



Indigenous Women's Economic Security and Wellbeing

July 2016 – Research Report

Project Partners:

University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills
Alberta Human Services
Alberta Indigenous Relations
Alberta Center for Child, Family, and Community Research

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Table of Contents

➤ Abstract	3
➤ Methodology	4
➤ Results and Analysis	
I. HOW DID WE SURVIVE?	9
Economy was created. It did not create us.	
Inclusive economics	
Mixed economics	
Reciprocity and healing	
Knowledge transmission	
Summary	
The disruption	12
II. HOW ARE WE SURVIVING NOW?	16
Education and training	
Programs and policy	
Funding sustainability and program measures	
Costs of the new economy	
Technology	
Summary	
III. HOW WILL WE SURVIVE IN THE FUTURE?	23
Dialogue	
Language and land	
Social economics and policy	
Identified actions and strategies	25
➤ Ethical Considerations	26
Who owns the knowledge gathered in the research process?	
How do we know our results were valid and reliable?	
Axiology	
Limitations of the Research	
➤ Conclusion	28
➤ Appendices	
a. Circle questions/guidelines/community posters	30
b. List of Participating Communities	33
c. Forum poster/agenda	34
d. Consent Form	34
e. References	37

ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2014, Blue Quills First Nations College (now University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'į nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills, UnBQ) was awarded funding from Alberta Human Services through the Alberta Centre for Child, Family, and Community Research to research the relationship between community disparity and Indigenous women's economic security. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of how Indigenous women, in the northeastern region of Alberta, feel and think about the economic welfare of their respective communities. The research project was completed within Cree ontology and was started in Cree ceremony. The Indigenous research method chosen was circle process. One hundred and twenty-six participants were brought together in community circles and key informant interviews spanning across ten First Nation, Métis, and Dene communities. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 85.

The term economy, a western or English definition, was initially translated into the Cree language, *manâcihcikêwin*, meaning 'how we take care of'. This ensured a culturally relevant context for discussion. Participants were then asked three questions as a basis for discussion; 1) how did our ancestors survive back in the day? 2) how are people surviving today? (including the barriers and supports they experience), and 3) how will our people survive in the future? The methodology, results, and analysis provide a blueprint that can be utilized to shape the future of economics and sustainability for Indigenous communities. The research is an authentic and urgent call to all invested in the economic sphere of Indigenous communities to undergo a shift in consciousness about current economic realities. It requires readers to rethink economics through the lens of community sustenance, relational accountability, harmony and wellbeing to ensure our collective survival.

INTRODUCTION

UnBQ invited students in the *iyiniw pimâtisiwin kiskeyihtamowin* Doctoral Program (ipk Program) to participate in this research project. The UnBQ doctoral program is anchored in ceremony and Indigenous knowledge, and invites students to conduct applied research that serves Indigenous community priorities. Six doctorate students formed the research team and several had previous research experience. With full support from their funders and their governing institution to complete the research within an Indigenous research paradigm, they utilized this project as an opportunity to fulfill their research requirements. The pressing issues initially identified as needing attention were poverty and dependence on social assistance arising from lack of employment and economic opportunity within Indigenous communities. This is often connected to increasingly high rates of First Nations and Métis children in care on and off reserve/settlement and often involves single parent families (predominantly women) who are less able to pursue employment and training away from their communities.

The researchers set out to understand how Cree, Dene, and Métis women felt and thought about the economy in which they live and work and to hear what their views and aspirations were regarding their future.

METHODOLOGY

To begin the project, we asked the Elders to lift the sacred pipe for us in ceremony seeking guidance and blessings from our ancestors and our grandmothers and grandfathers to ensure that we worked together in a good, respectful way. Before we derived our research questions, we needed to reflect on paradigms and have discussions on how to approach the research in a way that would be congruent with Indigenous worldview. So much of the research done on Indigenous peoples is deficit based, rather than strength based. As Indigenous researchers, it was important to determine from the very beginning the direction we would choose to focus our energies. By starting the project with ceremony we were grounded and were set on a path of raised awareness and consciousness.

We sought to understand the Cree word for economy. We asked ourselves: what does this concept mean to our ancestors; how do we understand it today? We found that economy translated to *manâcihcikêwin*, was not at all related to money or material gain but to *being gentle with* or *taking great care* in reference to maintaining peace and harmony within one's life and living in way that promotes the overall health of an individual, their family, and their relationships to all living things.

As Indigenous researchers, it was our ethical responsibility to approach community leaders to request permission to conduct research within their respective territories. We drafted a project description/invitation letter and presented it to leadership in participating communities in northeast Alberta to inform them of our project and offered them valuable information and education in exchange for the knowledge we would gather from the participants. In the winter of 2014, the research team received consent from the UnBQ Ethics Board and the governing nations to begin circle conversations with women and selected men to explore women's economic security and well-being within the region. In total, 10 communities participated. (See Appendices for list of communities)

A literature review was completed. Taking into consideration what we learned from that review and our background as Indigenous researchers, we agreed to gather data utilizing Indigenous Circle Process as circle process is an Indigenous method of sharing knowledge. A circle is essentially a form of participatory research that has long been used in Indigenous culture. It involves participants sitting in a circle and sharing their knowledge on the subject at hand. They can be used widely and can be applied to address harms or restore harmony within community, but can also be applied to larger levels of governance and community work as well. It is also a methodology that invokes collective action and mutual responsibility. Circles also create a sacred space for human growth and healing. (Bodor, 2011, p. 139) The following quote summarizes the epistemology of circles:

The Circle lives within each of us. It's part of us, and we are part of it. It's waiting to be rediscovered and brought to life again in the modern world. It's waiting to once again be used as an agent of profound connection, as a sacred tool, and as a teacher of the human spirit. It's waiting for our request for its help. (Moonwalker & O'Brien-Levin, 2008, p.47)

The decision to use circles was deliberate as the overall goal was not to just *do research* but to lift each other up *while* doing the research. (Bodor, 2011, p.141). The purpose of using circles was to seek answers while strengthening our medicine through gathering with women and men in community. Every circle began with ceremony or prayer, depending on the cultural context of the community and group. The research was a deliberate and conscious process of being open to Indigenous methods, ideas, creativity, and collectivity with a strong focus on maintaining healthy relations. It was always an informal process and our intent while doing this research was to improve our relationship with the ideas and concepts presented. The invitations we used and circulated for example, were very informal, welcoming and opening; encouraging women to come out for an evening with other women and not feel pressured about participating in a formal research project. We invited women to come visit (using the Cree and Dene language on our posters), have tea, and share a pleasant meal with conversation. The circles were essentially, good *medicine* and manifestations of our relationships to each other.

To facilitate the organization of these circles, researchers would start by connecting with a person in the community with whom they already had a good, long standing relationship. This relational invitation aids in anchoring the project within the community and assists with garnering the interest of other participants to join the circle. As individual researchers from various Indigenous communities, our diversity also helped to achieve the goal of ensuring voices from several Métis and First Nation communities were included in the research. In Western research this approach to gathering the sample group is known as snowball or referral sampling. In Indigenous research ontology, this method of inclusion by relation and connection is a key part of gathering participants within Indigenous communities because it puts the decision-making power in the hands of the community members and encourages relationship accountability to both the researchers and research participants.

Connection to community leaders was also important. Leaders were not just people in positions of power, but those who have the ability to bring in others to the circle based on their relational status in the community. This method of attracting participants was deliberate because it ensured women from all economic classes and ages came. We wanted to hear from regular, everyday women; young women, old women, struggling women, successful women. Some of those voices are often only heard in western quantitative studies through statistics that paint a grim picture of who we are in terms of where we are on the continuum of the economic success ladder. Getting an authentic, accurate voice of women from all walks of life and generations was a conscious part of the process.

As researchers we were very aware of our status and privilege as doctoral students, where many of us maintain prominent positions in the community such as academic instructors, Government staff, and in other formal leadership roles. We did not exclude that voice however, but by using community relationships as a basis of invitation; it ensured we had a wide range of participants with different points of views and experiences. By virtue of being Indigenous, we were able to connect with participants based on that relatedness which became more important than our status in the community or our places of work. This is based on the concept of relationality as Wilson explains:

If we step outside the community of Indigenous scholars, we can see the importance of relationship building in the everyday lives of most Indigenous people... The person is put into relationship through mutual friends or even through certain landmarks, places or events. Shared relationships allow for a strengthening of the new relationship. This allows you to become familiar with a person. Getting to know their relationships to other people or space is an appropriate way of finding out about them. Through this method of discovering relationships, one comes to know if the other person is Indigenous – by who they are related to but also by how they think... (2008, p.84)

An information form about the background of the project and a consent form were provided to participants at the beginning of the circles. The assigned researcher would then take the time to explain to the participants what the purpose of the research was, why we were doing it, and what would be done with the information the participants provided. When asked if anyone had questions about the consent form, many women questioned the word *pseudonym*. After explaining what the word meant, participants could not understand why someone would participate in a project to share their voice and then want to remain anonymous. Anonymity goes against our cultural law of *walk your talk*; because it is a form of accountability. In complete juxtaposition, anonymity is seen as hiding from accountability. In Indigenous communities, transparency is honored and expected. Hence, the use of a pseudonym was foreign to many and specifically the elderly participants who found it distasteful to be given such an option. In moving forward in Indigenous research paradigms, this issue will require a shift in thinking by Indigenous academics and scholars to ensure we align this area of the research process to the cultural expectations and knowledge systems of those being researched. This was an important learning opportunity for all of us.

