

Gender Issues in Canada: Aboriginal Women

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Introduction

In Canada, about 713,000 people living in non-reserve areas identified themselves as Aboriginal, that is, as North American Indian (about 358,000), Métis (about 295,000) or Inuit (about 46,000) in the 2001 Census.¹ The non-reserve population (over 70% of the total Aboriginal identity population in Canada) excludes people living on Indian reserves, and it includes people who live in Canada's largest cities, other urban areas, rural areas and in the Canadian Arctic.² The Aboriginal population is young, growing and increasingly urbanized.³ The 2001 Census shows that about 68% of the non-reserve Aboriginal population lived in urban areas.⁴ Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), discussing Aboriginal children in poverty in urban communities, reveals that "the median pre-tax income of all persons indicating Aboriginal identity is \$13,526, or 61% of median income for all Canadians (\$22,120)."⁵

Women in Canada 2000 (Statistics Canada) reports that there was a total of 408,100 Aboriginal women, who made up 3 % of the total female population in 1996.⁶ That year, women made up 51% of the total Aboriginal population, and 66% of all Aboriginal females were North American Indian, 25% were Métis and 5% were Inuit.⁷ The majority of Aboriginal women (72%) live off reserves, and the largest numbers of them live in Ontario and British Columbia.⁸ Many Aboriginal women have low incomes and their life expectancy is low compared to non-Aboriginal women.⁹ In *Women in Canada 2000*, Heather Tait states that "Aboriginal women are another group of women in Canada that may be doubly disadvantaged; that is, in some cases they face discrimination based not only on their gender, but also on their race."¹⁰ In this paper, an overview of Aboriginal women in Canada will be described by examining statistics and various researches.

Historical Backgrounds

Prior to the colonization of the Americas, Aboriginal women enjoyed considerable power in their life.¹¹ Gathering and hunting economies like those of the Mi'kmaq or Innu, and agricultural economies like those of the Iroquois and

Huron, were to some extent egalitarian communities.¹² Aboriginal women had power in some important areas: "relative autonomy in sexual life and marriage; some degree of influence in group decision-making; and significant participation in the religious or ceremonial lives of their people."¹³ Aboriginal women enjoyed "a position of authority in the family, clan and nation."¹⁴ However, "the political power of indigenous women declined with the spread of Europeans into their territories and the subsequent reorganization of Aboriginal life, including the legal categories imposed by the Government of Canada's Indian Act."¹⁵ Frideres states that the Indian Act "governs every aspect of Aboriginal life," and it "begins with determining the very existence of Aboriginal peoples (e.g., who is an Indian) and extends its tentacles from the boardroom to the bedroom."¹⁶ The Indian Act treated women and men differently until 1985. According to section 12(1)(b) of the Act, Aboriginal women who married non-Aboriginal men automatically lost their original status, and as a result, their First Nation (Band) membership, and moreover they could not regain it even if they were divorced or widowed.¹⁷ However, the Act conferred status to non-Aboriginal women who married Aboriginal men.¹⁸ Because of legal discrimination against Aboriginal women, many of them married non-Aboriginal men.¹⁹ Bill C-31 in 1985 eliminated sex discrimination and allowed many Aboriginal women and their children to reclaim their status.²⁰ However, the change in the legislation does not easily mend relationships between Aboriginal women and men.²¹ "Many women are resentful toward the men, who succeeded in blocking their reinstatement for so long, while the men resent Native Canadian women who married non-Native Canadians, and who may now bring these men into reserve communities."²² Owing to the passage of Bill C-31, new problems such as overcrowding, "exacerbating conditions of poverty, unemployment and inadequate educational facilities" have been brought to many reserves while the federal government has failed "to honour its undertakings to ease the increased burden of bands with inadequate resources."²³

The residential school system should also be considered to understand the influences that affected Aboriginal women's lives through generations. Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women (CPVAW) argues that "The residential school system cut to the very soul of Aboriginal women by stealing their most valued and vital roles of mother and grandmother, along with their children."²⁴ Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 reports that about 33,800 Aboriginal people aged 15 and over residing in non-reserve areas, attended a residential school, representing 6% of the

