



# GRASSROOTS EMPOWERMENT AND THE RISE OF THE NEWFOUNDLAND ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S NETWORK

REPORT ON NAWN'S FIRST EIGHT YEARS

By Dr. Jocelyn Thorpe and Sheila O'Neill



# INTRODUCTION

The Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network—NAWN—is a relatively young organization. Incorporated in December of 2005, NAWN's membership consists of Status-On-Reserve, Status-Off-Reserve and Non-Status Aboriginal women who live on the island portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. NAWN's mission is to promote, enhance and encourage the health and social, educational, economic, cultural and political well-being of Aboriginal women in Newfoundland. NAWN welcomes as members all Aboriginal women's groups and self-identified Aboriginal women. Since its inception, NAWN has ambitiously undertaken a number of projects designed to address issues that women have identified as central in their communities. To date, these projects have generated over \$2.1 million in federal and provincial funding. (See Appendix A.)

In 2012, Dr. Jocelyn Thorpe (Assistant Professor, Women's and Gender Studies, University of Manitoba) and Sheila O'Neill (NAWN member

and former NAWN President and Vice President) embarked upon a study to assess the effect that NAWN's activities have had on individuals and communities since the organization's beginning. NAWN's board approved the research, designed as it was to provide the organization with a detailed analysis of how effective NAWN has been in supporting the well-being of Aboriginal women on the island of Newfoundland. The research also had the potential to help NAWN determine its future activities. It seemed an appropriate time to conduct the study, since NAWN had become well established by 2012 and had a substantial record to reflect upon. Between May 31, 2012, and September 18, 2013, Sheila and Jocelyn conducted five focus groups comprised of between six and forty women (mean of seventeen participants per focus group), as well as six individual interviews. (See Appendix B.) The focus groups and interviews were with members of the women's groups associated with NAWN, and participation was entirely voluntary.

Participants in the research conducted focus groups like talking circles: one person spoke at a time, from the heart, while everyone else listened respectfully. Unlike most talking circles, though, the focus groups were structured so that what was said was not meant to stay there, but to circle back to the NAWN membership and board of directors so that women's experiences with and ideas about NAWN could shape the organization's future. The hope is that those of you who participated in a focus group and/or an interview will find your words and perspectives reflected in this report. As facilitators of the focus groups and interviews, Sheila and Jocelyn have very much enjoyed the process of listening to NAWN members' voices and compiling this report. It seems fitting that participants' perspectives have led to a report that has a circular shape, in spite of the linear look of these words on the page. The following four sections explain this idea. \*

# REPORT ON NAWN'S



# FIRST EIGHT YEARS



# CULTURE

A circle has no beginning and no end, and yet we must start our explanation somewhere. We begin with “culture” because that is what brought so many women to NAWN in the first place. One woman described herself as “hungry to know about my culture” and others agreed that they came to NAWN because they were “interested in learning about our culture and that.” Connecting with NAWN often allowed women the opportunity to realize that they had grown up engaged in activities that they later understood as part of Mi’kmaw culture, for example hunting, berry picking, and using certain plants as medicine. As one woman said in a focus group, “You thought it was normal. You thought everybody was taught it.” Some women commented that “everybody wasn’t taught that, the way we were raised,” yet added that “we weren’t raised in the knowledge that we were Aboriginal. We were just people.” Many women did

not grow up knowing about being Aboriginal because “it was kept hidden” in their families, while others knew but hoped in joining NAWN “to find out what it was all about.” Given the prejudice that Mi’kmaw people in Newfoundland experienced, it is no wonder that the families of many women either did not talk about being Aboriginal or indicated “Yes, you’re Aboriginal. But we don’t tell people outside the door.”

