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## A Community-Based Leadership Development Program for First Nations Women: Revaluing and Honoring Women's Strengths

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# A Community-Based Leadership Development Program for First Nations Women: Revaluing and Honoring Women's Strengths

## **Abstract**

Over 400 First Nation women participated in leadership development workshops developed by First Nation women for First Nation women. We collected survey data and conducted focus groups and interviews with workshop participants to identify outcomes and determine barriers and resources to women in leadership. Outcomes of the workshop included increased perception of women as leaders, increased personal capacity, and encouragement to seek opportunities for formal and informal leadership positions. Family and home responsibility, community pressure, and lack of support were identified as barriers faced by women in leadership or considering leadership positions. This program represents an effort to empower women to participate in social, cultural, and political life within their communities and obtain equitable political representation.

## **Keywords**

First Nations, leadership, women

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## **A Community-Based Leadership Development Program for First Nations Women: Revaluing and Honoring Women's Strengths**

Indigenous leadership and self-governance are important topics in Canadian public policy, particularly at a time when seminal decisions on the health, economy, politics, and social conditions of Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) and their communities are being made (Stout & Kipling, 1998). The legacy of colonialism, patriarchy, and marginalization continues to impact Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in the form of poverty, poor physical and mental health, socially inflicted trauma, and abuse (Adelson, 2005; Frideres & Gadacz, 2001; Stout & Kipling, 1998). While some Indigenous groups and communities are successfully re-establishing their right to self-determination, for others the struggle is ongoing. Indigenous women are an underrepresented group in leadership and policy relating to Indigenous peoples (Stout & Kipling, 1998); therefore, this article focuses specifically on First Nations women. We believe that First Nations women must be able to meaningfully participate in decisions about policies and programs that affect women, their families, and their communities.

The social and economic status of First Nations women has received increased attention over the last several years. Statistical information provides a general overview of their age distribution, family status, income, and educational attainment. Although these data do not capture the heterogeneity of social, economic, and cultural characteristics present, they provide some context for the life situations of First Nations women (Stout & Kipling, 1998). In 2006, there were approximately 360,000 First Nations women and girls in Canada, representing 51.6% of the First Nations population and 1.14% of the entire Canadian population (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). Between 1996 and 2006, the First Nations female population grew by approximately 30%, compared to a 9% growth rate in the non-Indigenous female population. Slightly more First Nations females lived off reserve (58.8%) compared to on reserve (41.2%). In terms of age distribution, the First Nations female population was younger than its non-Indigenous counterpart with a median age of 26.4 years, a difference of approximately 14 years. In 2001, life expectancy for a First Nations woman was 76.7 years and approximately 5 years shorter than her non-Indigenous counterpart (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011).

A large proportion of First Nations women lived with their immediate or extended families (87.3%) and were more likely to be lone parents compared to non-Indigenous females (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). According to the 2006 Canadian Census, 14% of First Nations females lived in crowded conditions, increasing to 26% among on-reserve females. Approximately one quarter of First Nations females lived in dwellings that were in need of major repair and this number increased to almost one half for females living on reserve. These numbers are 4 and 6 times higher, respectively, than for non-Indigenous females in Canada.

Education significantly influences future employment opportunities, income potential, and access to health information and resources (Adler & Newman, 2002) and thus is an important contributor to social and economic status. Overall, census data indicated that the educational attainment of First Nations women was lower than that of non-Indigenous women, although the gap is slowly closing (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2001). Between 2001 and 2006, education levels increased among First Nations women: In 2001, 48% of First Nations women had less than a high school education compared to 39% in 2006. By 2006, 8% had a university education, compared to 20% of non-Indigenous females. First

Nations females were more likely than males to have a university degree, and as likely as non-Indigenous females to have a community college degree or certificate. Post-secondary qualifications were more common among women dwelling off reserve (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011).

Finally, the 2006 Canadian census indicated that a significant number of First Nations women experienced financial hardship. Only 46.1% of First Nations women aged 15 and older were employed, compared to 50.7% of First Nations males and 62.7% of the non-Indigenous population (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). First Nations women also earned less; in 2006, the median income for First Nations females was \$14,490 compared \$20,640 for non-Indigenous females. For women living on reserve, the median income dropped to \$12,466. More than two times the number of First Nations females off reserve were living below the low income cut-off compared to non-Indigenous females (37% versus 16%, respectively) (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). Considering that First Nations women are often caring for a number of dependents, financial hardship becomes an even greater concern.

