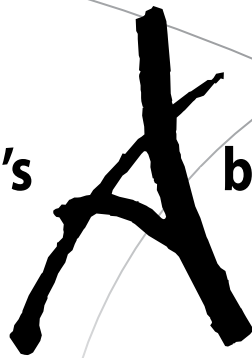


# Let's Meet Québec's boriginal Women





**Let's Meet Québec's Indigenous Women**



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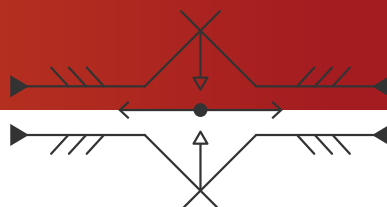
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“ We scarcely know each other. To build better relations between Aboriginal women and the rest of the population, including non-Aboriginal women, knowledge and understanding are needed. This publication should be one more step in that direction. ”

– Julie Miville-Dechéne,  
President of the Conseil du statut de la femme (2011-2016)

“ For us to work together, you need to know our history and our reality. Let’s get to know each other and break the myth. That’s how the road to reconciliation can begin. ”

– Viviane Michel,  
President of Québec Native Women

# P Presentation



Québec Native Women / Femmes autochtones du Québec and the Conseil du statut de la femme have combined their expertise to shine a light on the reality of Québec's Aboriginal women.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women have their own histories, different origins and distinct identities, but this does not prevent them from forming partnerships<sup>1</sup> and having common aspirations. Self-determination, non-discrimination for all, recognition for women's words and accomplishments: these are aspirations we share.

**L**et's Meet Québec's Aboriginal Women looks at various aspects of the lives of Aboriginal women: demography, identity, law and political organization, education, family, the economic situation, violence and political action.

A harsh reality stands out: the living conditions of Aboriginal women are inferior to those of the rest of the population. Life expectancy at birth is four to six years shorter for First Nations women than for other Québec women. According to the United Nations, in 2007-2008 Canada ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world\* on the human development index, while the First Nations ranked 68<sup>th</sup> <sup>2</sup>.

Aboriginal women suffer discrimination both as women and as Aboriginal people. They are confronted with obstacles to employment and education, and experience high rates of violence. There are deep-rooted prejudices toward them.

The purpose of this brochure is to raise awareness about the social, economic and political issues facing Québec's Aboriginal women and girls. So let's go and meet them!



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\* In 2015 it ranked 9<sup>th</sup> (out of 188)<sup>3</sup>.



# D Demography

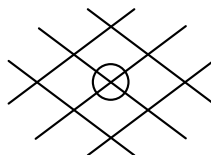


The Aboriginal population is younger than the non-Aboriginal population. This is primarily due to the higher fertility rate of Aboriginal women, combined with shorter life expectancy.

It is a diversified population. Each of the three main Aboriginal groups – First Nations, Métis, Inuit – includes a variety of distinct cultural groups. Across Canada, the Aboriginal presence is concentrated in outlying areas, but is increasingly urban.

## A few facts


- In 2011 the eleven Aboriginal nations of Québec had a total population of 141 915<sup>4</sup>. Three quarters of them live in Aboriginal communities<sup>5</sup>, with a smaller number being in urban centres. Most Inuit live in the northern villages that are on the shores of Ungava Bay, Hudson's Strait and Hudson's Bay<sup>6</sup>.
- In 2011 an estimated 71 710 women identifying as Aboriginal lived in the cities and communities of Québec. They represented about 1.8% of the province's female population<sup>7</sup>.
- From 2006 to 2011 their numbers grew by 30.6% in Québec. This was six times the growth of the non-Aboriginal female population, which grew by 4.9%. The same trend was observed with men<sup>\*,8</sup>.
- In 2011 Aboriginal women had an average of 2.4 children, compared to 1.7 for other Canadian women<sup>9</sup>.



---

\* These figures should be kept in perspective, since they are based on the declaration of Aboriginal identity in the census. More and more people are declaring their Aboriginal identity for the first time. This is referred to as "ethnic mobility".



- 
- In 2011 half of Québec's Aboriginal women were under 34, which was 9 years younger than the median age of Québec's female population. Also, 22.4% of Aboriginal women were 14 or under, compared to 15.3% for all Québec women<sup>10, 11</sup>.
  - In 2012, life expectancy at birth for First Nations women was 78 to 80 years, compared to 83.8 years for all Québec women<sup>12</sup>.

## **A holistic approach to the world**

"While Aboriginal nations differ considerably in terms of language and cultural practices, they share an overarching vision of the world and a system of beliefs centered on the concept of balance and harmony and on a holistic approach to life in nature. These concepts are expressed in the teachings of the circle.

At the centre of the holistic vision is the idea that balance is the ideal to achieve, and that every human is directed toward that goal. Living in self-respect, a person is composed of four equal components (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual), and each must be nourished to live a healthy, happy and productive life<sup>13</sup>."



© Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones du Québec

## At the heart of diversity

Québec has eleven Aboriginal groups, including ten First Nations and the Inuit people.

Québec's First Nations fall into two linguistic families (Algonquin and Iroquoian), while the Inuit are a distinct ethnic group. Each group has its own cultural and linguistic particularities.

Most Aboriginals have French or English as their mother tongue, while some also speak an Aboriginal language. Others however only speak their Aboriginal language. Some Aboriginal languages, such as Innu, Atikamekw, Cree and Inuktitut are in common use, while others are in danger of extinction or nearly extinct<sup>14</sup>.

## THE 17 ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS OF QUÉBEC

- |                            |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 01 Bas-Saint-Laurent       | 07 Outaouais                     | 12 Chaudière-Appalaches |
| 02 Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean | 08 Abitibi-Témiscamingue         | 13 Laval                |
| 03 Capitale-Nationale      | 09 Côte-Nord                     | 14 Lanaudière           |
| 04 Mauricie                | 10 Nord-du-Québec                | 15 Laurentides          |
| 05 Estrie                  | 11 Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine | 16 Montérégie           |
| 06 Montréal                |                                  | 17 Centre-du-Québec     |



# Identity, rights and power



“ The Indian Act changed the system by giving men more power. The notion of balance was lost. But now women want to regain their place<sup>15</sup>. ”

– Marjolaine Étienne, Vice-Chief for External Affairs  
Mashteuiatsh Band Council



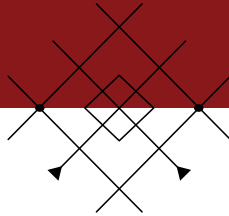
Colonization literally placed Aboriginal identity under tutelage. The legal and institutional system tried to eradicate the traditional social structures of Aboriginal peoples by imposing the European models of the day. It became virtually impossible for First Nations peoples to pass down their culture to their descendants.