Of course not all members of NAWN are Mi’kmaw, since NAWN is open to all self-identified Aboriginal women living on the island portion of Newfoundland and Labrador. Therefore, not everyone connected with the organization shares the experience of growing up Mi’kmaw in Newfoundland. Yet, as one woman pointed out in an interview, Mi’kmaw and non-Mi’kmaw NAWN members share with one another (and indeed with Indigenous peoples in many parts of the globe) a history of European

colonization: “it affected everybody right across the country.” As a result, she said, many Aboriginal people, including NAWN members who are Mi’kmaw, Inuit and Cree, are similarly regaining cultural knowledge and practices, “trying to learn, ... trying to connect to that.” While women came to NAWN with different experiences of being Aboriginal, everyone wanted to learn more and to meet other Aboriginal women on the island. Part of what made women feel welcome was NAWN’s inclusion of all women who identify as Aboriginal, regardless of their status under the *Indian Act*. NAWN sends the message that, as one person said in an interview, “nobody is more prepared to be an Aboriginal person than you,” a message that leads directly to the good feeling women have about NAWN. \*

# GOOD FEELING/ CONNECTEDNESS

*"It's the overall feeling that you get when you're together. I can't put it into words, but it's... it's a togetherness."*

*— GRAND FALLS-WINDSOR FOCUS-GROUP PARTICIPANT*

In each focus group, women talked about the good feeling they got when they spent time with one another. Some women, like the one quoted above, described the feeling as a “togetherness,” while others called it a “connection,” a “very strong feeling, a very good feeling,” or “that feeling of being safe.” One woman elaborated by saying that “I didn’t come out here... expecting to sit down and spill my guts with a feather in my hand. But in the talking circle... that’s pretty much what happened... You would think it would drain me, but it didn’t. It was like it revived me. And you felt the love and the connection from every person in that circle.” Often women mentioned this feeling of connectedness when discussing their participation in activities such as a talking circle, drumming, singing or smudging. But the feeling went beyond those activities as well. For example, when one woman was cleaning up after a drum-

ming group in Grand Falls, “that sense of freedom just kind of came over me, that moment of just being like ‘Yeah, wow. This is it! I’m involved in something that is true and good.’”

If a desire to learn about Mi’kmaw culture drew many women to NAWN, the connected feeling women get from NAWN is what many can no longer imagine living without. As one woman put it, “Sometimes when I am with those women, I feel very strong and I feel like I’m a source of strength. And there are other times when I’m with the women of NAWN and... I feel like I’m drawing strength from them.” In “learning to be who I am, and to be more content with myself” women gained not only connections to one another and to their identities as Aboriginal women, but strength and confidence stemming from those very connections. One woman described the feeling she got from participating in NAWN activities as a feeling of empowerment. As she put it, “I feel empowered... it’s just a wonderful feeling.” \*



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# FIRST EIGHT YEARS



# EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment, it turns out, is even more than a wonderful feeling: for many women of NAWN, empowerment is a new way of being in the world. One woman commented that “everybody’s kind of blossomed.” In the focus groups and interviews, women told story after story of finding their voices (literally!) through NAWN. Talking about the first time she had to sing a lead at a gathering, one woman said “I almost died.” But through participation in NAWN and her local women’s group, she now sings lead regularly. She commented with a laugh, “not that I’ve learned to sing, but I’ve learned not to care how I sound when I sing.” Another woman stated that “thanks to these women, and their strength and making me a very strong woman, because before I was not. I couldn’t speak if my life depended on it. I would barely say my name. Now, I don’t mind talking to anybody.” Others echoed her perspective, saying that the “image I’ve got of myself now... it’s amazing. I was... quiet, reserved, never said very much. Now, as you can see, you can’t

get me to stop talking!” Another added, “NAWN has done miracles for me personally... the women of NAWN, their strength alone lit something inside of me and showed me that, ‘You know something? You can be strong too. You are a woman and you’re more than capable of doing this too.’ You know? I mean, you’re around powerful women, they show you something you didn’t think you had.” While those who have been involved with NAWN since the beginning have had the opportunity to see that “there’s women there that blossomed from a tiny seed to a full-blown cherry tree,” others were surprised to hear of such transformations. One woman said, “when I met you, you had already been through that, that growth. And you know, I couldn’t imagine any one of you as being... shy or not confident. Because I look around, and I mean, that’s, that’s all I see, is confidence and empowerment and leadership.” One woman who has been involved with NAWN for many years commented that “I look at my reason for being passionate about what we do and why we do it, is women’s

voices weren’t being heard. Now they’re being heard.” Women agreed that their voices are now being heard because of the existence of NAWN, but not because NAWN speaks for the women: NAWN supports women to speak for themselves. As one woman put it, “we all have a voice and we all should use it, every one, each one of us.”