The circle guidelines were presented at the beginning of the circles to ensure everyone understood circle process; which is an informal process, but includes formal protocol. This needed to be observed and respected. This process was not new to the participants and was welcomed. Before commencing, the participants were shown on flip chart, by oral presentation and by poster presentation, the guiding questions for the circle. The participants shared their thoughts and feelings about each question, one at a time, moving clockwise around the circle, holding the recording device in their hands. In some circles, the device was put at the center of a table which the women surrounded. Participants were encouraged to speak in their Cree, Michif, or Dene languages. Each circle took approximately two to four hours with a refreshment and meal break at the half way point. We utilized women and caterers within the communities to provide the meals for the circles. We know that this type of work exists in our communities and is for some, a vital income supplement. We therefore ensured we budgeted for this and other forms of gift giving from the very beginning of the project. In adhering to cultural norms of Indigenous community which are based on reciprocity, each participant was given a small gift of appreciation from UnBQ at the conclusion of the circles. The Elders who attended the circles were provided monetary honorariums. In some cases, the community's key contacts provided door prizes for the groups.

In addition to our key contacts, many community organizations were instrumental in the organization of these circles. In the majority of cases, centers provided space free of charge for

the women to gather. This happened at local Canadian Native Friendship Centers, Community Halls and Recreation Centers, and Community Support Agencies. This was vital because women in the communities felt comfortable coming to these locations and agencies. It also reinforced that the leaders of these centers understood the genuine need for our research and they willingly supported it in this way. Our relationships with these organizations were often already in place. Completing a research project of this geographical magnitude, spanning ten different communities required these connections and it made the organization of circles relatively simple and ensured participants attended.

The recorded circles were secured at UnBQ. Each researcher who facilitated circles also submitted a written summary of themes to the project coordinator following the circles to ensure we captured and retained key themes and thoughts. Our research team then met for two sessions to develop a document that captured areas of themes and concepts based on what the participants said. We then collectively transcribed our circles verbatim into individual word documents (community circles and key informant interviews). Once the transcriptions were complete; a researcher within the team pulled together the data into a written document which resulted in detailed organization and theming, supported by direct quotes from the transcriptions. Subsequent meetings were held to ensure opportunity for clarification of themes and to ensure they were congruent with the experiences of the research team. This was a system of checks and balances. The sections were then related to larger theoretical concepts of this report.

Discussion on Methodology

The gathering of women in circle is a powerful tool to bring about *good medicine*. (Aitken, 1990). In many circles, after finishing the circle process and responding to the questions (through metaphor, story, and experiences) the women *stayed* for up to two additional hours because of the empowerment, relationship, laughter and memories the circles invoked. They needed more time to continue conversations and stories and to express their insights, in some sense debriefing to ensure the circle had some closure. Stories as knowledge continue to be vital forms of knowledge transference in Indigenous communities. In western research we would call these case studies. The desire for the participants to continue sharing stories was also an indicator that we were conducting research in a way that was consistent with Indigenous epistemology. As researchers, it is important to point out that we *also* left the circles empowered, uplifted, connected and full of *sakihtowin*, love. Laughter and tears were expressed by many. A great deal of healing, awareness, and learning occurred in the circles. Many participants from across the communities echoed one participant's thoughts from Kikino, "We need more of *this*. More of this kind of sharing, just...*women supporting other women*."

Wilson reinforces this concept of *research as medicine*:

It doesn't matter which method you use, this is the methodology, the theory...it's medicine. You know you go into a medicine teepee, what do you see all around you. Different medicines to meet different needs. That's the metaphor I like. And as we gather together as Indigenous scholars, we gather to strengthen our medicines. By preparing

what we have, and talking, and praying for each other. To bring wellness to our communities. (Wilson, 2008, p.111)

We did not come into the circles as objective researchers or outsiders. We came in as community members. And most importantly, we were not “inseparable from the subject of that research.” (Wilson, 2008, pg. 77) As one interrelated relationship, both the goal and outcome of applying Indigenous research methods (such as in using circle processes) is that the researchers then become inevitably accountable to those relationships based on the stories and experiences shared. This concept of *relational accountability* is not possible if researchers are objective, void of emotion and aim to be disconnected from what is shared from the participants. “When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us.” (Wilson, 2008, p.101)

The circles were based on *kiskinohamatowin*, a Cree concept that explains how it is not only a researcher that learns when a problem is being addressed with people. Rather, it is the belief that both researcher and the participants are learning from each other, simultaneously. It is, in essence, an equal or balanced relationship. We all come to the circle with something important to share and contribute as equals which promotes collective responsibility vs. the answer coming from one individual or entity. Community change then becomes the responsibility of all who come to the circle. This concept of problem solving was once an integral part of community wellness and sustainability in Indigenous communities but has been replaced by a paradigm and subsequent indoctrination of settler colonization and thought processes that assume external forces and institutions know what is best for our communities. These systems often look from the outside, inward. Wilson explains this shift in contemporary thinking and expresses how the power of community knowledge (based on the principal of autonomy) is abundant and evident in our communities today:

That community change you are talking about is inclusive; it calls all of the participants to help shape the policy, programs, based on the need of the community. So the community has direct access into the decision-making process. Another commonality has to be the consensus-based decision-making process, which fundamentally has to happen within that community in order to move decisions forward. (Wilson, 2008, p.110)

In summary, our connections to community and to those we had relationships with were used to pull together the community circles. We were obligated as Indigenous researchers to ensure the entire research process was based on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility; a prominent theme that would reflect the results and themes of the participant’s voices. As Indigenous researchers having been born and raised in various northeastern Alberta Indigenous communities, we (like the participants) are also connected to the cosmos, the families and kinship systems, the land, spirit, and the historical realm of what the women shared. The research experience and the relationships therefore became part of our collective experiences and lived realities. The work and responsibility will not end with the completion of this research project.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. HOW DID WE SURVIVE?

Economy was created. It did not create us.

The answers derived from the stories of participants around the first question of *how we survived* historically paints a picture of a time of subsistence. In the process of achieving this goal; economic systems were ultimately *created by communities* as a result of their attachment to their environments. At first glance for many readers and audiences, the discussion around the lifestyle and forms of economy that existed in Indigenous communities in the northeast region, may seem futile or extraneous given the colossal changes we have undergone and the economic positions we find ourselves in as societies today. “For many the term subsistence carries negative connotations of primitive ways of life, a low standard of living, or ‘eking out; a wretched existence in conditions of poverty.’ (Kuokkanen, 2011, p.218) But when we view the cyclical nature of economies as experienced by generations of participants; we are able to establish a historical lens that provides the basis for consciously and actively shaping the kind of society we want for future generations. Since the onset of post-capitalism theory, this is the first period in our history as humans where we are able to think critically about our role in depicting our own future.

The economics described by the Indigenous participants accurately described and brought to life the concept of how we sustained *life*. Their stories and collective voice recreated the process of harmonious integration of both the economic and social networks that existed. An overarching term the research team used to describe this era was *the good life*. This term highlighted the complex networks and layers of human development and self sustainability that emerged throughout the circles. Although much of the picture painted of the historical era around this initial question was arrived at through the voice of the Elders, the current generations were also engaged and provided their recollections of their grandparents’ and familial stories as well. The process allowed for the transference of knowledge between generations.

Survival was a prominent theme and was not only identified in the realm of the physical. It manifested in every sense of *nehiyawiak* (Cree people’s) philosophy on how they sustained life based on the emotional, social, physiological, intellectual, cultural and spiritual aspects of who they were. We learned that in the time of growing and harvesting there was a sense of *enoughness*. People were strong physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Inclusive economics

The economy of that time depended on the value of people helping people, *wicihitowin*. There was a strong sense of interrelatedness and inter-dependency on each other that went beyond the nuclear family. Families and extended families and kinship systems were intact – everyone knew their roles and although there were differences among women’s and men’s roles they were complementary and based on egalitarianism. Both were important and vital to a family’s survival. A prominent theme was the sense of hard work and hard times people experienced which, paradoxically, resulted in contentment because the societies were inclusive of everyone. As one participant explained, ‘No one was left behind. No one went hungry.’ One Elder from Conklin explained the division of tasks based on need, not gender:

Everybody did something. For fire you go out and get logs and sawed them to make fire. I would pick berries with my grandma *and* I would go out in the summertime with my Grandma to help trap. Everybody trapped. You had to. Both men and women. Women also took care of the home and the kids. But you know if you see something has to get done; you just do it.