Although statistical information risks oversimplifying and homogenizing the experiences of First Nations women and girls (and census data can provide an inaccurate picture due to poor compliance rates), the preceding data provide some context for their lives. What emerges is a social and economic picture that is quite different from that of non-Indigenous females and First Nations men. Given their unique experiences and central role in family and community life, First Nations women must be included in the leadership and decision-making processes affecting Indigenous peoples. Yet, historically opportunities for First Nations women to access, participate, or engage in policy development have been restricted. The 1869 Enfranchisement Act ("An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians," 1867) and 1876 Indian Act (enacted as part of the Constitution Act, 1867, Section 91(24) are examples of racist and sexist policies encountered by First Nations women; these policies limited women's sexual and reproductive freedoms by defining who could and could not hold "status" (Fiske, 1995). Prior to the 1985 amendments to the Indian Act (1985) (Bill C-31), band membership (for women and their children), the right to live on reserve and share in band resources, and the right to inherit property were only available to those with "status"; women were also excluded from public meetings and the band electorate (Fiske, 1995). Efforts by individuals and advocacy groups to further amend sexist policies have met with varying degrees of success (c.f. *McIvor v. Canada*, 2009). Systems governing communities have typically been patriarchal and the lack of women in leadership positions has systemically limited the voice and contribution of women in policy-related decisions (Fiske, 1995; Stout & Kipling, 1998). Participation of each member is vital for the health of a community and half of the community's available potential is missed if women do not participate in leadership, policy, and program development (Findlay & Wuttunee, 2007).

### **Major Women's Development Project**

NishnawbeAski Nation (NAN) is a political representation of 49 First Nation communities in Northern Ontario, representing approximately 45,000 individuals (NishnawbeAski Nation, 2011). The NAN Major Women's Development Project was formed to examine how women could be included in NAN's leadership processes, facilitate the on-going involvement of women in leadership, and promote women's development initiatives in the communities. The overall goal of the project was to increase women's knowledge and competencies, thereby empowering women to participate in social, cultural, and political life within their communities. The project materialized under the guidance of the Director of Women's

Development (co-author Simard-Chicago) with input from women in NAN communities, the NAN Women's Council, and other stakeholders (Maranzan, Sabourin, & Simard, 2011).

The Major Women's Development Project consisted of four-day workshops delivered to women residing in NAN communities, discussion during women's circles, and collection of baseline social and economic data. Curriculum materials were developed for the workshops to focus on personal capacity (e.g., stress management, communication skills, boundary setting) and leadership development (e.g., community planning, leadership skills). Workshop materials included facilitator and participant manuals, icebreaker games, and group discussion questions. The chief of each community was first contacted to explain the nature and purpose of the workshops and to ask if there was interest within the community. With the chief's permission, the workshops were advertised by posters and word-of-mouth. Trained facilitators, all of whom were First Nations women, went in groups of 2 or 3 to deliver the workshops in the communities (Maranzan et al., 2011). The final element of the Major Women's Development Project was the creation of a data collection tool to gather statistical information about NAN women's needs and experiences (results described in Maranzan et al., 2011).

The Major Women's Development Project was implemented from 2008 to 2010, with the goal of holding workshops in each of the 49 First Nations communities affiliated with NAN. Workshops were delivered in a total of 44 communities (one community declined participation, and four communities did not respond to initial inquiries and invitations). Participation records showed that 428 women and 15 men attended the workshops.

## **Objectives**

The objective of the present study was to determine the impact of the Major Women's Development Project on participants and determine the barriers and resources for women in leadership. We used quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the program's immediate outcomes such as changes in participants' knowledge and skills and impact on participants' lives. The information gathered was used to identify themes about women in leadership, barriers to leadership, and recommendations for future leadership development for First Nations women.

## **Methods**

Maranzan and Sabourin partnered with the NAN Director of Women's Development (co-author Simard-Chicago) to develop the methodology. Several meetings took place with advisors from the NAN Women's Council and workshop facilitators to identify key questions. A mixed methodology was chosen, resulting in a questionnaire about leadership and personal capacity to be distributed at the workshops with follow-up focus groups and interviews with women who attended the workshops. Support and approval for the Major Women's Development Project and evaluation was provided by the NAN Executive Committee. Permission to offer the workshops and data collection was obtained from each community's chief and/or band council. Ethical approval for data collection was obtained from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.

