



module summary

This module explores how Indigenous women are carrying on their traditional roles as leaders in many ways. As formal elected officials and informal community leaders, grassroots activists and legal campaigners, as mothers seeking justice, artists and so much more, Indigenous women continue to reclaim, reimagine and revitalize their communities.

Contemporary Indigenous Women's Leadership



video summary

(1:04:46 minutes)

No More Stolen Sisters. Idle No More. Water is Life. We have heard these phrases many times over the last decade, but we don't always hear the voices or see the faces doing the work behind these movements. Indigenous women have always played an integral role as leaders in the cultural, spiritual and political life of their communities. Colonial policies have long tried to dis-empower Indigenous nations by dis-empowering their women and the impacts of colonization have been severe. But Indigenous women have always resisted and found ways to continue to lead their communities in many ways: through cultural healing, safeguarding language, political action and more.

Ruth Scalp Lock is a Blackfoot woman from the Siksika Nation. She is the founding member of Awo Tann Healing Lodge, a shelter in Calgary Alberta where Indigenous women and children seek refuge from all forms of abuse in a uniquely Indigenous atmosphere. Ruth is a survivor, author, social worker and leader. In 2015 she released her autobiography, *My Name is Shield Woman*, chronicling her experiences in residential schools and her path to healing.

Dr. Cora Voyageur is a professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on the Indigenous experience in Canada that includes women's issues, politics, employment, community and economic development and health. She has conducted extensive community-initiated research, is an author, editor and proud grandmother.

Stephanie Harpe is a singer, actress, speaker and survivor. She runs the Esquao Adult and Youth Leadership program for the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women. Stephanie also shared her experience testifying at the National Inquiry with ACWS in Module 2 - MMIW: Inquiry & Action.



key concepts

- Personal, Cultural and Community Beliefs about Leadership
- How Colonization Disempowered Indigenous Women
- Contemporary Indigenous Women Leaders
- Women as Leaders Prior to Contact
- Formal and Informal Leadership
- Indigenous Activist Movements
- Everyday Acts of Leadership
- Mentorship
- Strength Based Development
- Supporting Indigenous Women's Leadership



Mi'kmaq Woman with Feather, 2013, Ossie Michelin retrieved from https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/4w7ymm/did-the-rcmp-just-ambush-a-peaceful-native-anti-fracking-protest

When we look at leadership by Indigenous women, we don't have to look any further than the history of how Canada came to be. It was our women who took pity on the visitors and not only doctored them back to health after their long journey but showed them how to live on these lands and how to work with the elements to hunt, trap and survive. Although we don't see any women's signatures on the Treaty documents they were pivotal in the making of the Treaties. As we heard from Lewis, they knew what the communities would need to survive in the quickly changing world. It may seem as though Indigenous women are hidden in the crevasses of history, but oral history teaches us they have always been at the forefront

Dr. Bear told us of some the roles Indigenous women have held and continue to hold in their Nations in the video for module five. Women's position as caretakers for children, Elders, the land and water mean her voice is respected and sought after when making decisions about the community. Her knowledge of Ceremony, language and her Nation's history/stories mean she is trusted as cultural and spiritual leader. Admiration for her relational intelligence and negotiation skill mean she is integral to diplomatic and trade relationships. When a woman walks in this world she walks with her families, her children, and all those children to come. Because of this she is already a leader, she has little people of the next 7 generations looking to her for guidance, protection and support, physically, mentally and spiritually.

Despite centuries of colonial attempts to disconnect Indigenous women from their role as caretakers of the environment, they have proven they are resourceful, strong, and courageous. The winter of 2012 showed us just what can happen when Indigenous women come together to raise national awareness. Nina Wilson, Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam and Sheelah McLean are the four women who started the national Idle No More movement. Across Canada people were coming together at rallies and round dances to protest Bill C-45, the "Jobs and Growth Act", which would drastically diminished environmental regulations and Indigenous rights. The movement has since grown and is active on issues of Indigenous rights, sovereignty and environmental protect.