The same models restricted women to secondary roles, outside of the structures of influence in their communities.

Along with their search for identity, Aboriginal women are fighting to resume their rightful place in their own communities, and to have their rights recognized both there and in society.

### **The band council**

In Aboriginal communities, local power is exercised by the band council, a system of governance established by the Indian Act. The band council has a more extensive mandate than do municipalities. It manages funds in the areas of health, education, employment, housing, recreation, social services, public works and public order. Communities may elect their band council by universal suffrage or as determined by their custom election code, which varies from community to community.



## A few facts

### *The Indian Act*

- Adopted in 1876, the Indian Act is still in force. Its avowed initial purpose was to wipe out the cultures of all First Nations.
- For over a hundred years, the Act was particularly discriminatory toward women. If they married a non-Indian they lost their Indian status, forcing them to leave their community and renounce their heritage along with their family land.
- Certain discriminatory elements of the Act were eliminated in 1985 after a long struggle by Aboriginal women's organizations.
- Since then, amendments to the Act have created new discriminations against women. For example, limitation clauses regarding Indian status have led to the exclusion of women and children from reserves.
- There is still inequality in the property rights of spouses, to the detriment of women<sup>16, 17</sup>.



Teharihulen Michel Savard, *Réciprocité*, 2009.



### *Political organization*

- The system created by the federal government reduced the influence of Aboriginal women in running their communities. They have been fighting to regain their place ever since.
- In 1951, Aboriginal women gained the right to participate in electing their band councils. They won the right to vote in Québec elections in 1969, a full 29 years after other Québec women. At the federal level they won this right earlier, in 1960<sup>18</sup>.
- 1992 saw the election of the first woman to the head of a band council. It was Jocelyne Gros-Louis, Grand Chief of the Huron Nation.
- In 2015, women held around 40% of the seats on the band councils of Québec and Labrador (103 of 250). Almost all are band councillors\*.
- Out of 45 chiefs and grand chiefs recognized by the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, just 7 are women (5 chiefs and 2 grand chiefs), representing about 16%<sup>19</sup> of the whole.
- In 2012, across Canada, there were 111 women among the 633 Aboriginal chiefs<sup>20</sup>.

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\* In 2010, the Conseil du statut de la femme published a brochure entitled *Rencontres entre vous et nous – Entretiens avec des élues autochtones du Québec*. It showcases the words of elected Aboriginal women who were met in the course of a unique collaboration between the Conseil du statut de la femme and the working group of elected women of the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador (<http://bit.ly/2bSnoht>).



## ***Idle No More***

The *Idle No More* movement arose in November 2012 in opposition to federal bill C-45. This bill would have changed elements of Aboriginal governance and environmental standards without any consultation of Aboriginals. Four women from Saskatchewan, including three Aboriginals, launched the movement in protest. The two women behind *Idle No More* in Québec, Mélissa Mollen Dupuis and Widia Larivière, see it as a way to be heard and to raise awareness throughout the population about issues affecting their peoples.



“ Contrary to what people think, *Idle No More* still exists today. Maybe it’s getting less attention from the mass media, but on the ground it’s still very active. I would even say it’s better organized than when it started. ”

– Widia Larivière, co-founder of the Québec section  
of the *Idle No More* movement<sup>21</sup>



## **Aboriginal filiation**

A child born of an Aboriginal mother and an Aboriginal father who, for whatever reason, has not signed the birth registration form, is considered to have just one Aboriginal parent. As a result, depending on the mother's status, the child may not inherit Indian status. If a Québec woman gave birth to a baby whose father was undeclared or unknown, would that child have less right to be a Canadian citizen?

Prior to 1985, if a child was born of a registered Aboriginal woman and a man who did not have Indian status, that child did not obtain Indian status. In 1985 Bill C-31 amended the Indian Act, allowing many women and their children to recover their Indian status<sup>22</sup>.

However, "when an Aboriginal woman prefers not to reveal the name of her father's child, the father is considered to be non-Aboriginal, preventing transmission of her status to her children and eliminating their rights to their territory. It's a real problem, since in 2001 an estimated 30% of Aboriginal children born after 1985 did not have a declared father, a rate that is twice the national average<sup>23</sup>."



# Education: from the residential schools to today



“ I sincerely hope that more and more young  
Aboriginals will go into law and also go to univer-  
sity. I am convinced that we have a duty to give  
back to our community, and I want to encourage  
young Aboriginals to uphold this tradition of  
their parents and ancestors, for community has  
always been central to Aboriginals.”

– Marie-Ève Bordeleau,  
first Cree lawyer in Québec



In education, Aboriginal women are following the Québec trend: more are completing postsecondary school than Aboriginal men, and they generally do better.

However, Aboriginal girls and women face obstacles that are directly related to their sex and Aboriginal status, which can interfere with their schooling. Violence, early pregnancies and single parenthood can hamper their education or completely stop it.

Though difficult to quantify, there is a gap between the funding of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal schools<sup>24</sup>. Lack of financial resources has multiple repercussions, including inadequate infrastructures, poor security, inappropriate programs, and lack of professional support to deal with the inter-generational fallout from the residential schools.

## Teaching Aboriginal history

In Québec, several universities offer programs in Aboriginal studies, covering the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and elsewhere in the world. They include Université de Montréal, Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Université Laval and Université du Québec à Montréal. Since January 2015 the last has also offered a course specifically on Aboriginal women.

