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GOSSIP: A Spoken History of Women in the North



Sisters, Jessie Oonark, Baker Lake, N.W.T.

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FOR A LONG TIME, there has been talk of change in the North. There was talk of change when the missionaries and traders arrived, when native children were sent to convent or residential schools, when aboriginal people were relocated to “settlements” from their camps, and when non-renewable resource exploration and exploitation accelerated the struggle for aboriginal rights and self-government.

With new social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental crises, the talk of change and its impact continues; numerous articles and analyses attest to the persistence of change as a focal point for northern study. However, a significant factor in these historical accounts is the absence of women’s viewpoints.

GOSSIP: A Spoken History of Women in the North is a written translation of women’s talk about a variety of issues and situations. To be published by the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee this fall, *GOSSIP* is the first book written by women from distinctly different northern cultures. In this issue of *Northern Perspectives*, we present excerpts from some of the materials contributed to this unique volume.

The word “gossip” has generally been used to discredit women’s comments, but feminist literature has explored and developed alternative interpretations. The intent is to make the reader more aware of how a term like “gossip”, when used pejoratively to describe communication between women, has tended to isolate them from one another by trivializing their everyday experiences. It is in this way that their accounts and perspectives have been neglected or marginalized in written records.

The bias in favour of “written records” in the history of the North has not only isolated women, but has also ignored and devalued the oral tradition of native people in northern Canada.

GOSSIP was conceived with two objectives in mind: to provide an opportunity for women to reflect on, gather, and express their views and experiences as women living in the North; and to raise awareness among southern Canadians about northern women, their perspectives, and their contributions.

The project, co-ordinated by **Mary Crnkovich**, a feminist researcher who has worked extensively with northern native peoples, encouraged women to write or to speak about the issues of interest to them. The words of those who chose to speak were transcribed into written form and translated into English where necessary. The resulting volume may help sensitize readers to the differences among the women involved and, more generally, to the importance of learning and talking about these differences.

GOSSIP does not aim to separate women from their cultural communities by focusing only on their viewpoints, to the exclusion of men. Nor does it present a Euro-Canadian, feminist perspective on women and the North. Rather, the intent is to focus on the variety of experiences among women coping with and initiating change within their communities. It is hoped that the material which comprises *GOSSIP: A Spoken History of Women in the North* will lead to a greater awareness of the North and its people and contribute to an historical record that is as yet incomplete.

The Changing Role of Women in the North



Toni Graeme



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The Shaman Teaches the Woman, Jessie Oonark, Baker Lake, N.W.T.

The role of women in the North appears to be getting more difficult, more stressful, and more thankless. The economic necessity for women to work outside the home is greater, and yet there is still the responsibility of keeping the family together. On top of that, there are the ever-increasing social problems, like drug and alcohol abuse, assaults, depression, and suicide. Whether or not these problems afflict our family, their increase is bound to have a serious effect on us.

I would like to turn the title around and focus on the "changing woman in the North". This is where the optimism is. It is the change that we as women make in our own lives that will determine our role in the North—and anywhere else for that matter.

Women are taking much more control over their own lives: when to marry; when to start a family; when and how to get an education. More women are setting career paths to suit their interests, even if they are ones that have traditionally been male-dominated.

The federal and territorial governments keep too few statistics on women in the North to be helpful to us in looking at women and their numbers in various areas. But because our communities are so small, and communication and networking so good, we can see some progress being made.

Two years ago, only 8 per cent of the management positions in the Government

of the Northwest Territories were held by women. Today, that number has risen to 10 per cent. Although a 2 per cent increase seems small, it is, nonetheless, an increase. Three out of four women who make up the increase are native northern women—this is progress.

Nationally, more women than men are successful in small business, but there are a surprising number of women active in business in the North, particularly in the western Arctic. In Yellowknife, it is estimated that almost one-third of the small businesses are owned by women. These businesses range from arts and graphics enterprises to clothing stores, restaurants, and travel agencies.

There is certainly room for growth in small business in the tourism and service sector. Women are becoming more aggressive in learning how to start and run a business, and in identifying sources of government and bank financing.

