

ENCOUNTERING EACH OTHER

DISCUSSIONS WITH ELECTED ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN QUÉBEC

Working Group of Elected Women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador
and
Conseil du statut de la femme

Encountering each other - Discussions with elected aboriginal women in Québec

Discussions with elected aboriginal women in Québec. Working Group of Elected Women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador.

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The Working Group of Elected Women was created by the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador (AFNQL) to prepare a proposal to the Council of Women of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) on the representation mandate of the AFNQL and on the definition and eventual creation of a structure to support that representation.

The Conseil du statut de la femme is a consultation and research body established in 1973. It provides advice on any subject submitted for its analysis concerning equality and the respect of women's rights. The members' assembly of the Conseil is composed of the President and ten women drawn from women's associations, university circles, socio-economic groups and unions.

A Word from Marjolaine Étienne

Words of women, women elected or designated, women who are present, active and involved.

Words of women who speak with conviction, who express their wishes, their visions, but who by mysterious changes and ramifications have been silent, or rather unheard!

Encountering each other. A collection of sentences, thoughts, the fruit of a **path-breaking collaboration between us and you.** Between the elected women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador and the Conseil du statut de la femme. Between practical women, thinking women and women who make decisions. For those who don't know us, a unique opportunity to meet us, be with us, understand our expectations, our path, our future.

Exchanges with elected aboriginal women. An exchange made possible by close and open collaboration between our organizations. A living exchange of desires, those especially of Christiane Pelchat, President of the Conseil du statut de la femme, without whom this study could not have happened. I thank her for her willingness to listen, above all for her integrity and unshakeable conviction in the STRENGTH of women and the BALANCE they bring, today and always, to our societies. With few words and little time, she has captured "**what we were seeking**", which is rare and always welcome. Proof that collaboration, plain and simple, can bear fruit. Thank-you again for supporting this study and most of all this collaboration, which I hope will continue for a very long time.

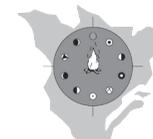
Thank-you as well to the Chiefs of the AFNQL, particularly its Regional Chief, Ghislain Picard, for supporting this study and understanding the questions I raised in a discussion paper in autumn 2007. Our thanks also to the Québec Regional Office of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, for supporting the participation of an aboriginal resource in every phase of the process.

Last but not least, I salute the efforts of all the militant aboriginal women who, for over 35 years, have supported the cause of First Nations women.

May you enjoy your reading, especially you, the young women through whom our future will come to pass.

Marjolaine Étienne

*Vice Chief, External Affairs, Conseil des Montagnais du Lac-Saint-Jean
Designated representative, Council of Women of the AFN*



Assembly of the
First Nations
of Québec
and Labrador



Credit: L'imagier

Credit: L'imagerie



A Word from Christiane Pelchat

I am delighted to present you with the results of this participatory research-action, conducted jointly with the Working Group of Elected Women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador (AFNQL).

It was a unique opportunity for the Conseil du statut de la femme to work together with elected aboriginal women to establish a collective portrait of these decision makers, to know them better and to make them known.

At the heart of this collection are the words of elected or designated women. Presented differently from the Conseil's usual works, it is intended first as a written document for you, Québec's elected aboriginal women, and as a reference for your successors. It identifies what unites you and highlights certain needs, including those for the means to encourage future female leaders. This work will also be of interest to anyone wishing to know you better as a group of engaged women.

I am impressed by the realities and challenges you face. I am also touched, as a former elected representative myself, to discover how much we have in common, despite our cultural and historical differences.

I wish to thank the women who participated, both in the group discussions and in the various phases of the process leading to this collective portrait. I also thank the entire research team, and cannot express how grateful I am to Marjolaine Étienne for enabling this connection between the AFNQL and the Conseil for the purpose of supporting Québec's elected aboriginal women.

The success of this project is unquestionably due to the fact that it was based on mutual respect and complicity. I encourage all departments and agencies that work with the aboriginal milieu to follow its example.

**Conseil du statut
de la femme**

Québec 

Christiane Pelchat

*President
Conseil du statut de la femme*

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Foreword

This document showcases the words of the elected aboriginal women of Québec. A collective portrait of those women, it is the fruit of a unique collaboration between the Working Group of Elected Women of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador (AFNQL)¹ and the Conseil du statut de la femme. The process and methodology used are outlined in the Appendix. Due to the diversity of linguistic realities, some of the statements quoted in the sidebars of these pages were freely translated by the joint research team. This collection is addressed primarily to the elected aboriginal women themselves, the main participants, who wished to know and acknowledge each other through a participatory research-action. The map below highlights the aboriginal communities of Québec. Note that the AFNQL represents 10 of Québec's 11 aboriginal nations.

The Aboriginal Nations of Québec

- Abénaquis
- Algonquins
- Attikameks
- Cris
- Hurons-Wendats
- Innus (Montagnais)
- Malécites
- Micmacs
- Mohawks
- Naskapis

Inuits*

* Note that the Inuit nation is not a member of the AFNQL.



¹ For more information about aboriginal communities and their political representation, see the AFNQL's website [<http://www.apnql-afnql.com/en/accueil/index.php>] as well as that of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca>], in the section "First Nation Profiles – Political Organization". Complementary information can also be found on the website of the Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones (Québec) [<http://www.autochtones.gouv.qc.ca/index.asp>].

