sufficient notice of upcoming events is a critical first step in this regard.

By way of example, several participants were given two to three weeks to prepare for this Roundtable, making it difficult for them to consult with their own organizations or communities prior to the meeting. One woman argued,

“governments need to give us enough time to allow us prepare for meetings. I know I could have used more time to discuss the issues with Saskatchewan women”.

Similarly, Roundtable participants from remote or northern regions felt a general lack of appreciation for the vast distances they must travel to attend public meetings and gatherings. Not only is such travel time-consuming and expensive, but it is often stressful as well. It is all the more so if the journey is undertaken at the last minute. Some participants, therefore, suggested that the next meeting be held in a remote or Northern locale, in the interest of fairness. This move would also focus attention on the problems that Aboriginal peoples in these areas face.

By the same token, the Aboriginal women at the Roundtable also acknowledged that this is a time of shrinking budgets and rapidly shifting priorities and that it is sometimes impossible to provide proper notice or follow the appropriate protocols. In these cases, participants stressed that they would rather seize an opportunity as it becomes available, rather than standing by while it slips away. Referring to the lack of notice before the Roundtable, one woman said, “we don't want to serve the government, but we do want to take advantage of our time together”.

In expecting governments to commit themselves to a respectful consultation process, Aboriginal women must also be prepared to devote the time and effort necessary to achieve meaningful results. A Roundtable participant expressed this sentiment on behalf of the others by stating, “in my territory we would not quit at 4:30. We would work until the work was done”.

Communication

For First Nations, Métis and Inuit women, effective communication is critical if a consultation exercise is to be successful. This entails taking basic steps to ensure that individuals can speak to and understand each other. For this, necessary tools must be brought on-side in a timely and sensitive manner. In the context of the Roundtable, participants were disappointed that Inuktitut-English interpretation was not available from the beginning, even as they expressed their appreciation for the translation services once these were in place and working. The lack of interpretation at the outset of the meeting reflected a lack of respect — language and culture are at the heart of relations between Aboriginal women and governments and also among Aboriginal

women themselves. Sensitivity toward these issues and needs is key to a positive and successful consultation.

As well, the women emphasized the importance of having understandable consultation materials, such as background reports and discussion papers. From their perspective, these must appeal to the literacy levels of a cross-section of women. Since target audiences are diverse and are likely to include women with a wide range of formal educational backgrounds, this has to be kept in mind during consultations.

According to Roundtable participants, well-developed listening skills are also vital to the success of any consultation exercise. One woman put it as, "every person, every nation, every association has its own reality. How we are going to reach consensus is by listening to each other". Other participants agreed, with several arguing that respect for others and a willingness to listen to their point of view are both necessary if Aboriginal women are to find common ground amid their diversity.

In any meeting, there is potential for conflict. Given that the Roundtable itself came close to giving in to conflict, participants were especially sensitive to it. For this reason, there was considerable discussion of 'emotional triggers' and the care outsiders must take not to use words and actions that lay bare the pain and suffering Aboriginal women continue to experience. In one woman's wise words, "there are many ways in which triggers can produce reactions. What we want the government people to see is that the way words are presented can be very powerful and you have to remember that." A similar point of view was expressed by another participant, who stated,

"People are being made sick by the oppression and the appropriation of their bodies and even their brains. This makes people allergic to the hurtful words other might say, and makes them react violently."

Finally, Roundtable participants expressed a desire for two-way communication between governments and communities, and between communities themselves. In both cases, the goal is the same: to share information in an honest, respectful fashion. The outcome is also the same: 'power-with', not 'power-over'. Thus, governments must take the necessary steps to ensure that Aboriginal women's views and opinions flow upwards to senior management levels. They must also give women the necessary time and resources to share what they have learned within their communities and constituencies when they return home.