Wherever we live, the quality of the social fabric of our lives is incredibly important. With the territorial government having to respond to an ever-increasing rate of social problems, women are taking a lead role in identifying particular problems and initiating local solutions. They are bringing people together to analyse the situation, locating resource people who can help, and finding funding to establish projects or services to meet the needs. A prime example of this type of initiative is Nutaraq's Place, the newly opened transi-

tion house in Iqaluit, a project undertaken by the Agvvik Society. It took almost three years of planning before its doors were opened to those in need. Their persistence and commitment is typical of the women throughout the North who are successful at whatever they determine to do.

In the last federal election we saw a woman running in the eastern Arctic and two in the West. Greater numbers of women are taking leadership roles in native and other non-governmental organizations. Doing so means we are not only making a contribution to our community but are also learning how groups work, the impact they can have, and, in a small way, gaining organizational and corporate experience in goal-setting and budgeting.

Every day I hear of women establishing their own network which they hope will rival and replace the Old Boys Network. Like everything else on Earth, we are evolving. As with every generation, the future of our daughters and granddaughters to be freer than ourselves, and to pursue their goals, rests with us today.

I think we have many exciting challenges ahead of us in the next few years in the North, and I have every confidence that women in all communities will rise to the occasion.

Toni Graeme is the former Director, Women's Secretariat, Government of the Northwest Territories.

The Role of Inuit Women in Politics



Ovilu Goo Doyle

It is essential that Inuit women be equally involved in, and responsible for, political development. Hence, we must work hard, both as individuals and in groups, to identify and eliminate the barriers that currently exist.

Inuit women's representation is still fairly limited, even though a number of major Inuit organizations have been headed by women for some years. For example, one woman is a member of the executive council in the Northwest Territories legislative assembly; another was elected for a second term as president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

Generally, Inuit women hold less than 20 per cent of board and executive positions in such organizations. There is only one woman out of 12 voting members on the board of directors of the national Inuit organization—Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. This, of course, is far from acceptable, but linked to the fact that leadership was, first and foremost, introduced to the men, a precedent which is difficult to break through, despite the fact that many women are fully capable of assuming leadership positions.

It also relates to the disadvantages that women are, or have been, facing in the communities; for example, lack of child care and educational facilities, and pre-employment and employment opportunities. An increasing number of women cope with these obstacles by taking initiatives to minimize their number and effect in the communities, or by moving to centres where they are partly eliminated through greater access to service.

Inuit women have an intimate knowledge of the conditions in their communities. They have always been the doers and shapers of Inuit social affairs and the keepers of cultural values. This is clearly reflected in the tendency for women to be most closely involved in the educational, social, and health sectors. These are, in fact, areas with very large budgets and many responsibilities.

Women should become more visible participants in areas such as the negotiation of land claims and constitutional rights.

These responsibilities, as well as the ability to speak and teach our children in Inuktitut, are part of the preservation and enhancement of our distinct cultural identity, and they affect our lives directly.

Inuit organizations were instrumental in promoting the inclusion of an equality clause in the Canadian Constitution. However, this had very limited impact on the generally poor representation of women in local, regional, and national decision-making bodies. Our organizations and governing structures are still male-dominated, except in a few isolated cases. We had anticipated that the publicity surrounding the inclusion of an "equality clause" would bring about a change of attitude and positive action with regard to the representation of women.

According to prominent Inuit women leaders, one must be determined to break through the barrier created by a lack of self-confidence and the paternalistic attitudes which still prevail. To become equal, women must take on responsibility. Women often find that they must work much harder than their male counterparts to prove their capacities as politicians and to become influential in the modern way.

It is not always an easy task for women politicians to promote so-called women's issues, let alone to be engaged in politics. Despite the fact that such issues appear from time to time in election campaigns, they soon disappear from the agenda. Therefore, it is essential that we not only be critical when electing our leadership, but also show our women support

Women are developing a greater awareness of political and bureaucratic procedures by questioning government initiatives and policies. But to drastically change the *status quo*, there has to be a change of attitude. Inuit women must take steps to change their own attitudes about themselves—as well as the attitudes taken by many men who refuse to see us as equal partners in politics.