NAWN has assisted women learning their strengths as well as finding their voices. Some have facilitated workshops in their communities, “being role models for the rest of the women,” while others began conducting ceremonies and taking teachings back to their women’s groups and communities. Generally, “a lot of the women becoming involved with NAWN are learning their strengths.” Like “finding voice,” the idea of “learning strengths” implies that the strengths (like the voices) were there to begin with. Perhaps that is why so many women have found their experience with NAWN to be an empowering one: they are finding in themselves, rather than being given, strengths and skills

they did not know they possessed. One woman observed that “you don’t think that you have all of these strengths in yourself. But when you do something like that [a workshop on recognizing your strengths and skills], you say... ‘I do!... And you come to realize that you have more skills and strengths than you realize.”

The empowerment of women has benefitted not just the women themselves—though the positive change in and for women cannot be underestimated, as almost every woman who participated in a focus group or interview talked about her personal transformation and growth as a result of her connection with NAWN—but their families and communities as well. One woman said that “from the get go” what she learned from NAWN was a “holistic focus... the focus is put on the family, which is essentially the community... There’s so much emphasis on passing on your knowledge and showing other people. So, I feel... that the central basis of all the teachings of everything is sharing and learning and taking care of each other and being healthy as a person, as a family, as a community.” One story highlights the rippling effects of NAWN particularly well:

*“We ordered a drum for each of the women’s groups... and we gave each of our board members a drum and said ‘This is not your drum. You will carry the drum... back to your community and you’ll teach the songs to women in your women’s groups.’ And in a very short time, I’m talking months, the next time there was a gathering, there were like, all of a sudden, there’s twenty-eight drums on the altar, because we brought those drums into the community, then other people started ordering drums. And then people started making their own drums in the community.”*

As one woman involved with NAWN since the organization’s beginning said, “If there’s only one woman in your community now who knows things, then that one woman who knows things is going to start passing it around, and then all of a sudden there are three or four women who know things... That’s what we did.” NAWN’s recognition that “every woman is a part of that community and every woman has a part to play, in whatever ways that she is comfortable with,” may be key to the organization’s success in assisting women to find their voices and their strengths, and in turn to support their communities. \*



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# CIRCLING BACK TO CULTURE

*"We know who we are. We're proud of who we are. And I think the difference now is, these women can say it: I'm proud of who I am."*

*—ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOCUS-GROUP PARTICIPANT*

Women's hunger for knowledge about their culture led many to NAWN and to surprising feelings of connectedness and experiences of empowerment. It also led women into their communities as role models and as community leaders rooted in culture and in confidence that "Yeah, you know, I'm Indian and I'm proud of it." We are back where we started at culture, no coincidence given that, as one woman stated, "the one thing that's been constant, in everything we've done, has been the culture, in everything. It doesn't matter if two people meet, or forty-three people meet, the culture has always been front and centre." Women also described how over the years NAWN has become associated with

cultural knowledge and strength, and in turn how a connectedness with NAWN leads to good feelings. One woman said that "as an Aboriginal woman, I'm proud to say that I'm a member of NAWN." If learning about culture leads to a good feeling of connectedness leads to empowerment leads back to cultural rootedness, then it seems to make sense to keep this powerful circle going. Indeed, everyone who participated in a focus group or interview stressed the importance of NAWN continuing into the indefinite future and reaching out to more women as well as to other community members, especially young people. In the next section, we describe women's ideas for keeping the circle going. \*