Respect

Although respect in consultation was front and centre for the participants, they also addressed this issue within larger policy frameworks. In particular, the women called upon the federal

government to acknowledge the full extent of its responsibility to the First Peoples of Canada. They also demanded that governments recognize that First Nations, Métis and Inuit each have their own histories and identities, and as such cannot be treated in consultation exercises as though they all formed part of a single convenient group.

Roundtable participants also felt that due respect for the diversity within Aboriginal communities was important. According to the women, consultation organizers must make a special effort to ensure that the voices of the most marginalized are both listened to and valued. Further, they must themselves remember to honour one another. Differences have to be put aside in order for answers to surface, as argued below:

“We have to recognize that although we all have our own ways, we are all earth people. We have to find answers together. I am sure there is an answer that will suit everybody; we just have to be respectful of each other.”

There was also widespread agreement among the women that consultation approaches have to be sensitive to the diversity of Aboriginal traditions and values. In other words, ways must be found to fit Elders, ceremonies and prayer into meetings and gatherings without losing sight of the other nations and cultures in the room. A number of Roundtable participants saw this as a basis for an entirely new model for consulting with Aboriginal peoples. Creative changes to the existing model are vital according to the women: “we need to get away from oppressive structures in consultation and return to a more holistic approach. We are asking for a re-alignment”.

Accountability

During the course of their deliberations, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women voiced some cynicism towards formal consultations. They noted that the Panel on Family Violence, the Marshall Enquiry and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples are all examples of costly ventures that have done little to alter the day-to-day realities of most Aboriginal people across the country. For this reason accountability became a priority area for the women.

According to them, key principles for consultation must be adopted. This would be one way of promoting greater accountability. Principles are yardsticks against which affected individuals and communities can measure the relative success of consultations:-

“We believe in principles in consultation. We believe that principles should be agreed to before the consultation starts by those who are being consulted with. And then we can go back and see if we have shown respect to those principles.”

Similarly, many of the participants voiced strong support for the notion of ‘informed consent’. Whenever a government or other body is putting a policy, program or project into effect, ‘informed consent’ must take place. This is especially true when these programs or projects are

likely to impact upon Aboriginal peoples. Consultation exercises must also include a capacity-building component. This is to ensure that all Aboriginal stakeholders have, at their disposal, the necessary information and tools to make well-reasoned decisions.

In this regard, the women did not merely emphasize the need for accountable consultative mechanisms. They also asked for accountable leaders and governments. Thus, they were uncompromising in their demand that the government meet all of its fiduciary and moral obligations to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. They also emphasized the need for Aboriginal political leaders to become more accountable to community members for the decisions they make and positions they adopt. In the words of one woman, “many of the leaders say the right words in public, but at home they put down their own people. We have to find a way to reach them”.

Evaluation and follow-up

The emphasis on accountability led the participants to evaluation issues. Even in the context of the Roundtable, the women expressed a strong desire to participate in the drafting of the final report, and to be involved in any follow-up activities that might be planned.

“We have some concern that there be a check to ensure that the diversity of the group is reflected in the final paper. One idea would be to get people to comment on and review the paper. Although we understand it may be hard for everyone to have input, there should be at least a selection of people involved.”

The women also agreed that all decision-making and consultations need to have built-in evaluations. Where Aboriginal peoples are stakeholders, this is even more important. In any case, consultation participants and community members must be brought into the decision-making loop. One way to do this is to involve them in planning efforts. Another is to give them a continued say in the use of the information they share.

TOWARDS A CONSULTATION FRAMEWORK

Diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit women were brought together for the Aboriginal Women's Roundtable on Gender Equality. They came to Ottawa from all regions of the country, from many different nations, and from a wide range of professions and personal backgrounds. Despite these differences, they all shared a common commitment to the struggle for healing and justice in the face of more than 500 years of oppression, domination and colonialism.

Yet their diversity presents a particular set of challenges and difficulties. This is so for the women and those who seek their input on policies and projects. In the words of one of the Roundtable participants,

“I really appreciate the complexity of our diversity but how is this going to be reflected in the end result? There's going to be different views, and how is this going to be synthesized and be reflective of our diversity?”

