

Native Women Fighting for Their Birthright



“We’ve had a long, hard struggle. I think what kept us going was our heritage and our sticking together. Maybe we didn’t have all the same ideas, but we all had the one main goal in mind: equality for the women.”

- Tobique woman, Mavis Goeres

When European colonizers arrived in North America, they brought with them patriarchal views, norms and laws, and imposed them on the Native populations. This change has been long-suffered and long-resisted by Native women struggling to honour their traditional ways of life and their birthright.

Through the 1970s and the 1980s, the issue of legal discrimination against Native women grabbed international attention. In fact, the Canadian government's patrilineal Indian Act discriminated against Native women from 1869 until 1985. It required Native women to follow their husbands into or out of Native status. Thus, the women and their children would lose their treaty and aboriginal rights should they marry non-natives or non-status Indians, unable to regain them even if they were later divorced or widowed. “Along with her status, the woman lost her band membership and with it, her property,

her inheritance, residency, burial, medical, educational and voting rights on the reserve” (Silman 12). Another problem was that an Indian man could marry a White woman, and bestow his status on his wife and children, making them “instant Indians.” Consequently, Native women, who were stripped of their traditional matrilineal power, became dependant on men as well as the property of men according to Europeanized views.

The book *Enough is Enough* as told to author Janet Silman, relays the story of a group of Maliseet women from the small community of Tobique, New Brunswick. These women were at the forefront of the fight for the rights of Aboriginal women and their children who lost their status as a result of the Act’s discriminatory sections. Actually, at first, the Tobique women formed their group “to improve local living conditions for women and children” (Silman 9). The Indian Act at the time not only denied some Native women their birthright but also “gave men sole ownership of property through *certificates of possession*” (Silman 11). Women who were evicted or thrown out of their homes by their husbands had “no housing rights or recourse to help through the law” (Silman 11). In 1977, women started to gather to protest this situation. They soon realized that, while many Native women shared goals for the advancement of their people, their voices were often ignored by the aboriginal leadership and male-dominated political organizations. This just fuelled the fire and the Tobique Women gathered even more members and organized the Native Women's Walk in July 1979, from Oka to Parliament Hill, and were behind the complaint to the United Nations. Finally, in June 1985, the Canadian Parliament revised the Indian Act and passed a bill which not only marked the culmination of the years of protest by the Tobique women, but also ended over a hundred years of legislated sexual discrimination against all Native women in Canada.

On the whole, Native women today face many issues stemming from the circumstances and events of Canadian colonial history and the imposition of a patriarchal system on formerly matriarchal or egalitarian Aboriginal communities. However, the spirit of change that sparked the Tobique women was felt among other groups of strong Native women, who courageously fought against the appalling discriminatory requirements of the Indian Act in order to secure a better future for all Native women. Since then, Aboriginal women have been second to none in fighting for their right to self-determination.

Work Cited:

Silman, Janet. *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out*.

http://books.google.com/books?id=z8AvpUPM96oC&pg=PA234&lpg=PA234&dq=enough+is+enough+janet+silman&source=web&ots=g4XIKm9jkX&sig=P3NOiR4NH19RwwYr57HJa0WtOAo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PPA14,M1

For more information on the history of Native women rights:

Blair, Peggy J. *Rights of Aboriginal Women On- and Off-Reserve*. The Scow Institute. 2005. Link:

<http://www.scowinstitute.ca/library/documents/RPRightsofWomen.pdf>