To ensure that the quality of life for Inuit women is taken into consideration in long-term political and economic planning, we must speak out and take action on our own behalf.

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Woman, Jessie Oonark, Baker Lake, N.W.T.

Ovilu Goo Doyle is the Secretary Treasurer of Pauktuutit, the Inuit Women's Association of Canada.

Ethnicity and Feminism: Inuit Women in Greenland and Canada



Marianne Lykke Thomsen

Inuit women have always maintained that their organizations are complementary, rather than conflictual, with men and Inuit political activities. It continues to be more crucial to Inuit women in both Greenland and Canada to secure the rights of Inuit as a people than to secure the rights of women.

Generally, Inuit women have not applied feminist strategies as a means of securing representation and influence in Canada. They have, to some extent, distanced themselves from other women's groups to emphasize their ethnic identity and the solidarity of their society. In many instances, they have refused to work with the more radical Indian women, even when organizations have been set up to encompass both groups. However, there is a danger in being too flexible and patient, as can be seen in the case of Greenland.

Greenlandic women, who were very patient and supportive during the initial preparations for the transfer of powers from Denmark to the Home Rule, were frustrated and disappointed to find themselves neglected by male politicians. Now that the Home Rule system is in place, it is still extremely difficult for women to be recognized as equal participants at all levels.

Women have had relatively little success in advancing their participation on decision-making bodies. The struggle to recruit women candidates and have them elected to political office continues. The attitude of male politicians toward women's participation and tradition-bound voting habits are the reasons often cited for this protracted struggle.

Inuit women in Canada may or may not experience a similar situation once land claims negotiations are completed and the green light is given to some form of self-government. At present, it is considered far more important to perform collectively as Inuit toward Euro-Canadian governments and administrations than to reveal possible internal weaknesses. But, in fact, Inuit women are visible participants in this process.

Assistance and guidance from government programs directed toward native women may help prevent the situation from becoming as striking as that in Greenland.

The dilemma faced by women during the Home Rule negotiations, and which still causes problems for women today, was one identified in the mid-1970s by two Greenlandic women. They emphasized that consciousness-raising among Greenlanders with respect to ethnic identity and national feeling left little room for awareness about the relations between men and women. On the other hand, by being an important partner in the struggle for ethnic identity, the women's movement in Greenland has had to take a wider perspective than most in the Western world. It is because of this that it has proved difficult for women to combine movements to transfer methods and strategies.

Nevertheless, for many years, Greenlandic women had a working relationship with the formally established women's organizations in Denmark. In the past, some Greenlandic women have also been strongly involved in more radical initiatives; since the introduction of Home Rule, however, these ties have weakened. From the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, Greenlandic women received support in the form of leadership training and other programs from the Danish Women's Society. The Danish women also provided information and support on the question of legal abortion which arose with the introduction of the Abortion Act in 1975. A subcommittee for Greenlandic women, formed in 1960, has assisted Inuit women living in Denmark. In addition, Greenlandic women have continued a formal relationship with Denmark through a representative on the Danish Equal Status Council, which was the source of inspiration for the establishment of the Equality Committee in Greenland. Finally, the Greenlandic membership of the Nordic Council gives women the opportunity to join the Nordic Forum for Women.

At first glance, debate among Canadian Inuit women only indirectly addresses their

relationship with feminist movements, as mentioned above. However, now that Inuit women have their own national forum in Pauktuutit, the situation is changing. Women are more prepared and receptive to collaboration. Again, this can hardly be avoided given the fact that governments tend to direct their programs to native people as one category and women as another. Furthermore, the sensitivity that Euro-Canadian women have displayed toward Inuit women striving to define their own situation indicates greater awareness and a desire to collaborate on equal terms.

Canadian Inuit women are involved in a number of projects, council work, and programs set up by government agencies and southern organizations, such as the Aboriginal Women's Program, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Women's Secretariat and the Northern Women's Program of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Whereas Inuit women in Canada can benefit, to some extent, from collaboration with other native and non-native women's organizations, Greenlandic women now feel somewhat isolated, as they are largely left out of the political process; at the same time, their contacts with the outside world are sporadic.

