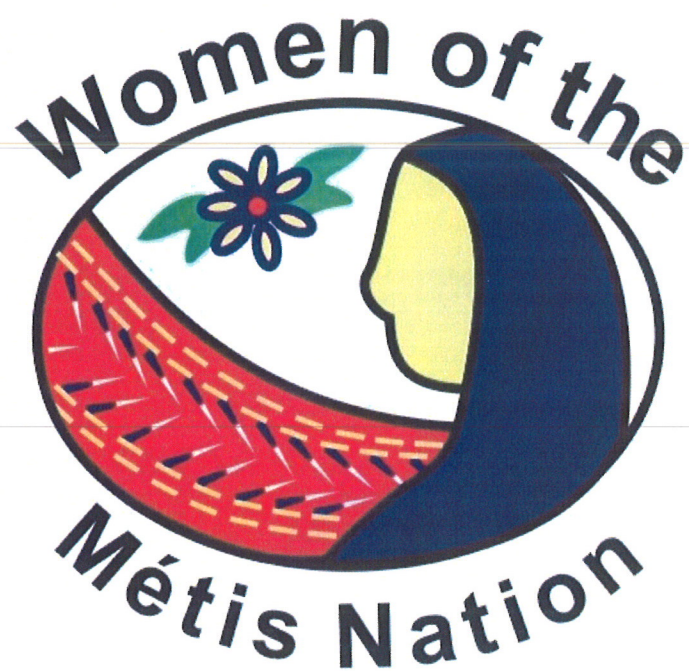




Women of the Métis Nation

Education Policy Paper

Acknowledgements

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“(S)He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable (her) him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop (her) his abilities,(her) his individual judgment, and (her) his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.”

~ International Declaration of the Rights of the Child, Principle 7

Background

According to the 2001 Aboriginal People's Survey, 48% of Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 not living on reserve had not completed their secondary school education. Less than half (43.9%) of Métis youth between 15 and 24 years of age completed high school or education at a higher level. Most Métis families (69%) live in urban centres.¹ The Métis population represents the majority of the non-reserve Aboriginal population; in cities such as Winnipeg, Prince Albert, and Edmonton, Métis people represent over 50% of the Aboriginal population.² Large numbers of Métis also live in the Thunder Bay and Toronto areas. For those Métis children who live in urban areas, their chance of living in a lone-parent household are almost double that of their rural counterparts.³ Of the 69% of Métis families living in urban centres, 42% of these households are headed by lone parents.⁴ Women head up nearly all of these lone-parent families.

In light of those numbers, Métis women face overwhelming challenges with regard to accessing and completing all levels of education, and it is the duty of both the federal and provincial levels of government to ensure that Métis women are afforded equality with respect to education. Levels of government are bound by their duty to all Canadian citizens to ensure equal access to education, and at the same time, levels of government are bound by the recognition of Métis people as a collective of distinct Aboriginal people, whose rights are guaranteed under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

Further, Article 1.1 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* dictates that all peoples have the right of self-determination. They have the right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. They have the right to determine who the individual members of their society are and how their children are raised. By virtue of these rights, in conjunction with Canada's Constitution Act, Métis women have the right to expect government to foster substantive quality with regard to our education.

¹ Statistics Canada, *Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report*, (5th ed.), Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, (2006), p. 19.

² Hodgson Smith, Kathy, "Statement of Métis Learning", p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ *Supra*, note 1.

Substantive equality for Métis women must be fostered, whereby substantive equality recognizes that “*patterns of disadvantage and oppression exist in society and requires that law makers and government officials take this into account in their actions.*”⁵ Métis women are in a disadvantaged position when it comes to education and are greatly impacted by the legacy of colonial oppression, comparably faced by their First Nations and Inuit sisters. Yet, the Métis experience is also unique, in that Métis women have been marginalized both by virtue of their Aboriginality (and Métisness), and by being forced to “fend for themselves”, with little access to resources which would help remedy the negative effects of the colonial process.

Métis women walk with our feet in two worlds. We are fiercely connected to our Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers, and at the same time continuously confronting the world left for us by our non-Aboriginal ancestors. For the betterment of Métis women, steps need to be taken to ensure substantively equal access to education that is reflective of, and fosters the unique spirit of Métis culture. Met with firm commitment on the part of all levels of government, education of Métis women will serve to uplift and enhance Métis women, men, and children, and Canadian society as a whole.