Since the fall of 2011, a course on Aboriginal culture and realities is given to 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year secondary students at Le Carrefour comprehensive school in Val-d'Or, to build bridges between young Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals\*. In response to this initiative by the school principal, nearly fifteen teachers offered to take part in the project<sup>25</sup>.

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\* In Canada, any person who is not of Amerindian or Inuit origin.

## **A few facts**

### ***A high dropout rate***

- In 2006, the dropout rate of Aboriginals from secondary schools in Québec was 43%, or 28 percentage points higher than that of non-Aboriginal students<sup>26</sup>.
- Several studies highlight the obstacles to success and perseverance among Aboriginal students: lack of funding, less experienced teaching staff, high student absenteeism, prejudices, etc.<sup>27</sup>
- For girls in particular, family responsibilities are often an impediment to education. This is confirmed by the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS): when asked why they left school, female dropouts usually cited pregnancy or the need to care for their children, while male dropouts cited a desire to work, money problems, school problems, and lack of interest<sup>28</sup>.

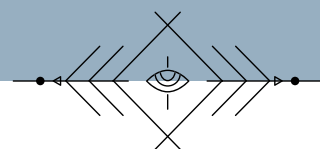
### ***Encouraging statistics***

- In 2011, across Canada, just over half (51%) of Aboriginal women aged 25 to 64 had completed postsecondary studies, compared to nearly two thirds (65%) of non-Aboriginal women<sup>29</sup>.
- In 2011, across Canada, the percentage of Aboriginals with a university degree was higher for women (12%) than it was for men (7%). But these rates are far lower than those for non-Aboriginal women and men (28% and 25%, respectively)<sup>30</sup>.





Study period at Roman Catholic Indian Residential School, [Fort] Resolution, Northwest Territories. Canada. Department of the Interior fonds / Library and Archives Canada / PA-042133.



## An Aboriginal CÉGEP in Québec

Kiuna Institution, in the Abenaki community of Odanak in Centre-du-Québec, is the only CÉGEP devoted exclusively to teaching Aboriginals. Its creation is the fruit of ten years' work by the First Nations Education Council. It enables the postsecondary educational success of Aboriginals by offering an education that values the cultures and expertise of Aboriginal peoples.

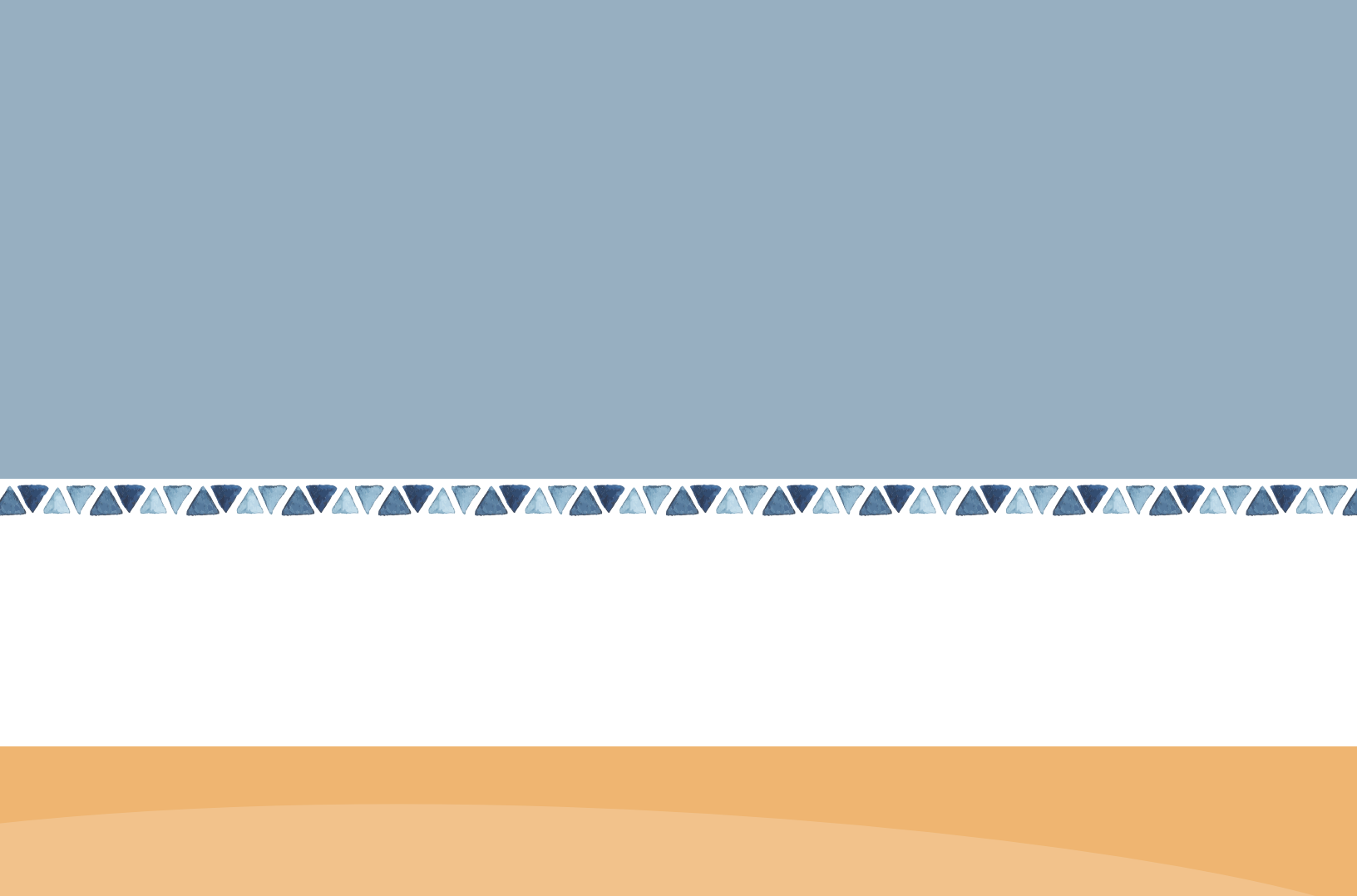


## The legacy of the residential schools

Aboriginal education in Canada is marked by the fraught legacy of the Indian residential school system. In 1892 the federal government introduced a policy of assimilation, a key ingredient of which was the creation, with the Catholic church, of a network of residential schools across the country. Their purpose was to educate, evangelize and assimilate Aboriginal children, who were torn from their families and forced to give up all references to their culture.

