

DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHANGING GENDER ROLES OF GWICH'IN WOMEN

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1. INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL CHANGE in the name of "development" has had profound implications on the lives of Aboriginal women and their communities. Indeed, Aboriginal people throughout the world are seeking strategies to better their lives and relationships with each other and society broadly. Sharing is culturally an integral component of many of these communities. This paper seeks to share the experiences of Gwich'in communities in socio-economic change.

The Gwich'in are the northern most Amerindians. Traditionally they lived a nomadic way of life, hunting and gathering. At present the Gwich'in live along the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories. In December 1992, the Gwich'in settled a Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement with the Government of Canada.¹

The aim of this paper is to examine the changing gender roles of Gwich'in women. The paper is based on interviews conducted by two researchers in the Gwich'in communities of Inuvik² and Fort McPherson,³ Northwest Territories in 1994 and 1995 respectively. The changing gender roles of women will be considered from three perspectives: (1) the movement from the traditional to the wage economy, (2) the community management and leadership role of women, and (3) the impact of the Land Claim Agreement.

The methodology employed in these aboriginal communities balances the requirements of the researchers with the needs of the partic-

ipants. As more researchers are met with demands from aboriginal communities for inclusion in setting the study parameters and in sharing in the research results, new, more participatory models are evolving. The one used in the study will be briefly examined.

(1) COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Research in the Northwest Territories is guided by a number of sources including Aboriginal committees set up under Nunavut in the eastern Arctic, the western-based Science Institute of the Northwest Territories and the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies. Their research mandates require researchers to place affected aboriginal communities in the information and decision loop from the initial stages to project completion. Aboriginal communities based in southern Canada are beginning to demand the same level of participation.⁴ This is very much in keeping with aboriginal demands for governance. The key words for researchers successfully studying anything which impacts on aboriginal life are 'sensitivity' and 'awareness.' Researchers are dealing with ways to give aboriginal people an effective voice and input into the research process. Research products must be of value to the aboriginal and academic community. The results need to be shared effectively. The methodology employed in this research draws on a number of approaches that honour the foregoing guidelines.

The Gwich'in research is, in fact, part of a larger project where aboriginal communities are surveyed on the topic of economic development. The issue under review is one of interest to aboriginal communities and should celebrate the positive experience of aboriginal communities in the area of economic development. The results will be of value to the community and to other aboriginal communities.

Further, each community has input into who is interviewed, what information is discussed, editorial changes and final approval of the information profiling their community. Men and women participate who are involved in community development including elders, youth, political leaders, band administrators, consultants and community members. They review this work for accuracy and their views are respected regarding the information they allow to be publicized about

their community. The research results will be given back to the communities and information sessions will be available to interested communities.

Researchers of issues involving aboriginal people are being required to move to a more inclusive process. If they do not, the type of research on issues involving aboriginal people will be severely circumscribed. There are situations in Canada where aboriginal communities will not allow research in their communities. Research opportunities will reopen as research codes are jointly developed by universities and aboriginal communities. The code administered for northern research by the Science Institute of the Northwest Territories and the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies is one such example.

(II) APPROPRIATE LITERATURE

Where applicable, a literature review of gender issues and roles has been undertaken with sensitivity to cross-cultural comparisons. Investigation of gender issues has essentially emerged from the perspective of western industrialized society. While this material contributes to an overall understanding of gender relations, it is not necessarily applicable to societies that have their roots in a non-western culture. The majority of this literature does not take into account the immense complexity resulting from dramatic social change of hunter-gatherer society to a market economy. The transition is by no means a complete one.

Furthermore, the Western anthropological model influenced by Euro-American interpretations of gender roles do not take into consideration the nuances of gender relationships between women and men in hunting and gathering society. This is because Western literature does not consider gender roles within the wider context of relationships between humans and animals which is central to hunting and gathering societies (Bodenhorn, 1990).