Women, along with men worked hard to ensure survival and children were socialized and integrated into this process and helped in every way possible. Families stayed together for survival and people helped one another with subsistence activities that would ensure their physical survival through the seasons. Kuokkanen explains the definition of subsistence:

”...also called domestic production, follows the seasonal cycle of available resources – it has also been called the ‘seasonal, integrated economy’ – and it includes hunting, fishing, gathering, trapping, and other activities which provide income in kind - food, heat, clothing, shelter and a variety of other subsistence goods and services” consumed and shared within the family and community.” (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 219)

Mixed economics

Subsistence stories and evidence of mixed economic activities were a recurring theme that surfaced from the participants and included their collective experiences, memories, and stories of gardening, trapping, fishing, hunting (game based on the seasons), and the purchasing of goods from market centers in nearby communities. Themes of trade were evident, especially amongst the older generation of participants. Items bought from small markets, for example, were purchased based on the economics of trade and barter rather than cash transactions which were not prominent in the rural communities. Such items were those that could not be produced within their own economic systems of subsistence. Sugar, salt, tea, flour (later years), fats (lard) and other supplies that were required to sustain the economics of the home and community sustenance activities such as gardens and agricultural activities were bought via trade. A Metis Elder from Conklin explained, “Summertime it’s berries. You buy your groceries, exchange for groceries. The store keeper...we had a store; she buys all the berries and ships them out. They give you wooden boxes and they clean them and ship them out.” Further evidence of mixed forms of economics was explained by an Elder from Kehewin:

We were always dressed nice because my mom loved sewing. She knit our socks, our scarves, our mitts and sewed our dresses...she did all of this. My dad worked hard hunting and trapping. And working for farmers. Going to B.C. to work in the lumber camps. They did not just sit back. At the time probably there would have not been any social assistance. They had to do a lot of things. They had to work extremely hard for us to survive.

Contemporary research also reinforced themes that surfaced from participants; that the significance of the traditional economy of that era went beyond an economic realm. It was the entire experience of living on the land and with the land, which brought meaning to community members lives.

Indigenous economies such as household production and subsistence activities extend far beyond the economic sphere: they are at the heart of who people are culturally and socially. These economies, including the practices of sharing, manifest indigenous worldviews characterized by interdependence and reciprocity that extend to all living things and to the land. In short, besides an economic occupation, subsistence activities are an expression of one's identity, culture and values. They are also a means by which social networks are maintained and reinforced. (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 218).

Reciprocity and healing

In addition to the sustenance for food, medicines were abundant and utilized. This included physical medicines that could be harvested and mixed into recipes to cure various ailments and also spiritual remedies as evidenced through ceremonial life and the sharing of knowledge to heal oneself from spiritual and emotional ailments. An Elder from Saddle Lake explained, "There are many medicines everywhere and spirit bestowed this knowledge of medicinal plants to the people, those that were thought to hold this knowledge in a good way to help others. When Whiteman came, this knowledge was also shared with them." People were the primary helpers in their own healing processes. This healing was achieved through celebrations and rites of passages which reinforced the belief that *everyone's life had purpose and value*. One participant from Saddle Lake remembered. "People were given a way to live. Creator gave us all a way to live and still does. There is a reason we were put here."

Values of generosity were derived from principles of spirituality and Christianity (depending on the community one lived). Generosity was esteemed and helping others was expected. It was also an integral and essential characteristic of those who were seen as leaders within community. Reciprocity was also a central theme. A participant from Saddle Lake shared "My father would buy horses that were not wanted. He would train them and then re-sell them. He taught us that in order to have something, we must give something. He used to make me mad when he would give away nice things."

Knowledge transmission

Languages and cultural practices were also intact and were transmitted from generation to generation. "Our relationships are about how we take care of one another, how we are connected to one another. When you grow up in the language, each word carries a deeper meaning that doesn't have to be explained; you know it by the time you are expected to carry those responsibilities." (Makokis, 2009) Because the Indigenous languages of communities were intact; boundaries, social norms and behaviors were also healthy. One participant shared a memory of boundaries: "What I find really interesting when I reflect on that is I never went into those sheds to be nosy or to dig around or inspect it. I respected what was there. When I think about that respect, in the context of boundaries, my boundaries haven't been violated yet because I didn't dig around." The concepts of accountability, reciprocity were themes that emerged over and over within the circles and communities were governed by natural laws embedded in language that ensured survival of families and communities. "Knowledge transference kept people physically alive, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally alive and alert...the whole value of keeping people alive, living *pimatisiwin*, a good life. That was a complete family and

community integration.” (Saddle Lake Participant) Another participant from Fishing Lake explained, “*People* shaped my life, not the systems we talk about today.”

Summary

This entire era can be summarized as a system that explains a life force solidified by a vital link between methods of subsistence and Indigenous knowledge. Scholarship on this theme is prevalent amongst all Indigenous systems of traditional economics. Indigenous knowledge is essentially a product of subsistence based economies and suggests that both are interrelated. ‘We cannot preserve one without the other.’ (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 220) In order to preserve and protect our complex ways of sustaining life in all aspects (language, values, identity, connection to the land) both participants and existing research suggest that the path forward lies in encouraging the continuation of forms of subsistence which are still evident in communities today. How to strategically do that amidst today’s economic demands is not clear. What we heard, however, is that Indigenous communities in northeastern Alberta thrived and prospered in subsistence economic systems that were based on Cree concepts of *awîna kiya/kîya* (who they were), *kiyânaw* (was inclusive of all) which resulted in *miyo-pimâtisiwin* (living a good life).

THE DISRUPTION

Our Elders tell us that in order to know where we are going; we need to know where we’ve been. Before we can discuss how women are surviving today, we need to understand the historical relationship. Though this is not a comprehensive piece, it nevertheless requires attention in order to understand the research results around the second research question; *how we are surviving today*. Through the colonization process that existed (and largely still exists today), the conscious destruction to kinship ties and displacement of women’s roles in the community severely affected the autonomy of our nations. This discourse directly impacts the economic statistics of inequity between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada; a picture painted well by economists today. It is often expressed in media as *closing the gap*; a problematic perception in itself for several reasons which will be discussed. Examining the colonial history is an important piece of understanding the context of economics. Without this knowledge; all of us (Indigenous communities included) are at risk of perpetuating solely colonial discourses to improve economic security.

The economic state, power and influence of Indigenous women began its path of decline not long after contact with European settlers. Historical colonial leaders knew that in order to succeed in colonizing Indigenous peoples they needed to displace women’s roles within the community, and they succeeded at that through several acts of legally enforced assimilation. The legislative passing of the 1876 Indian Act, followed by the imposition of patriarchal laws and policies onto children through forced education in Indian Residential schools are only two prominent examples of the destruction of relationship between women and children. (Settee, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2009) The Indian Act disrupted traditional governance systems as well, misplacing women’s roles *outside* the community, while privileging male over female in land ownership and property rights. The loss of women’s’ roles also created loss in social and kinship structures. This has contributed significantly to the inequality of

Indigenous women and contributes to the high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada. (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, Hampton, 2004) Recently this violence has gained international media attention and is now being reported in mainstream media as a result of the campaigns and calls of Indigenous women and organizations, their families and International human rights groups such as Amnesty International and the United Nations. The influence of the international community in developing and affirming *rights based* approaches to protect Indigenous people's rights to safety, sustenance, and economics cannot be understated.

Today, we continue to see the impact of this family and kinship disruption in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care in Alberta, and throughout Canada. There are more Indigenous children in care today than there were during the 1960's. This is known or referred to as *the sixties scoop*. This dark period in Canadian history was characterized by shocking increases of child welfare involvement in Indigenous communities across Canada (Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009). Researchers from the University of Manitoba concluded a study in 1992 that confirmed Indigenous children were taken away in huge numbers less for reasons of poverty, family dysfunction or rapid social change, but to support government policy to remove Indigenous children from their families in an effort to expedite cultural assimilation into European colonial culture. They concluded that the child welfare system was part of the deliberate assault on Indigenous society designed to continue to make colonial changes in Indigenous people (Fournier, 2000). Canada's highest human rights court recently declared *this year* (2016) that Canada discriminates against First Nations children measured by the huge funding inequities for child welfare programs for children living on reserve, when compared to children living off-reserve.

