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Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies



Talking Circle Medicine by Leah Dorion
retrieved from https://www.leahdorion.ca/gallery_2004-2006.html

“In the beginning, there was nothing but water, nothing but a wide, wide sea. The only people in the world were the animals that lived in and on water.

Then down from the sky world a woman fell, a divine person. Two loons flying over the water happened to look up and see her falling. Quickly they placed themselves beneath her and joined their bodies to make a cushion for her to rest upon.

Thus, they saved her from drowning.

While they held her, they cried with a loud voice to the other animals, asking their help. Now the cry of the loon can be heard at a great distance over water, and so the other creatures gathered quickly.

As soon as Great Turtle learned the reason for the call, he stepped forth from the council. “Give her to me,” he said to the loons. “Put her on my back. My back is broad.”

- As quoted in *Indian Legends of Canada*
by Ella Elizabeth Clarke



module summary

This module will explore concepts of the pre- and post- contact roles of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBQQTIA as leaders, healers, providers, protectors, teachers. We will look at how colonization has impacted their traditional influence and ways Indigenous women may reconnect to their power and place.



video summary

(54:59 minutes)

Professor Tracy Bear joins Lewis to discuss the gender spectrum and the roles that Indigenous women and gender-full people played as leaders, teachers, protectors, and more. Looking at how colonization purposely deconstructed Indigenous concepts of gender roles and 'proper' relationships between people of all genders in order to gain access to land. Also explored are ways Indigenous women continue to resist, reconnect and rebuild and what shelters can do to support their efforts.

Tracy Bear is a Nehiyaw iskwêw (Cree woman) from Montreal Lake First Nation in northern Saskatchewan and the Director of the Indigenous Women's Resilience Project. She has a PhD in English and Film Studies and her dissertation, *Power in My Blood: Corporeal Sovereignty Through a Praxis of Indigenous Eroticanalysis* won the Governor General Gold Medal award in 2016. She is an Assistant Professor cross appointed with the Faculty of Native Studies and the Dept. of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Alberta. She was the Academic Lead and Professor of Record on the hugely successful Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) called 'Indigenous Canada'. She is also involved with a Research-Creation Laboratory series project with Kim Tallbear and Kirsten Lindquist called *Tipi Confessions*.



key concepts

- Women's Roles Prior to Contact
- Western Gender Roles as a Tool of Colonization
- Indigenous Women's Agency, Resistance and Resurgence
- Gender Spectrum, Fluidity and Gender-full People/Societies
- Everyday Activism
- Power of Ceremony
- Tips for Ally Organizations
- Building Inclusive Communities
- Creating Safe Spaces in Shelters

Indigenous women are the backbones of their cultures and communities. Indigenous knowledge tells us that when a woman is in the process of creating life, she is in her most sacred state of being. They are life givers and caregivers. They are the voices for their children, grandchildren and all those children yet to come. They are the voices for the lands and for the water. They are the carriers of languages and hold the future in their hands every time they carry their children. They are Knowledge Keepers and Pipe Bearers, Elders and Ceremony Leaders. They brokered trade and shaped alliances. Sadly, many of these traditional understandings and teachings are not utilized due to large disconnections from culture and Ceremonies. Although there are still many Elders who carry this knowledge it is up to each individual to seek out those stories and Ceremonies. Many Indigenous Nations have always been matrilineal societies, meaning the men would stay with the woman's family upon marriage and children would be known by their mother's clan and lineage. It was a built-in security for women, it is much harder to abuse a woman when she is surrounded by her family.

Indigenous cultures have traditionally recognized and welcomed gender diverse people within their ranks. The roles of these gender diverse people may have differed according to culture, but the acceptance was there. First Nation's scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen and historians such as Walter Williams, Jonathan Katz and Patricia Nell Warren have taken on the task of documenting sexual and gender diversity in First Nation societies and cultures before the Europeans reached North America. In most of the hundreds of languages that predated the arrival of Europeans, there were words for sexual and gender diverse individuals, none of them derogatory. The Hummingbird Society, Winkte, Badé, Ogokwe, two-spirited, the peace chief, medicine person, sacred clown, keeper of a medicine lodge, male and female warrior, buffalo dancer, prophet, sun-dancer, sorcerer, storyteller, camp crier, healer: these are all symbols and words used to describe gender and sexually diverse sacred people. These names reflected recognition of the sacredness of two-spirited people who were

“Some First Nations people also had a matriarchal society. There was a welfare system that surpassed (all) other systems. Our welfare system was woven into family; children never were orphans because the extended family is always there. There is even a Cree word in our language about a child raised out of his or her home: *e woni-kihít*, growing up without knowing she/he belongs to another family.”

– Theresa C. Wildcat, Elder



Osh-Tish (Finds Them And Kills Them), Crow tribe, was a Badé. On the left is Osh Tish, a biological male in woman's attire, his wife to the right. Osh Tish earned a reputation for bravery and was afforded distinctive social and ceremonial status within the tribe.