Métis women are vital to the strength of Métis communities, and as natural educators of children, have the potential to carry knowledge from both worlds to pass along and better prepare Métis children for engagement with their Métis and non-Métis worlds. Steps must be taken to remedy the long-standing practice of treating Métis as the “minority within a minority”, and in particular, treating Métis women, who have consistently been forced into a place of disadvantage in comparison to Métis men, with dignity, equality, and respect.

Steps taken with regard to Métis women’s education need to be made in the spirit of self-government, meaning that the long-term goal of any endeavour be Métis control of Métis education. The Government of Canada recognizes the inherent right of self-government as an existing right within section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. Recognition of the inherent right is based on the view that the Aboriginal peoples in Canada have the right to govern themselves in relation to matters that are internal to their communities, integral to their unique cultures, identities, traditions, languages and institutions, and with respect to their special relationship to the land and their resources.

A barrier exists to understanding exactly what is needed with regard to Métis women’s education, and it is a lack of Métis-specific data and research. While there is comprehensive research with regard to First Nations and Inuit peoples, there is a lack of consistent research on the state of Métis women’s education and the importance of Métis women’s education to the Métis Nation as a whole. Métis-specific research must be carried out.

⁵ Court Challenges of Canada, 2002, <http://www.ccpcj.ca/i/l-formoreinfo.html>.
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Education Policy Paper

The Importance of Early Childhood Development and Day Care

There is now an overwhelming consensus that early childhood development is considered the most important stage in building a learning foundation for all later learning. Studies indicate that early intervention is a much better investment than remedial or compensatory interventions in human capital later in life. In 2001, the federal government acknowledged that early childhood learning supports and services were uneven in quality and availability in its consultations on the Innovation Agenda.

Métis Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agencies (AHRDA) voiced similar concerns in the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (AHRDS) renewal process and unanimously called on the federal government to address Métis childcare needs. Even the federal government's life long learning policy paper acknowledged that:

Parental and community supports are equally important factors in ensuring the developmental foundation needed in early childhood. There is abundant evidence that children who have experienced high quality early childhood development programs learn better in school. Early childhood development programs, such as prenatal health programs, Head Start programs and quality childcare programs (among others) are highly effective means of ensuring children get the best possible start in life, and ensuring school readiness, by addressing developmental and cultural needs in the early years, if administered in culturally sensitive and targeted ways.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has also joined the chorus of voices suggesting that Canada's future competitiveness was threatened by its inability to address the learning needs of Canada's children. The OECD called early childhood initiatives a "seriously under-funded patchwork quilt of money wasting programs that provide little more than glorified babysitting".

Métis Early Childhood Development and Day Care Services

There are a number of challenges facing Métis women with regard to education. The first is a lack of access to childcare. This is symptomatic of the situation facing women across the Canadian state, but for Métis women, this has a very specific and negative impact. Given the marked statistical differentiation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal lone-parent families, Métis women (who are the heads of lone-parent families the majority of the time), more than non-Aboriginal women, face a lack of access to childcare. This is mediated by factors such as affordability; Métis women often live far below the low-income cut-off lines, forcing them into the system of government-run childcare where they will

face off against non-Aboriginal women (directly ignoring the unique impact of colonial history on the state of Métis women's lives):

“Currently, the childcare component of the AHRDS (Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy) is managed by the FNIHB (First Nations and Inuit Health Branch) and is used for access to childcare spaces from single and other parents while addressing employment, training, and upgrading. The Métis do not have access to these childcare or any other childcare dollars.”⁶

A major problem with the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Early Childhood Development Agreement, moved through the CHST, is that while reporting measures do exist, no one at the federal level monitors whether Aboriginal people off-reserve, specifically Métis, are obtaining equitable allocation.

Health Canada's \$25 million support for Off-Reserve Aboriginal Head Start initiatives, to a degree a lauded initiative, relies on pan-Aboriginal implementation approaches that restrict its effectiveness for the Métis community. Health Canada has indicated that the current off-reserve program only addresses 7.6% of 3-5 year old off-reserve Aboriginal children (114 preschool centres servicing some 3,500 children). Moreover, while the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey reflected increased attendance of Aboriginal children in preschool programs, it was not made clear what percentage of people surveyed were Métis, and more importantly, what percentage had attended Métis-specific preschool programs.