Gender as distinguished from sex, refers not to the biological difference between women and men but to socially constructed relations between them which may or may not relate to biological differences. Gender roles are context specific and therefore vary amongst different cultures and over time in the same culture. The fact that gender rela-

tions are socially constructed means that they can and do change due to altering circumstances (Kassam 1997). Gender roles legitimize social behaviour and reinforce what is considered appropriate male and female activity and identity within a particular culture (Bonvillain 1989).

There is a large body of evidence indicating that existing gender roles in diverse aboriginal communities do not necessarily follow from the traditions of those communities but may have emerged as a result of the impact of: (1) colonialism, (2) christianization of those communities and (3) imposition of the market system. The effect of these three related impacts upon gender relations and the resultant disruptions in respective aboriginal cultures are a key factor in understanding existing valuations and activities of women and men (Bonvillain 1989; Bourgeault 1983; Leacock 1982). While the time of contact may have differed, the net impact on diverse aboriginal cultures was the undermining of traditional patterns of life and the rise of new production relations.

Aboriginal communities manifested tremendous diversity in terms of production relations through activities such as hunting and gathering, agriculture, and commercial relations. This plurality also existed in traditional gender roles between men and women. The impact of colonization and the social change that ensued moved all these varied communities irreversibly in one direction: namely that of industrialized capitalist society. Compulsory attendance to residential schools in Canada's North was key in forcing that change in cultural patterns in general and gender roles in particular (Boothroyd 1991). Children attending residential schools were put into a context where they would strive to conform to the social expectations of their European teachers rather than those of their parents. Referring to existing Gwich'in society, the Mayor of Fort McPherson, Piet Van Loon notes: "the culture that exists, or the traditions that exist, and I'm talking outside of language, because . . . the Gwich'in language is far richer and goes far deeper than the sort of traditional ways that people live now, [is] really anglicized, and I mean the word in two ways, I mean Englishized and Anglicanized.

Doug Smith (1995), the Executive Director of the Gwich'in Healing Program, maintains that women in Aboriginal communities

have suffered from a double oppression: the first from colonization and the second from the pent up rage of men whose lives were turned upside down by the social change and took their frustration out on their wives. Arguably, children are triply oppressed, receiving the rage and frustration of both parents. Thus, a vicious cycle of pain and suffering is created. This cycle is very difficult to break even when colonialism in its strict sense is gone but prevails insidiously in the economic and cultural sphere (Said 1993).

As a result of the 1876 Indian Act in which Aboriginal people were made direct wards of the Canadian Government, calculated interventions were made to direct Aboriginal culture towards southern Canadian norms. The development in the 1950s and 1960s of the welfare state gave the final impetus to change of traditional ways of life (Boothroyd 1991). The federal government sought to concentrate Aboriginal peoples in settlements where services of the welfare state could be provided such as housing, health care, and education. Once having concentrated the population in settlements, the stage was set for modernization according to southern standards.

II. FROM THE TRADITIONAL ECONOMY TO THE WAGE ECONOMY

Based on ethnographic data of the Gwich'in⁵ living near the Chandalar River in Alaska, McKennan (1965: 51-52) maintains that the division of labour was based on sex. The men undertook hunting and trapping, making of tools and weapons, and driving of dog teams. The women prepared game and fish for cooking or storage, gathered berries, tanned skins, sewed, packed dogs, carried the larger burdens on the trail and cared for children. He maintained that these Gwich'in were a male-centred society but the relative positions of the two genders was balanced by women's ownership of property like lodges and tools. Furthermore, marriage tended to be matrilineal.⁶

Paradoxically, two legends that McKennan records suggest that these roles were not as precisely defined. The legend of *the Spider Woman and the Two Lost Sisters* speaks of two sisters tending to their

younger brother while the parents are often absent from camp on hunting expeditions. *The Girl who Journeyed to the Land of the Dead*, which is a variant of the tale of the Spider Woman, talks about two girls tracking a porcupine. McKennan's accounts, when considered against the backdrop of these legends, may be an indication of his own culture's influence on constructed gender categories than of Gwich'in reality.