This separation, and the physical, psychological and sexual abuse they underwent, caused an intergenerational trauma from which Aboriginal communities and families are still suffering today.





More than 150 000 girls and boys from 5 to 18 years of age attended the residential schools. At least 4000 died there<sup>31</sup>. Most of the schools ceased operations in the 1970s, but the last didn't close until 1996. In 2008 the Government of Canada made an official apology for the harm done to those who attended the schools, and for the consequences visited upon subsequent generations. Though there are multiple social factors behind the overrepresentation of Aboriginals in the judicial system, studies have shown that it is partly due to the repercussions of the residential school regime<sup>32</sup>.

In 2009 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada\* was set up to rebuild relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canadian society. Over six years, the Commission gathered testimony on the abuses suffered by former students of Aboriginal residential schools. In June 2015 the Commission submitted a final report presenting 94 recommendations and concrete courses of action to remedy the damage caused by residential schools and to further the process of reconciliation<sup>33</sup>. The Commission concluded that the residential school system constituted cultural genocide toward the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

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\* To learn the precise mandate of the Commission, consult the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation: <http://nctr.ca>.

## Wapikoni Mobile

// Before, a lot of them [young girls in her community] thought only boys could accomplish things. When they saw me participating in Wapikoni, a few wanted to get involved. It shows them that they too can achieve their dreams. //

– Jani Bellefleur-Kaltush\*

In 2003, filmmaker Manon Barbeau and the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw co-founded Wapikoni Mobile in collaboration with several partners. Officially launched in 2004 at the Montréal First Peoples Festival, the Wapikoni mobile production studio travels among the communities offering workshops to young Aboriginals on short film production.

Wapikoni Mobile's missions include combating isolation and suicide among First Nations youth. The project brings young people together while encouraging the development of their artistic, technical, social and professional skills<sup>34</sup>.

Through this initiative, hundreds of young Aboriginals have had the opportunity to affirm their pride in being Aboriginal and to express themselves on subjects they care about, while raising awareness about these realities in the non-Aboriginal population\*\*.

---

\* Originally from Nutashkuan, the Innu community of Natashquan, Jani Bellefleur-Kaltush produced a short film on the devastating effect of rumours. Her film *Ne le dis pas* won the Best Short Film award at the prestigious imagineNATIVE film festival in Toronto. Subsequently she obtained a bursary from the Canada Arts Council to produce a short film. She also worked on the production of *Mesnak* by Yves Sioui Durand, the first full-length fiction film produced in Québec by an Aboriginal<sup>35</sup>.

\*\* An eloquent example of the creativity of Wapikoni Mobile, the short film *Où sont tes plumes?*, produced by Widia Larivière and Mélanie Lumsdem, presents two pairs of sisters who offer a humorous look at prejudices toward the First Nations (<http://bit.ly/1NA5PjS>).

# F Family situation

The family situation of Aboriginal women differs sharply from that of non-Aboriginal women.

Concepts of family and its components can be quite different from one Aboriginal nation to another. Since extended family support systems are common, statistics about single-parent families can be misleading relative to the real composition of a family unit and the interactions between children and adults within it<sup>36</sup>.



## A few facts

- In 2011 the fertility index of Aboriginal women was 2.2 children per woman. This is higher than the figure for non-Aboriginal women, which is 1.6<sup>37</sup>.
- In 2006, Aboriginal\* or mixed families\*\* represented 2% of Québec families with at least one child<sup>38</sup>.
- In 2011, proportionally speaking, there were twice as many Aboriginal children living in multifamily households compared to non-Aboriginal children. For example, 18% of Inuit children were in a household with more than one family, compared to 4% for the non-Aboriginal population<sup>39</sup>.
- In 2011, 3% of Aboriginal children under 15 were living with their grandparents (without their parents) while 1% were with another family member<sup>40</sup>.
- In 2011, 50% of Canadian Aboriginal children aged 14 or under were living with two parents, while 29% were with a single mother and 6% with a single father<sup>41</sup>.

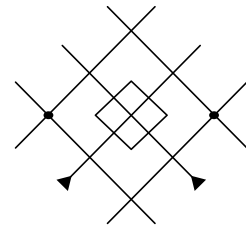


- In 2006, 32.1% of Aboriginal families were single-parent, compared to 27.8% of Québec families<sup>42</sup>.
- Aboriginal families have more children than non-Aboriginal families. In 2006 in Québec, more than a quarter (27.9%) of Aboriginal families had three or more children, while this was true of just 14.4% of non-Aboriginal families<sup>43</sup>.

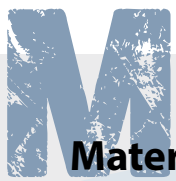
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\* In which both spouses or the single parent have an Aboriginal identity.

\*\* In which one spouse is Aboriginal and the other not.



- In 2006, 40.7% of Aboriginal couples with children were in a common-law relationship, versus 34.3% for the comparable population across Québec. This situation is partly explained by the youth of Aboriginal couples, and by the fact that young couples prefer common-law relationships<sup>44</sup>.
- The infant mortality rate was 6.2 per 1000 among Aboriginals living on reserves in southern Québec, 11.7 per 1000 among Crees and Naskapis, and nearly 19 per 1000 in Inuit communities. In the general population the infant mortality rate is 4.9 per 1000<sup>45</sup>.
- In 2013, the stillbirth rate after 6 months of pregnancy was 6.8 per 1000 among Inuit mothers, and 5.7 per 1000 among other First Nations mothers. Among non-Aboriginal Québec women the rate is 3.6 per 1000<sup>46</sup>.



## **Maternity: Aboriginal midwives at the heart of the family**

Traditionally, the midwife profession is valued by Aboriginal women<sup>47</sup>. Data show that midwife care contributes to population health by, among other things, reducing premature births and perinatal mortality<sup>48</sup>.