It was not until waves of Indigenous rights movements in the late 1960's and 70's that a shift in consciousness began to emerge, that the human rights of Indigenous peoples, or lack thereof, was brought to the forefront of Canadian households. By that time, the trauma and generational effects of genocide, abuse, and marginalization were colossal and rampant in all Indigenous communities in Canada. Dr. Leona Makokis, a residential school survivor and young adult during the 1960's speaks of this era, "Thousands of our people were destroyed as through this process of legally enforced assimilation, our culture, our spirit, our identity, our language, our humanness, our traditions, our relationships, and our ability to parent were extinguished." (2009, p. 1),

The colonial process in relation to the colossal extent of land loss, land access and land rights; experienced by all Indigenous people in Canada, have effectively limited opportunities and ability to develop sound economic sustainability over the last century through subsistence, food security, and in many other economic facets. For example, numerous land regulations and policies have been developed to exclude Indigenous people and communities from economic self-reliance.

In Canada, the Aboriginal subsistence economy has been regulated since the late nineteenth century. The wildlife and game regulations under the guise of conservation, the establishment of parks, seasonal hunting closures and moratoriums by the government imposed severe limitations on subsistence economies, radically altering the social and

economic organization of indigenous societies. Especially in the 1950's, the government interventions based on assumptions of modernity had a particularly drastic impact on Aboriginal people and their communities. (Kuokkanan, 2011 p. 223)

Up until 1960, First Nations peoples in Canada were not legally entitled to own businesses or have a lawyer represent them in court proceedings. They were not legally able to vote in federal elections or leave their reservations without permission from the Indian agents assigned to their communities. Similarly, with the Métis at Red River during the late 1800's, Churches (powerful institutions of colonization) strongly discouraged any subsistence activity that entailed the 'savagery of nomadic life' such as the semi-annual buffalo hunts. These hunts were the ultimate example of community organization and are documented as astonishing economic ventures involving thousands of people. The hunts mobilized strong democratic leadership and communal laws and responsibilities that were strictly adhered to. These unwritten laws transcended into community daily life; were respected and implemented for generations until the imposition of a new system of justice replaced it (The Royal Canadian Mounted Police). The hunts sustained families economically and culturally. Those families that left to participate in the hunts were socially ostracized by the priests about their refusal to take on agriculture as a sole source of subsistence as historically documented in their correspondence citing their disapproval and frustration to their diocese superiors. This nomadic behavior according to the priests (who held powerful positions within the social and economic realm of Métis communities) impeded one's ability to become a good Christian and become fully assimilated into settler or white society.

The Métis experience of land loss and the economic deterioration is no less significant than our First Nations brothers and sisters. Alberta is the only province in Canada that has a land base for Métis communities; largely due to Canada's western expansion policies that resulted in a fraudulent scrip system that left thousands homeless and landless by the end of the 18th century. Hence the term *road allowance people* used throughout history to describe the Métis. The Métis resurgence and resistance sprang up under Riel and was quickly put to an end after the Canadian military took up arms against the Métis at Duck Lake and Batoche and executed Riel in 1885. Decades of land displacement resulted in severe impoverishment. This made access to relief programs (developed in Alberta in response to the economic crisis of the 1930's) impossible for the Métis as one needed to have a legal land address to apply. Plagued by economic, health, and poverty epidemics, the re-organization of the Métis began once again in the 1930's and resulted in a new sense of nationalism under groups such as L'association des Métis d'Alberta. The Ewing Commission; an inquiry into the condition of the Métis populations of Alberta was the beginning of a 15 year course of action and lobbying led by grassroots Métis leaders (Tomkins, Dion, Brady, Norris and many others) that would eventually lead to the Métis Betterment Act and an accord that would secure land through the creation of ten Métis settlements in Alberta. Two settlements of land were later rescinded by the Alberta Government and today there are eight remaining, four of them in northeastern Alberta.

The challenges to Indigenous economics from a subsistence standpoint still exist today. In 2004, following the release of the Powley decision (Supreme Court of Canada) the Métis Nation of Alberta signed an Interim Métis Harvesting Agreement (IMHA) with Alberta. The IMHA recognized the right of MNA members to harvest food for sustenance throughout the province.

In 2007, under new political leadership, Alberta unilaterally cancelled the IMHA and implemented an arbitrary Métis Harvesting Policy. Alberta's new policy only recognizes 17 site-specific locations in northern Alberta and requires an individual to prove to Alberta that they are ancestrally connected to those site-specific locations. If an individual proves to Alberta that they are Métis pursuant to its policy, an individual receives a letter that authorizes them to harvest in a 160 kilometer radius of those site-specific locations. (Metis National Council, 2011, p.15). There has not been a harvesting agreement in place between the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Alberta Government since the Klein administration. It is difficult to discuss things like economic *food security* in many Indigenous communities without acknowledging these types of unilateral, oppressive policies that exist today.

Today there are still complex issues around land ownership, title and an existent disconnect between Indigenous land rights and the larger capitalist economic structures that require land ownership and collateral. Title to Indigenous lands is often under recognized in the current economy. The process for families living on-reserve or on-settlement (*who are land holders*) to purchase homes or businesses through mainstream banks and finance institutions is often an oppressive, complicated and challenging experience.

Economic policy like the aforementioned has occurred, and continues to occur, within the context of colonization, social exclusion and political and economic marginalization. Understanding this context and the resulting barriers is essential to understanding the economic playing field of Indigenous peoples in the northeast region. These are the lived economic realities of people within Indigenous communities across Canada. Without acknowledging these realities and inequalities while talking about 'gap-closing' falsely assumes there is a level playing field to successfully achieve this goal. When it is noted that these gaps continue to exist; we all too often point to Indigenous communities rather than existing policies and structures that impede this change. Furthermore; attempting to piecemeal economic security into silos based on one component of wellness (i.e. financial) is not helpful for our communities in the long term. Our history has depicted a clear message thus far; the parts of our economics are not inseparable. You cannot address one part without the other. Economics is weaved within the social, political and cultural experience of our people.

2. HOW ARE WE SURVIVING NOW?

Education and training

Education has become extremely important in the current economy and yet there is a dichotomy that exists around education. From one standpoint, many women talked about the importance and need for our children to become educated and many have, successfully. One woman from Cold Lake talked about educational attainment from a rights based approach. "I took advantage of the opportunities...the right to be educated that our people negotiated for. And I earned five university degrees there. There is nothing else I can do there at that level." Another stated, "...and it is education that is the life giver of today; they need to go to school in order to fend for themselves....maybe Elders could be brought to the schools to talk to the kids.. it would help them to get on with their lives. School is so important and from there they could go on and

support themselves. It would be good, I would like to see that happen.” From another perspective; there is apprehension about women’s roles today and the push to solely rely on Western training and education as a means to a *better life*. There are also generational differences in women’s roles and responsibility that have evolved due to the imposition of new economic realities. And it has impacted how we raise and socialize children today. One grandmother explained this dichotomy:

Sitting here listening to these women, there is a division here somewhere, in terms of the women’s roles from when I was growing up to today and the women today now have different roles. They don’t have the roles we had...what I’m saying is that the roles are different. I knew what I had to do at home, I was taught. Like she said - you learned from your mother and the boys learned from their father, and that’s what happened with my sons and daughter. My mom was her idol. My daughter learned different things from my mom because my mom was a good teacher. My mom taught me about the home. We were nurses, we were doctors, we were *more* than that. Today there are less home responsibilities because women are in the labour force. And the children are where? They are being raised by someone else. It is what is happening. Your child leaves you when they are about two years old now they go and someone else changes their pampers, plays with them. Then they go to head start, then kindergarten five days a week. In my days it was only two hours a day. You see the difference?

Education and training systems and institutions must be based on our own knowledge systems. 'We want our children to come home after getting educated with an even stronger sense of knowing who they are'. These systems must be reflective of both traditional and current models of ways of knowing and learning. 'We want them to have education. We want them to have good jobs and careers but not at the expense that their learning has disconnected them from who they are or their responsibility to be of service to their communities'. In addition to education systems that are not reflective of Indigenous knowledge systems; the current system has forced many of our children to leave their communities for secondary and post-secondary attainment. There are still communities in Alberta (Conklin, Alberta for example) that require students to leave their communities to receive education. The voices of the women are strongly against this practice and see this as a continuation of colonial practice of disconnecting children from community and parents. Another theme that emerged was education versus skills. As one participant stated, “They are supposed to get smart but I’m not so sure.” Another participant from Cold Lake stated, “My father told me it was time to quit school and learn how to make a living.” We must go back to our own ways of developing and valuing skills.

We heard that women’s roles within their families today are still complex. Technical skills and relationship skills cannot be separated from each other. Governments and educational institutions have tried to do that, teaching primarily through academics, training and encouraging the attainment of *technical skills* needed to do a job. Only recently has the discussion emerged about how to incorporate these *soft skills* that are developed through good relational development in the home beginning as children and is continually developed throughout the lifespan. Education and training today is often void of things imperative to survival; good communication skills, knowing how to resolve conflict, understanding how to work in teams, and the ability to give and receive

feedback. Research shows that people are hired on the basis of their technical skills but are fired on the basis of their (poor) interpersonal skills. We heard through the circles that several participants had retained the technical skills needed to manage the responsibilities in their work and home lives; but there was a clear message that many do not have a positive relational space nor the support of men or supportive partners within their lives. When we look at the context of women's lives and then consider the demand in society to add more training (technical skills) which inevitably expands women's responsibilities; the question arose as to how to move forward in spite of a poor (non-supported) relational space? To keep adding skills, training, and education, without addressing the social economy and its place within our society placed many participants at a standstill (especially amongst single parent families). What we did hear collectively is that social networks of support must be part of the current and future economy. They can't be separate.