“ Among Blackfoot people, homosexuality was a non-issue.

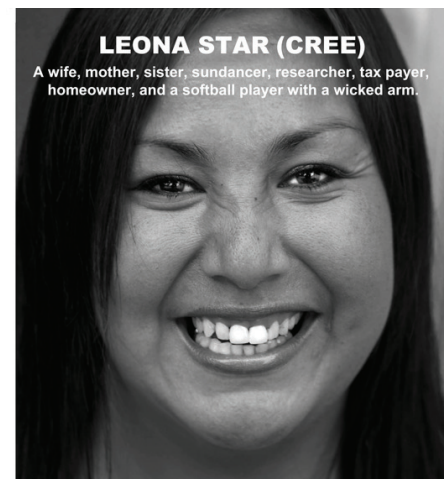
The issue was living collectively in peace and harmony. Homosexuality became an issue with the introduction of Christian views that it is a sin and evil people do this.”

- Caroline Yellowhorn,
Elder

a respected and vital part of their societies. Two-spirited people were medicine people, warriors, healers and visionaries. It was said that two-spirited people walked where everyone else was afraid to and would walk where no one else would. For many tribes, two-spirited were part of a tradition that included respect.

Acts of and impacts of colonization continue to upset the balance and we see today roles have shifted towards a Western standard, where Indigenous women people have become invisible or disposal. This imbalance results in the staggering numbers of Indigenous women who are missing and murdered compared to other women in Canada. According to Statistics Canada 2016/2017, Indigenous women make up 43% of admissions to all Canadian correctional facilities despite only being 4.1% of the total population. Not only that, but a further 55% of incarcerated women are Indigenous. That is the same percentage of Indigenous women who were admitted to Alberta women's shelters in 2015/2016. Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual) people also face disproportionate violence and have been included in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).

We have already discussed the tragedy of MMIWG in module two and it seems that Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA are overrepresented in every sad statistic there is, to the point where tragedy seems to be the only representation we see in society and media. Despite the violent realities Indigenous women face there are just as many success stories that are overlooked. We all need to feel safe in order to thrive in any environment and shelters can foster safe spaces that allow natural resilience to come through. When given the space to use their voice Indigenous women will tell their stories and given the supports, they will navigate their way through the barriers placed in front of them.



Leona from the Perception series by KC Adams retrieved from <http://www.kcadams.net/art/photography/Perception/PerceptionLeona.html>

Today many Indigenous women have overcome barriers of systemic racism, addiction, poverty, family and personal trauma and have chosen a better life for themselves, their families and their communities. Often, when Indigenous women have children, they become incredibly motivated to pursue the path of education as means to support their families. In the voice of someone who has overcome many barriers:

“From my experience after addressing my addiction and leaving an abusive relationship I wanted to live a healthy lifestyle. With a two-year-old son and living on welfare I wanted a life better for my son. So, I went to school. My motivation was the realization that I could use my personal experience as an asset when I saw many obstacles already.”

– 2019 ACWS Community Conversation Participant



You Are Not Forgotten by Angela Sterritt retrieved from <https://angelasterritt.com/portfolio/angela-sterritt-original-acrylic-paintings/>



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Individual Self-Reflection Questions for Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies

Concepts of gender roles and sexuality are deeply ingrained and shaped by the culture and worldview we grow up in. How has your culture or worldview shaped your ideas of what it means to be a specific gender (man, woman, transgender, etc.) or sexual orientation (gay, straight, two-spirit, etc.)? How has this changed throughout your life? How does this inform your practice?

Why did colonizing nations target Indigenous women and want to change Indigenous gender roles?

Historically Indigenous women had power and agency, often making decisions to marry non-Indigenous men in early Canadian history. But this story is not told by the European men who recorded much of history. Think about the most prominent narratives you hear (in media, in the general public, etc.) about Indigenous women right now. How are they portrayed? What is the connection with how Indigenous women are often portrayed by media today with how they are portrayed in history?

Dr. Bear believes that traditions should benefit and serve their communities, and as communities change traditions may also have to change. How could this relate to practices with the women children and families you serve? Are there practices that you have changed to better serve the women, children and families in your care? Are there practices you would like to change to better serve them? How might you do it?

Dr. Bear talks about seeing her Indigenous women students as icebergs, carrying large hidden burdens. How can you or do you work to go 'beneath the surface'? How is it or how could it be helpful?

How does Dr. Bears explanation of the small, everyday acts of resistance, reconnection and rebuilding by Indigenous women resonate with your experiences?

What are some questions you still have? How can you find the answers?

What was your most important take-way from this video?

How will you use this knowledge of Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies in your work going forward?

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Staff Talking Circle Questions for Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies

Do the Elders, Grandmothers and/or Knowledge Keepers etc. in our shelter embody the values of our organization?

How does culture and worldview shape ideas of gender and sexuality?