Introduction

This document is the outcome of a collaboration between you and us to gain a better understanding of your realities as elected aboriginal women. Of the 22 elected women that we met in the group discussions held from March 11 to April 16, 2009, the vast majority believe in the importance of parity between women and men in political institutions, and in the place of women in aboriginal politics to ensure balance in decision-making processes.

It is important to note that in the autumn of 2008, during preparations for the first assembly of women in government in Québec and Labrador, the AFNQL recorded a first: the existence of 80 elected aboriginal women in Québec. That first meeting, and your participation in the discussion groups leading to the present document, showed the importance of meeting you among your peers, as elected women, and of offering you our awareness and recognition.

- *For the well-being of our people, we have to work in a balance of men and women.*
- *If there weren't any women in the council, life would be harder for the community. **Balance is important.** We especially have to make sure not to leave everything up to men. It's dangerous, it's unbalanced.*

1. In general terms

According to your comments, some of you always wanted to be in politics, whether for personal reasons (career choice or other) or political reasons (such as carrying on a parent's commitment to a cause). However, most seem to have been elected to office through a combination of circumstances (a chief's invitation to join the team, repeated requests by clan or family, political involvement after a life event, etc.).

A considerable number of you are respected models of achievement in your communities. Even before you got into politics, your personality and socio-community involvement caused many of you to be invited to stand for election as councillor, chief or grand chief. Those invitations often worked as an incentive to reflection (a catalyst). Whether from your family (immediate or extended) or other members of the community (influential or not), repeated encouragements to get involved kept feeding that process of reflection. And yet your decision to get into politics, or stay there, depended on more personal considerations, such as the potential impact on your family life. Though generally positive, your political life can at times have negative effects, both on you and those close to you in the community.

- *My **grandfather** was a chief, that gave me confidence in my abilities.*
- *My **parents** hoped I would get involved in politics. My father told me it was time I did something.*
- *The **women wanted a female representative**, but nobody wanted to do it.*
- *Certain people in the community are **models**; they influenced my decision to go into politics.*
- *Being in politics **is a life path**, it was a goal in my life. After 25 years of preparation and sober reflection, I jumped in.*
- *It was people in the community who **came and asked me to run. It's the image I project** in the community that made them ask me to go into politics: my education, my social behaviour, my life.*
- *I had been **asked for a long time** by the community, **by an elder**, to get into politics.*
- ***Our natural leadership qualities** (honour, integrity, justice) make people want us to get involved in politics.*
- *I was angry, I didn't agree with the way the chief ran the community, I **thought there were injustices, favouritism**. I decided to get involved to correct things, to bring change.*
- *A **parent's political experience can discourage children, make them disgusted with politics** (why would I get involved!). We have to watch out for that, put value back into the role of politician.*
- *We do politics for the challenge, for personal satisfaction, for issues, projects... **If you have abilities, you can do things for the community; you have to try, you have to go for it, you don't have a choice. It becomes a passion.***

Many of you revealed that the decision to get into politics was due to ethical principles, to a personal awareness of your abilities and a desire to put them to the benefit of the community. These principles give special priority to children and the family. Where the community is concerned, your principles give equal priority to the young, elders, women, men, and in certain respects the clan and nation.

Whether you are known for your natural leadership abilities, are an example of hope and commitment in your personal life², or are working toward a political career, most of you show very little inclination to seek power for power's sake. You are primarily motivated by creative solutions and local strategies. National, regional and pan-Canadian aboriginal matters were rarely mentioned in the discussions, except to mention the lack of communication toward you from all those levels. You often stressed your lack of knowledge about those organizations and their respective mandates, confirming the problem of communication. But always your political priority is the community for which you became involved.

- ***I'm in politics for the overall well-being of my community. There are a lot of problems. I have knowledge and abilities, they should serve the community. You should be able to make a difference, bring changes to the community. We have to show that we can do things, make progress step by step.***
- ***My being in politics comes from my life path. I became a politician over time. I've always been a woman with ideas. I realized that my community needed my qualities, I couldn't not get involved. It's a mission I've given myself.***
- ***We have to be creative to help our community. It's long, it takes a lot of time. We have to come up with ideas to get young people interested in their community. They're our future. We have to mobilize them. We have to mobilize the community. We have to put tools in place to awaken interest in the future of the community. We have to help, support young people. Lead them further. It's our responsibility.***
- ***We have to get used to working with the regional level. We need to know them.***

² For example: leaving the community to get an education, then returning; gaining work experience off-reserve; overcoming personal problems.

2. More specifically

Many personal examples and anecdotes enriched the seven discussion groups, whose dynamics varied noticeably depending on composition (diversity of nations or not; use of one, two or three languages, etc.). Sometimes in English, sometimes in an aboriginal language, but often in French, you shared your personal grievances and collective concerns. Education, health and social services are still the mandates most often assigned to you once you are elected. But more and more, for some of you, women are playing a greater role in matters related to territorial claims and economic development.

Beyond the different personal elements, deriving notably from your own life stories, your words, though varied, revealed three recurring focal points that for all of you are both sources of motivation (commitment) and drivers of political action.

In no particular order, these focal points are:

- living conditions in your communities;
- identity, culture, language;
- collective rights (and non-discrimination).