# KEEPING THE CIRCLE GOING SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

*“We needed to form a network so that we could come together. We could talk and we could share and we could learn. So I saw NAWN then as an organization that could bring Aboriginal women together. Whatever that meant was okay.”*

— INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

Clearly, NAWN has brought Aboriginal women together, and those women continue to talk, share and learn. NAWN has enjoyed great success in meeting its mandate, and the organization has flourished beyond its founding members' hopes and expectations. NAWN has much to celebrate: like the women who have blossomed, NAWN itself has grown from a tiny seed to an established and well-regarded organization that attracts funding to continue its work as well as respect from the communities it supports. According to many NAWN members, however, there remains much work to do. As one woman said, “I

see NAWN continuing to reach out to women,” while another commented that, “I can’t see them [NAWN] not being a strong voice in the future.” A third said, “I hope someday that all the Aboriginal women on this island are a part of NAWN.” NAWN’s reputation has grown enormously over the past several years, but, as many members observed, there remain “a lot of women out there who don’t know that we exist” and who could be part of “this great organization and do something in the community.” In many cases, it was women’s own positive experiences with NAWN that led them to emphasize the need for the organization’s work to continue. One woman noted that the benefits NAWN members have experienced were not meant for just a “small number of people.” Rather, all women who want to should be able to “feel the same things we’ve enjoyed for all these months and years.” Many specific suggestions by members about the future of NAWN relate to how the organization can expand its membership. This section of the report, “Keeping the Circle Going,” includes a list of

specific suggestions offered by focus-group and interview participants about NAWN’s future.

Questions of funding emerged as central to focus-group and interview discussions about the future of NAWN. While many women involved with NAWN from the beginning laughed as they recalled the early days of the organization, when they packed their own lunches and carpooled across the island to begin the network, they also recalled those days fondly and thought of their work then as truly grassroots. With more funding has come the ability to reach more women and do more projects, as well as to maintain an office space in Stephenville, but it has also meant having to consider what funders as well as NAWN members hope to get out of the organization. In the focus groups and interviews, women held fast to the perspective that NAWN needs to find a way to negotiate the complexities of funding while keeping true to its mission of promoting the well-being of Aboriginal women on the island of New-

foundland. Some pointed out specific challenges of having NAWN dependent on funding requirements. One woman said that if “we didn’t have to be looking for funding all the time,” it would be a relief and would “give us that heartbeat” and allow us to “put forward projects that are more in line with what our ideals are instead of being dictated by funding.” For example, right now, questions of health, including diabetes, heart disease and healthy eating, seem of particular concern to NAWN members, many of whom said in the focus groups that they would like to have a series of workshops on these questions. It seems that at the present time, however, it is difficult to get funding because health “is not a hot topic for funding agencies right now,” which makes it difficult for NAWN to “meet the needs of our women.” One interview participant stated quite clearly that “in the next few years, we have to become self-sufficient.” Certainly NAWN is not the only non-profit organization to grapple with funding constraints and challenges, but it is nevertheless worth noting that this issue is one that many women discussed as a top concern for NAWN’s future.

One potentially surprising finding from the focus groups and interviews was that for NAWN members, the culture-connectedness-empowerment-culture circle featured much more prominently in women’s discussions of NAWN than did what they learned through participating in any one NAWN-led activity, such as the violence prevention workshops. (For a more complete list of activities, see Appendix A.) One woman figured that with the focus on culture, “the other things will fall in place,” and that appears to be coming to fruition with NAWN. That said, women did talk about the importance of continuing on with the workshops in the future, particularly because they found them valuable in their communities. One predicted that as more women attended workshops, there will be more “happier people and then that will affect their family situation and then that in turn reaches out into the community. And it’s just like a... rolling stone. Right? It just keeps on building and building and building.” In fact, some women thought the workshops would have a greater effect in communities now that NAWN’s name is connected to the organization’s good work and will therefore draw participants whatever the workshop topic. No single workshop topic stood out as particularly necessary to continue in the future, as different women spoke of a variety of workshops as the most beneficial to them and to their communities.