How have we seen the impact of differing worldviews regarding gender and sexuality between Indigenous nations and colonizing nations in Canada's history? In our current time?

How can our organization recognize the full value of the knowledge of the Elders, Grandmothers and/or Knowledge Keepers etc. that contribute to our organization?

How does our organization empower Indigenous voices among our staff/volunteers? What do we do well and what can we do better?

Keeping in mind Dr. Bears advice, what are somethings our organization can do to incorporate ceremony?

Dr. Bear believes that traditions should benefit and serve their communities, and as communities change traditions may also have to change. How could this relate to our organization's policies or practices? Are there policies or practices we should re-evaluate to better serve the women, children and families? How might we do it?

What was your most important take-way from this video?

How will you use this knowledge of Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies in your work going forward?

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Women's Talking Circle Questions for Indigenous Women in Indigenous Societies

Concepts of gender roles and sexuality are deeply ingrained and shaped by the culture and worldview we grow up in. How has your culture or worldview shaped your ideas of what it means to be a specific gender (man, woman, transgender, etc.) or sexual orientation (gay, straight, two-spirit, etc.). How has this changed throughout your life? How has this affected your life?

Dr. Bear believes that traditions should benefit and serve their communities, and as communities change traditions may also have to change. How might this relate to our behaviours, attitudes, patterns, etc. in relationships and life? Are there behaviours, attitudes, patterns, etc. that no longer serve you? How can the shelter support you in finding ones that do serve you?

What is your relation to ceremony? Would you like to practice more ceremony? How can the shelter support this?

How does Dr. Bears explanation of the small, everyday acts of resistance, reconnection and rebuilding by Indigenous women resonate with your experiences?

What are some questions you still have? How can we find the answers?

What was your most important take-way from this video?

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References

The Sacred Space of Womanhood. (2012. National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health Women)

https://www.nccih.ca/495/The_Sacred_Space_of_Womanhood_Mothering_across_the_Generations_-_Background_report.nccih?id=66

Background report from the 2-day gathering on First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Women and Mothering National Showcase.

Traditional Gender Roles. (2008. Kanawayhitowintaking: Taking Care of Each Other's Spirit, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres)

<http://www.kanawayhitowin.ca/>

Brief description of traditional gender roles especially as they relate to violence against women.

A Guide on Two-Spirited People for First Nations Communities. (1998. Deschamps, G., Dubois, M., 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations: We Are Part of Tradition)

<http://www.2spirits.com/PDFolder/WeArePartOfTradition.pdf>

An in-depth overview of Two-Spirit traditions and contemporary challenges in among First Nations in Canada.

The Two-Spirit Tradition in Native American Culture. (2016. Indian Country Today Media Network, BUST) <https://bust.com/living/16700-two-spirits.html>

The history of the modern term Two-Spirit and how it relates to traditional understanding of gender diversity across many Indigenous Nations in North America. Profiles of some significant Two-Spirit historical figures.

Adult and youth correctional statistics in Canada 2016/2017. (2017. Statistics Canada)

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54972-eng.htm>

ACWS Annual Provincial Shelter Data 2015-16. (2016. Alberta Council of Women's Shelters)

<https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2697/view>

Chapter 2: Indigenous Recognitions of Power and Place. Pgs. 129-179 (2019.

National Inquiry in to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry)

https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf

Chapter on the pre- and post- contact roles of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA as leaders, healers, providers, protectors, teachers and their influence on culture, land, economics, law and governance.

Further Learning Material

Dr. Diana Steinhauer: Traditional Woman's Teachings. (2016. Amiskwaciy History Series)

Run time: 1:24:14

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vx62NQahHiE&t=623s>

Dr. Diana Steinhauer shares her Indigenous knowledge regarding women's teachings, these are traditional teachings passed on to her from her Elders.

Women in Blackfoot Societies. (2018. Blackfoot Digital Library) Run time: 1:46:53

<https://www.blackfootdigitallibrary.com/digital/collection/bdl/id/3092/rec/1>

Beverly Little Bear talks about the roles of Blackfoot women and the roles they carry within their Nations.

Marginalization of Aboriginal Women in Canada. (2011. Hanson, Erin, First Nations Studies Program.)

https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/marginalization_of_aboriginal_women/

A short summary of systemic policies that have removed Indigenous women's rights and contributed to their increased rates of poverty, addiction, incarceration and as victims of violence.

What does "Two-Spirit" Mean?. (2018. InQueery them.) Run time: 6:16

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4lBibGzUnE>

A very brief history of the term Two-Spirit with a few examples of Two-Spirit people from various Nations.

The Genderbread Person v.4.0: Gender Explained Using Continuums. (2015. Killermann, Sam.)

<https://www.genderbread.org/resource/genderbread-person-v4-0-poster>

A copyright free edu-graphic and explainer that breaks the complicated concepts into bit-sized, digestible pieces.