- ***There are things that should be changed.** I want to change things, that's why I'm here. Injustice, the lack of help and mutual aid, **there are many problems in the communities: drugs, alcohol, violence, health.** We have to do something about them, but we should also work on economic development.*
- ***We have to wake people up, make them understand that they have to think about the future, the children, the language, the culture. It's urgent.***
- ***I'm very concerned about our rights. We have to protect them, protect ourselves.***

2.1 Living conditions in your communities

Though you do not all advocate the same solutions or political actions, you are united in your commitment to the well-being of your community and that of its children. You are deeply concerned about the living conditions in your communities.

Those conditions vary considerably from one community to another, but your comments indicate that in many cases they are damaging to the health of aboriginal populations and/or local economic development. Some of you are therefore especially concerned about the lack of direct services and prevention programs.

One of the most worrisome social realities, for many of you, is overcrowding due to the lack of housing. It is a direct cause of other problems, including violence and the loss of motivation among young people (hopelessness).

Despite the gravity of these communal realities, few of you seem discouraged by the scale of the task, though you all expressed a need for support. You do not over-dramatize these social situations; on the contrary, a profound wisdom emerges when you speak of the reality and the challenges of such living conditions. You express an urgent need to make people in the community take responsibility both individually and collectively. You also say that the improvement of living conditions should be accomplished through manpower training and economic development.

Yet for all that you have in common, there is such diversity in your socio-communal contexts that the realities of some are very different from the realities of others, as are your needs. Thus the difficulty for aboriginal women in government of finding a common focus for political intervention.

- *I'm in politics to change things, for the well-being of my community.*
- *Child placement, adoption, youth protection, these are very important issues. If we lose our children, we lose everything.*
- *Nobody was concerned about mental health, only community health.*
- *Housing is a big problem. When you're in sub-standard housing, things don't go well: violence, dropping out, discouragement...*
- *The lack of housing is a major issue. I'm in politics to work on that. I want to put all my energy into it.*
- *Housing and support for families are also very important.*
- *The priorities are manpower development, training, communications and commercial and economic development.*
- *It's all about self-government. Before, we only worked on infrastructure; today we have to think about human resources, people, education, training. We have to speak in terms of self-government, taking responsibility individually and collectively.*
- *The important issues are education, violence and drug addiction, Bill 125³ and self-government.*

³ Bill 125, Act to modify the Youth Protection Act and other legislative provisions.

2.2 Identity, culture, language

Attachment to aboriginal identity, culture and language is a significant and recurring element in your remarks. For many, maintaining a strong aboriginal identity is essential to the survival of your communities. For others, the erosion of cultural values is hastened by modernity and the massive arrival of new technologies. Some of you said modernity is just one more challenge that is impossible to avoid, and the communities will have to learn to deal with it. For many of you, language is the prime driver of culture and identity, and therefore should be a priority for the survival of Québec's First Nations. Education is also identified as an important issue. You believe the educational system should promote equality and be adapted to aboriginal needs and realities, helping to transmit aboriginal values and culture.

Cultural survival also depends, for some of you, on the acquisition of certain ancestral principles, such as survival in the forest and learning cultural values.

Moreover, you emphasize the fact that pride in being aboriginal must transcend the generations and inspire the young, who are often the most vulnerable to loss of identity. Education both at school and at home is therefore essential for promoting the transmission of values. Your words underscore the urgent necessity of making people aware of the need for political action on these matters.

For many, the administrative culture imposed by various levels of government is not just burdensome, it fails to respect the aboriginal community. It is one more factor contributing to the erosion of identity. Some of you think that raising the awareness of non-aboriginal people is worth considering, if it could help protect aboriginal identity. But again, the diversity of your cultures came to the fore during the discussions, despite the attachment you all share for the community values that characterize the aboriginal milieu.

- *Improving the quality of social life in the community, working on culture, that's why I'm in politics.*
- *Loss of identity, loss of culture, loss of language, these are very important issues; they are bound to the territory.*
- *We have to make young families understand that language is our identity. Loss of language is dangerous, it's the loss of our identity. I wanted to help people become proud again through their culture. We should stop putting our culture on the back burner. There is a problem with pride among aboriginal people, they don't know how to hold their heads up high. We have to work to help them.*
- *There are problems of identity, pride in being aboriginal is disappearing. It's as if we're ashamed of being Indian.*
- *We should develop the territory, but not excessively, we must always work with family values. We must bridge the gap between development and family values, cultural values...*
- *We must work on our community base, it's the basis of our societies.*
- *Education is a major issue, we have to make sure it's egalitarian and adapted to us.*
- *We should find a way to make others understand the situation that aboriginal people are really in.*
- *Relations with the governments are complicated. They use scientific words that people don't understand. The level of language is difficult, people can't make sense out of it. It's like it's not made for us.*
- *There ought to be training for professionals who come to work in the communities, to give them a better understanding of who we are.*
- *All the regulations are made by other people and don't take our social and cultural reality into consideration, don't support aboriginal people. We don't fit in with them. That's what we should work on.*

2.3 Respect for collective rights

Non-discrimination and respect for collective rights are extremely important to you. These themes, which came up in all the discussion groups, indicate that whether real or perceived, injustice motivates a great many of you. Lack of equal opportunity, iniquities related to «white» people's systems and their negative effects on your communities, loss of territory, and the bureaucratic and political complications of making land claims, were just some examples.