Beyond these three major topics discussed about the future of NAWN—reaching out to potential members, figuring out funding, and maintaining the workshops—focus-group and interview participants had a number of specific comments and suggestions for NAWN as the organization moves into its next eight years. These are included in point-form below:

- Specific targets for outreach should be: youth, perhaps including young men as well as young women; women and youth beyond the west coast of the island; and new members of Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation Band.
- NAWN should communicate its activities as widely as possible in as many ways as possible, including through the website, posters, telephone calls, email, Facebook, and mail-outs. NAWN members LOVE to hear about what other members are doing, even in geographically distant regions, and sometimes feel excluded when they don't have access to the information.
- Members would appreciate having physical spaces beyond the office in Stephenville, and see this as connected to outreach as well: a physical presence will encourage connectedness to NAWN, as it has on the west coast.
- NAWN should add workshops on health, including diabetes, heart disease and healthy eating, to its already impressive repertoire.
- NAWN should continue its connection with Miawpukek First Nation (Conne River), as this mutually beneficial relationship has the potential to become even stronger.
- If NAWN continues to expand, NAWN will outgrow the current board structure of one representative per women's group plus one member at large. NAWN should review its board structure and constitution to ensure that it is able to represent fully its membership while maintaining a functioning board.
- NAWN should keep up its good work, including its material support of women's organizations across the island!

NAWN has risen, and the women of NAWN have big plans for the organization. While new challenges have presented themselves alongside NAWN's growth since 2005, NAWN members are confident that they can meet and exceed these challenges, as they have always done. The women's words in this report reflect their perspectives in a specific moment. It will be fascinating to see how these perspectives change over time, as NAWN grows and changes as well. Wela'lin for reading this report. \*



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FIRST EIGHT YEARS



# APPENDIX A

## LIST OF SELECTED NAWN PROJECTS

### 2012-2015

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#### **Following In Our Grandmothers Footprints: Realizing Our Leadership Potential**

The project seeks to identify the barriers that exist or are perceived to exist that are preventing Aboriginal women from achieving economic security. Through the use of gender-based analysis, roundtable discussions, informal meetings, and a joint two-day networking information session, the project is identifying and developing strategies and recommendations aimed at improving the conditions affecting the economic security of Aboriginal women and their families in Benoit's Cove and Stephenville.

*Funding Amount:* \$300 000.00

*Funding Agency:* Status of Women

*Partnership Funding:* Canadian Heritage

*Funding Amount:* \$25 000.00

### 2012

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#### **Journey to Wellness: Grandmother's Healing Lodge**

The project brought together Aboriginal Elders, youth, women and a local youth artist to design and paint a traditional wigwam to be used in the communities for ceremonies and at traditional

gatherings. The project also provided participants with the ability to learn traditional beading which could be used on their regalia.

*Funding Amount:* \$12 425.00

*Funding Agency:* Canadian Heritage

*Partnership Funding:* Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

*Funding Amount:* \$1 000.00

#### **Aboriginal Women and Youth: Reclaiming our Heritage, Strengthening our Futures**

The project conducted two (2) two (2) day workshops across three (3) regions of Newfoundland to develop a traditional practice DVD to allow Aboriginal women, youth and others to learn traditional chants. The project also included cultural sensitivity workshops which helped to build knowledge in the project participants about how to deal with discrimination and racism.

*Funding Amount:* \$29 500.00

*Funding Agency:* Canadian Heritage

*Partnership Funding:* Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

*Funding Amount:* \$7 425.40

*In-kind:* The Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network

*Funding Amount:* \$52 973.27

### 2010-2012

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#### **Keeping Safe, Finding the Balance through Knowledge**

The project was a two (2) year youth-focused and youth driven drug awareness and healthy lifestyle choices project. The project was led by an Aboriginal youth steering committee, which determined the implementation of and training for 18 illicit drug information and healthy lifestyle choices workshops. The project reached 225 Aboriginal youths in 18 targeted communities and developed a game and video that are available online for other youth groups or like-minded organizations. The resources and workshops were all culturally based and included the advice and support of Elders in the identified communities.