Idle No More founders: Nina Wilson, Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam and Sheelah McLean retrieved from <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/being-idle-no-more-women-behind-movement>



Idle No More protest retrieved from <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/idle-no-more-women-leading-action-indigenous-rights-canada>



The Scream by Kent Monkman retrieved from <https://www.kentmonkman.com/>

Despite being discriminated against not just for being Indigenous and not just for being women but being both and having rights stripped away depending on who you married, Indigenous women stayed proud of their heritage and fought for fair treatment. Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Sandra Lovelace Nicholas challenged the sexism in the Indian Act and fought legal battles for over a decade. Their efforts lead to important changes in 1985 and Lovelace continues to fight for changes alongside many other Indigenous organizations.

Despite being forced into residential schools and being denied the love of their families and communities Indigenous women show their immense love for their children and do their best to keep their children safe. Tenacious Indigenous women like Human rights defender Cindy Blackstock, BC activist Patricia Dawn and Ontario mom Tamara Malcolm show the different forms leadership can take when it comes to fighting discriminatory child apprehension practices.

Despite being witness to the ugliness of colonial violence, Indigenous women continue to create beautiful art that honours their culture, connects to all people and engages with relevant issues. Metis painter Christi Belcourt and Inuk singer Tanya Tagaq are both visionary artists transforming traditions, inspiring younger generations and bringing their voices and visions to the world.

It would seem as though Indigenous women have to work harder and have more barriers to overcome and although that may be the case it also means that Indigenous women carry the key to resiliency. Indigenous women are 3 times more likely to go to university than Indigenous men, which shows the determination to support their families. Often, they are attending these institutions of learning while being exposed to racism, along with the lateral violence which accompanies it. The number of Indigenous women who have educated themselves and gone on to have successful careers is also growing and must be acknowledged.



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Individual Self-Reflection Questions for Indigenous Women's Leadership

The guests in this video all talk about a person they knew, personally or through reputation, who influenced what they thought of as leadership. Describe someone who impacted your views of leadership. (Formal or informal leaders. Ex. family member, co-worker or boss, coach, client, public figure, etc.)

Why did you choose the person above as an example of leadership?

What did the person you chose do that worked? What did they do that did not work?

What are the most important lessons you learned about leadership from the person you described?

Based on the video discussion and your personal experiences, create a set of characteristics or guidelines for effective leadership.

What are the skills and abilities you possess to be an effective leader?

Why is it important to highlight examples of Indigenous women as leaders? How can you do that in your work?

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

How will this knowledge about Indigenous Women's Leadership inform your work going forward?

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Staff Sharing Circle Discussion Questions for Indigenous Women's Leadership

The guests in this video all talk about a person they knew, personally or through reputation, who influenced what they thought of as leadership. Have the group individually think of someone (Formal or informal leaders. Ex. family member, co-worker or boss, coach, client, public figure, etc.) who impacted their views of leadership and consider or discuss some of the following questions.

- Why is the person they chose an example of leadership?
- What did they do that worked? What did not work?
- What did they learn about leadership from them?

Work as a group to define leadership. Does it always look the same or take the same form? What are the commonalities? What are the differences?

As a group create a set of characteristics of guidelines for effective leadership.

Why is it important to highlight examples of Indigenous women as leaders? How can we do that in our organization, community, etc.?

Why is it important for staff and/or clients to see themselves as leaders? How can we encourage that self-perception and support leadership skill building?

What do we do well to create opportunities for staff and/or clients to see themselves as leaders? How can we improve? Are there supports or resources in our community?

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

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

How will this knowledge of Indigenous Women's Leadership inform your work going forward?

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Women's Sharing Circle Discussion Questions for Indigenous Women's Leadership

The guests in this video all talk about a person they knew, personally or through reputation, who influenced what they thought of as leadership. Have the group individually think of someone (Formal or informal leaders. Ex. family member, co-worker or boss, coach, client, public figure, etc.) who impacted their views of leadership and consider or discuss some of the following questions.