I see a real disconnect with that circle of support. It used to be there for families. I heard this many times from people and is especially true in our farming community, you would leave the door open because somebody would need to come in...there are so many things going on that women are carrying the burden of. That primary responsibility of trying to hold the pieces together. So in terms of economic security or sustainability, not only are women carrying those multiple roles, now they are expected to have a job on top of being home maker, nurturer and father; get a job, go to school. I think women are doing the best they can. I think we actually need to build more supports like mentors, cultures, and connections. How do we support each other; me by myself, but also how do we re-connect to each other in ways that are helpful? (Saddle Lake Participant)

Programs and policy

We heard clearly that programs and supports that do exist for women and families are built around red tape and many felt the programs are set up to exclude rather than include. The women talked about how access is always based on things like eligibility, rules, age, income, family status, Indigenous status, etc. Their Indigenous status often became the determining factor in exclusion, versus access based on the socio-economic complexity of their situations. The process of accessing services for many has been one of *humiliation*. This was a prominent theme. One young woman stated, "We are not broken, the system is broken." Many feel that the systems are set up to give the least possible support which stems from a policy framework that suggests government social support systems are based on *last resort* rather *than support* in general. Those excluded from these supports or those who spoke about not qualifying were often the most vulnerable (Indigenous women, single parents), and those suffering from addictions. This reinforces a cycle of blame. As one participant said, governments then tell them "you need to pull up your boot straps". They feel further victimized as having something wrong with *them* which reinforces a cycle of inferiority, especially with the economic opportunity across Alberta. Most assume that employment is equally accessible by all. Lack of child care availability (and affordability), transportation issues due to the geographic location of our communities in proximity to urban centers, and work that is meaningful were common themes.

This has resulted in sense of hopelessness amongst many of the women who participated and it illustrated a huge gap between women and families' experiences and their ability to participate in

the *Alberta opportunity*. We found through the women's stories (young and old) that these barriers have also placed women in positions where they experienced situations of desperation which contributed to dangers such as, violence, homelessness, and run ins with child welfare and law enforcement systems.

...the barrier for me was the transportation trying to get to town, and find jobs. I remember working at Hamar's Groceries making minimum wage and trying to pay for my sitter and my ride, and then when you get a vehicle, you're paying for gas and babysitting and it would never balance out...so I just thought I'm going to Portage to take social work, but it seems like now the more you make the more its gone. I definitely think there are opportunities. One of our biggest opportunities as women is education. I wish there was more opportunities because when I worked at the shelter you see women coming in, they struggle. A lot of them don't have drivers, or learners or information where they can get help. I think it's having knowledge and we need to keep educating women, if you don't *know* - you struggle along the way. I'm thankful that I've had my family along the way. (Kikino participant)

Funding sustainability and program measures

Many participants who held leadership positions within social based and grass roots programs and institutions expressed concern that their sectors are not seen as a priority for continual funding due to the demands for technical training and skill development which they felt has largely been the focus within the current economy (i.e. oil and gas sectors). The grassroots programs within communities are often reliant on funding from governments to operate. They talked about how their funding was rarely continual (operating year to year) and the difficulty in their ability to address issues within their community's long term. Ironically, these agencies are providing programs and services focused on what women are saying they need to bring back into their lives and their communities (connectedness, relational support and culture).

Similar to the theme of how women described feeling excluded by having to jump through so many hoops to receive services, Indigenous organizations expressed a similar sentiment. The way Governments require these organizations to define success is narrow and results in a fragile funding continuance. The message was that there needs to be a renewed outlook or shift in thinking around program measurements and indicators of success as these are based mostly on Western concepts of success (i.e. solely quantitative statistics) which determine future funding. These concepts need to be derived from an Indigenous lens (i.e. measuring the relational, emotional, or spiritual impact of a program or service).

Costs of the new economy

Underlying all themes that materialized was great concern on behalf of older generations for the younger generations. There is fear that the current and younger generations are learning to be *something else* (than Indigenous) within a current economic system that measures success by one's ability to fully assimilate, a pattern repeated in previous generations. Embedded in the

current economy are respective meanings and definitions of success and it is largely based on the accumulation of material things. Although many were sincerely happy that many of our people in our communities are no longer confined to extreme poverty and have bought into the economic opportunity that emerged; there was a sense of loss and grievance about what this process has cost many of our people; costs in terms of the shift from the priority of family responsibility and relationships to the inability to focus or spend time on the preservation of culture, language, and relationships within the current economy. Yet there was strong consensus that in order to *survive*; there must be a continuation and resurgence of cultural and spiritual knowledge transfer between generations. The current economy has interrupted the transmission of language and knowledge, skills and roles of individuals within community. It has also promoted the accumulation of wealth in terms of material possessions to determine success and happiness; yet the research shows we are in serious economic strife, are unhealthy and unhappy.

One need not look far to find mainstream research that supports this theme. What the voices of the participants told us was that those things alone do not make us happy. Furthermore; current economics do not teach people how to survive, or how to 'sustain' themselves. It teaches how to make money. It is void of reciprocity; *iyiniw wecehtowin*, a concept inherent to community survival and ways of being. Current systems teach us to take without giving; which can be seen in families and children today. Participants said children are 'spoiled'; parents give them everything based on their experiences of childhood poverty and they expect nothing in return. They are not learning the skills on how to work, live, or sustain themselves as adults.

I remember the Oka crisis...what we were hearing at the time and what we were doing at the time - but it almost told me, just like my mother and all the women from past generations, all the knowledge they held...where is it going? It's almost like we are the salmon swimming upstream and struggling. Now that influence of economics – having that brand new truck and things as wealth that is supposed to identify us as better native people, and I think here are our elders saying that's not the solution. Look at all the oil money given to the people. Look at what it did. Money is not the solution, poverty is not the solution either having the big vehicles and houses and those things that put us in the same standing with the broader society. Simply said; going back to the values that we need to live by; that we always lived by - four generations ago – it got lost. We lost that. Our elders have been telling us. Even in this atmosphere; those things can be taught and instilled. If we can't have those things there needs to be a place. Just like our people kept our ceremonies, there needs to be a place to keep those things.

There was a strong collective voice about how the current economy supports the individual versus their collective values of community; which did not align. Many women talked about how this contributed to the collapse of the relational interconnectedness they had to each other (relationships) family structures, and kinship structures. They spoke about how the economy requires the abandonment of family, community and children for economic survival; yet - almost all Elders reiterated that these things *must* be the center of our lives if we are going to survive now and in the future. This theme can be described as a strong sense of *loss*; and an urgency to reclaim that loss within a looming shadow of hopelessness around how exactly to do that within

the constraints of the current economy. Women felt that moving forward in the current economy risks loss of identity and connection to who they are and this was unsettling for many.

I see in my own self, I had no connection and I was lost. And we need that. For us to survive one hundred years of oppression, what is it going to take? We have to get out of that oppressive controlled state; we have to find ourselves, our spirit, our language, our culture, who we are. I was told when I started to go on my healing journey that I needed that and I was asked by an Elder, he said to me “who are you and where do you come from?” and on the surface I said, “well I’m a Cree woman from Saddle Lake.” But yet deep down there is history there and I didn’t know it and he told me, “How do you know where you are going in life if you don’t know where you came from?” And that is what I meant by *being lost*. (Saddle Lake Participant).

Governance

We heard that the current economic system strains our relationships in terms of moving forward in a good way around our own governance; including First Nations and Métis governance systems and relationships. The current economy in Alberta requires the competition of land access and the race for land control and resource extraction. It has changed our relationship from one of caretaker, to one of exploitation. As discussed earlier, there is a historic pattern of Governments controlling and interfering with Indigenous groups’ ability for sustenance. Many women talked out this theme and they felt that this competition for wealth through cash and accumulations of resources has led astray our leadership and Indigenous governance electorate which has made leadership dependent upon capitalism to improve communities. They talked about how this process over time, has disconnected our leadership from the reality of community members; but has also disconnected them from their responsibility to ensure communities are equipped and funded for social networks and systems. Many felt their leaders have evaded responsibility in many communities (but not all) to uphold the natural and spiritual laws of their ancestors in ensuring that Mother Earth, *okawimawaskiy*, is protected to ensure the future survival of their children and grandchildren. This theme suggests that the current economy in the region is on a path of un-sustainability that risks our collective survival.