Our interviews indicate that Gwich'in women of the generation prior to settlement were raised on the land, living in small family groups which were involved in hunting and trapping activities. Their role models were the family. In other words, while specific traditional roles for the different sexes did exist they were not necessarily fixed. In a small community grouping where survival of the extended family is paramount, gender roles were fluid. Hannah Alexie (1995) describes her upbringing on the land as well as the traditional roles:

I was taught all my traditional values on the land. My Mom taught me how to dry meat and do house chores like working with moose skin, caribou skin and all these things. My Dad taught me how to hunt, how to set traps and all that. I liked going hunting and trapping with my Dad, rather than staying home working with moose skin or sewing or doing house chores like making dry meat and keeping the house or tent clean.

Task assignment within a family or another social context molds and modifies behaviour in favour of specific gender roles (Condon and Stern 1993). It is noteworthy that Gwich'in parents taught their children survival and life skills rather than focusing solely on male and female tasks. This suggests gendered interdependence rather than a strict sexual division of labour. Bonvillain (1989: 5) notes a similar pattern of culturally differentiated ideals on the one hand and actual practice on the other amongst the Montagnais-Naskapi of eastern Labrador. "Men hunted, fished and made their equipment" whilst "women prepared food, made clothing and tents and cared for their children." However, "in actual practice, women often accompanied their fathers or husbands in hunting and men readily tended to children's needs."

The introduction of the wage economy changed gender roles. Sarah Jerome (1995), Principal of the Chief Julia School, describes this:

We went through a transitional period during the 1970s when the whole subsistence economy of the community went to a wage economy. The trapping lifestyle of the trappers was sort of being phased out and the wage economy was coming in and this is where a lot of women in the community who had the education and who had the time to get the jobs, who were willing to be trained, got into the wage economy, and they gradually became the breadwinners of the community. This left our men in a sort of limbo, there was no more trapping to be done, they didn't have the skills or the education to get into these job situations, so they were sort of just stuck.

The cash economy recognized as 'productive' the gender roles of women and men only in terms of their income earning capacity (Moser 1989). In this sense the traditional hunting and trapping lifestyle of the Gwich'in after the decline of the fur industry was not seen as necessarily 'productive'. The impact on the community was dire in two ways: (1) from the displacement of men from their traditional roles; and (2) from the vagaries of unstable, resource-oriented wage employment. Sarah Jerome (1995) describes this vividly:

I know that a lot of the men were not comfortable with that [changing gender roles], but they had no choice, so they automatically turned to the next thing they could think of, which was drinking, which created a lot of social problems within the community. But it wasn't their fault, because they didn't have the education, they didn't have the skills to go out there and get jobs. A lot of them had skills to go out [on the land] and work with the oil companies with the boom that they had in the Beaufort Delta region of exploration, gas exploration . . . they were making a lot of money in a very short time frame. I remember being so afraid thinking, what are we going to do with these people when the oil boom is over and they're back, what are we going to do with them?

The nature of the economy is best characterized as 'mixed,' com-

binning elements of the wage and traditional forms of livelihood. Mary Teya (1995), a community health representative in Fort McPherson, describes her personal struggle with having to get a job to be able to buy things for her children:

I had to, a lot of times I felt guilty being out there and working and my husband staying at home. Of course he went hunting and fishing and that, but still it really bothered me a lot of times, but as time went on I got used to it, and today I feel good about it. But the workforce has changed a lot of things for us.

Condon and Stern (1993) in their research on gender identity amongst Inuit youth have noted that socialization for young girls through parental role models as both homemakers and wage earners has changed female aspirations. Traditional roles of women are being supplemented rather than replaced. Therefore, women, in addition to being care givers, mothers, and seamstresses, are also participating in careers and generating income.

The gender inter-dependence of labour, where sexual division of labour was not necessarily fixed in hunting and gathering activities may explain the relative ease with which women had been able to move into wage employment. Their positions were never subordinate to those of the men. This implies that Gwich'in women had control over their own labour (Bodenhorn, 1990).

III. COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT AND THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF WOMEN

Caroline Moser (1989) outlines community management and community leadership gender roles: community management refers to the collective aspect of organization, production and consumption of resources; and community leadership includes status and power associated with community management. The implementation of the welfare state in the 1950s and 1960s exposed the cleavage between the mixed bush and wage economies. Men tried to continue the traditional patterns of hunting and trapping whilst women moved with

their children to settlements. In the absence of men, who were out on the land, women had to take on the community leadership roles. Ruth Carroll (1994) describes this transition:

Way back in maybe the 60s or so, and maybe even earlier I guess when we had the schools in the community, and the men continued to live out on the land, they continued to be trappers and hunters, and the women had, in order to educate their children in the white man's way, they had to come into the communities and stay there, and then as things began to happen in the communities, they needed people to sit on different boards and committees, and if there were no men around, the women got on.

Fogel-Chance (1994: iv) observed that amongst the North Slope Iñupiat in Anchorage, Alaska, women tended to "have more schooling, worked year-round, have steadier employment histories, and live in an urban-setting" compared to men.

Women in Gwich'in communities have been able to exert greater independence through wage employment, but their gender bears a double burden. As a result of the market economy the role of women has increased to generating income for the family as well as tending to household responsibilities. Sarah Jerome (1995) describes her day:

The role of the woman in the community is very, very important, because, even before I go to work in the morning, I'm in how many different roles, I'm a mother, I'm a wife, I'm a principal, I have to get sub-teachers, I may have to go out and be a breadwinner, I am a breadwinner, I have to make sure that there's enough food in the house for my family for the day, all these different things that I have to do. So I fulfil so many different roles before I go to work. In my job as a principal, I'm there as a friend, I'm there as an auntie, a principal, a teacher, you name it, and I have to fulfil all these roles, it's never, never ending. Women are such an important part of a community, and we always say, leave it to the women to try to solve the problems, because the men are not emotionally involved as we are. A lot of times they overlook those little things that are so important.

While traditionally the concept of chief amongst the Gwich'in is associated with men, the idea of the 'Elder' who advised the Chief was void of gender specification. In other words, the community did not differentiate between 'Elder man' and 'Elder woman'; rather they were recognized for their knowledge and wisdom (Ross 1995). In the 1980s, three of the four Chiefs in Gwich'in communities were women (Alexie 1994). Women currently occupy a significant if not the majority of positions on the Band Council (Charlie 1995, Cayen 1995, Teya 1995).

As a result of settlement and the changing lifestyle, the traditional role of the Elder has been greatly undermined. Mary Teya (1995) describes this role:

The role of an elder back when I was growing up and the role of an elder today is completely different I feel. I mean it's still the same, but it's not practised as much any more, but I remember my grandparents, they were always advising, they were always encouraging, and they were always teaching, and teaching verbally, and we learned by observing a lot of times. They made sure that their children were, they always watched eh, they always watched.

I think things have changed with the elders too . . . Like, for example, when they're out on the land, you never saw an elder sit down and do nothing, they're always preparing food, cutting up meat, and preparing to store it, or drying it, or they were sitting down and tanning, tanning hides or sewing, making things, you know, boots and mitts and parkas, stuff like that, they were always doing something. Then sometimes you see them go out and set traps for squirrels or whatever they can get. They're setting snares for rabbits, they go make hooks, they set hooks under ice, they go do that. They were always out there doing something, if not they were packing wood or snow, or ice or water, they were always busy. Usually out on the land where there's the places where people used to live, it's usually family, like grandparents, and like my parents. There's me, and my parents, and there's my grandparents eh, it's that way, just about every case, extended family, living together. And they do all

these kinds of things today they're put in homes where you just need to push buttons to put a stove on, turn a tap on to get water.