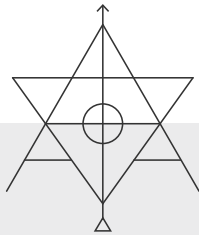
In Québec, Aboriginal midwives typically receive their training through community-based training programs, or by one generation of midwives passing on their traditional knowledge and skills to the next generation.

The National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health recommends that health services for future mothers be based on modern medicine while incorporating Aboriginal traditions and cultural beliefs<sup>49</sup>.

Due to the geographic isolation of Aboriginal communities, there is limited access in Québec and Canada to maternal care adapted to the cultures of Aboriginal women and families. Additionally, multiple factors have restrained the expansion of Aboriginal midwifery, including tighter regulations on midwifery practice and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining midwives<sup>50</sup>. Aboriginal midwives comprise about 5% of the membership of the Québec Order of Midwives. All are Inuit and practise in Nunavik<sup>51</sup>.

“The birthing process for Aboriginal women is entrenched in culture and tradition. As a result, not only must health services for expectant mothers include modern forms of medical care, they must also incorporate tradition and cultural beliefs. This includes incorporating traditional knowledge,





Source: iStockphoto

medicine and practices of maternal and child health, as well as Aboriginal conceptions of health and well-being. While there is considerable diversity among Aboriginal populations regarding these conceptions of health and well-being, what is shared is a holistic view of health, where balance must be maintained mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally. Increasing the number of Aboriginal midwives to bring birthing back to the communities is seen as one means of improving access to culturally appropriate health services<sup>52</sup>.

In March 2014, Québec Native Women and the National Council of Midwives launched the Aboriginal Midwifery Toolkit. It was developed to provide concrete knowledge and tools to First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities looking to bring birth care closer to home<sup>53</sup>.



## Adoption

Consultations in Aboriginal communities indicate that state adoption, as practised by non-Aboriginals, is contrary to the conception of familial bonds held by Aboriginal peoples.

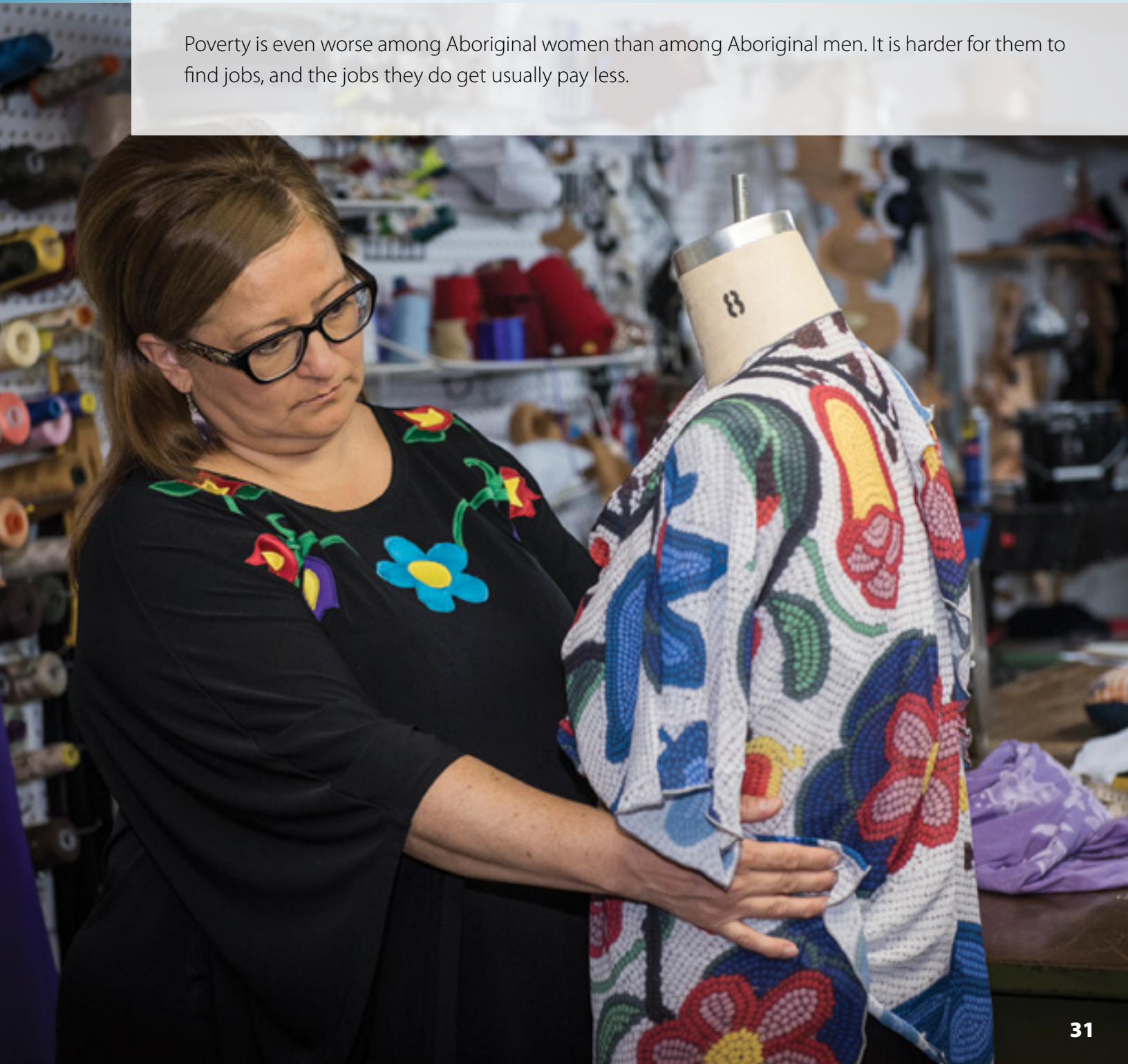
Aboriginals have long expressed a desire for greater autonomy in social services and child protection. They particularly

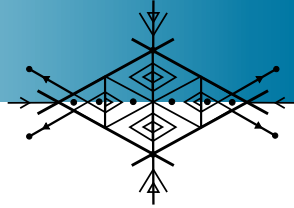
want recognition for customary adoption, “a time-honoured practice in which an Aboriginal parent entrusts their child to a person they trust, to take care of the child and ensure its education [...] when the parent is unable to assume this function on their own”<sup>54</sup>.