Our Leaders are not fighting for us. At election time, we give them the power to look after us but all we see is them going to different meetings everywhere with different companies and they don’t tell us what is happening, what they are doing. And look our water and air is getting polluted, our animals are sick. You know we are in dire straits, and it’s not only us. There are more people coming, the white people are joining us, many people joining us from everywhere. (Saddle Lake Elder)

In terms of governance the women expressed that they felt their leadership models were based on colonial structures which include patriarchal practices including sexism. Women do not feel they are being represented politically. There was a sense of urgency amongst many to return to, and restore, a traditional sense of governance within our communities based on natural laws. The need for systems to reflect the collective community as it once did, including youth and women’s voices.

I ran in the last election, some of the households I visited told me, women do not belong in politics. I was told that by women as well. We as women are all leaders, because we do so much for our families. But yet we live in a community that is chauvinistic. They believe men will do better. I think traditional roles for women have changed and evolved over time where access to economic sustainability truly means equality. You explained at the beginning there was no hierarchy in our culture, then along came western civilization and there was a hierarchy. And now Aboriginal women have gone out and gotten an education, *but there's still no equality*. We have to take those traditional values back and find that equality and that balance once again. (Kikino Participant)

Technology

The race for technological advancement and dependency on it for survival in our world of communications and work has resulted in a lack of experiential teaching and interaction with our children. The current economy has placed technology at the forefront of a nation's measurement of progress. Yet we heard from the participants that learning and socialization happens through the process of *kiskinohamâwasowin*; learnings and teachings by modeling, showing, experiencing, and interacting. Many expressed the concern of i phones, i pads, and television as replacing the raising, socialization, and teaching of children. "And this is replacing our roles and responsibilities as parents. We have to start at home, telling our children and grandchildren. We have to love them, do that, I tell them I love them, I hug them and say, oh you're a good boy, a good girl, I love you so much. This is what our Creator told us to do, to love one another, this is natural law." (Saddle Lake Participant)

Summary

The shift from subsistence economies to the current economy has resulted in the exclusion of Indigenous women in the race for development and modernity. In many parts of the world subsistence economy has traditionally been, to a large extent, the domain of women and inclusive of women. (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 234) Their roles were the foundation of their communities and so the shift in economics has been detrimental to Indigenous women in the northeast in various aspects of their economic, political, and social lives. The current economy undermines and undervalues our traditional systems of mixed economics that exist in our communities (income, trade, labour, sustenance, hunting, fishing, gardens, art, etc) including food sustenance.

Governance cannot be solely based on notions of 'inclusion into' or 'gap closing' by basing everything on 'successful integration' into a capitalistic economy. The contemporary messages suggest that the focus needs to be on closing the gap between Indigenous peoples and mainstream society, which focuses on our deficits and inability to 'bring ourselves up to mainstream success statistics' without acknowledging the historical discourse of interference and imposed economic policies. (Canadian Social Economy Hub, 2008). The current system both undermines and disguises the value and complexity of women's multiple roles and responsibilities within Indigenous families/kinship systems. It also encourages the inequity between genders. The women have voiced that there needs to be a match between their communities collective values and their respective governing institutions, whether that be Métis, First Nation, or Dene. Governance must reflect social economics - a system that includes the

socialization of children and the welfare of those most vulnerable in our communities. The themes echo the very understanding of the Cree term *manâcihcikêwin*; that we must move forward cautiously and carefully, and think critically about how we are going to take care of our families and also the environment that sustains us. “The most destructive effects of the decimation of subsistence economies are not economic, but social or cultural is significant when considering the role of indigenous economic systems in contemporary discourses of and struggles for self-determination. In other words, discussing and envisioning viable and just institutions of Indigenous governance today require that we include subsistence economies into our considerations.” (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 230) We are currently caught in a cycle due to our integration into the market, capitalist economy and globalization. As a result the theme has emerged within our research with a strong push to look within our own systems if we are going to survive and maintain the important collective values that are still part of our existence and consciousness.

If we continually frame the issue of women’s economic security in terms of socio-economic gaps that must be overcome or reached within capitalist societies, that discourse shifts us away from the path of community driven participation and autonomic self-determination in ways that are congruent and aligned within our own Indigenous ontology. The questions that have emerged based on what we have heard from our communities is: how do we rethink current forms of economic organization – namely, other economic models that allow us to move forward in a way that includes traditional forms of Indigenous economics where they are seen as imperative and needed for future sustainability? As we move forward we are faced with the challenge of rethinking our responsibilities and our systems. We need to come together and talk about this. “We need to have a discussion about systems” as one participant shared. “We are the Keepers of this Earth. Those are divinely mandated instructions to us. We are at an incredible challenge at this point of our journey. We have been blessed by being Indigenous. What a blessing, and what a responsibility.” (Dr. Henrietta Mann at the Native Peoples Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop, November 2009.)

3. HOW WILL WE SURVIVE IN THE FUTURE?

On April 28, 2016, a one-day forum was held at the University nuhelot’îne thâyots’î nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills. Approximately 115 delegates were in attendance. The purpose of this gathering was to present the research findings gathered from communities and participants. From this forum came many specific recommendations in addition to what we heard from the participants about what is needed for the future. The following is a synthesized summary of those recommendations and themes that emerged from both the research circles and data gathered at the forum.

Dialogue

The need for the continued space and opportunity for more dialogue was central. Dialogue that is community based, and inclusive of diverse demographics; but also inclusive of our partners and allies going forward. Dialogue based on respect and informality; much like the process of the

research. This needs to happen at all levels of community amidst all governance structures. Women talked about wanting this to happen from within their own communities. “If we can do it the way our grandparents see it or had seen it and live it instead of just talking about it, that would be a beginning; that is what we need to do. We need more of our people to come together – not to create a big program.” (Cold Lake Participant) “We need to have a conversation on systems.” (Saddle Lake Participant) Going forward it is imperative that the entities that make up a community engage themselves in this form of dialogue as well. One woman explained, “What do we need to make a difference? More conversations, thinking mindfully, intentionally: be *action people*. How do we redefine that role of consumers and how do we recreate that role of producer?” The theme of needing space and time to share stories and learn from each other’s experiences’ rather than trudging forward without thinking critically about the systems we find ourselves in was thought to be dangerous. The research results suggest that the economic system of our society is now *creating us*. *We are no longer creating economy*. We now have a message to share with larger society because of our experience within the circle of economics we have experienced.

Language and land

In order to contextualize the plan forward into the future the women reiterated the theme of resurgence of and use of Indigenous (Cree) languages. Because the language carries spiritual and behavioral responsibilities inherent within the ontology, the women felt it was essential to include the language within future frameworks of economy. By doing so, the inclusion of culture is automatically embedded. “I always remember those words in Cree – *awina kiya* – who are you? Do I even know who I am - can I even answer that? Today I can. I really believe that is the only way we are going to survive in the future; by going back to the pureness, to the culture, the language and the land.” (Cold Lake participant) When we learn our Indigenous language that is intrinsically connected to the land, we change the way we interact with the land and each other.

The need to understand and remember our relationship and responsibility to land was another theme. “I realize that yes, we need to take care of Mother Earth and this is another way we will be able to survive. We have to keep her clean. Our water is so polluted and our people are dying from many kinds of illnesses like cancer and diabetes. A long time ago that was unheard of. Today it is abundant.” When this dialogue is derived from a cultural viewpoint; it reconnects us to our roles as protectors of the land not only in terms as environmental stewards; but in terms of a reciprocal relationship with land that permeates all our systems (including education, social and political). Connection to land/environment, stewardship for the protection of future generations must be part of the future. “My best memory is going out into the bush with my twelve year old son and him driving me around on the quad, looking at plants, looking for berries and it was amazing. Just him and I in the bush. *That’s where our future lies – in educating our children.*” Economics moving forward needs to be based on reciprocity and the sustainability that is found within Indigenous life force.

Social economics and policy

We heard that social and support networks cannot be separate from economy. Our notion of economy requires the re-education of economic partners, institutions, and systems we work with to ensure programs and services reflect needs and aspirations of what women have voiced. It is

not just about adding more training, it's also about support networks and re-prioritizing funding so that programs are not geared to just fulfill capitalistic/market trends. It requires re-examining the need for supports that reflect our values of safety, family, holistic good health, and relational space. "There are many opportunities to do our own work but making sure we have those value systems in place to do the work we do. It shifted, even though I believe that I have the same values as my *capanahk*, it's different because the relationship between families and communities are very different. To do the work I need to do; I need to make sure I am safe, my family is safe, and that we are taken care of; so we can take care of others." (Saddle Lake Participant)

Social and support based economics have often been excluded or limited from the priority lists of governments and other institutions such as education. Efforts have largely been based on capitalism and trends of market needs only. One participant explains how this impacted her, "I wish there had been other options...that there would have been a place where there was a support group or somewhere to fall back to find resources to survive without having to resort to things that we grew up knowing were wrong."