Your words were most heated when you spoke of the loss of property rights for children of mixed marriages⁴ and children placed in off-reserve adoption (real or apprehended consequences of laws intended to protect children). Your passion, realism and sensitivity reminded us that most of you are mothers and even grandmothers. Numerous personal and very moving examples illustrated your comments and animated the discussion groups. On this theme of respect for collective rights, your differences swiftly disappeared, for you share a desire for social justice. Your intolerance for injustice includes not only injustice toward aboriginal people and their nations, but any form of discrimination or favouritism.

As with the other focal points, lack of information and the complexity of the issues were again flagged as significant limitations on asserting your rights and/or having meaningful political influence.

- *I want recognition for our rights. I get a feeling of social injustice when I meet aboriginal people. We should protect our identity, our culture, our rights.*
- *There is a lot of injustice in the community.*
- *I was helping people to speak up, I was helping them express how bad things were in the community, the injustices.*
- *My goal is to bring justice and fairness back into the community.*
- *I'm very concerned about our rights. We must protect them, protect ourselves.*
- *You get the impression of being in a system based on the planned extinction of aboriginal people.*
- *People tell them, «You're an aboriginal, you can't succeed.» We have to change that mentality.*
- *We should put in place a more neutral, more just political system. Too much of it is about clans.*
- *It's important that aboriginal people be listened to wherever they go.*
- *Matrimonial real property and Bill C-31⁵ are priority issues. It's about identity, the future.*

⁴ See the website of the Assembly of First Nations [<http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=3070>].

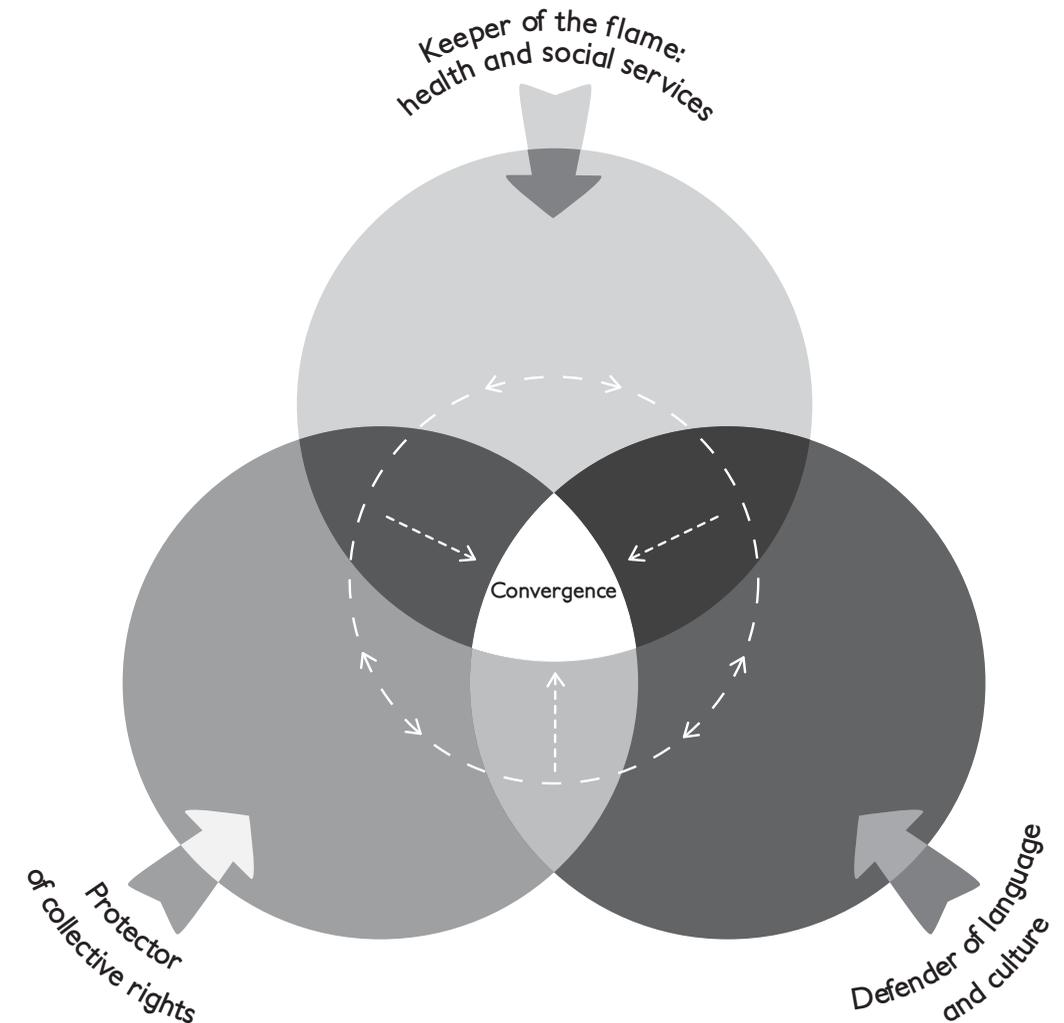
⁵ Bill C-31, an Act to Amend the Indian Act.

Focal Points and Sources of Motivation

In sum, you are keepers of the flame, watching over the well-being of your people through political action to improve the living conditions in your communities, especially health and social services. You are ardent defenders of aboriginal language and identity, focusing your interventions on education and culture. And you are protectors of collective rights, seeking ways to defend aboriginal rights through political action.

Generally then, your entry into politics was nourished by a desire to help, to defend and promote the interests of your people, with children occupying an important place in your concerns. Power for power's sake is not the driving force.