# Socioeconomic situation

The socioeconomic situation of Aboriginals is far from enviable. This was the finding of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in a report published in 2014 after visiting Aboriginal communities across the country<sup>55</sup>.

Poverty is even worse among Aboriginal women than among Aboriginal men. It is harder for them to find jobs, and the jobs they do get usually pay less.





## **A few facts**

### *Employment and income*

- In 2011, 50.4% of Canadian Aboriginal women aged 15 and over held a job, compared to 57.3% of non-Aboriginal women<sup>56</sup>.
- Aboriginal women living on Canadian reserves are at a particular disadvantage. In 2011 their rate of employment, at 35%, was 15 percentage points lower than those living off-reserve (50%)<sup>57</sup>.
- This is largely explained by the scarcity of available jobs in many communities, along with family responsibilities limiting their participation in the job market.
- In 2011, Canadian Aboriginal women aged 15 and over had a median income of \$19 289, which is 84% of what Aboriginal men receive (\$22 889) and just 78% of what non-Aboriginal women receive (\$24 842)<sup>58</sup>.
- In 2006, across Canada, 36% of Aboriginal women living off-reserve were below the low-income threshold, more than twice the rate for non-Aboriginal women (17%)<sup>59</sup>.
- On the other hand, Aboriginal women who persevere in their education have a higher employment rate. In 2011, 82% of Aboriginal women aged 25 to 64 who held a certificate, diploma or university degree were employed, compared to 79.5% of non-Aboriginal Canadian women<sup>60</sup>.

- In 2011, among Aboriginal women aged 25 to 64 who did not have a certificate, diploma or degree, just over a third (36%) were employed, while nearly 60% of those with a high school diploma or equivalent were employed. Additionally, 73% of Aboriginal women who had completed postsecondary school were employed, compared to 78% of non-Aboriginal women<sup>61</sup>.

- According to a survey conducted in 2011, 14.3% of men from Aboriginal communities owned a business, compared to 9.1% of women<sup>62</sup>. Compared to Québec women in general, Aboriginal women seem to have greater entrepreneurial dynamism, as appears to be the case for Aboriginal men: thus, in 2011 7.3% of Québec women and 11.8% of Québec men owned a business<sup>63</sup>.

### ***Access to housing***

- According to the Société d'habitation du Québec, there is a serious shortage of housing in Québec's Aboriginal communities. Living in outdated and overcrowded dwellings can be damaging to health and make social problems worse<sup>64</sup>.
- In the 2011 census, the average household size in First Nations communities was found to be 3.9 people per dwelling; however, in many First Nations the average household has over 5.0 people per dwelling. For comparison, in Québec as a whole the average household has 2.1 people per dwelling<sup>65</sup>.
- Overcrowding and the housing shortage in Aboriginal communities are particularly deleterious to women, since in situations of domestic violence they may have nowhere else to go.





## **Employment and training program for off-reserve Aboriginal women**

As a part of the federal government's Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy, Québec Native Women, in collaboration with the Native Women's Association of Canada, has created an employment and training assistance program for off-reserve Aboriginal women.

The purpose of this training and work experience project is to improve the employment potential and earning capacity of Aboriginal women living off-reserve<sup>66</sup>.

## **A tenacious myth**

Thanks to their Indian status, Aboriginals have an economic advantage because they don't pay any taxes.

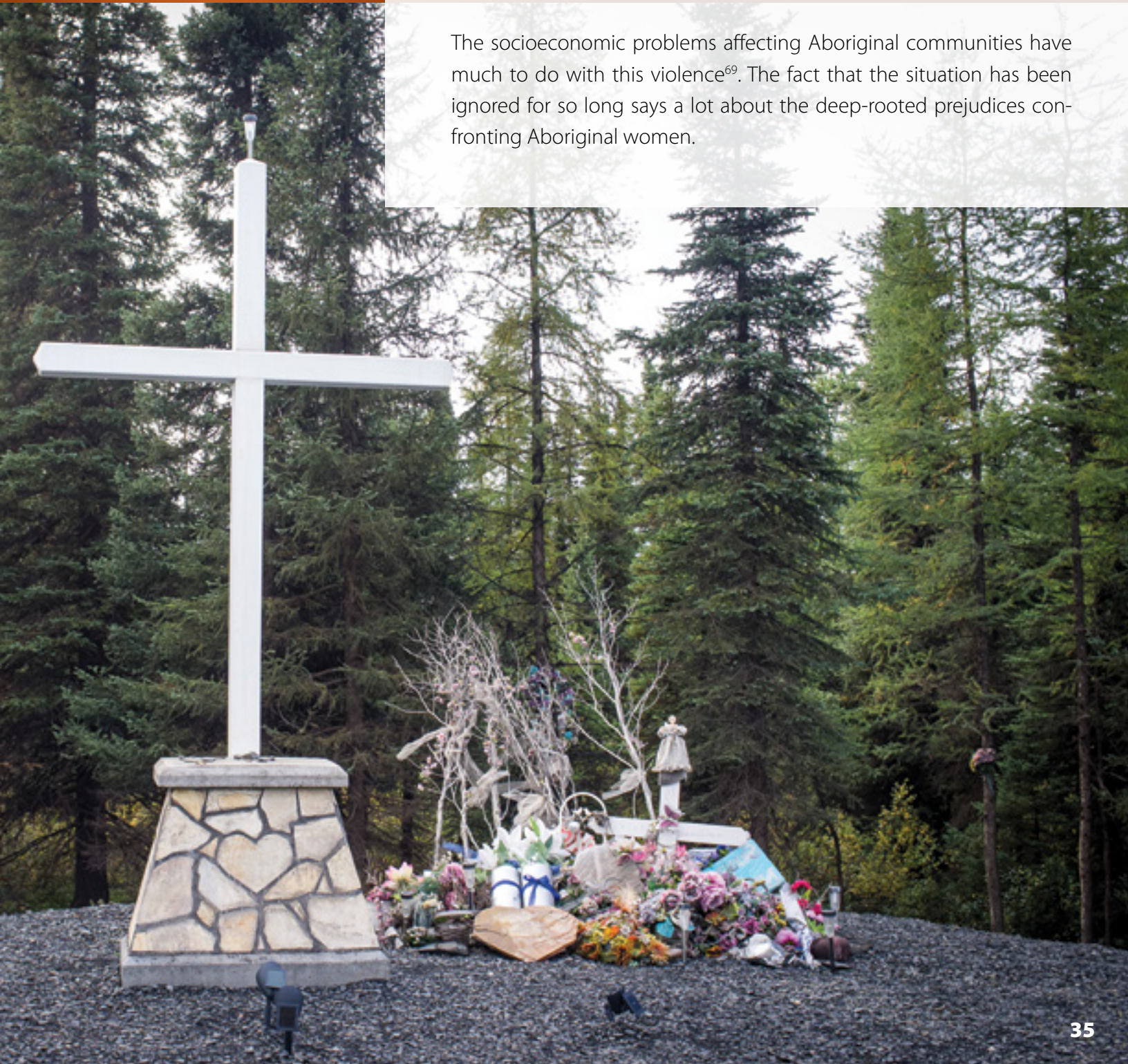
In reality, only First Nations individuals with Indian status pay no tax, and only if they live on-reserve or work for a company whose place of business is on-reserve. Aboriginals living off-reserve pay all taxes, as do the Inuit. Among Québec Aboriginals, 27% of women and 23% of men were living off-reserve in 2011<sup>67</sup>.