*Funding Amount:* \$193 972.25

*Funding Agency:* Health Canada – DSCIF Fund

*Partnership Funding:*

Western Health

Central Health

Mental Health and Addictions

Provincial Wellness Initiative

Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs

New Horizons for Seniors

*In-Kind:* The Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network

## 2010-2011

### **Protecting Aboriginal Seniors**

The project Protecting Aboriginal Seniors was designed to provide awareness to seniors about violence and how it impacts the entire community.

*Funding Amount:* \$25 000.00

*Funding Agency:* New Horizons for Seniors Partnering with Elders

### **Women's World 2011**

The Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network was chosen to present on the project Breaking Barriers, Building Strong Minds to delegates at this conference. The event brought together nearly 2000 participants from 92 countries, 800 presenters, 350 volunteers, dozens of sponsors, committee members and supportive allies. By all measures, this historic congress itself broke barriers and ground by raising the bar for how women can converge in ways that value and respect the participation of under-represented communities.

## 2009-2010

### **Choose Life: You have the Power**

The project Choose Life: You have the Power brought together Aboriginal youth, Elders and facilitators to develop a one (1) day culturally based workshop on teen suicide for youth between the ages of 12 and 19. The project trained 36 facilita-

tors on the issue of teen suicide and reached a total of 155 youths in 15 communities across the island.

*Funding Amount:* \$20 000.00

*Funding Agency:* Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs

*Partnership Funding:*

*In-Kind:* The Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network

was produced by the Gingko Transition House of Fredericton, NB.

*Funding Amount:* \$156 507.00

*Funding Agency:* Status of Women Canada

*Funding Amount:* \$122 860.00

*Partnership Funding:* Canadian Heritage and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador

## 2008-2009

### **Aboriginal Women on the Verge of Rising (Kiskat-pukuwit): Breaking Barriers, Building Strong Minds**

This three-phase project had two main objectives, focusing on the Aboriginal women represented by NAWN:

- To build strong minds through empowerment and building of leadership capacity resulting in strong, determined, educated Aboriginal women; incorporating culture as a strong foundation.
- To break barriers through violence prevention and awareness through community specific violence prevention tools, leadership skills, cultural healing, and encouragement to end the cycle of abuse in women and children.

To implement this ambitious program NAWN purchased a toolkit from the Native Women's Association of Canada called the Youth Council Violence Prevention Toolkit, and used a free toolkit called the Healing Journey (Family Violence Prevention in Aboriginal Communities) which

## 2007

### **Annual General Assembly and Retreat 2007**

Status, Status off-reserve and Non-status Aboriginal women from across Newfoundland gathered September 14th – 16th, 2007, at Twin Ponds camp and convention center near Glenwood for their Annual General Assembly, Election of Officers and Cultural Retreat. At that time NAWN had a membership of 300 and six (6) formed Aboriginal women's groups, and three (3) forming groups. The membership adopted its first constitution and elected a new Executive with a two (2) year mandate. The Board also consists of seven (7) Regional Directors including a Director representing Aboriginal women where no Association exists.

*Funding amount:* \$25 000.00

*Funding Agency:* Canadian Heritage

*Partnership Funding:* Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

*Funding Amount:* \$10 982.00

## APPENDIX B FOCUS GROUPS & INTERVIEWS

### INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

- July 20, 2013 (in person)
- July 23, 2013 (in person)
- July 25, 2013 (in person)
- July 25, 2013 (in person)
- July 29, 2013 (over email)
- October 7, 2013 (over the phone)

### FOCUS GROUPS

- Grand Falls-Windsor: May 31, 2012
- Annual General Assembly: October 27, 2012
- Miawpukek First Nation: July 23, 2013
- St. George's: July 24, 2013
- Stephenville: September 14, 2013





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