## **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were distributed to women attending the workshops and contained items about their leadership involvement, interest in running for chief or council, barriers to running for a formal leadership position, and women's involvement in their communities. Data are reported as frequency distributions below.

## **Focus Groups and Interviews**

We conducted five focus groups and five individual interviews with women who participated in the leadership and personal capacity-building workshops. Two focus groups were held in Thunder Bay with women from several communities ( $n = 20$ ), and three focus groups were held in NAN communities ( $n = 19$ ). These communities were chosen on the basis of geographic factors: one community was located in an urban setting, and the other communities were accessible only by air and ice road (one each in Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario). Snacks and participant incentives were provided at each focus group and all women gave informed consent to participate and to have the session audiotaped.

All focus groups were facilitated by co-authors Maranzan and Sabourin and began with group introductions and a discussion of the purpose of the meeting. The Major Women's Development Project Director and staff were not present and participants' anonymity was ensured in order to encourage women to speak honestly about the program. One facilitator asked specific questions of the group and ensured that each participant had the opportunity to speak. The second facilitator ran the audiotape and kept notes on procedure and participants' responses. Questions asked by the facilitator were:

1. "What part or parts of the workshop impacted you the most?" The facilitator prompted each woman to consider all aspects of the workshop by asking, "what stands out the most?" "Was there a specific topic that really caught your attention?"
2. "Are there skills that you became more aware of and decided to pursue?" The facilitator followed up with "have you made any small or big life changes as a result of the workshop?"
3. "Did this workshop impact your family or community?" "If so, how?"
4. "Do you see changes in opportunities for women to be leaders in the NAN communities?" "If so, what changes have you seen?"
5. "What is needed for women take a more active role in leadership in your community?" The facilitator inquired as to what factors are obstacles or barriers and what is needed for women to overcome these barriers. The facilitator followed up with "how can women's leadership be supported and nurtured in your community?"

At the end of each focus group, the facilitator asked if there were other issues about the workshop or women in leadership that participants wanted to share. The summary notes on procedure and responses were reviewed with the participants, who agreed that the summary notes captured the content of the discussion. Individual interviews were conducted with five women who were not able to attend the focus

groups but requested to participate. The same focus group questions and procedure were followed for the interview process.

Each audiotape was transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. All transcripts were first read to obtain an overall sense of the data. Thematic content analysis as outlined by Cresswell (1998) was used to identify themes in relation to the questions asked. A list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping themes including verbatim examples was generated separately by two of the researchers, and consensually validated by obtaining agreement between the researchers. Member checking was then used to solicit participants' views of the research findings' credibility.

## **Results**

### **Results from Questionnaires**

A total of 234 women completed the questionnaire while attending the community workshops. Fifty percent of the women were under the age of 40 years, with 26.2% between the ages of 31 and 40. The majority of the women were married or in a common-law relationship (55.9%) and spoke English as a first language (53.1%). Other first languages included Ojibway, Cree, and Oji-Cree. Half of the women had completed high school (49.6%) and 19% had completed post-secondary education.

At the time of the workshops, 17.9% of participants had run for chief and/or council in their community, while another 27.8% had thought about it. The women were also active in other aspects of community life, with 75.2% volunteering in their communities. Most commonly, the women volunteered at community events (48.3%), followed by fundraising (44.4%), cooking (40.6%), cleaning (29.5%), crisis response (28.6%), and visiting families in need (22.2%).

Participants were asked about barriers and alternate responsibilities encountered by women who run for leadership positions. The most frequent response was family responsibility, endorsed by 48.5% of the women. Other concerns expressed by participants were: community pressure (44.9%), home responsibility (43.7%), lack of support (37.9%), self-esteem issues (26.1%), and financial concerns (17.5%).