There is a hope that policy changes will happen within community governance structures; as well as in external governance and funding structures to create opportunities for changes and sound policy that reflects the complexity of Indigenous communities. "I guess policy change. Some of what you're working on with this research project is creating opportunities. There's organizations coming up that address issues women are facing such as the IAAW, Women Building Futures, so there is opportunities coming forward that are being recognized." (Kikino Participant)

IDENTIFIED ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES:

1. Funding of workshops/training/sharing circles that would facilitate concrete work plans supporting a revitalized knowledge of women's strength, men's support to familial systems, and healthy reciprocity between men and women.
2. Consultations with local communities to develop community based solutions to a sustainable economy; what are the opportunities and possibilities (small business, family ventures/co-ops with intergenerational relationships)
3. Learn about other models of economics (various cooperatives, Mondragon model)
4. Establish Women's Wellness Centres to provide a gathering place for women's voice and social action.
5. Nurture connections between Elders and youth, between men and women and between the people and their community to reclaim economic security.
6. Mentorship with Elders by way of cultural teachings.
7. All resources (financial and in-kind) should go directly to communities for the people and to be managed by the people, for their reclamation and revitalization of economic strength.
8. The exploration of the development of a community development program similar to the COADY institute (a focus on Asset Based Community Development) be situated in Alberta, with UnBQ as the best suited site is vital. A concerted effort must occur to support innovation, initiative and inspiration in communities and across generations.

9. The provision of a Classroom on Wheels (CoW) traveling to communities in revitalization of land and language connections, culture and tradition. The Language use must be supported and encouraged. Its use will facilitate community action. The language is for everyone. Encouragement must be offered for the children and youth especially.
10. TRC Calls to Action: facilitate healing from historic and intergenerational traumas to address identity, healing in families, healing in communities and understanding between members of the global family. The invitation of voices has awakened a consciousness of the work that must continue for those yet to be born and for those voices that have yet to be honored and heard.
11. More research needs to occur; encouraging voices to explore ethical spaces and to enact the axiological responsibility of what is now known.
12. Further work must commence related to women's studies, sustainable communities, and the restoration of relationships.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Who owns the knowledge gathered in the research process?

For this project, we understood there was a collective ownership of the data. Communities understood that they owned their own stories. Our research team, which conducted the study under the Blue Quills ethics policy, held no conclusions about *owning* the data gathered. One community for example, requested their audio recording be given to them after their circle was complete. In applying Indigenous research methodology; it is not possible for researchers to own knowledge. That knowledge belongs to community.

Wilson explains this concept further: "If knowledge is formed in a relationship, it can't be owned. I guess you could ask, "Would you own the knowledge or would it own you?" Reality is a set of relationships so one person can't claim ownership over it. That whole idea of discovering something is not there, as what you are doing is just creating a new set of relationships. The idea belongs to the cosmos, to all of the relations that is has formed, not to the individual who happens to be the first to write about it." (Wilson, 2008, p. 114) We are faced with trying to come up with terms to phrase where this knowledge is held and how; and the concepts will likely be derived from the Cree language. Some of the terms discussed were 'guardians of the research' or 'holders of the research'. Balancing the ownership of the knowledge while still being acknowledged as gatherers and writers of the knowledge is challenging in moving forward and it closely resembles the larger outcomes of the research themes; how to move forward in balancing worldviews.

How do we know our results were valid and reliable?

In order to ensure validity we needed to ensure the research questions would encourage conversation, especially when we approached Elders. Coming with a set of questions too specific can seem invasive and narrow. Doing so can obstruct the process of oral transmission and stories that we wanted to ensure came through. That's why we didn't ask, "What are specific economic strategies you want to see? What do you think about the current economic situation?" The answers would likely have reflected a capitalist or western response that would not have painted a broader picture of who we are in terms of our strengths and resiliencies. It would have likely

focused on our weaknesses in relation to where we are on the continuum of economics in relation to western standards that often exclude the emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of a community's *wellness* or determinants of health. The questions we used invited open ended responses that allowed reflection and ideas to come forth. The circle approach is a process of building up of ideas which allowed us to hear them and document them.

While we did the research circles, it is important to remember we were in ceremony. We were active listeners in circle process and little or no note taking is done during the circles. That is why researchers did summaries after the circles – to ensure we captured insights that came to us, in addition to transcribing. To be able to extrapolate what comes from circles through conversation is a valid tool. The validity and reliability was therefore determined by the authenticity and credibility of what people shared; and ceremony was the process that ensured this. We measured the reliability and validity by looking at the research results and analysis and asked ourselves: “is this true to what people said? Does it reflect that we have a solid understanding of what they shared? Do we feel good in our *hearts and minds* that we have established relational accountability?” If we don't have those things...then we don't have reliability. In our research process; we did not have to look externally to incorporate measures to find out if what people shared was true. We knew the results were valid and reliable because of our experience of relational accountability. We were confident that we could take the results of the participants and share it with good conviction. We knew that we could encourage communities to use this research as a framework for their own purposes. The process we used ensured that the voices were authentic.

Axiology

This part of the research process discusses what we do with the results and how we present them, how we have reflected and maintained accuracy of the participant's voices (their truths) and our responsibility to understand and relate to it. The presentation or knowledge transfer (axiology) is also about what we do with the results, how we use them – and continuing healthy relationships. It meant going back to the community and talking to those we interviewed and saying; “this is what we gathered. Out of all of this, this is what we are thinking.”

We organized a community forum at UnBQ on April 28, 2016. We invited, by formal letter and personal invitation, key community contacts and leaders of all the communities involved in the research. We promoted the event widely on social media to ensure it reached as many people as possible including participants from all the communities that participated. This again spread through our relationships and connections to each other. Sharing the results and transferring that knowledge learned is our axiology in the research process. Our responsibility is not just to share knowledge but to do so in a way that says “here are the ideas that were formed; and now we are going to share them in a way that shows our respect and honor for that knowledge.” The research group agreed to share the blue print of the research to communities via the planned forum; to gather feedback based on community ideas, creativity and action oriented strategies. That data too was incorporated back this report.

Taking this concept a step further; we asked ourselves as researchers; “how has this process changed us?” Demonstrating the respect and honor for this knowledge that we now carry requires us to reflect on this. Here are some of our own expressions of that honor and change:

“In my ipk doctoral journey, particularly, this specific WES study, I heard the voices of my early confusion associated with trauma. However, the feeling of love and compassion were evident in the storyteller's pain of loss (es). The voices resonated a familiarity to my mother, grandmothers, aunts, older sisters, and cousins, even though *mâmwikamâtowin* wasn't there. Because of their stories, I instilled in me the renewed responsibility of carrying forward the laws and gifts of language, *wahkohtowin*, accountability, and *mamowikamatowin* embedded in the natural laws of practice. It's like making a personal promise to those who've gone before me; to the ones who cared enough to ensure the story was told. To say I am grateful is only the tip of what I feel in gratitude because now I can share what little I know and understand. This is why it's so important to bring it forward to our children; so they can become the storyteller to those waiting to be born. My renewed responsibility of carrying the bundle forward in a loving safe environment to ensure sustainability is why I choose to embrace the next role of life; the story keeper who chooses to retell with love. I recognized the similar experiences of learning, love, survival, abandonment, skill development and attunement and it continues to be a time of great *mahtâwisiwin*: of mystery.”

“Being schooled in western scientific research, I was happy to be free from the confines and strains of objectivity, statistical rigor and jargon, standardization, and isolation as researcher. Knowing that I am connected to community as an Indigenous person, made it so easy for me to round up my co-researchers, my participants (not my subjects), and work together to search for an answer to our research questions. I am not separate from my community no matter what hat I wear. I am an integral part of the whole. We are all related, we know what we need to do, and we are the medicine. What a breath of fresh air this research project has been. It is good to be Indigenous and to search for knowledge the way we have always done, in a circle, respecting and honoring every voice within the natural environment, ensuring we leave the ground in a much better place than we found it. What a blessing it is to give and to receive equally. It is truly our way and it is good.”

“This research has greatly affected my business and the way I do business, work with others inter-generationally, with being mentored and mentoring. Everything I learn I try to share, I network in order to help connect people. It's not about hoarding resources, information, money, or social capital, it's about good relations. It also confirmed that what I have been thinking and working is on the right track of indigenomics. This work is so important with contributing to the indigenomics discourses, it is about decolonizing our economy and confirming how much our communities have the resources/medicine we need to move forward and be a great part of change.”

Limitations of the research

The research is based on oral stories, and how that presents itself in discourse or logic is non linear. When trying to write this in a linear and written expression and trying to capture how

these ideas were formed; it becomes difficult because in that process we lose some depth. Writing the results could not have fully translated the impact and power of those circles. So what we took away was a sense of new knowledge that we hold in our heads and hearts. Because it is part of us; it will be brought into our work and lives and those we share it with. As stated earlier; the research for our team did not end with the completion of the project. Part of that relational responsibility is also inclusive of those coming to listen and learn from what we shared; coming from a place of openness and readiness to *hear and understand*. “You need to be able to still your own thoughts for a moment to really understand where the other person is coming from, to be able to put their ideas into their context.”(Wilson, 2008, p.114).