Yet like your sources of motivation, these three focal points are far from static, since they can vary with time and context. Though they were generally what brought you into politics, your political life and related experience have led you to consider different means and strategies, depending on the issue at stake. With experience, your motivations and political interventions seem to converge.



3. Balance in complementarity: the place of women in aboriginal politics, an essential role for overall well-being⁶

You believe strongly in women having a place and a role in politics, as a way to create a balance of power and establish a decision-making dynamic that is more beneficial to your communities. Though you are thoroughly pro-equality where women-men representation is concerned, you expressed a sense of duality between you and elected men, citing numerous examples of women's contribution being more creative, more productive than men's, without however diminishing the importance of men's place in politics and the communities. In your view, women in government make a complementary contribution, bringing new solutions and a holistic vision that is needed by your communities. Some of you say that women are more inclined toward conciliation, and show greater respect toward the community and the public administration.

For many of you, getting into or staying in politics is about regaining your place as a woman, a place that was lost through the perverse effects of colonization. As examples, you cite the residential schools and the Indian Act, with the masculinist attitudes it embodies.

On many occasions, you said that women have a tougher time in politics, must fight harder and in different ways to accomplish their political objectives, especially if they try to work on nontraditional issues (territory, resources, claims, etc.). Most elected women are put in charge of matters related to the family and children. As for the role of political advisor, usually held by women, it isn't always a full-time position, even when the tasks assigned require an enormous investment of time.

- *I want people to understand that **for the well-being of the community** (family, personal, economic...) **there have to be women participating in political life. Before, there was no place for women in politics, no support.***
- *That has changed. Before, men just wouldn't listen. **The more women are involved, the more they have to listen to us.***
- *It's time women **took back their place. Even the elders say it.***
- *We should take back our place as women. **Take back our place.***
- *Today's woman can do anything, **she should take back her place.***
- *Women **should take back their place, the power they lost with colonization.** A leader has no gender. A leader grows, develops.*
- ***Now there's a lot of respect from men.***
- *Nowadays, **women talk more in the council.***
- ***Women have a more strategic way of looking at development.***
- ***Women are more capable of changing things.** I'm in politics because people asked me. I know I can do something for my community, I have something to offer. I'm well-organized and I have a vision for my community.*
- *We have to be many women. **If you're alone, you're not listened to, not supported. Women are concerned about the children, the future. Men seem to forget these problems, as if they weren't important enough.***
- ***For negotiations, since it's men who are on the other side, the council prefers to send men. We have to change that.***
- *Women have different ways of doing things. **It's important for these ways to be considered [in politics], it's a question of balance.***
- ***There have to be more women in politics.** Men are focused on territorial issues, women see and care about social problems.*
- *It's mostly women who bring new ideas. **It's important to get a men-women balance.***

⁶ Balance in complementarity refers to a holistic approach, the principle of complementarity of roles between women and men, children and elders in your communities. «Balance in complementarity» and «taking back our place» are two themes that should be explored further, to better understand the implications of these words.

Having numerous women in government, and female solidarity in political office, would both be very good things. But sometimes solidarity is impossible, due to conflicts between clans for example. Some of you spoke of the importance of maintaining an independent voice, out of respect for the people, despite pressure from peers when there is a struggle between clans.

Contrary to more «masculine» approaches, such as those based on power games, many of you prefer the «little steps» approach, without necessarily excluding other strategies. Your age can be used to enhance your credibility in political office: the younger you are, the greater the challenge. The realities associated with having a family, such as balancing work and family life, are not a source of conflict for you, but rather a challenge specific to women, a fact of life. Your words highlight the overriding importance you give to your role as mothers, some of you being quite concerned about the effects of your political careers on your children and family. Moreover, many of you have to pursue a professional career before, during and after the electoral process.

- *Before, there was no place for women in politics, there was no support.*
- *Women don't see things in the same way as men, the solutions they see are different. That's what's good for the community. **Balance.***
- *Women have more of an overall vision of the life of a community, of the present and the future.*
- *Women are more receptive toward recommendations and suggestions. **Receptive toward what people are.***
- *There have to be several women in a council. We can talk, exchange ideas about solutions. **When there aren't any other women, it's hard to contribute our ideas.***
- *Women **work through conciliation**, with respect for each other, respect for the people.*
- *Women politicians delegate more to the administration. They stay closer to the community. **They're close to people, to the base.***

- ***Women should take a stand, fight to have the responsibilities they want.** I don't want to stay in the issues traditionally reserved for women. Territorial claims, that's what interests me. I think they're very important to the community, and I want to participate actively. I'm very connected to defending rights. I don't want to spend my time on social issues. **It's not my strength.***
- ***Women have to defend themselves more than men.** They have to work harder.*
- *As a woman, **you have to work hard** to prove that you're capable, to get something done, to be listened to.*
- *I feel that I'm being **judged because of my age and lack of experience.***
- *Women **are used to wearing a lot of different hats.***
- *I've got conflicting roles (council member, mother, worker). **It's a lot of pressure for my family. Sometimes I'm afraid for my children.***
- *Some quit their jobs, others don't. **Most of the meetings are held in the evening.***
- *Men are more angry, more aggressive; **women give an impression of serenity. It's good for the people, the community.** Men listen and end up by accepting. **We don't want to attack men, it's balance that's important.** It's changing slowly, we have to deal with men's mentality, especially men from older generations.*
- ***Being in politics doesn't really affect the children, unless you're shaking things up.***
- *The power of men – it's hard, very hard to work with a gang of men. **You have to be several women, you have to stand together.***
- *More and more, people want women to be in politics. **Men want to win, they want wealth, power.** Women tend to be closer to the people.*
- ***You shouldn't use power to increase your power.***
- *Many little things done well end up accomplishing something good. **That's the difference between men and women.***

4. Your needs as elected women

Most of you have men or women politicians as models, whether aboriginal or not, but do not have access to any coaching from them. You report that while your electoral codes do not discriminate against women, they say nothing about parity. Despite general knowledge about the electoral code of your community, several of you said you don't understand the underlying issues.