Furthermore, this "privilege" prescribed by the Indian Act suppresses certain other rights. Thus, Aboriginals are denied the right to property on reserves, a major obstacle to obtaining credit, which is critical to running a business<sup>68</sup>.

# V Violence

Aboriginal women and girls are disproportionately subject to all forms of violence. The numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women immediately come to mind.

The socioeconomic problems affecting Aboriginal communities have much to do with this violence<sup>69</sup>. The fact that the situation has been ignored for so long says a lot about the deep-rooted prejudices confronting Aboriginal women.







## **A few facts**

### *Missing and murdered Aboriginal women*

- In spring 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police confirmed that since 1980, across Canada, there had been 1017 cases of murdered Aboriginal women and another 164 cases of missing Aboriginal women<sup>70</sup>.
- Though just 4.3% of the female population, Aboriginal women account for 16% of the women murdered in Canada between 1980 and 2012. In 2013 they accounted for 11.3% of the country's missing women<sup>71</sup>.
- Between 2001 and 2011, at least 8% of all murdered women aged 15 years and older were Aboriginal, double their representation in the Canadian population (4%)<sup>72</sup>.
- In 2012, across Canada, over a quarter (25.8%) of First Nations women living off-reserve said they had suicidal thoughts, compared to 13.8% of non-Aboriginal women<sup>73</sup>.

## **Collaboration with Montréal police (SPVM)**

In summer 2015, Québec Native Women helped to draw up a collaborative agreement between the Montréal police service (SPVM) and Montréal's urban Aboriginal community<sup>74</sup>. The objectives of the agreement include encouraging preventive

approaches, building awareness among police officers about Aboriginal realities, and developing joint intervention strategies (prevention and response) for missing Aboriginal women.

- After years of demands by Aboriginal women, on December 8, 2015 the federal government announced a national inquiry<sup>75</sup> into the tragedy of missing and murdered Aboriginal girls and women.

### *Over-representation in the prison system*

- In 2015, Aboriginal women constituted 36% of the female population of Canadian prisons<sup>76</sup>, despite being just 4% of Canada's female population<sup>77</sup>. Aboriginal men constituted 25% of the male prison population. Note however that in Québec, the proportion of Aboriginals in prison (both sexes combined) is lower (13%) than in the Prairies, where it is 49%<sup>78</sup>.
- From 2002 to 2012, the number of incarcerated Aboriginal women increased by 97% across the country<sup>79</sup>.

### **Violence prevention campaign: including men in the solution**

Québec Native Women is conducting a non-violence awareness campaign for Aboriginal men. This campaign is one of multiple initiatives by the organization concerning conjugal and family violence. QNW collaborates closely with other organizations in conducting studies and developing culturally appropriate measures to address this problem<sup>80</sup>.



### *Domestic violence*

- Aboriginal women are three times more likely to experience domestic violence than non-Aboriginal women<sup>81</sup>.
- In 2011, Aboriginal women accounted for at least 11% of the victims of homicide committed in the context of an intimate relationship, and 10% of the victims of murder perpetrated by someone other than an intimate partner<sup>82</sup>.
- Aboriginal women victims of domestic violence were more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report that they feared for their lives (52% versus 31%)<sup>83</sup>.

### *Sexual violence*<sup>84</sup>

- At least three quarters (75%) of Aboriginal girls under 18 have been victims of sexual aggression<sup>85</sup>.
- A study of sexual abuse in Québec First Nations, conducted in 2005, revealed that nearly half of Aboriginals (48.1%) knew victims who had suffered sexual abuse, while 42% knew victims who were abused in the home of their predator. Based on available data, most reported abuses are within the family network.
- 89.1% of Aboriginal respondents to a study on sexual abuse in First Nations communities thought that when victims do not report the abuse it is because they refuse to go through the justice system.



## The sources of violence

// The sedentarization and colonization of the last century, the scars left by the horrors committed in the Indian residential schools, discrimination, racism: the causes of violence among Aboriginals are both structural and historical. This violence is not part of their culture, I condemn that notion. Alcohol can serve as a trigger, but is not a cause of violence. //

– Mylène Jaccoud,  
researcher in criminology  
at Université de Montréal<sup>86</sup>

## Network of shelters for Aboriginal women

In Québec, Aboriginal women facing domestic violence can seek refuge in eleven shelters belonging to the *Réseau des maisons d'hébergement des femmes autochtones*. Many of the shelters are remote however, some being accessible only by airplane. According to Québec Native Women, only the two shelters that are in cities receive the same level of funding as other Québec women's shelters<sup>87</sup>.