Consensus is always difficult to achieve in a group with multiple interests and points of view. Therefore, it is important to identify the factors and players that can either make or break consultations.

Face-to-face Circle

There are a number of key actors and relationships that can affect the course and direction of the consultation process. When meeting face-to-face at a public meeting or gathering, there are a number of individuals whose actions and words can have a significant impact upon the proceedings. This group can include consultants, Elders, spokespeople for a particular position or organization, non-Aboriginal sympathizers and community activists. Their influence on the larger group may either be destructive or constructive.

Interface Circle

Also relevant in this regard are the government and Aboriginal organizations with their own stakes in the process and outcome. These include Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Status of Women Canada (SWC), Privy Council Office (PCO), Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), Métis National Council (MNC), Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), Métis National Council of Women (MNCW), Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association and Native Friendship Centres Association of Canada. They make up the 'interface circle' and are directly involved in the consultation process.

Faceless Circle

There is a larger 'faceless circle' of groups and individuals whose influence is less immediate, but significant nonetheless. Falling into the 'faceless circle' are Aboriginal women in general, participants' constituencies and home communities, public servants, interested federal government departments, the provinces and territories, and Aboriginal men. They are not usually present at the consultations.

It is important to recognize the conflicting interests these various stakeholders represent. Also critical is how their actions and words can influence the consultation outcome.

Key Forces For Balance

Participants bring different perspectives and ideas with them to consultations. These include everything from traditions and values, to identity and interests, to meeting goals and organization agendas. Each of these acts as an anchor linking each woman to the outside world and gives her a unique perspective and vision. Rising upward from this base are the strategic directions of vision, equality and consultation. It is the boundary between creative, constructive dialogue and destructive, stagnant talk. On either side are the factors influencing the meeting's eventual outcome.

A negative outcome is likely if participants feel they are being made invisible (shut out) and inaudible (shut up), or if they are forced to 'shut down' in the face of insensitivity and disrespect.

In the latter case, women at the Roundtable reported how they avoided potential hurt by withdrawing into themselves. By doing so, they virtually 'left' the meeting even though they were still there in person. Notably, it is the scarcity of resources which often results in competition among Aboriginal organizations, thereby dividing women from each other.

By contrast, a positive outcome is achievable if participants are able to see their diversity as an opportunity rather than a threat. In addition, their deliberations must be underpinned by good leadership, meaningful participation and a strong commitment to healing. Good leaders must 'make sense' of complicated issues for other women by bringing forward new and sound insights. To do so, they must be willing to step aside while someone else does the same. Participation means to 'make do' based on what is at one's disposal at the time. Being resourceful is the way to full participation. Healing is to 'make up' differences of opinion, values and beliefs even as these collide. A Métis woman wished that the rifts among her group would have been healed prior to this meeting.

To be successful, consultations with Aboriginal women must embody a process that is respectful, focused and inclusive. Moreover, women want these to be guided by principles that are known and accepted by all. While these principles are likely to vary somewhat according to the needs and priorities of those involved, it is nonetheless possible to identify five central pillars on which future consultations may be based.

Relationships/Resources

Roundtable participants emphasized the importance of core funding of Aboriginal women's organizations so that these can adequately represent their interests. But they also made clear that positive, respectful relationships among women are critical in any consultation exercise.

Space/Time

The women at the Roundtable called upon governments to give them more notice prior to meetings and other gatherings. They stressed the need for sensitivity to the vast distances participants must travel, and to considering alternative locations for consultation fora. Above all, women appreciated the chance to be heard, whether they expressed strong emotions or not. That they were welcomed as part of the group, no matter what they thought and how they shared this, helped them claim their rightful place at the table.

Improvisation/Planning

There is clearly a need for careful planning if a meeting involving several dozen participants is to unfold smoothly. There was broad agreement among the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women that people must be willing to seize opportunities as they arise, and be flexible enough to do the best they can with what is available to them. This does not mean accepting second-rate consultations, however. It means holding first-rate consultations given a set of circumstances and resources.