Aboriginal population with some formal education.²⁵ It also shows that the total (in reserve and non-reserve areas) still living who attended residential school is estimated to be between 80,000 and 90,000. In this Statistics Canada's survey, it is stated that "Often, children were separated from their families and their communities to attend residential school," and that "While not all children had negative experiences in these schools, incidents of abuse have been cited by many former students."²⁶ Cassidy et al., indicating negative effects on Aboriginal women's parenting skills, observe that "Years of residential schools and forced adoption have left a generation of Aboriginal women who have no mothers, grandmothers, or great-grandmothers."²⁷ CPVAW contends that "The residential school era marked a turning point for Aboriginal women in Canada," and that "Their rights, status and identity were now fading into near obscurity."²⁸ CPVAW further indicates that Aboriginal women have struggled in poverty, and that "Many Aboriginal families became second-, third- or fourth-generation 'welfare families'."²⁹

Family Status

Most Aboriginal people live with their immediate family.³⁰ In 1996, 88% of Aboriginal women aged 15 and over lived with family members, compared with 83.4% of non-Aboriginal women.³¹ In Canada, about 13% of women never marry and over 30% of women who marry will be divorced or separated.³² More than 40% of Canadian women ranging in age from 30 to 39 are expected to opt for a common-law union as their first union, while this percentage is estimated to reach 53% among 20- to 29-year-olds (Statistics Canada, 2002).³³ Among people aged 15-64, Aboriginal people were less likely to be living with their spouse compared with non-Aboriginal people (31% versus 51%), while Aboriginal people were about twice as likely to be living in a common-law relationship (18% versus 9%).³⁴ They are also more likely than non-Aboriginal people to be lone parents (11% versus 5%).³⁵ In Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas such as Winnipeg, Regina, and Saskatoon, about half of the Aboriginal children lived with a single parent.³⁶ In 1996, 18% of Aboriginal women aged 15-64 were heading lone-parent families, making up 86% of all Aboriginal lone parents.³⁷ Lone-parent families headed by Aboriginal women had an average of 2.3 children, compared with 1.8 children headed by non-Aboriginal female lone parents.³⁸ Thirty-two percent of Aboriginal children under

15 years of age lived in a lone-parent family, twice the rate in the non-Aboriginal population (16%).³⁹ The divorce rate among Aboriginals is similar to that for non-Aboriginal people.⁴⁰ Larson et al. cite Frideres' argument that "many Native women never formally marry – although they live with a man and bear children – in part because an unmarried Native mother may receive more baby-bonus payments than a mother who is married and separated," and that "Native Canadian women are also eligible for various educational and vocational training programs only if they are unmarried."⁴¹ While women's reliance on government transfer payments is explained in this description, the following report in "Living with Mom or Dad, or both? (Statistics Canada)" should be noted. In Canada, children of common-law unions "are more likely to end up living with their mother and seeing their father irregularly or not at all" and these children are "also less likely to receive regular financial support from their father."⁴²

Cassidy et al. elucidate by observing that Aboriginal women value "an extended, community-supported family form" in which children were brought up by the group as a whole. Cassidy et al. also point out that "Today, it is not uncommon for a single Native woman with biological children of her own to adopt other Native children rather than let them be turned over to Children's Aid and risk placement in non-native foster homes."⁴³

Low Income among Aboriginal Women

Overall, Aboriginal peoples tend to earn less than non-Aboriginals, with those who live on reserves earning substantially less than those who live off the reserves.⁴⁴ Many Aboriginal women have low incomes. In 1996, Aboriginal women had an average income of \$13,300, over \$6,000 less than the figure for non-Aboriginal women (\$19,350) and \$5,000 less than that for Aboriginal men (\$18,200). That year, 42.7% of Aboriginal women aged 15 and over had incomes below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-offs, compared with 20.3% of non-Aboriginal women and 35.1% of Aboriginal men.⁴⁵ "The low-income situation of Aboriginal lone mothers is even more serious" as 73% of those mothers lived below the low-income cut-offs, compared with 45% of non-Aboriginal lone mothers.⁴⁶ "Composition of personal income of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, 1995" reveals that 32.2% of all the income of Aboriginal women came from government transfer payments, compared with 17.9% of non-Aboriginal women.⁴⁷ Among the problems Aboriginal

single mothers reported in the “Epijig Ag Unjuana Project,” health (depression: 40%), social life (loneliness: 42%), economics (food and clothing costs: 46%) were their major concerns.⁴⁸ Concerning poverty among Aboriginal women, Marlee Kline contends in “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women,” that “Poverty is often responsible for the difficulties mothers, and in particular lone mothers, have in providing primary care to their children, and this has specific implications for First Nation mothers who disproportionately live in poverty largely as a result of colonialist practices and policies.”⁴⁹