The impact of modernization was to weaken and even replace the legitimacy of authority based on the sacredness of tradition (Weber 1962). Modernity thus opposed traditional institutions. In this process the knowledge held through the traditional authority was not only undermined but was considered without value. Degrees became the criteria of valuation rather than cumulative inter-generational experience. With the intervention of a wage economy, the role of the Elder was subordinated. However, amongst the Gwich'in this extreme tendency has been curtailed and is being redefined. Today, in simply practical terms, the bush economy is necessary for sustenance in terms of food, the maintenance of culture and 'development' in both the economic and social sense. One of the best sources of knowledge on the capacity of the land and the plants, fish and wildlife it supports are Elders and those who continue to live from the land. This body of knowledge emerges from generations of accumulated experience of a community living in close contact with nature (Johnson 1992).

The Gwich'in are seeking innovative ways to recover and maintain that knowledge. This has re-integrated the role of the Elder in community life. For instance, the Gwich'in Language and Cultural Project, the impetus for which came from women living in Fort McPherson, has not only reconstructed the role of the Elder as the holder of knowledge in a modern context but has also re-established their role as advisors to the community (Ryan and Robinson 1990).

IV. THE IMPACT OF THE LAND CLAIMS AGREEMENT

The Gwich'in, like all aboriginal societies today, are in the midst of profound change (Newhouse 1992). What will their society look like in ten years? What effect will the land claim have on people in the community? In particular, will women have opportunities to be involved in their community and how?

The process of change intensified with the settlement of a

Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement with the Government of Canada in December 1992. This gave the Gwich'in control over 8,658 square miles of land in the Northwest Territories and 600 square miles in the Yukon Territory, as well as the ability to command significant financial resources of approximately \$75 million over 15 years (Ross 1995). As a result of self-government, the Gwich'in will determine their own path to development in general and the roles of women and men in particular.

There are several aspects to the post-claim experiences that give clues as to the shape of the future: production of a financial plan for the community, a perspective from a band employee and a new business owner.

Once the agreement was signed, the Gwich'in leadership planned their next steps. They hired a facilitator and in February, 1994 they developed a Financial Road Map. It was critical to the process that the delegates represent the community. Sixty people from all walks of life including youth, elders, men, and women occupying various places in the economic strata of the community participated. They broke into discussion circles all the while maintaining diversity in each circle. The aim of the Road Map was to develop a strategic plan in light of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (Robinson and Kassam 1994).

The result is a document containing a vision statement, values and belief statements and their principles for investment. Most importantly, the people who were present agreed with the document. The goals are inclusive and show a balance between traditional values and modern business goals.

Women's contributions were valued traditionally in Gwich'in communities and that continues today. Women have opportunities to participate in the structures that are being put into place to handle self-governance. One such woman is Dolly Carmichael. She is a member of the Gwich'in Tribal Council, several community boards and is the band financial assistant. She says:

I think women basically the same as everybody else I've always had a lot of support from the leadership. I've never had any time where I could not go in and talk to any of them on anything, even from

the time when I started as a secretary. They always took the time to answer my questions about the claim. I think that's what really got me involved was the leadership with their encouragement. That is why I am on council.

When I grew up, there was no difference between my brother and me. If he got to go hunting, well the next time it was my turn. If he had to chop wood, well then, I had to pack it, and the other way around. My parents always treated us as equals, never gave one something over the other, and so I grew up in that attitude.

The community totally accepts my family's choices. Their daughters chop wood if they want or don't if they don't like it. I try to make sure my daughter spends time on the land with her grandparents and learns the traditional life. I always tell her that she can do anything she wants when she grows up, she doesn't have to be a secretary (Carmichael, 1994).

Finally, there is the perspective of a Gwich'in woman who recently established a family business in Fort McPherson. Her story illustrates the impact of the Gwich'in Land Claim on the changing gender roles. It is a tale of self-empowerment. Diane Peterson, who had gone door to door to explain the implications prior to its acceptance by fellow community members, wanted to set up a taxi business. She started by approaching the territorial government but found little success. Three months later she turned to the Band Council.