Quality/Quantity

It is desirable to consult as widely as possible before making a decision or initiating a new policy, program or project. Still, Roundtable participants strongly felt that consultation is most likely to be useful if it is meaningful, focused and forward-looking. Those who buy into this approach make for high quality consultations, yet their numbers need not be huge.

Traditions/Modernity

As was stressed repeatedly over the course of the Roundtable, traditions and ceremonies play a central role in the lives of most Aboriginal peoples. At the same time, Aboriginal people are at the forefront of technological change and development. They can now make use of the Internet to overcome the remoteness of some of their communities. In a similar fashion, approaches to consultation can involve the modern and the traditional, and use prayers, talking circles and humour while also employing e-communications and air travel.

SPECIFIC DIRECTIONS AND VISION STATEMENT

After they discussed issues related to consultation and equality, Roundtable participants identified a number of specific directions to guide future actions and interventions. They also devoted considerable energy to the task of developing a vision statement to guide future consultation exercises. Grouped by theme area, these deliberations are summarized below:

Specific Directions:

Consultation/Roundtable follow-up

- Participants be given an opportunity to review and comment on a draft of the Roundtable proceedings report prior to its publication.
- Individuals participating in any future consultation meeting be directly involved in the development of the agenda and background materials.
- Consideration be given to holding the next consultation meeting in a remote or northern locale.
- Steps be taken to ensure that language interpretation is available from the beginning of any future consultation meeting.
- Elders be given a more prominent role in future consultation meetings.
- Women Chiefs be invited to participate in any future consultation meeting.
- Participation in future consultation meetings be more open to two-spirited women, disabled women, women who have been in prison, and street women.
- Steps be taken to ensure that First Nations, Métis and Inuit women's views are adequately represented and respected in all future consultations with Aboriginal peoples.

Equality for Aboriginal women

- Aboriginal gender equality be promoted through the provision of core funding to First Nations, Métis and Inuit women's organizations.
- Initiatives to promote Aboriginal gender equality be undertaken collaboratively by First Nations, Métis and Inuit women's organizations and key federal government departments.
- On-going consultation be undertaken with First Nations, Métis and Inuit women on self-government, Bill C-31, the Corbiere decision and matrimonial property rights.
- Funds be allocated to support research by Aboriginal women's organizations on issues related to Bill C-31.
- Steps be taken by Aboriginal women's organizations to develop a strong statement on the need for absolute equality between women and men in all matters pertaining to Indian status determination.
- A campaign be developed and implemented to educate First Nations Chiefs on the problems and challenges faced by Aboriginal women affected by Bill C-31.
- Funds be allocated to document and publicize best practices which serve to foster or promote Aboriginal women's rights and well being.

Equality for Aboriginal peoples

- Governments and funding bodies be sensitized to the unique needs and realities of Inuit people.
- Funds be allocated to convene an Inuit women's roundtable on issues related to consultation and gender equality.
- Targeted funds be allocated by the federal government to provide support and services to Aboriginal peoples living in urban areas.
- A national meeting of Aboriginal organizations be convened in order to develop a framework for joint action to safeguard and promote Aboriginal peoples' rights and well being.

Justice

- On-going consultation be undertaken with First Nations, Métis and Inuit women on the impact of restorative justice approaches.
- Consideration be given to establishing an Aboriginal ombudsperson's office to investigate violations of Aboriginal individuals' human rights on Aboriginal territory and elsewhere in Canada.

Traditional knowledge and spirituality

- Funds be allocated to First Nations, Métis and Inuit women's organizations to undertake research on traditional approaches to health and healing.
- Steps be taken to make greater use of traditional knowledge and spirituality with apprehended children and youth.
- Research be undertaken to explore ways of better integrating traditional approaches to governance into existing self-government structures.