Despite the fact that pan-arctic initiatives, such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference Women's Commission, have proved thoroughly disappointing, the idea of future collaboration among Inuit women remains a desirable goal. It is recognized that, through this type of networking, the ideas and inventions necessary for integrating women into decision-making bodies can be communicated to the entire arctic community.

Marianne Lykke Thomsen lives in Nuuk, Greenland where she is actively involved in women's issues.

The Changing Experience of Child-bearing in the N.W.T.



Prepared for the N.W.T. Native Women's Association by Leslie Paulette



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Big Woman, Jessie Oonark, Baker Lake, N.W.T.

The Traditional Experience

Prior to the arrival of doctors, nurses, nursing stations, and hospitals in the North, when aboriginal people lived in a traditional way, childbirth and child care were family-centred experiences. Young women were taught by their mothers about their menstrual cycle, and about the roles and responsibilities of women, at the time of puberty. Mothers chaperoned their daughters carefully, and babies were rarely born to women who were not already partnered with a man who could provide for his family. Women married at a young age, often as a result of an arrangement made by their parents.

Following marriage, a young woman was also taught to recognize the early signs of pregnancy, such as the absence of menstrual periods. As soon as she discovered that she was pregnant, she was expected to tell her mother right away. In some regions, it was considered taboo to hide the fact of one's pregnancy, and was said to lead to a harder labour for the woman. As soon as her pregnancy was revealed, a young woman was counselled by her mother and other female elders about the right ways to look after herself and her baby.

They tell us to walk a lot. That way the baby is always moving and is born healthy. And we are not allowed to eat a lot of bannock and greasy foods or sweet foods, because the baby will get big and fat.

Fort Rae elder

By the time a young woman was ready to give birth to her first baby, she was usually already acquainted with childbirth firsthand. Young married women were encouraged to attend the births of others, so that they might learn by observation and explanation from older, experienced women.

When a woman goes into labour, all the women go over there and us young girls have to accompany them. Our mothers and our grandmothers show us how it's done and explain everything, the reasons why they're doing it that way. And as soon as we know that the baby's born, as soon as we hear it crying, they make us all kiss the baby.

Fort Franklin elder

As the time for her baby's birth approached, the young mother prepared the things she would need. She gathered a

good supply of moss for her baby and for herself. She sewed a moss bag and prepared a cord made from twisted fibres or sinew for tying off the baby's umbilical cord. She also made a pad of moss, sometimes covered with fabric, to position under herself at the time of the baby's birth. Finally, she would go out into the bush and cut a dry pole to have ready as a cross-bar on which she could lean for support during labour and delivery. In all her preparations, she might be assisted by her sisters or friends.

When the mother went into labour, the news spread quickly to others in the camp or the village, and soon she was surrounded and supported by other women. Her mother, grandmother, sisters, and friends might all be there, taking turns walking with her, rubbing her back, and supporting her during contractions. Almost always, her husband was there with her, unless he was out hunting or checking traps at the time and could not be contacted.

My husband's relatives were always there to help me. But only when my husband lifted me up (during contractions), that's when my baby would be born! Of the ten children we had, he was there for nine of them.

Fort Franklin elder

Particularly in the days when people lived in small family camps in the bush all year round, it was common for the father to take a very active role in the birth. And, sometimes, when birth took place on the trail, a woman's husband was her only midwife.

In most communities, there was at least one woman who was recognized as an experienced birth attendant, or midwife. She might have acquired her skills as an apprentice, alongside her own mother or grandmother. Or she might have demonstrated a special interest in or aptitude for midwifery at a young age, and learned from experience as a result of attending, with enthusiasm, as many births as she could.

A midwife would be called on by the family to come and help, especially if the labour seemed long or difficult. She offered her skill, her experience, and her reassuring presence. Sometimes, she also brought with her herbal medicines that helped the labouring woman along.