I was given the run around at the first place I went to, so then I went and saw James Ross [Chief in Fort McPherson], and he asked me to write a proposal. Not having seen a proposal in my life I never knew how to write a proposal, so that took another, maybe 2 weeks to just sit at home and wonder who I could get to write my proposal, and who I could ask to do all the hard work for me, and one morning I phoned the band office and I asked my cousin William Cree who worked at the band office, I asked him if he could help me write a proposal. So he asked me to come in the morning and he'd help me on it. I got there in the morning, he was

busy on his computer, he told me he's got some business to finish and then he'll deal with me. So in the meantime I sat back and I had this sample copy of a business plan, so I took that and I started reading it, and I sort of got a little understanding of what was a proposal. So I sat down and I started writing, and I wrote non-stop and by the time I got out of there it was 1:00, he went for lunch and he was back and I was still writing, so after he came back I told him I think I had a proposal. I asked him to read it, and I told him I was going home for lunch, and I'll come by later on. So that's what I did, I came back and he was surprised, he said he thought it was a good proposal, so what I had to do is make draft after draft. We made some changes and then I took it to the band manager . . . Dean Smith (Peterson 1995).

Today, Peterson's Taxi is a thriving business, serving Fort McPherson and surrounding communities.

While these experiences provide only a limited view into the Gwich'in community, the experiences are powerful examples of the role of women in the community. The Land Claim Agreement will probably have the greatest impact on changing gender roles. The Gwich'in will have control over their own resources and determine the nature of their community into the next century. This will be determined by three factors: (1) control over education policy, (2) the role of traditional knowledge and its integration into daily life, and (3) the influence of the media such as television, radio, newspapers and the internet. Gender roles are determined through task assignment and socialization. Role models, therefore, play a key role in helping the youth define their gender identity (Condon and Stern 1993). By the Gwich'in having greater control over their education policy, examples of gender roles will be more in tune with Gwich'in culture rather than southern norms. Acquisition of, and according importance to, traditional knowledge will provide a northern context to make education relevant to young people. The media is the strongest force in reinforcing southern gender norms. However, this need not be the case entirely, selective programming can reinforce standards that are collectively agreed upon as northern.

V. DISCUSSION

The tale of Gwich'in Women is one of self-empowerment against a backdrop of dramatic social change. Arguably their traditional upbringing may have been the key feature in preparing them to cope with change. While being raised to be mothers, care givers, makers of clothing, preparers of food and so on; they were also taught skills such as hunting to prepare them for survival. This fluidity of gender roles was an important asset when facing what seem like insurmountable obstacles as a result of colonization, christianization and the imposition of the market system. This is a case of women accepting modernity on their own terms. The traditional gender roles of women were supplemented rather than replaced by entry into the market system.

When examining gender roles and community development, it is clear that for the Gwich'in the word "community" includes not only humans but the plant and animal life in their traditional lands. Therefore examination of gender relations must also take into account the relations of humans to the surrounding wildlife. The majority of the discussion on gender issues in European literature is devoid of this nuance.

As the implications of the Land Claim Agreement unfold, Gwich'in women will continue to be key players in their communities well-being. The Gwich'in approach to community development appears to be inclusive of all community members and draws on traditional beliefs and blends modern tools to become a modern aboriginal community meeting change on their terms. Women play a critical role and are challenged to meet their potential and develop skills that will benefit the community. While Fort McPherson and Inuvik suffer the social ills of many communities, there are bright lights to be found in the people who have a clear vision of the community and are willing to work hard to make it a reality.

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¹ Gwich'in Land Claim Settlement Act, 1992, received Royal Assent on 17 December 1992 and was proclaimed in force as of 22 December, 1992.

² Wanda Wuttunee

³ Karim-Aly Kassam

⁴ The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs in September 1995 placed a moratorium on research in communities until a Code of Ethics is developed with the assistance of the communities and the University of Manitoba. Similarly communities in the Northwest Territories are sensitive to these issues and often require input into much of the research process including how information is gathered and disseminated.

⁵ Referred to by McKennan as Chandalar Kutchin.

⁶ According to VanStone (1974: 52-53) newly married couples lived with the bride's family and the husband worked for his new father-in-law. After the birth of their first child, the couple would establish a new residence. VanStone maintains that matrilineal clans were once prevalent amongst the Alaskan Gwich'in.