



The National Aboriginal Women's Summit

Prepared for the
House of Commons
Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

April 28, 2008

Submission by the
Native Women's Association of Canada

Good afternoon. My name is Claudette Dumont-Smith, the Acting Executive Director of the Native Women's Association of Canada. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Committee on this important topic. Beverley Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada sends her regrets, as she is attending a meeting out of the country today.

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a nationally representative political organization comprised of thirteen Provincial Territorial Member Associations. Our goal is to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well being of Aboriginal women within First Nations, Métis and Canadian societies.

NWAC aims to ensure that the unique needs of Aboriginal women are addressed throughout all processes at the national level. Empowering Aboriginal women by facilitating their participation in legislative and policy reforms promotes equal opportunity, and ensures that the use of culturally relevant, gender-based approaches result in a more balanced, holistic approach to the issues under consideration.

On June 20 to 22, 2007, the first National Aboriginal Women's Summit (NAWS I) was held in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador. From NWAC's perspective this was a historic event, and one that directly resulted from NWAC's earlier efforts at the First Ministers Meeting (FMM) in Kelowna in 2005. At the FMM, NWAC's goal was to close the gap that then existed in terms of the lack of attention to Aboriginal women's issues on the part of all levels of government. While NWAC was not able to achieve the full

inclusion at the FMM that we had hoped for and expected, we are pleased that events such as NAWS show how we are making progress, however slow and incremental, towards our goals of achieving the recognition and inclusion of Aboriginal women in these national processes.

NWAC was honoured and pleased to co-host NAWS I. NWAC believes in promoting and facilitating unity among Aboriginal women, which is why we ensured the participation of all National Aboriginal Organizations and other relevant parties such as the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence and the National Association of Friendship Centres. As a result, the summit was attended by over 300 individuals, including Aboriginal women from across Canada who represented a wide variety of Aboriginal and women's organizations, as well as political leaders and government staff from the federal, provincial and territorial governments and Aboriginal representative organizations and Nations.

This first Summit presented the opportunity for Aboriginal women to explore issues together and make recommendations to move these issues forward. The title for NAWS I was "Strong Women, Strong Communities." The agenda was divided into three key themes:

- Health, Safety and Wellness
- Equality and Empowerment and
- Strength, Balance and Honour.

There were several key outcomes of the Summit. The first key outcome was the consensus on necessary actions and the recommendations that were developed over the three days by the participants. These recommendations ranged from broad principles that should underpin all future action to specific actions to be taken to improve the participation and inclusion of Aboriginal women in policy and decision making processes and to improve the social, economic, political, cultural and personal well being of Aboriginal women. The participants clearly endorsed their organizations and leadership. They reminded us that the term Aboriginal includes Métis, Inuit, First Nations, Status and Non-Status individuals, inclusively and equally, as well as all the organizations that represent them. In all three theme areas participants clearly recommended that Aboriginal women must be engaged and actively participating in leadership and at all decision making tables so that they are well served in all legislative, policy and programming initiatives. They recommended that culturally relevant gender based analysis be consistently and constantly used when making these decisions. Other recommendations addressed economic development, education, addressing the special needs of youth and Elders, improved health care, the elimination of violence against women, the adoption of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, and the revitalization and ongoing maintenance of Aboriginal languages and culture.

In addition to the recommendations resulting from this summit, a second key outcome was the clear building of momentum over the three days of the Summit. On the final day, several provinces and territories indicated their willingness to host a subsequent National Aboriginal Women's Summit. This has resulted in the planning currently underway for

NAWS II which will be held in Yellowknife, from July 29th to 31st, 2008: NWAC and the Northwest Territorial government are currently co-chairing the committees that are organizing and planning NAWS II. NAWS III will be held in Manitoba in 2009.

A third outcome of the Summit was the organization of conferences or summits at the provincial and territorial level. In some provinces and territories, Aboriginal women held meetings in advance of NAWS I to discuss issues and develop local and regional positions to take forward to the summit. Following NAWS I, Aboriginal women have met to review the recommendations and action plans developed at NAWS, in order to prepare local and provincial/territorial approaches to implementing these measures. For example, the Yukon Aboriginal Women's Summit was held in Watson Lake and Whitehorse in November 2007. Yukon women who attended this summit reviewed the outcomes of NAWS I and developed recommendations and action plans specifically for their territory.

Why has NAWS I been so successful? From the perspective of Aboriginal women, NAWS I provided an opportunity to view issues on a broad, national scale, and to come to agreement on next steps. It enabled Aboriginal women from across Canada to get on the same page in terms of information, approach, understanding and plans for the future. It provided Aboriginal women with the opportunity to respond to a common set of issues and challenges, and to develop an approach that each can use when dealing with the same "partners" – the various departments of the federal government.

The discussions at the Summit reminded Aboriginal women that they are not working in isolation on these sometimes overwhelming problems, and that there are commonalities to the experiences and issues they face every day. Although there are some regional differences that were identified, the women were reminded that they face common issues, common difficulties, and can find strength, understanding and assistance from one another to deal with them.

NAWS I provided an opportunity for Aboriginal women to remind the leadership – both the political and the organizational leadership – in government at all levels that women are important, that they must be a part of all processes and decisions, and that their views, issues, needs and concerns must be taken into account.

NAWS I provided the participating governments with a clear indication of current thinking, issues, problems and preferred approaches of Aboriginal women in all parts of the country. To the extent that Aboriginal women are able to develop common goals, priorities and approaches, this will benefit the federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments who must respond to these needs.

What do we need to build on the successes of this first Summit?

We need to ensure subsequent Summits are relevant, and continue to build on the work done at the first NAWS. This is already being undertaken, as the organizers for NAWS II

work to ensure that the agenda moves forward from recommendations to action and reporting out on results.

We need to ensure that there is sufficient funding to keep future National Aboriginal Women's Summits active and relevant. We need to ensure that there is adequate support so that inadequate resources do not cause them to fail.

The costs that need to be covered include

- the costs associated with attending future Summits for the delegates and representatives from women's and Aboriginal organizations
- the costs associated with developing and organizing NAWS for NWAC and other NAOs who participate in this work
- the costs associated with co chairing NAWS for NWAC
- the costs associated with implementing and advancing the NAWS agenda in between sessions for NWAC and other NAOs and women's organizations. This is an area that is particularly lacking at the moment, especially as women's and Aboriginal organizations see their core funding cut, and their project funding restricted.

NWAC has been consistently urging that all policy and program changes must respect the distinct cultures, traditions and languages of Aboriginal Peoples. These traditions include equal respect for women. It is not enough to consider or analyze the implications of policy decision on Aboriginal women without our direct participation: we must include

the voices of Aboriginal women and their representatives in these processes as we move forward and target this segment of the Aboriginal population for positive change. It is our firm belief that when Aboriginal women are safe and healthy, their children, families, communities and Nations will also be healthy. This message was confirmed and validated at the National Aboriginal Women's Summit in Corner Brook last year. We look forward to the advances that NAWS II will bring, and we believe that the measures contained in the recommendations developed at the first National Aboriginal Women's Summit, and that will be further refined and implemented as a result of subsequent Summits, are an important step towards our goals of empowering and advancing the equality of Aboriginal women.

Thank you.