The CCSD research project *Urban Poverty in Canada* reports the economic situation of people with Aboriginal identity living in Canada’s Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs).⁵⁰ In 1995, 50.4% of the Aboriginal population were poor, compared with 21.2% of the non-Aboriginal population in CMAs.⁵¹ In all family categories in all CMAs, Aboriginal families had higher poverty rates than non-Aboriginal families, and Aboriginal children under 15 had the highest poverty rate – 61.5%.⁵² Blackstock points out that “Canada’s aboriginal peoples would rank 78th on the UNPD’s Human Development Index, while Canada has consistently placed at the top (1-3) of countries on that scale.”⁵³ Anderson (CCSD) notes that 52.1% of all Aboriginal children were poor, the highest rate of the three equity groups (Aboriginal, visible minority children, and children with disabilities), and that Aboriginal children had more health problems.⁵⁴ “Childhood poverty is associated with higher chances of poor health, low educational attainment, riskier environments, and riskier behaviours among children (CCSD).”⁵⁵ Aboriginal children experience lower levels of educational attainment compared to non-Aboriginal children.⁵⁶ Riedmann et al. cite the following report: “The rate of accidental death and injury among Aboriginal children is four times that of the non-Aboriginal population;”⁵⁷ “Between 1986 and 1990, the suicide rate among Aboriginal children aged 10 to 11 was more than five times the rate found among non-Aboriginal children.”⁵⁸

One of the factors contributing to poverty among Aboriginal women is the difficulty in getting a good job. Aboriginal women were less likely to be employed than either Aboriginal men or non-Aboriginal women, and they were heavily concentrated in low-paying jobs such as sales and service (40.1%) or clerical and administrative (23.4%) jobs.⁵⁹ Unemployment rates among Aboriginal women were highest for young adults, and in 1996, 29% of Aboriginal lone mothers were unemployed, compared with 16% of non-Aboriginal female lone parents.⁶⁰

Educational attainment may be another factor linked to low-income status. In 1996, only 5% of the out-of-school Aboriginal women had a university degree, compared with 14% of non-Aboriginal females.⁶¹ Kunz et al. (CCSD) state that “Even with post-secondary education, job opportunities may still be out of reach for Aboriginal peoples,” and that there is subtle discrimination in the workplace.⁶² A report for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples states that “Aboriginal people face discrimination in hiring and employment,” and thus they are not favored in Canada’s labor market.⁶³

Conclusion

Aboriginal women in Canada are disadvantaged relative to overall Canadians. As various statistics show, Aboriginal women have shorter life expectancies, lower incomes, less educational attainment, fewer job opportunities, and higher rates of single parenthood and unemployment, compared with non-Aboriginal women. The majority of Aboriginal single mothers have struggled with social and health problems in poverty. The rate and depth of poverty in these families is a serious issue, and it has affected children in many aspects of their lives. Effective policies to reduce poverty among Aboriginal lone mothers and children are strongly needed.

Notes

¹ Statistics Canada, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial Findings: Well-being of the Non-reserve Aboriginal Population* (Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, 2003) 8.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Anderson, “Aboriginal Children in Poverty in Urban Communities: Social Exclusion and the Growing Racialization of Poverty in Canada,” 19 Mar. 2003, Canadian Council on Social Development, 22 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.ccsd.ca/pr/2003/aboriginal.htm>>.

⁶ Statistics Canada, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-based Statistical Report* (Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, 2000) 247. “The Aboriginal population includes those who identified with an Aboriginal group, either North American Indian, Métis or Inuit, on the 1996 Census. The Aboriginal population also includes people who did not identify with an Aboriginal group, but who were Registered Indians and/or First Nations (Band) members. Also note that, in 1996, 77 Indian reserves and settlements did not take part in the census and the estimated 44,000 people living in these communities are not included in the data in this chapter (260).” Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) reports that “In 2001, 976,305 persons identified as Aboriginal peoples, 22.2% higher than in 1996, while the Non-Aboriginal population grew by only 3.4% between 1996 and 2001.” Anderson, CCSD.

