

Feminism and Aboriginal Culture

One Woman's View

by Agnes Grant

Une femme blanche discute de son travail dans une communauté autochtone. Elle examine les contradictions qui existent au sein du mouvement féministe constatant que celui-ci n'inclus pas toujours les questions qui ont rapport aux autochtones.

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As a Caucasian feminist working almost exclusively in First Nations communi-

ties, with First Nations people who are predominantly women, I have been plagued for many years by the contradictions in some feminist agendas. From first hand experience and through dialogue with Aboriginal colleagues I know that there is little equity for women in First Nations communities.

However, it is not always possible to subscribe to the feminist agenda as presented by some women's groups, especially the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), and be acceptable in First Nations communities. For example, I was forced to take sides during the Charlottetown Accord referendum debate over the issue of First Nation's right to self-government.

Like many Canadian women, I was not absolutely convinced that NAC was right to come out against the accord. Nor was I absolutely sure that the First Nation's position (supporting the accord) would help them achieve the right to self-determination.

With NAC's cavalier statements about First Nations being able to achieve self-government through other channels, the die was cast for me. NAC had obviously learned little from the Oka crisis. Through Oka we saw just how far the Mohawks

were prepared to go to protect their rights and we also observed how far Canadians were prepared to go to suppress Aboriginals.

First Nations people will eventually achieve self-government but it will not be without cost to Canadian society. For a group like NAC, which is so used to struggling for equality, to make light of another group's efforts serves only to alienate people.

I have come to reject single-issue positions since they over-simplify at the expense of others. Such an approach is not within my vision of feminism, and though I understand the urgency of women's issues, I cannot work only for women's issues.

The feminist movement has been justifiably criticized in the past for being white-middle-class, but it must be recognized that many feminists have earnestly sought ways to involve women from other races and cultures. What has not been understood or acknowledged is the profoundly racist nature of Canadian society. Caucasian women need never concern themselves with racism unless they consciously choose to do so. Many privileged (white) members of society are completely unaware of the complex relationships that exist between white and minority people. This is not to say that white feminists are unfair or racist, but many of us do operate in cooperation with a racist system.

Having worked for over 20 years in northern communities training Aboriginal teachers, I have noticed the hostility many Aboriginal women feel when pressured to join Caucasian feminists. I have seen the pain of Aboriginal women as they have attempted to seek equality within women's groups. A few have succeeded but many more have experienced their involvement in the feminist movement as another demonstration of marginalization. A few examples will demonstrate my point.

At the 1985 World Conference in Nairobi, Aboriginal women did not participate in activities with "Canadian" women. At a workshop conducted by Aboriginal women, I listened with acute embarrassment as Caucasian women discussed their difficulty in communicating with minority women. This was puzzling as the Aboriginal women had just presented to them a multitude of commonalities. At another conference I watched as an Aboriginal guest speaker was shouted down by a Caucasian woman who had not agreed with her comments. The guest speaker left the building in tears and stood on the curb waiting for a taxi as local women in groups of two and three brushed by her.

It is not my intention to be critical or negative toward my sisters. I cite the above examples, not as proof that feminists are racist and unfeeling, but as specific examples of what it can be like to be a First Nations woman in our midst.

Various women's initiatives have made real attempts and progress at grappling with First Nations issues. Bill C-31, the bill which gave status First Nations women equality with First Nations men would likely never have been passed if it had not been for the support of other women. Undoubtedly, Aboriginal women have benefitted from the actions of feminists and in our hearts I know that we all rejoice that this is so.

A cursory examination of key feminist issues, however, reveals worlds that are separated by such chasms they appear irreconcilable. It is only a minority of Aboriginal women who can take for granted adequate food and housing for their children, sanitation, adequate police protection, justice from the courts, non-coercive health care, and an education system which respects their cultures and spirituality. Reproductive choice and abortion? Abortion is not an issue

when the highest infant mortality rate in Canada is found among Aboriginal children under a year old. Equality in the work place is not an issue when some First Nations communities have a 75 percent or higher unemployment rate. Sexual orientation? Long before Europeans invaded this continent there was acceptance of a person's sexual orientation as a matter of course and respect.

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The bottom line is that in a racist society women are as much the enemy as men. When the Canadian government/army fired tear gas at innocent Mohawk women and bayoneted a 14-year-old girl in the breast who was only attempting to go home, we needed to make that an issue. At stake was not a "Native issue," nor a "women's issue." At stake was a justice issue for a minority group.

First Nations women see the destruction of their culture as the major barrier to equality and a productive life. They see the destruction of their men by colonial powers as the most devastating of all factors. First Nations women will tell you that the concepts they have of themselves as mothers, as the bearers of children, the keepers of the family unit, and the transmitters of culture, has remained comparatively intact. There is no such equivalent cultural identity for their men. While Aboriginal women may feel that they have suffered greatly at the hands of their men as well as men from outside their culture, they believe that Aboriginal men have suffered more. The woman who is battered suffers great mental and physical anguish. The man who batters is a man who has lost his soul. He has lashed out at what is the core and root of his culture, the respect for Mother Earth, and by extension, woman.

Through my association with First Nations people I have come to value myself as a woman in a way I had never imagined possible. Their spir-

itual belief places Mother Earth, and by extension all women through their ability to give birth, at the centre of all life. No amount of Christian dogma has shaken this reverence for womanhood.

Rarely have I heard "put-down" comments about women by First Nations men the way we are so used to hearing in our culture. Never have I heard sexually explicit, exploitive jokes about women. That is not to say that sexually explicit jokes don't exist. The difference is that they acknowledge sexuality as a healthy, mutually enjoyable activity and the jokes are told with great candour instead of leering and innuendo. And there is meticulous adherence to when and where such joking is permitted.

The prestige and value of First Nations women increases with age. The devaluing of age by white society is a contradiction manifested in many feminist activities and actions which can be particularly painful to First Nations women. White women who make derogatory comments about their mothers, or even aunts, are viewed with shock and pity, for surely these are women who are lost on their spiritual journey.

When I walk into a crowded room and a young First Nations woman rises to give me her chair I have learned not to say, "I'm not that old!" I take the chair humbly and gratefully, acknowledging that I am respected because of my years. I am being shown that I am an important person who is valued for the experience I have acquired in my journey through life. I am also being told that I am loved because of my age. And because I am older, it is incumbent upon me to remember my position as an older woman in the family of humanity and interact with the people around me in an appropriate and respectful fashion.

That brings me full circle to my opening comments.

When we become strident, single-issue women, we are not serving anyone, least of all ourselves. "Female power" is really not about gender, it is fundamental to the real humanity in

us. If we allow ourselves to be seduced by the patriarchal methods by which our country functions today—the confrontation, the adversarial way of resolving issues, the power struggles—we may win some battles, yes, but we will have already lost the war.

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