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

All focus group and interview participants indicated they had attended the workshops in their communities. Themes were identified for each question and are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Themes from focus groups and interviews regarding leadership and personal capacity building**

Question	Theme
What part or parts of the workshop impacted you the most?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased perception of women as leaders</li> <li>• Recognition of natural leaders</li> <li>• Motivation to change through positive role modeling</li> <li>• Intergenerational relationship building</li> </ul>
Are there skills that you became more aware of and decided to pursue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal education</li> <li>• Stress management skills</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> </ul>
Did this workshop impact your family or community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of increased female leadership and employment</li> <li>• Community among women</li> </ul>
Do you see changes in opportunities for women to be leaders in NAN communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement for women to get involved</li> </ul>
What is needed for women to take a more active role in leadership in your community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved access to training opportunities</li> <li>• Women’s recognition of their skills and abilities</li> <li>• Opportunities to interact with chief and council</li> <li>• More community support for women leaders</li> </ul>



For question 1, the participants reflected on the part(s) of the workshop with the most impact, and many women spoke about their increased sense of women's ability to be leaders, the recognition of natural leadership ability, and of learning leadership skills through positive role modeling. One woman stated,

My mom and my aunties are a big influence because they were strong women.

Another said,

I've learned a lot from the women in our First Nation, especially the [women] Chief and Council.

Many participants identified the accessibility of the workshops as an important feature. Education and training activities are usually offered outside of First Nations communities and many women stated that holding the workshops within each community made it easy for women to attend. The women were also impacted by the facilitators, all of whom were First Nations women, and discussed the significance of the workshops being developed by First Nations women for First Nations women.

Question 2 identified skills that participants developed or became aware of and had decided to pursue. Many women talked about the value of education and how important it is for youth and adults. One participant said,

... speakers and women's conferences and training were talking about education and kids. I could relate, learning and going to school. I said I can do it too.

Another woman described how a youth who attended the workshops went from not being in high school to now attending university. The focus group participants also talked about personal capacity skills such as improved stress management and self esteem skills.

Similar experiences were repeated throughout the focus groups. For example,

I speak up for myself now.

I've learned how to handle my stress level.

I manage my life more.

[the workshop] taught me to be proud of myself.

One woman explained,

I came from residential school, where the spirit got squelched, I'm getting it back slowly, these workshops really help.

The women also spoke about the opportunity for intergenerational relationship building and knowledge exchange provided by the workshops. Since the workshops were open to all females it was common for

youth, adults, and elders to attend together. Another woman summed up her experience of the workshop by saying,

For myself I see a lot of growth from the training, I learned my language and work with elders.

The third focus group question asked about the impact of the workshop on participants' families and/or communities. Women spoke about themselves and others who were seeking job opportunities, securing employment, and participating in political aspects of their communities since attending the workshops. An example was given of a participant who watched one of the workshop videos on the regional First Nations police service and went on to become a police officer. Participants also believed the increased knowledge and skills would impact their communities:

Women are more confident to do whatever they want, after these workshops they want to start their own activities.

Another participant said,

Women can organize events that they want to see happen.

Finally, participants also spoke about increased community among women, summarized best by one woman's statement:

We can empower each other.

Another woman stated,

I want to do something for my community, to raise women's voices. Women need to stand together, [it has] always been men but [we] need more women to speak up for women's issues.

The sub-theme of community among women was best summarized by the statement,

We had nothing, but then we realized we had everything, we had each other.

The final two questions focused on changes in opportunities for women to be leaders, and what would be needed for women to take a more active leadership role. Participants gave examples of how women were being encouraged to get involved, a change from their earlier experiences. As one woman stated,

Patterns of thinking are changing, chiefs are starting to encourage women to get involved.

Many women commented that improved access to training opportunities would help support more women leaders. Participants also described how women need to have increased recognition of their skills and abilities. One participant described the impact that a single person can have by saying,

... simply start by knowing how much power each person has.

Others believed that opportunities to interact with chief and council and greater community support would benefit women and encourage them to take on leadership roles.

## Discussion

The Major Women's Development Project was developed by First Nations women, for First Nations women, and was delivered by First Nations women in the communities. Delivering the workshops in women's home communities improved access to the workshop for women who were otherwise limited by geographic and financial restraints. More than 400 women attended the workshops, with a sub-sample of women completing questionnaires and participating in focus groups to identify training outcomes and describe barriers and resources to women in leadership. Key outcomes were an increased perception of women as leaders, enhanced personal well-being, and encouragement to seek out opportunities for greater community and leadership involvement.