The location in both rural and urban spaces of childcare facilities can pose a problem of access for women as well. Transportation to and from the childcare facilities, as well as transportation to and from the educational institution can either prove severely limited, as in the case of rural Métis women, and financially impractical in the case of many urban Métis women who are trying to head single-parent families.

In addition, finding childcare that is culturally relevant is next to impossible for Métis women in many areas. It is vital that Métis children's mainstream education stays closely linked with Métis culture, given that childhood is marked by the most crucial of formative years of the child.

Kindergarten to Grade 12

Métis children are not succeeding in the K-12 system to the same extent as other Canadians. During these formative years, there is a lack of awareness of Métis culture and society in provincially run educational programs. It is no small wonder that Métis girls choose to drop out of educational systems that offer no positive representations of themselves or their culture. Women are negatively

⁶ *Supra*, note 1, p.16.

affected by educational environments that continue to portray Métis people in a negative light (e.g. Riel “rebellion”), or when Métis people are excluded from discussion altogether. Many Métis women are the products of provincial schools that deliver sub-standard curriculum that do little to eliminate ignorance and racism among Canada’s children. When material is delivered about Métis people, it rarely (if ever) is presented from the perspective of Métis people, and fails to make mention of the names of influential Métis women, such as Victoria Belcourt Calihoo. The women of Métis history are represented as nameless and faceless, acting in shadowy support to the more “recognizable” figures of Métis history.

Métis Post-secondary Education Institutions

At the post-secondary level, training at colleges within a Métis framework and with a possible outcome of preparing Métis women to work in the larger Canadian society, or to return to work within Métis communities, is non-existent. At the university level, with the exception of the Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel Institutes, there are no institutes specifically designed with Métis students in mind. Within other university and Indigenous Studies departments, there remains a lack of culturally relevant and sensitive information in relation to Métis people.

Métis women also face challenges with regard to securing funding for post-secondary education. Excluded from the federal support program for First Nations and Inuit students, Métis women are forced to stand side-by-side with other Canadian women, hoping to secure funding from federal and provincial loan programs. The combination of rising tuition and the fact that the majority of Métis income levels are lower than other Canadians, has created severe impediments to Métis participation in post-secondary institutions. According to Statistics Canada’s Métis Profile from 1991 and 1996, of the 428 women who received their education degree from SUNTEP, 304 (71%) were below the poverty line (\$10,421/year) when they began their studies. Roughly 55% of their income came from government sources. By the end of their degree, Métis students carried average debt load of \$40,000.⁷

Where funding for post-secondary education is made available, it is delivered through Métis National Council provincial bodies, and is filtered through Human Resource and Skills Development Canada (HRSD). HRSD has a number of criteria that must be met in order for Métis women to access educational funding. The funding is primarily intended for vocational training programs of 52 weeks or less. No consistent financial support is offered for Métis women who wish to attend programs at colleges or universities that would prepare them for furthering studies or seeking employment positions beyond entry level. Métis women do not qualify under this funding regulation, for college or university programs that

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

are two, three, four, or five years in duration, such as Bachelors of Engineering, Bachelors of Art, Diplomas in Human Resources Management, or Diplomas in Business Management. Métis women, in terms of their economic situation, remain heavily impacted by the colonial legacy, and a lack of support for pursuit of education which would help heal communities, lift them out of poverty, and encourage the self-governing of Métis people, consistent with section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

Under the HRSD guidelines, women are also prohibited from working for the duration of their studies. While non-Métis students who rely on loan programs are permitted to work to a certain degree, Métis women who choose to “take advantage” of what limited funding is made available to them in recognition of their unique place as Aboriginal peoples in Canada, are simultaneously negatively affected by the regulation stopping them from seeking even part-time employment. As it is, the programs are not designed to fully support Métis women and their families during the 52 weeks of study, and with no option to work women are forced to turn to federal and provincial loan programs again, if eligible.

College and university education is imperative for the success of members in society. For Métis women who fall well below the non-Métis average in terms of educational attainment, this is of even more importance. As our non-Métis peers become greater educated, we are told that the best we may strive for are career college programs that are intended to employ us in as little time as possible. We are told that the education of Métis women is not worth investing in.