Reproduction of the painting *How Much Was Forgotten* (acrylic on canvas) by the Plains Cree artist Ruth Cuthand. Taken from the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada collection. Reproduction authorized by Ruth Cuthand.

## National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

In December 2015 the Government of Canada announced a national inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. This was the fruit of protracted lobbying by Aboriginal women, women's groups and civil society stakeholders.

In late 2015, Québec Native Women published an exploratory study (currently being translated into English) entitled *Debout et solidaires – Femmes autochtones disparues ou assassinées au Québec*<sup>88</sup> (standing together – missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Québec). The study's objectives included pinpointing the specific characteristics of the problem in Québec, identifying its causes, listening to the people affected, and proposing avenues for action appropriate to the Aboriginal populations of Québec.

"The history of Aboriginal peoples in Québec includes a chain of disappearances directly linked to the policies of assimilation and elimination orchestrated by the governments of Canada and Québec. Today, these disappearances [...] take on various forms, of which murder is the most severe and most definitive. To better understand the nature of this phenomenon, our inquiry addresses the forms of violence going on in Aboriginal communities, both on the personal level and in structural and institutional terms. We set out to document the way in which this violence reflects the virtually systematic discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people on the part of people in positions of authority. [...]

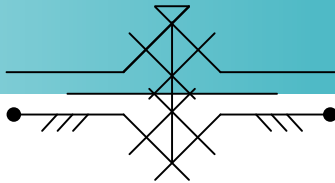
[T]his study has given us a privileged opportunity to meet the families of missing or murdered Aboriginal women. Their testimony enabled us to identify their needs in terms of relations with police forces, emotional support, documentation on the issue and building awareness among the public and decision-makers<sup>89</sup>."

# C Conclusion

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in Québec experience different realities and face very different challenges, in terms not only of history and origin but also identity.

For First Nations women and girls, these differences affect many areas of their lives. The challenges are numerous, especially in terms of education, employment, health, housing and the fight against violence.





Clearly, both legal and actual equality have yet to be achieved. But there is great promise in the social and political mobilization of Québec's Aboriginal women. We are beginning to see the emergence of influential leaders among them, both in and outside of their communities.

They are lawyers, film-makers, politicians, community workers, militants, midwives, teachers... They are fighting for better living conditions and the right to equality in every domain for all Aboriginal women, at both the legislative and constitutional levels.

“ Many of our conflicts are based on a general lack of knowledge about the other. With a nuanced, accessible and revealing look at the situation of First Nations and Inuit in Québec [...], let us hope that the non-Aboriginal majority will be better informed and have a better appreciation of the changes needed. [...] To lay the foundation for true coexistence, we must first understand and accept the errors of the past, and above all not repeat them. [...] Perhaps in that way, by encouraging encounters little by little between Québécois and Aboriginals, a common vision of our collective future may emerge. ”

– Ghislain Picard,  
Chief of the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador<sup>90</sup>



As with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to understand the daunting legacy of the Aboriginal residential schools, the launching of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls is an important step toward establishing a relationship of trust between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginals.

Building these bridges will require a variety of initiatives toward eliminating prejudice and developing better knowledge and greater comprehension of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.

To go forward, it is essential to understand the extent of the harm done to First Nations women and men. Thus the necessity of recognizing the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples and the repercussions of the assimilation policies imposed since European colonization.

In this sense, each of us can contribute toward respecting the rights and improving the well-being of Aboriginal women, who must be central to the issues and decisions affecting them.









# Collaborating bodies

## **Québec Native Women / Femmes autochtones du Québec**

Founded in 1974 as Aboriginal women fought for the abolition of discriminatory clauses in the Indian Act, Québec Native Women defends the interests of Aboriginal women in Québec, including those living off-reserve. The organization sits at the table of the Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, and on the Board of Directors of Native Parajudicial Services of Québec.

QNW/FAQ supports the efforts of Aboriginal women to improve their living conditions through the promotion of non-violence, justice, health and equality. It also empowers women in their commitment to the communities.

The President of QNW/FAQ is assisted by a Board of Directors composed of thirteen other members representing the Aboriginal nations of Québec as well as young Aboriginals.

## **Conseil du statut de la femme**

The Conseil du statut de la femme is a governmental consultation and research body that since 1973 has worked to promote and defend the rights and interests of Québec women. In working toward equality between women and men, the Conseil has the two-fold mission of advising the Minister and the Government of Québec on any subject related to equality and respect for the rights and status of women, and of providing relevant information to women and the public.

To that end, the Conseil documents the living conditions of Québec women through a variety of information documents, opinions, briefs and studies, while advising the Government on proposed legislation, policies and actions that have a bearing on women's right to equality.

The President of the Conseil is supported by ten members representing various circles of Québec society.



## Photographs

Three generations of women – Kanesatake Community (cover page).

Attikamek woman with her granddaughter – Manawan community (p. 7).

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Inuit child picking cloudberry – Natashquan community (p. 9).

Spiritual meeting – Kitigan Zibi community (p. 13).

Artwork by Teharihulen Michel Savard, Huron-Wendat artist – Wendake community (p. 15).

Attikamek highschool student from the Manawan community (p. 19).

Attikamek highschool student from the Manawan community (p. 20).

Roman Catholic Indian Residential School, [Fort] Resolution, Northwest Territories (p. 22).

Young girls playing broomball – Manawan community (p. 25).

Child – Matimekush–Lac-John community (p. 26).

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Tammy Beauvais, fashion designer – Kahnawake community (p. 31).

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Artwork by Ruth Cuthand, Plains Cree artist (p. 40).

Three generations, women and young girl – Kanesatake community (p. 41).

Grandmother – Matimekush–Lac-John community (p. 43).

Matimekush–Lac-John community (p. 44).

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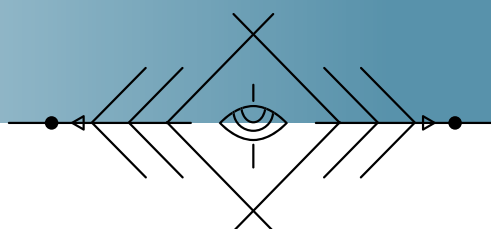
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