- Why is the person they chose an example of leadership?
- What did they do that worked? What did not work?
- What did they learn about leadership from them?

Work as a group to define leadership. Does it always look the same or take the same form? What are the commonalities? What are the differences?

As a group create a set of characteristics of guidelines for effective leadership.

What are the skills and abilities you possess to be an effective leader?

Are there leadership skills you would like to work on? How might the shelter help you?

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

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

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References

ACWS Annual Provincial Shelter Data 2015-16 (2016 Alberta Council of Women's Shelters) [https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2697/view/Data from 41 women's shelter organizations](https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2697/view/Data%20from%2041%20women's%20shelter%20organizations).

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An overview of the Idle No More movement including its leaders, foundation, issues, activism, impact and ongoing activities.

Jeannette Corbiere Lavell. (2018. Robinson, Amanda, The Canadian Encyclopedia) <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/jeannette-vivian-lavell>
[Overview of the educator, activist and community worker's legal cases, personal life and career.](#)

Sandra Lovelace Nicholas. (2018. Conn, Heather, The Canadian Encyclopedia) <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sandra-lovelace-nicholas>
[Overview of Senator and Indigenous rights activist's career.](#)

Canada Being Sued for Child Welfare System The 'Incentivizes' The Apprehension of Children. (Martens, Kathleen, APTN National News) <https://aptnnews.ca/2019/03/06/canada-being-sued-for-child-welfare-system-that-incentivizes-the-apprehension-of-children/>
Article about the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society's legal case against the Canadian Government for severely underfunding on-reserve child welfare.

One Woman's Campaign to End Indigenous Child Apprehension. (2018. Hyslop, Katie, The Tyee) <https://thetyee.ca/News/2018/11/27/Campaign-End-Indigenous-Child-Apprehensions/>
Article outlining British Columbia activist Patricia Dawn's work to create a "no-apprehension zone" in the Cowichan Valley for Indigenous women.

A 'Relentless' Indigenous Mom is Fundraising to Get Her Kids Back. (2017. Stechyson, Natalie, Huffpost) https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/10/30/a-relentless-indigenous-mom-is-fundraising-to-get-her-kids-back_a_23260604/
Story of Tamara Malcom's more than 10-year struggle to get her children out of care after they were apprehended as a result of her being a victim of domestic violence.



Further Learning Materials:

Strong Girls, Strong Women: Young Indigenous Women's Circle of Leadership, (2018. [UAlberta Advancement](#)) Runtime: 5:34

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7mukkac2q0>

A look at what the University of Alberta is doing to empower young Indigenous women.

Aboriginal women: resistance, resilience & revitalization (2014. Patti Doyle Bedwell, TEDxCapeBreton) Runtime: 14:51

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1yCvKA-WdU>

In this TEDX Patti Doyle Bedwell talks about racism and the importance of knowing your own history and being able to find your voice. She focuses on Mi'kmaq women and how the Indian Act has dictated the Indigenous population.

Learning from Canada's Aboriginal Women Leaders. (2016. Sternberg, Laura, Canadian Women's Foundation)

<https://canadianwomen.org/blog/learning-from-canadas-aboriginal-women-leaders/>

Article highlighting several Indigenous women

Esquao Youth Leadership Development. (Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women) <https://iaaw.ca/programs-services/esquao-youth-leadership/>

IAAW offer youth leadership development to build skill and confidence in young women aged 13-17 years old.

Indigenous Women in Leadership. (2019. Banff Centre for Arts and Culture) <https://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/indigenous-women-leadership/20200621>

Overview information for the Banff Centre leadership program specifically for Indigenous Women.

Alberta Mentoring Partnership. (Government of Alberta)

<https://albertamentors.ca/>

<http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/family-community/15646.html>

Partnership program that provides networking, research, training and resources for communities and organizations to develop and enhance mentorship programs.

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