- ⁷ "Figures do not sum to 100 because the remaining women did not identify with an Aboriginal group but were Registered Indians and/or First Nation (Band) members (260)." *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 247.
- ⁸ *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 248.
- ⁹ *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 251, 259.
- ¹⁰ *Women in Canada 2000: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 247.
- ¹¹ Agnes Riedmann, Mary Ann Lamanna and Adie Nelson, *Marriages and Families: First Canadian Edition* (Scarborough: Nelson, 2003) 67.
- ¹² Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson and Naomi Black, *Canadian Women: A History* 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, Ltd., 1996) 19.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (Aboriginal Panel), "Our Story," *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow and Lise Gottell (Toronto: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 2000) 374. Abbreviation CPVAW is used by the author, Yakushi.
- ¹⁵ Riedmann et al. 68.
- ¹⁶ James Frideres, "Altered States: Federal Policy and Aboriginal Peoples," *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada* 2nd ed., Peter S. Li (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1999) 116.
- ¹⁷ Ruth Roach Pierson, "The Mainstream Women's Movement and the Politics of Difference," *Canadian Women's Issues: Volume I, Strong Voices*, Ruth Roach Pierson, Marjorie Griffin Cohen, Paula Bourne and Philinda Masters (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1993) 198.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Lyle E. Larson, J. Walter Goltz, and Brenda E. Munro, *Families in Canada: Social Contexts, Continuities, and Changes* 2nd ed. (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 2000) 97.
- ²⁰ Pierson 198.
- ²¹ Larson et al. 97.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Pierson 198.
- ²⁴ Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (Aboriginal Panel) 376. In this report, it also argues that "Most cases of abuse could be traced to the residential school, from where victims often carried the abuse back to their homes and communities (377)."
- ²⁵ *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 – Initial Findings: Well-being of the Non-reserve Aboriginal Population* 22.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Barbara Cassidy, Robina Lord and Nancy Mandell, "Silenced and Forgotten Women: Race, Poverty and Disability," *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Mandell (Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1995) 38.
- ²⁸ Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (Aboriginal Panel) 376.
- ²⁹ Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (Aboriginal Panel) 377.
- ³⁰ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics Profile Series (Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, 2001) 4.
- ³¹ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 253, 264.
- ³² Paul Philips and Erin Philips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Canadian Labour Market*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers, 2000) 74.
- ³³ Statistics Canada, Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, *General Social Survey – Cycle 15: Changing Conjugal Life in Canada* (Ottawa: Ministry of Industry, 2002) 3.
- ³⁴ (In 1996) *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* 4.

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- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ (In 1996) Riedmann et al. 11.
- ³⁷ *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* 4.
- ³⁸ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 254.
- ³⁹ *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* 4.
- ⁴⁰ Larson et al. 98.
- ⁴¹ Larson et al. 98. James S. Frideres, *Native Peoples in Canada, Contemporary Conflicts*, 4th ed. (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1993).
- ⁴² Statistics Canada, "The People: Living with Mom or Dad, or Both," Canada e-Book, 29 Mar. 2004, <http://142.206.72.67/02/02d/02d_002b_e.htm>.
- ⁴³ Cassidy et al. 37.
- ⁴⁴ Statistics Canada, "The People: Equity Groups," Canada e-Book, 19 Mar. 2004, <http://142.206.72.67/02/02e/_008d_e.htm>.
- ⁴⁵ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 258-68. "Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-offs are used to classify families and unattached individuals into 'low-income' and 'other' groups. Families or individuals are classified as 'low income' if they spend, on average, at least 20 percentage points more of their pre-tax income than the Canadian average on food, shelter, and clothing (140)."
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 267.
- ⁴⁸ Cassidy et al. 35-36.
- ⁴⁹ Marlee Kline, "Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women," *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women's Studies Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow and Lise Gottell (Toronto: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 2000) 199.
- ⁵⁰ Kevin Lee, "Measuring Poverty among Canada's Aboriginal People," *Perception*, CCSD, Canada, (September 1999) 9.
- ⁵¹ Kevin Lee, *Perception* 10.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ Anderson (CCSD).
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Kevin K. Lee, *Urban Poverty in Canada: A Statistical Profile*, (Ottawa: CCSD, 2000) 28.
- ⁵⁶ CCSD, *Thinking Ahead: Trends Affecting Public Education in the Future*, July 22, 2003 <<http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/Gordon/part1.htm>>.
- ⁵⁷ Riedmann et al. 376. Health Canada, *Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians*, Prepared by the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health for the Meeting of Ministers of Health, (Charlottetown: PEI, 1999).
- ⁵⁸ Riedmann et al. 376. National Forum on Health, n.d. *The Need for An Aboriginal Health Institute in Canada*, Synthesis Reports and Issues Paper, Final Report, Vol. 11. <www.hc_sc.gc.ca/publicat/involv2/aborig/idsabo/html>.
- ⁵⁹ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 257, 266.
- ⁶⁰ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 258.
- ⁶¹ *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report* 255.
- ⁶² "Unequal Access: A Report Card on Racism," *Perception* CCSD Vol. 24, #3 (Winter 2000). <<http://www.ccsd.ca/perception/243/racism.htm>>.
- ⁶³ CCSD, *Urban Poverty in Canada* 39.