Some of you indicate that you would benefit from studying the Indian Act and the workings of customary law, since their complexities make your task extremely laborious⁷. A number of you spoke of needing to develop strategies for dealing with government red tape and jurisdictional issues. For some of you these are simply a challenge, but for many they are an obstacle to improving living conditions in your communities.

Though you are all women, aboriginal people and elected representatives, the diversity of your realities points up the breadth of the challenge facing you as a group to answer such a wide range of needs. You gave voice frequently to the need to share among yourselves, as elected women, and with other groups, as a way to facilitate effective political action, both individually and collectively. This tangible need for sharing and interchange is in itself an argument for standing together, uniting your voices to demand training and support.

- *Politics are complex in an aboriginal community. It's hard, there's so much to do. That's why women have to work together.*
- *Right now, there's nothing to support the work women are doing in politics.*
- *The government doesn't help us. It's too complex. Those people understand each other, but they don't understand us.*
- *Relations with the governments aren't difficult, just complex. It's the complexity that makes things interesting, makes us take on challenges. We need to find the right solutions for us. We need to develop strategies for dealing with those people.*
- *We should detach ourselves from government, find other solutions, solutions that are more like us.*
- *It's important to be politically involved outside the community, it helps you build bridges.*
- *You have to take a wider view, wider than what's in front of your nose. You have to work in a sensible, logical way with details about the important things. You have to stay focused.*
- *It's important to bring all the groups together, not just the council, but the health committee, the youth committee, the school committee, the recreation committee... You have to work on a community basis, it's part of us.*
- *You have to be genuine, encourage a team spirit in council and in the organizations. You shouldn't do things for power or prestige. You shouldn't be afraid to learn, you need to be able to build a team and know how to delegate. That's how you get things done. We have to develop strategies for working with the government. They're two completely different worlds, and we need to find solutions.*

⁷ This remark does not imply that the participants are in agreement with the Indian Act.

4.1 Support

Despite your acknowledged leadership abilities and the recognition of your people, being an elected official in a small community creates a sense of isolation that, for some of you, can make your job socially difficult.

The community's expectations are at times misplaced; there are mistaken perceptions about your role that you are helpless to change. This and the demands of the political arena (confusion about the boundaries between politics and administration, urgent situations where you have to make decisions without time for analysis, lack of structures or funding to support your role as a councillor, etc.), all put pressure on you and at times restrict your capacity for political action.

Your comments indicate that these pressures are alleviated by talking with other elected women, for you can share experiences and discuss the interests and issues you have in common without having to explain the socio-communal realities of the aboriginal milieu. You see these exchanges as a complementary means of finding solutions, defining your limits, asserting your political positions and learning to manage confrontational situations.

For you, support means more than exchanges with peers; it includes the need for up-to-date information about the various issues being handled by regional aboriginal bodies. Lack of information is a hindrance to the proper functioning of your political role. Ongoing quality information is an essential tool for an effective and efficient political role, and you are very aware of not having it.

- *The first thing you have to do is learn; there's a lot of stuff to understand, to master.*
- *In my community, gender isn't important in politics; it's the profile, the qualities people want.*
- *It's important to have a good support network.*
- *We have too many roles (mother, councillor, employee, sister, daughter). It's hard to set boundaries. We're always accountable, yet we don't have much time for our role as councillors. The pressure is hard.*

- *People look at us differently. You're no longer somebody's sister, somebody's daughter, you're a Councillor.*
- *We need advice, networking and support.*
- *It's hard sometimes. People see us as models. Our personality wasn't developed for the purpose of being visible, having to live up to all these expectations.*
- *People put us on a pedestal – it's nerve-wracking. Sometimes you feel like you won't be able to live up to their expectations. In council, I don't feel like I'm being listened to. They force us to make decisions quickly. I'm not comfortable. I'm afraid I'll disappoint people.*
- *I have children and a job. I don't have time to analyze all the issues. I'm afraid of losing my credibility with people. Often, I'm presented with a resolution that I have to sign right away. «If you don't sign, we're going to lose funding!» I find that hard.*
- *Peer pressure can be tough, especially from elders.*
- *In politics, you're in a machine that you don't always understand. You have to be strong.*
- *It's tough in politics. It takes strength, there's a lot of confrontation.*
- *I didn't enjoy my first experience in politics. It was very difficult. I felt more useful at work than as a council member.*
- *In our council, there are just two seats for women. We often have the impression of not being listened to, having no support.*
- *I'm finding it hard to get my ideas accepted. I'm helpless, I don't know what to do. I almost feel obligated to pound my fist on the table, like the men. We are X number of council members with X number of ways of thinking. I don't know how to handle that. I'm discouraged. I feel like I'm lost in the bush.*
- *Sometimes it's hard to define your limits.*
- *The problem is getting information – being informed. There should be government monitoring to keep us informed about what's happening. There should also be more communication with the AFNQL. We're not always informed about what's happening in the commissions.*

4.2 Training

Few of you received any specific training for your duties as an elected official. That said, many have learned on the job, with help from your peers, and have taught yourselves using the means at hand. A good number have taken made-to-measure training that was tailored to your local, not regional, reality. You perceive made-to-measure training as something that can help you be politically effective, an opportunity to learn about law, politics, strategy, negotiating, budget analysis, project management, the management of human and material resources, and so on.

A number of you stressed the problems you have had with local and national media, which you often speak of as having bad faith. You see a real need for learning how to handle «white» journalists, particularly in terms of potential strategic alliances. Some of you detailed how you form alliances with certain people in the regional media, as a way of getting around the amateurism of certain journalists.

Interestingly, some of you stated that the need for training is not exclusive to aboriginal people, but would be equally beneficial for non-aboriginals, in terms of relations with the governments, media, social workers and others, just for the sake of mutual comprehension.

Identifying your training needs is complicated somewhat by the diversity of your community realities, as well as by your differences in education (secondary school, college, university) and your other skills and knowledge (workplace, bush skills, etc.).

- *Decisions are made too quickly, we don't have enough information, there's too much rubber stamping.*
- *When you've just been elected, you need training. There are a lot of issues and we don't know what to do with them, how to prepare a resolution, how to work with the staff, how to analyze things.*
- *Lack of information and lack of training are real problems. We need to find solutions.*

- *We need training for working with the media, for developing political strategies and doing financial analysis.*
- *We need training sessions on developing political strategies and working with the governments.*
- *We should have training to understand the different levels of government.*
- *Training in negotiation would be important.*
- *There ought to be training for elected officials and managers.*
- *Keeping politics separate from administration is not always easy. People should be educated, including the chiefs of communities.*
- *Elected officials often mix politics and administration. We have to watch out for that. We should set up mechanisms to keep the two spheres separate.*
- *All training and experience from outside are good for the community.*
- *What the media do is disinformation. They manipulate the information we give them.*
- *We should learn to work with the media so it will be useful to us.*
- *We should have training to know how to work with the media. It's dangerous, they can tear us down, but we have no choice. We have to work with them. The media can decide the future of a nation.*
- *The structures we work in are very complex. We need to understand them better. The media aren't being used for political action. We should change that, otherwise they can destroy us.*
- *Training should be given to people who are elected. We should know what the regional organizations are doing. Ignorance can be very harmful. The regional organizations play a role as intermediaries. There are too many people at once, too many people talking, you lose track.*
- *We don't have enough information, we don't know enough about the processes, the procedures. You get lost. When I was elected, I didn't know what the council actually did. I had ideas about changes for the future of the community. I didn't know how to go about putting them in place.*
- *We need tools that explain the structures in simple terms. It's hard to figure out who does what, who talks to whom. It's like «The Twelve Tasks of Asterix».*

4.3 Leadership Renewal

For most of you, the next generation of women in government will depend in large part on the example you set for the young people of your communities. Your accomplishments and the coherence of your political actions (actions consistent with your words) will ensure you of active successors. You are convinced of the need for a high level of political performance, to enhance the role of elected representative: heightening its value in order to mobilize young people in your communities.

In parallel, on the whole you recognize the importance of incorporating the issues of aboriginal politics, its structures and mechanisms, into education. In several of your communities, various initiatives to develop future leaders are already underway, such as public speaking contests and student councils.

Supporting you and giving you the training needed to be politically effective would be an excellent way to encourage the next generation of women in government. It would also demonstrate the importance of the role of women in aboriginal politics in seeking the balance necessary for the wellbeing of communities.

- *It's important to support the next generation: a special leadership class, mentoring for girls, public speaking contests for young people, getting young women involved in committees to help them develop, gain confidence. **It's important to ground young women in important values. We have to work on the values that define us as a society.***
- *Inform young people, raise their awareness. **Us, we're always doing politics.** You can't get away from politics in your community. You're part of the life of the community, so you participate in political life. **You're born Indian, so you do politics. That's the way it is.***
- ***We should help young people understand politics.** Young men and young women (discussion groups, talks, models). Young people ought to show an active interest. Starting in school, **we should educate them about politics, the role of a politician.***
- *Important to **train and sensitize young people so someone will be there to carry on after us.***
- ***In politics, women see things men don't see. There aren't enough women involved, we should be making an effort to train more.** The men have their noses stuck in the issues and don't see anything else. They keep making the same mistakes over and over. They're too oriented toward «business», not enough toward family, community. They're often very narrow and old-fashioned.*
- *We should educate people about what the role of a politician really is. **We have to get rid of the old political culture.** We have to work to change things.*

Conclusion

The field collaboration between the Working Group of Elected Women of the AFNQL and the Conseil du statut de la femme has been, first of all, an opportunity for you to meet and for us to meet each other. Using means that we worked out together, and that are described briefly in the Appendix, this fruitful association enabled the gathering of wide-ranging information about your realities, those of the elected women of the First Nations of Québec. The sharing of resources and expertise allowed a co-construction of knowledge, thereby establishing the collective portrait that we present here. In acknowledging our differences and complementarities throughout the process, we respected the feminist principle of recognizing woman as subject, not as an object of study. This approach is in harmony with the spirit of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador Research Protocol.