Usually, labour and delivery were normal, and minor complications were handled as they arose by the midwife and the attending relatives. The mother was encouraged to be up and walking during labour. As labour became really active, and the time of birth approached, the mother assumed a squatting or kneeling position. The dry pole, lashed across two upright poles, or hung by two ropes from the ceiling like a swing, provided a crossbar on which she could lean.

Each time she would get a pain, they would help her up so she could lean on that stick. And they would support her back, pushing with their hands on the lower part of her back. And then when the pain was relieved, they would lower her down again. And that's how our babies were born—in those days you never saw a woman lying on her back to have her baby, never!

Fort Rae elders

As the baby's head began to deliver, someone prepared to catch the baby from behind or in front. Rarely was it required to deliver the head, and tears to the mother were unheard of. The baby was given directly to the mother, while the placenta was delivered and the cord cut. Different people in different regions observed their own particular customs regarding the disposal of the afterbirth, but it was never disposed of casually. It might be wrapped in a bundle and placed in a tree, burned in

the fire, or else preserved and dried to make a particularly potent medicine for treating sickness; the placenta was respected for its power and its special relationship to the child. Likewise, the stump of the umbilical cord, when it dried up and fell off, was kept or disposed of in a ritual manner. Even the amniotic fluid, when the bag of water broke, was regarded by some people as blessed water that was beneficial to anyone who touched it.

Following the birth of her child, the young mother, especially the first-time mother, was counselled in the art of motherhood and child care by her relatives and more experienced friends. Children were breastfed, sometimes for as long as two or three years. This served as a natural form of family planning, often resulting in several years spacing between children. Every woman had her own particular way of rearing and caring for her children, so the new mother would take from these offerings that which would be useful to her.

The elders interviewed recalled very few serious complications among the births in which they had participated. They pointed out that the traditional lifestyle was hard and strenuous, but that people were vigorous and healthy. Also, their diet was comprised chiefly of natural foods from the land. These factors, they maintain, contributed to the ease with which they gave birth, and to the general good health of mothers and their infants.

There were, however, occasions when serious complications arose, and birth attendants had to deal with them as best they could. Most of these problems occurred in the third stage of labour, that is, the delivery of the placenta. Several accounts were related of retained placentas that had to be removed, either manually or by cord traction. One elder recalled how she had stayed with a woman for two days and nights until she was able to remove the retained placenta and control the bleeding. She later learned that the same woman died after a subsequent birth as a result of a similar complication. In one story told by the women of Fort Rae, a woman suffered a prolapsed uterus a month or so after the birth of her child, and was nursed by the other women in camp who used hot compresses and massage until the condition corrected itself.

One woman in Fort Franklin recalled the breech birth of her daughter, following an unusually long and difficult labour. Another explained how she and a group of other birth attendants had worked successfully to do an external version, turning a

baby from a transverse position to a vertex position so that it could be born:

By God, we sure did a lot of turning, each of us taking turns, until we got that baby turned around! And then everything was alright.

Fort Franklin elder

In times of really serious birth complications, the aid of a medicine man was sometimes sought. Medicine and prayers and the faith of all in attendance were credited with saving the lives of more than one mother and child. There were cases, however, where it seemed that nothing could be done. Such was the story of the death of a baby, resulting from apparent shoulder dystocia. In such circumstances, the grief of the family was shared by the entire community.

Childbirth was indeed an experience that brought members of the family and the community together in a unique and very intimate way. The elders suggested that in the days when families gave birth together in this way, the bonds between family members were stronger than they are today. In particular, men seemed to have a different kind of appreciation for their wives, and a closer relationship to their children. The elders spoke fondly and with enthusiasm about their experiences, and explained that the act of helping another woman in childbirth was considered to be God's work, an honour and privilege to perform. Thus, women caring for one another had a spiritual dimension as well as a purely practical dimension. It was with sadness and regret that the elders noted that in today's scheme of things, there seems to be no room for native women to help each other in this way anymore.

Delivering babies, you're doing the work of God, just like looking after the sick or the elderly. It helps you to stay good. But nowadays, they take young pregnant girls off to the hospital, just like the sick elders, and it seems they have no use for us anymore.