In mainstream research we are taught from the early stages of learning to pick apart others’ ideas, to dissect, compare, contrast and add pieces we feel were missed. Written research is part of this discourse as well. With this research project; we didn’t do this because you can’t pick apart relationships and the experiences of people. Therefore there is not a piece that provides an analysis of gaps or a *picking apart* or deconstruction of the participant’s stories. It is our hope that people will use this knowledge as a vehicle or tool to further create new relationships for their own research and that this will perhaps be a *stepping stone* for academic scholars studying Indigenous economics.

CONCLUSION

The data revealed that Indigenous women in northeastern Alberta have not lost their strength, resilience, or power. They do not sit idle in despair; rather they have always worked hard and will continue to work hard in order to survive. They are doing what they can to remember their teachings and pass them down to younger generations. This transference has not been completely stopped; but it has been greatly interrupted. There is an urgency to reconnect to that knowledge and find ways to do so within an economic system that is more balanced. “I think most of us recognize all the losses we have experienced because of colonization. Yet it’s a two-sided coin. Because it has made us strong, it has made us to be survivors and having to depend on our own inner strength to get through some of these things.” (Lac La Biche participant). The comradeship and strength of women that surfaces when they come together is a cornerstone that future dialogues and research can be built upon.

This study presents a framework and recommendations made up of Indigenous women’s voices in northeastern Alberta. It can, and should be, utilized to mobilize a broader, inclusive dialogue on how we move towards economic sustainability. It is our hope that this information is used to help direct policy at every level of governance. It represents Indigenous value systems which are based on the wellness *of all of us*. This research is evidence that we understand and have created economics as evident in the generations of transferred knowledge that ensured our survival. That survival was, and is, based on spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical (*miyo pimatisiwin*) wellness and stability where evidence of social inclusion was manifested through our connection to our environments. The values of *sâkhitowin*, *iyiniw paminisowin*, and *mâtinamâkêw* (love, determination, and sharing) are inclusive within our understanding of economy and are imperative when addressing economic sustainability now and in the future.

APPENDIX A

Women's Economic Security & Well-being

CIRCLE QUESTIONS

- 1) Tell us how we survived in our ancestors' time... talk about how we took care of our needs (food, shelter, clothing)
 - a. Who did what?
(men's roles, women's roles)
- 2) How do we survive now?
 - a. what are the issues we face
(barriers and opportunities)
- 3) What do we need to do to make it better?

Protocols of the Circle

- 1) Only one person may speak at a time while proceeding in a clockwise direction. (People speak about themselves, not about others. "I" messages)
- 2) The Laws of the Creator shall govern the person speaking:
 - caring
 - sharing
 - honesty
 - determination
- 3) A person may only speak in turn. There are also to be no interruptions while the person is speaking.
- 4) If desired, a person may pass when it is his/her time to speak.
- 5) All other participants are attentive (listening) to the person speaking.
- 6) Confidentiality is assumed unless participants have agreed that information is to be taken outside the circle.

Blue Quills First Nations College

Adapted from

Rupert Ross (1996). *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*,
Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada

Women's voices



Astam (come) Let's get
Together, Eat, Visit, Laugh
and Talk about:

How our Ancestors Lived

The roles men and women had

How we Live Today

The roles we have now

How will our Children Live

What does Economic Security mean to
us

The things we need to be well and
secure

The issues we face as women

The barriers and opportunities we have

How we can make it better

March 19, 2015 4pm to 8pm

Supper will be served at 6pm

**Good Fish Lake Daycare – Multi Purpose
Room**



HOSTED BY BLUE QUILLS FIRST NATION COLLEGE UNIVERSITY
FOR RESEARCH ON NATIVE WOMEN AND ECONOMIC WELLNESS AND SECURITY
Contact Darlene Auger | darleneauger@shaw.ca | 780 915-2395

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

Kikino Métis Settlement

Fishing Lake Métis Settlement

Lac La Biche

Frog Lake First Nation

Saddle Lake Cree Nation

Kehewin Cree Nation

Cold Lake First Nation

Beaver Lake Cree Nation

Whitefish Lake First Nation

St. Paul

APPENDIX C



U N I V E R S I T Y
nuhelot'ine thaiyots'ï nistameyimâkanak
BLUE QUILLS

Forum: Indigenous Women's Economic Security and Wellbeing

Keynote: Dr. Wilma Jackknife, B.A., LLB, LLM, SJD

Cold Lake First Nations

"The voices of women come from the land, whispering the children home to places of warmth and security once the pain of the past is understood..." Dale Steinhauer 2015

Beginning in May 2014, Blue Quills, in partnership with the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research and the Government of Alberta, held several community research circles and interviewed over 100 participant's. They were asked questions around the needs of Indigenous Women's Economic Security. The responses were critical and urgent. Participants included members from across northeastern Alberta including: Lac La Biche, Cold Lake First Nation, Whitefish Lake First Nation, Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Fishing Lake Metis Settlement, Kehewin Cree Nation, Beaver Lake Cree Nation, Kikino Metis Settlement, St. Paul, and University nuhelot'ine thaiyots'ï nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills (UnBQ).

This gathering has three objectives

- To give back what we have gathered (our findings) to our research and community participants
- To share knowledge with and inform all organizations who work with Indigenous women and their families at both front line and policy/governance levels
- To mobilize and create capacity within community to develop economic security and wellness strategies for future generations of Indigenous women and their families.

AGENDA

9:00am

Opening smudge and prayer

Keynote Presentation: Dr. Wilma Jackknife, Cold Lake First Nations

Sharing the voices: Presentation by Nadia Bourque/Darlene Auger

Nutrition Break

Sharing the Voices Continued

12:00pm

Complimentary Lunch, Blue Quills Gymnasium

1:00pm

Dialogue Circle Discussions

Nutrition Break

Report Back to Larger Group/Next Steps/Pathways to Possibilities

3:30

Closing Keynote Speaker

Closing Prayer

APPENDIX D



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Box 279, ST. PAUL, ALBERTA, CANADA T0A 3A0
TEL 780-645-4455 FAX 780-645-5215 www.bluequills.ca

Title of Project: Women's Well-Being and Economic Security

Principal Researcher: Sherri Chisan, ipkDoc

Research Team: Darlene Auger, Nadia Bourque, Carol Melnyk-Poliakiwski, Dale Steinhauer,
Sharon Steinhauer

This form is part of the process of *informed consent*. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you are free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand the information.

Purpose of this Study:

There are pressing issues that need attention as we look for solutions for our next generations. We have a collective opportunity to address

- poverty and dependence on social assistance
- arising from lack of employment and economic opportunity,
- which is often connected to increasingly high rates of First Nations children in care on and off reserve,
- often involving single parent families,
- mostly women who are less able to pursue work elsewhere (camp jobs).

Blue Quills First Nations College has received the consent of their Research Ethics' Board and local community leadership to conduct circle conversations to explore the connections between these issues and women's economic security and creating local economies.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

The research project will invite community members to give voice to their experience, and to participate in exploring strategies to create sustainable local economies. Community members (women, men, Elders, and leaders) will look at the connections between Indigenous knowledge and identity as a way of understanding the current situation and identifying potential solutions to improve women's well-being and economic security.

Participants will identify the contributing factors that influence their successes or create barriers by identifying what is working and what could be working better. This group conversation will typically occur over a three to four hour period with refreshments. Participants may also be asked to provide a personal interview beyond the group conversation but are not obligated to provide their voice beyond the circle.

The consent form will be signed prior to participating in the circle dialogue.

Participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate at any point during this research project and withdraw at anytime without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

What type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

"There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some or none of

them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:”

I grant permission to be audio taped:

Yes: ____ No: ____

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by initials or pseudonym:

Yes: ____ No: ____

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

You may quote me and use my name:

Yes: ____ No: ____

Are There Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

There are no foreseeable risks, harms or inconveniences to the participant. However, we will be talking about matters that trigger memories or emotions and the team is available to provide direct support and/or referral to a helping resource.

What Happens to the Information I provide?

The information will be written into a report which will be used by your local community, Blue Quills First Nations College and the Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research for possible distribution to government, and agencies who have an interest in the topic area.

The information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. The information is kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and research team. The data will be stored for three years on a computer disk, at which time it will be permanently erased.

Signature (written consent)

Printed name

Date

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to be a research participant.

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research or you have concerns about the way you’ve been treated as a participant, please contact:

Principal Researcher: Sherri Chisan, email sherric@bluequills.ca

Blue Quills First Nations College: Research Department

1-888-645-4455

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

The researcher has kept a copy of the consent form

APPENDIX E

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