General actions

- Funds be allocated to the collection and publication of submissions and testimony by Aboriginal women before the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Vision Statement

Although the First Nations, Métis and Inuit women attending the Roundtable did not focus on the wording of a vision statement as such, there was widespread agreement on the following key principles:

- Recognition of our children and grandchildren as First Peoples in perpetuity.
- Right of Aboriginal peoples to health and self-sustaining communities.
- Right of Aboriginal peoples to a clean environment, clean air and non-contaminated foods.

Some participants undertook a drawing exercise in which they identified what they considered to be the most important features of the 'ideal' consultation exercise. Their findings are outlined below:

- There must be recognition and celebration of those who are not whole.
- Consultation participants must always try to speak from the heart.
- The diversity of perspectives must be listened to and valued, even when one does not agree with what others are saying.
- Women and men must work together for the well being of all.
- Aboriginal women must honour themselves and each other as human beings.
- Aboriginal women must always remember that they are here today because of the wisdom of their mothers and grandmothers. This wisdom must be passed down to the next seven generations.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AND AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

Mae Louise Campbell (Elder) Clan Mother Turtle Lodge	Kim Ghostkeeper (Facilitator)
Mary Ann Miller Decontie (Elder)	Charlotte Gregoire
Rhoda Karetak (Elder)	Rose Gregoire
Alma Adams Metis National Council of Women	Harriet Kalleo
Simona Arnatsiaq Qiqiktani Inuit Association	Meeka Kilabuk (Facilitator)
Ruby Arngnanaaq	Rebecca Kudloo Nunavut Status of Women
Michèle Audette Association des femmes autochtones du Québec	Victoria LaBillois First Nation Human Resource Development Commission of Québec
Fay Blaney (Facilitator) Aboriginal Women's Action Network	Joanne Lampe Labrador Inuit Association
Edna Brass	Bridgette Larocque Metis National Council of Women
Connie Braun	Clara Linklater
Carole Brazeau (Facilitator)	Audrey Lucier Metis Women of Manitoba
Veronica Dewar Pauktuutit	Alanis Obomsawin (Facilitator)
Shiningwater Diabo Aboriginal Women's Support Centre	Shirley O'Connor
Madeleine Dion Stout (Facilitator)	Cheryle Partridge Native Human Services Laurentian University
Lorraine Freeman Metis Resource Centre Inc.	Chief Margaret Penasse-Mayer Nipissing First Nation
Sheila Genaille Metis National Council of Women	Diana Rinas

Terri Sabattis

Merilda St-Onge
Association des femmes autochtones
du Québec

Debbie Thomas
Quebec Native Women Inc.

Viola Thomas
United Native Nations

Mori Tilton
Métis Provincial Council of Women of
British Columbia

Marilyn Van Bibber

Government Representatives

The Honourable Hedy Fry, P.C., M.P.
Secretary of State
(Status of Women) (Multiculturalism)

Christina Tavares
Secretary of State's Office

Florence Ievers
Co-ordinator
Status of Women Canada

Nanci-Jean Waugh
Status of Women Canada

Jackie Claxton
Status of Women Canada

Lucie Marchessault-Lussier
Status of Women Canada

Anne Schroder
Status of Women Canada

Donna Hickey
Human Resources Development Canada

Catherine Jones
Health Canada

Line Paré
Indian and Northern
Affairs Canada

Charlotte Trudel-Siouï
Office of the Federal Interlocutor for
Métis and Non-Status Indians
Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat
Privy Council Office

Maria Shin
Status of Women Canada

Elizabeth Casuga
Status of Women Canada

Jo-Anne Monette
Status of Women Canada

Jessica Gibbs
Status of Women Canada

Linda Camponi
Office of the Federal Interlocutor for
Métis and Non-Status Indians
Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat
Privy Council Office

Doris Debassige-Toeg
Department of Canadian Heritage

Karen Green
Department of Justice Canada

Jocelyne Gauvreau
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada