

Erasmus and Ovide Mercredi. They were just young fellows at the time. We got their support and they helped us get recognition with the chiefs.

Working on 12(1)(b) also brought issues of Aboriginal self-government and control over First Nations membership to the forefront. "At that time, the men weren't talking self-government issues. They didn't even have that concept, I don't think. And yet we weren't given due recognition in that whole area," Bobbi explains.

Yukon Native women have been seen as leaders at the national level. Since 1975 they have had a representative on the national executive of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). That doesn't mean that Yukon Native women have always agreed with the rest of the national organization. Just last year when NWAC was embroiled in the Constitutional debate over equality rights protection for Aboriginal women under Aboriginal self-government, the Yukon delegates took a different position. Rosemary Trehearne explains:

Yukon women don't have that problem here. We know and understand that women in some of the provinces have a very hard time—that they are not being listened to by the chiefs. But that is not happening in the Yukon. Lots of Indian women are in leadership positions here.

Bobbi Smith explains that this issue is also tied to a national debate on the form of self-government. If First

Nations governments are built on the traditional Aboriginal way of governing, where equity is built into the system, there wouldn't be a need for the "white" ways of protecting rights. However, if Aboriginal governments are patterned on the "white" system of governing, Native women will likely need Charter protections. Native women are aware of the possibility that Aboriginal governments won't develop in a traditional manner.

Today, the issues for Native women are much the same as they were 15 years ago, although both Rosemary and Bobbi admit that there has been great progress over the years. Healing is still seen as key to dealing with many of the other social and economic problems in First Nations communities. Healing must be spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. As Bobbi points out:

That's where Dene Nets'edet'an (People Awakening) comes in. It's easier to deal with the symptoms rather than the underlying causes, but those are the issues we have to deal with. If we can start mobilizing people to start exploring their own traumas, they'll want to find out who they are and then they want to reestablish a direction that they want to go. That's a long process, yet it has to happen.

The roots of *Dene Nets'edet'an* go back to 1979. In 1981, it became a priority for YNWA, and finally, in the late 1980s the project received almost \$1 million in funding from the federal government. Since then, women have



Susan McCallum, *Untitled*, Print, Courtesy of Bobbi Smith

Photo: Yukon Government

been trained to go into the community, find out what the community wants, and offer workshops and information on topics such as grieving and residential school syndrome.

The project is ongoing although funding is a constant problem. Right now the workers are paid on a fee-for-service basis by First Nations who want them to come into their communities.

YTWA is always learning about the healing process through feedback from *Dene Nets'edet'an*. Bobbi states that "It has shown us that there is strength in the community, with individuals, and in their own time, they will reveal this strength to us."

Another issue of concern to Yukon Native women is their relationship with Yukon Native Products. The co-op developed by Native women has now become a business in its own right. Many women find that they can no longer relate to it. Supplies are expensive. "It's a very sore point for Indian women. That was theirs to start with and has grown out of their reach. They just don't feel ownership anymore," says Rosemary.

YTWA will continue to address this issue in the coming year.

For Native women, then, the change is ongoing and gradual. Bobbi Smith believes that change would occur faster if Native people reverted back to the old ways of doing things, built on respect for one another.

Right now we hold on to the "white" way of doing things a lot and it creates conflict within our communities. Women don't have as much to lose so that they are very able to share with one another in their growth, whatever arena they are involved in. Whereas with the men, their area of involvement is limited to the political arena and they dabble some in the economics. They don't really involve themselves in the social area, which is a huge area. In the past, all those areas were important to all people. I feel that women have more opportunities to be involved in all areas. You can see that they have progressed since the 1970s.

Regarding the role of the non-Native women's movement in supporting Aboriginal women in their struggles, both Rosemary and Bobbi emphasize the need for respect. Non-native women may not understand Native women, but they should respect their choices. There will be times when Native women and non-Native women don't agree. That doesn't mean that they cannot respect one another. Bobbi believes that non-Native women have a right to disagree and comment on Native women's issues, but asks that non-Native women first learn about these issues before they speak.

Rosemary also points out that working with groups that focus on single issues is often frustrating for Aboriginal women, because they see issues as interconnected and not separate. Women in this situation have often found themselves up against a wall, because non-Native women are

unwilling to deal with the holistic point of view.

Despite the differences between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women, both Bobbi and Rosemary hope that women can work together more on common issues. There is strength in numbers.

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MARYBETH WESTMAN

I am an Indian Gypsie from the place behind
the ice walls.
A place where reflections are false and
where reality crumbles.
And the cement beneath makes it more
difficult.
The invisible light in the darkness,
Leads the way to the clockwork of my
beliefs;
Where the squares connect
And the gate never opens.
Whenever I take myself
My soul follows with a pack of wolves.
And I try to keep my balance
Over the crossing of the clouds.
I crawl, I hang, I float, I fly,
In the dark space that is mine.
A buckle, a tick, a tear,
And I'm still here.

*Marybeth Westman is a Northern Tutchone Native from
Carmacks, Yukon, Canada.*