Fort Franklin elder

Leslie Paulette, a Dene woman, lives in Fort Fitzgerald, Alberta and is a consultant working with the N.W.T. Native Women's Association.

Band-Aid Solutions for Family Violence



Susan Sammons

In 1982, a sub-committee of the Baffin Women's Association was formed to deal with the issues of family violence and spousal assault. Composed of local women, this sub-committee became the Baffin Regional Agvvik Society in 1985. The need for a home for battered women in the Baffin Region was identified early in the society's history, but much work and lobbying was needed for the shelter to become a reality.

In March 1987, after receiving an operating budget from the Department of Social Services and the Government of the Northwest Territories, Nutaraq's Place first opened its doors, in a building owned by the GNWT Housing Corporation. The house is named after Leah Nutaraq, an Iqaluit woman who spent much of her life involved in issues concerning the family. To date, it is the only transition house in the eastern Arctic.

Soon after the house became operational, it was apparent that, beyond providing a safe and secure home for women and their children, many more resources would be needed to help remedy family violence problems in Baffin communities. It also became evident that the house was understaffed and underfunded, thus eliminating all but minimal services. Some of the gaps in services which were identified included: the absence of a children's program for residents at the house; lack of an advocacy worker available to explain court and legal procedures; the need for counselling for batterers; and public education.

It was soon noted that many of the children of house residents had either been witness to, or victims of, family violence themselves, and that much work was required to break the cycle of violence. Observations of many situations in which the children, as well as the mother, had been battered showed that parent-child bonding had been damaged when the mother had been unable to prevent the abuse.

From discussions with batterers, there is substantial evidence to suggest that batterers grow up in homes where violence is

present, whether they encounter it as victims of violence themselves, or as witnesses to their fathers beating their mothers. In this atmosphere, children learn that violence is an acceptable and effective way to win arguments. They learn that physical power can be misused against weaker people with impunity. Without programs geared specifically to children from violent homes, the probability of the cycle repeating itself through subsequent generations is substantially increased.

For victims of violence to make use of the courts and the legal system itself, it is imperative that they be aware of these structures and how they operate. The majority of residents at Nutaraq's Place have little knowledge of court procedures, or the justice system in general. Owing to the small population of northern communities, there is competition for available legal services; as a result, lawyers and court workers are placed in a conflict situation, as they represent the batterers who have peace bonds against them and also represent them in court when necessary.

Due to this conflict situation, it is difficult for victims to find legal support if called upon as witnesses. Many female first- and second-time offenders are themselves victims of family violence and spousal assault. If women are to avail themselves of the legal options available to them, and if future conflicts with the law are to be prevented, this gap in services must be addressed.

Many of the women resident at our house eventually decide to return home. This decision is governed by several circumstances. For some, family pressures by parents and in-laws are too much to bear, since the batterer may be the sole hunter in the family; the woman is perceived as selfish and the source of others' suffering if he is incarcerated.

An acute housing shortage in northern communities adds more pressure to this situation. There are very few options available to women who do not want to return

home. In Iqaluit, the largest Baffin community, the waiting list for public housing is two years long. It is often impossible for victims to move in with relatives, who may be under-housed themselves; placing an additional woman and her children in a two-bedroom house already occupied by 10 people can lead to the development of another potentially violent situation. Although government employment provides housing, this usually applies only to positions requiring education or skills at a level far above that commonly possessed by transition house residents. It is a lack of employment and the reliance on welfare which compels most women to return home.

More often than not, the women return to exactly the same situation from which they departed. In the meantime, the batterer has not received counselling for his violent behaviour since his wife and children left, a fact which poses the risk of more violence in the future.

At present, a volunteer group of concerned professionals, victims, and clergy are in the process of setting up a program for batterers, which will be run on a volunteer basis (due to the lack of funding).

Public awareness concerning family violence is low, and substantial amounts of money need to be spent on bilingual public education programs. It is imperative that materials and media presentations be produced in Inuktitut as well as English. This has frequently been overlooked in the past, and the message has not been understood by the community at large.