From the wealth of human experience that you so generously shared, we can state that you are fundamentally engaged in the reality of the communities for which you were elected. You are dealing with multiple political issues of health and social services, culture and education, women's rights and rights for your nations, notably in the management of territory and resources. Having discovered the singularity of your communities and the plurality of your realities, we know we must speak in the plural when trying to understand what it means to be an aboriginal woman in government.

You have told us that your role as elected official is stimulating, often energizing, though at times hard to manage due to your multiple commitments and roles (representative, professional, mother, grandmother, spouse). Worried about your effectiveness as a woman in government, you are conscious of your limitations and your need for support and training. You expressed a range of needs for training, information and support (exchanges, mentoring, networking) and how beneficial it would be if these needs were answered. You are certain that if they were, it would do much to encourage the next generation of aboriginal women leaders.

Despite very different social and economic realities, you are committed and united in the defence and promotion of social justice, collective rights and non-discrimination. In this respect, some of you raised specific issues of discrimination, such as matrimonial real property, the repercussions of mixed marriage for children, and the placing of children into off-reserve foster homes. These topics, like others related to your sources of motivation and drivers of political action, were often raised with passion and emotion, making all the more evident your need for information, training, and opportunities to exchange among yourselves. «Taking our place as women in aboriginal political institutions» and «balance for the community's wellbeing» are interwoven throughout your remarks. Your attachment to these concepts is evident, and we believe they should be explored more deeply, perhaps in complementary studies.

We hope this collective portrait speaks to you as aboriginal elected women, and we thank you for the confidence you have placed in us. Now it is for you to choose how you may find a collective voice.

- *As elected women, we can't fall into the trap of wishful thinking: that everything can happen quickly, easily, that money would solve all the problems. **We have to make progress step by step, holding our course, never losing sight of our objectives.** We shouldn't just focus on negative things; **you also have to see what's going well**, and make other people see it too.*
- *We should **develop plans** with a **view of the whole** (have a very structured way of thinking – always step by step). We should make sure we understand, understand the system better before making decisions. We should look at all the options. It's hard to change people's mentality, to convince them to change the structure, to get them to accept a different way of looking at things. But we have to do it. You have a portfolio, specific issues, but you shouldn't just focus on them. **The point of what you're doing is the whole life and future of the community.***

The process was worked out so as to respect the spirit of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador Research Protocol. It was a participatory research-action⁸ of a qualitative nature, combining co-researchers from the Conseil du statut de la femme and the AFNQL Working Group of Elected Women, with methodological support from an external researcher. The information forming the basis of this document was gathered during discussion groups in which all elected aboriginal women in Québec were invited to participate⁹. The invitations were sent out jointly by the AFNQL Working Group and the Conseil du statut de la femme. Seven discussion groups were held, on the Côte-Nord, in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, in Baie-James, in the regions of Québec and Gaspésie and in Montréal. They took place between March 11 and April 16, 2009, and provided a forum for 22 elected women from 8 First Nations on the territory of Québec to share their realities. The diversity of the participants must be emphasized, for they and their nations do not by any means form a homogeneous category. The socio-political realities of their communities (rural, semi-rural, urban and off-reserve), like the roles they play as representatives, are highly varied, and there are many differences in the electoral modes of their nations and communities.

The principal objective of the discussion groups, as requested by the AFNQL Working Group, was to develop a better knowledge of the reality of elected aboriginal women in Québec, by means of exchanges with and among them, in order to understand the issues surrounding that role and to encourage female representation in councils. Written documents about this reality, in Québec, are extremely rare. This unique collaboration between the aboriginal community and the Conseil du statut de la femme was a privileged opportunity to gather information on this subject.

A variety of themes on both public and private life, chosen beforehand, were considered during the meetings. The latter were co-conducted in French and English by a representative designated by the Working Group of Elected Women and a research officer with the Conseil du statut de la femme. Participants could express themselves in the language of their choice (an aboriginal language or English or French, followed by free translation). The questions prompting discussion had been presented earlier for comment to a smaller group of elected aboriginal women.

The vast diversity of realities observed in the discussion groups required the co-researchers to adjust constantly, encouraging interchange among women who often did not know each other and were from different communities and nations. We must point out the importance these women generally gave to acknowledging each other before expressing the issues that concerned them. They made a real effort to draw common conclusions and identify the links uniting them.

Prior to the participants' contribution to this process, the research team obtained their verbal consent, since the written consent form was rejected by the Working Group on the basis of cultural accommodation. The comments gathered were subjected to thematic analysis, in a joint process involving the co-researchers of the AFNQL and the Conseil du statut de la femme.

In accordance with our chosen approach, a preliminary version of this document was presented to a small group of elected aboriginal women belonging to 4 nations in 7 different communities, the purpose being to ensure the credibility of the results and conclusions. After two days of further discussion, the comments received led to minor modifications to the content of the document and how it would be disseminated. Some of the women have already gone on to take action based on this document and the discussion groups.

⁸ For more information about this method of research, we suggest the following work: MORRIS, Marika. «Participatory Research and Action: A Guide to Becoming a Researcher for Social Change», Ottawa, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2002, 72 pp.

⁹ In September 2008, prior to the data collection, the exact number of elected aboriginal women was counted for the first time at the first assembly of women in government, in which the Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones du Québec, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Conseil du statut de la femme participated as observers.