The spirit of the workshop was to inspire women to recognize, utilize, and build upon their strengths. A key theme expressed throughout our data was the value of drawing on First Nations women's pre-existing strengths. Our data show the majority of women attending the workshops were already involved in their communities, an example of a pre-existing strength. Examples of community involvement included volunteering at community events, fundraising, cooking, cleaning, crisis response, and visiting families in need. The women also spoke about other female role models within NishnabeAski Nation and their communities. Furthermore, workshop participants were committed to mentoring other women. Although leadership can be thought of in terms of formal political or job-related roles, leadership can also be informally exercised through volunteerism and role modeling. The workshops helped participants recognize the important leadership roles already held by women within the community. Informal roles may not be as visible as formal leadership roles but they contribute significantly to the well-being of families and communities.

Focus group participants also described changes in their skills and personal capacity resulting from the workshops. Improved stress management and enhanced self-esteem are examples of personal capacity building that occurred. We heard about women who made changes in unhealthy relationships by setting and maintaining boundaries. These findings fit with some participants' belief that balance in one's personal life can support balance in one's public life. We also heard examples of how the workshop inspired women to go back to school, seek employment, and look into options for starting their own businesses. As described by Stout and Kipling (1998), Indigenous women's influence can come from their education as they work in various roles throughout the health, education, and government sectors. Census data has indicated that First Nations women are more likely than their male counterparts have at least some university education, although they are still behind non-Indigenous women in this area (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). As far as education influences social, economic, and leadership status, obstacles to First Nations women's educational success must be addressed.

At the time of the workshops, approximately 18% of participants had run for chief and/or council in their community, while another 28% had thought about it. These numbers are encouraging because, as in recent history indicates, opportunities for women to participate in leadership were restricted through exclusion from public meetings and the band electorate, and women were discouraged from contributing in governance (Fiske, 1995; Stout & Kipling, 1998). These numbers also suggest that women who attended the workshops likely had a pre-existing interest in or experience with leadership and so self-selected into the workshops.

Workshop participants also identified barriers to women in leadership. Almost half of survey respondents indicated that family responsibility was a concern for women in leadership; home responsibility was another commonly endorsed concern. Indeed, First Nations women are often faced with balancing the competing demands of their family and community roles (Stout & Kipling, 1998) and our findings suggest that difficulty balancing these responsibilities presents a barrier to women's participation in political life. Self-esteem issues and financial concerns were also identified as barriers to leadership by survey respondents. Our data do not allow for more in-depth analysis of these factors; however, Miller (1992) found that Coast Salish women had greater electoral success in communities where males did not have disproportionate incomes compared to females. Interestingly, women's electoral success was negatively associated with median household income; women held more council seats in poorer communities perhaps due to new economic and educational resources available to them (Miller, 1992).

Our survey respondents indicated that community pressure and lack of support were barriers to leadership participation. A similar theme emerged from our qualitative data: women described how women were discouraged from organizing and were not being encouraged to step forward for leadership positions. Very little has been written about the role communities play in supporting or oppressing women's political activities (Stout & Kipling, 1998). Our findings show that the community does play a role; however our data do not provide more specific information about community influence. The role that communities play in supporting or discouraging women's leadership is an important area for further research.

The results of this study should be considered in light of the following limitations. Throughout delivery of the community workshops, the facilitators were able to tailor the workshop materials to the needs identified by participants, which naturally varied from workshop to workshop and community to community; this variability in content may have impacted our findings. We cannot account for changes resulting from forces acting outside of the Major Women's Development Project (e.g., other programs and policies which may have affected our outcomes) because we did not have a comparison group. Finally, we collected data from a sample of women who participated in the workshops and this sample may not be representative of the larger group of women who attended or of First Nations women in the general population. As previously stated, it is possible that workshop participants self-selected due to a pre-existing interest and/or participation in leadership.

## **Conclusions**

Although this article has focused on women and leadership, it is important to note that it does not only relate to women. Women are concerned about the health, economics, and culture of their families, communities, and First Nations society, which is inclusive of females and males. Furthermore, "revaluing Aboriginal women does not mean devaluing Aboriginal men" (Findlay & Wuttunee, 2007, p. 5). The Major Women's Development Project succeeded in increasing women's perception of themselves as leaders in various capacities, impacted personal development, and encouraged women to seek opportunities to take on leadership roles. The project also identified barriers faced by women in leadership, barriers that must be addressed before women can obtain equitable representation and inclusion in leadership and decision-making processes. We believe the full potential of First Nations

women will be realized when they are able to meaningfully participate in decisions about policies and programs that affect women, their families, and their communities.

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