The family violence problem in northern communities is a difficult and complex issue. We all know it happens, but solving it will be a long-term undertaking. Unless adequate funding and services are allocated to address gaps in services, the probability of the cycle continuing into the next generation is almost a certainty.

Susan Sammons is an instructor at Arctic College in Iqaluit.

Nursing in the North



Brenda Canitz

Health care in the North is largely dependent on the nurses who provide the care. The success of their work rests upon the individual and, in many cases, highly personal factors—who they are, how they perceive their job and their position within the community, and their approach to native people. The job is multi-faceted, and, at one time or another, most nurses assume varied roles.

The dynamics of the northern health-care system, and their effects on the nurses who work within that system, can be both positive and negative. A few northern communities have some of the most comprehensive, accessible, and high-quality health care available in the world. Since health-care needs in the North are varied, and must be met using limited resources, the environment provides an excellent opportunity for nurses to fully utilize their education and past experiences without the restrictions present in the South.

On the negative side, northern health-care costs have remained high, and over the past 50 years, only minor improvement has been noted in the traditional measures of health status—infant mortality and life expectancy—for the native population. Also, many nurses who come to the North for the first time have little experience in the various aspects of care given, and limited resources and personnel do not provide adequate time for orientation or ongoing in-service education. As a result, the new nurse is often left to “figure things out for herself”.

This is an insensitive and often dangerous practice, leading to a disjointed health care program with few innovations. The turnover rate for nurses practising in the North is high. There are perpetual shortages of health-care personnel, and positions are often left unstaffed for long periods of time. Neither the health-care system nor its personnel can be tailored to the special beliefs or needs of the native population; consequently, little use is made of the native healers and midwives who could assume some of the burden.

The fact that most nurses are single women maintains a subtle, but effective, form of isolation and control. They are alone, with little social support and with

little opportunity to separate themselves from the government's health-care apparatus and their professional posts. They go for long periods of time with little relaxation or sleep, yet continue to function with the intensity and compassion inherent in life-and-death situations. This leaves them vulnerable to the stress and strains of their work.

Nurses leaving their positions in the North often take many long-term problems with them. For example, many jump every time the phone or doorbell rings. It takes quite a while for the habits born of “being ready just in case” to gradually disappear. Those who may have been victims of physical and/or sexual violence take even deeper scars with them when they leave the North. Considering that most nurses are already tired, stressed, and working with limited support and extended responsibilities, these attacks can be the final blow to an already fragile psyche.

If she is lucky, a nurse leaves the northern health-care system before becoming convinced that it can't function without her. She leaves while she still has the skills that are marketable in other areas of health care. She makes a career change while still possessing the capability to work with others in a non-supervisory role. She gets out while she still has the clarity of vision to look beyond race and social class to see the person who is sick and needs help.

Native health care remains in crisis. The current system is failing. Working at the grassroots level of the health-care system, nurses are in the best position to improve the health status of native people by cooperating with them on socio-economic and health-care issues. It is the only way we will improve a currently dismal situation.

To accomplish this, the direction of the health-care programs must come from the local level. Programs must represent native needs and native solutions. Equally important to all of this, we must become concerned for the well-being of health-care workers—for it is the nurses of the North who can pull the system forward to meet the future needs of native and northern people.

Brenda Canitz is a nurse who has worked in the N.W.T. for several years.

A Note to Our Readers

Several readers have questioned our recent switch from paper envelopes to plastic mailing bags. We appreciate your concern for environmental protection and are currently investigating a number of alternatives, including biodegradable plastic and recycled paper products.

Although costs are higher—as is the case for envelopes—we hope to come up with an economical and environmentally friendly solution in the very near future.

Please bear with us, and remember, your comments and suggestions are always welcome.

GOSSIP: A Spoken History of Women in the North, edited by Mary Crnkovich, will be released at the national conference of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW), 9-12 November 1989 in Yellowknife, N.W.T. Copies are available at \$25.00 each from the Canadian Arctic Resources Committee, 111 Sparks Street, 4th Floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5B5 attn. Publications Orders. Tel. (613)236-7379/FAX (613)232-4665.

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