Coping with Colonialism:
Services for Aboriginal Women
in Prince Rupert, British Columbia

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Introduction

The history of colonialism has greatly influenced First Nations peoples' livelihoods and experiences in Canada. Coping with colonial legacies, such as material poverty, still remains a central part of the struggles of Aboriginal people across the country (Menzies 2004). Aboriginal women, in particular, continue to be embattled by dramatic social and economic disadvantages (Fiske 1991; Voyageur 2000), and thus, research assessing the resilient effects of colonial history on their present conditions is needed.

In this chapter I take up this concern and offer an overview of the services available for First Nations women in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Based on qualitative data derived from formal interviews, informal conversations, participant observations, and newspaper research, the chapter sets out not only to delineate some of the service programs' characteristics, but to examine how effectively they address First Nations issues, particularly those of Aboriginal women. Looking at existing and non-existing community services, this study demonstrates that not enough gender-and ethnic-visible social programs aiming to counter the structural disadvantages that affect First Nations peoples are offered.

Through an analysis of the most significant features of – and justifications for – the existing services, it is argued that service programming targeted at Aboriginal peoples has been conceived with a limited colour- and gender-blind view, and that only through the visibility of ethnic- and gender-specific needs, community services would help Aboriginal women overcome some of the many negative by-products of colonial history.

Research Context

The Northwest Coast has long been a location of anthropological study. Drawing on pioneering studies by Franz Boas (1889, 1890) and other renowned academics (De Laguna 1972; Garfield 1939, 1966; Maud 1989), contemporary research has paid attention to First Nations' movements towards self-determination, including land claims, ownership and title, and the struggles for cultural revitalization (Campbell 2005; Culhane 1998; Harris 2002; Seguin 1984; Tennant 1990). Taking a political economy approach, scholars have also focused on issues of colonialism and its political and economic components (Fisher 1977; Muckle 1998), and have examined the initial integration of the First Nations labour force into the emergent industrial economy of the 19th Century, the subsequent deprivation of their resources, and their exclusion from the world capitalist economy (Campbell 1984; Knight 1996; McDonald 1984). Similarly, significant attention has been given to the resource extraction economies of British Columbia, such as the fishery and forestry industries and the effects of the participation or exclusion of First Nations peoples in them (Marchak et al. 1987; Menzies and Butler 2001). Researchers have examined the fourth-world-like conditions of underdevelopment and extreme material poverty resulting from these exclusionary practices (Barsh 1994; McDonald 1994), as well as the construction and reproduction of social inequalities in relation to existing class, racial, sexual, and gender relations (Barman 1997/98; Fiske 1996a; Menzies 1994, 1996).

Yet, with some notable exceptions (Biewert 1999; Dyck and Waldram 1993; McDonald 2003), the critical issues of marginalization and poverty, including unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, suicide and sexual abuse, and inadequate housing, have been documented to a large extent through statistics and survey data (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Statistics Canada 1994, 1995, 2001, 2006). Likewise, the growth of urban areas and the social processes resulting from larger populations of Aboriginal peoples concentrated around them (Dosman 1972; Nagler 1970) has been the subject of little qualitative research (Andersen and Denis 2003). The need for further results in this area becomes evident if we consider that the 2001 Census states that over 70% of the total Aboriginal identified population was living off-reserves and that most of them were living in urban areas (Statistics Canada 2003). The few existing qualitative studies focusing on issues of material poverty for Aboriginal peoples in urban areas have tended to look at large urban areas, such as Vancouver or Toronto (Benoit et al. 2003; McCaskill 1983; Richards 1994), and despite their contributions at illuminating the linkages between colonialism, material poverty, and its interrelated problems, more attention needs to be paid to the same problems in small and medium size urban cities.

Concurrently, research on Aboriginal women has analyzed the discriminatory practices of the Indian Act and its subsequent amendment with Bill C-31 (Bourassa et al. 2004; Fiske 2006), women's political practices (Browne et al. 2010;

Fiske 1990, 1992), and the rise of an Aboriginal women's movement (Fiske 1993, 1996b; Ouellete 2002; Simpson 2001). However, little has been written on women's relations (and access) to services, except in the health area (Browne et al. 2000). A notable exception is the work of Allison Williams (1997) on Aboriginal women's socio-economic situation in Toronto. Virtually no qualitative research that looks at community services for Aboriginal women in the city of Prince Rupert has been conducted. This paper seeks to begin filling in these research gaps.

Scope of Study

This article is a study of First Nations urban women and the community services available to them in the city of Prince Rupert, British Columbia. My research project's central goal is to provide an overview of the services available for Aboriginal women in one of the largest cities in the northwest coast of British Columbia. This chapter addresses two interrelated questions. First, what are the services in Prince Rupert offered for the community at large and what are their most relevant characteristics? Second, what are the services available for Aboriginal women and how effective are they in dealing with these women's most pressing issues?

In the field, the first research question included looking at the most important features of existing programs, the criteria that had to be met in order to gain access to them, the length of time the services had being running, and their main sources of funding. Also, one of the goals was to understand who the main users of community programs were and, from the point of view of the service providers, what other services were further needed in town. The second research question aimed at understanding Aboriginal women's access (or lack thereof) to existing services. It comprised looking at the ways women access and experience those services, what factors prevented or enabled their use of available programs, and ultimately, whether Aboriginal women actually made use of those services in order to cope with issues associated with material poverty, such as inadequate housing, underemployment and unemployment, insufficient education, and domestic violence, to name but a few.

Even though my initial research project intended to focus on Aboriginal women's personal narratives regarding their particular experiences of – and responses to – issues of material poverty, coming to the realization that there was insufficient information on existing community services for Indigenous peoples on and off the reserve gave my research a slightly different direction. Thus, my project took a different path, so that providing the community with a clear picture of the current services and resources on offer – specifically those available for Aboriginal women – as well as understanding Aboriginal women's participation in those programs and identifying the reasons that might facilitate or impede access to them, became the central concerns of my final project. It is important to mention that although politically distinct, in this paper I use the terms First Nations, Aboriginal, Native and

Indigenous indiscriminately to refer to both status and non-status original dwellers in the now urban area of Prince Rupert.

The Research Process

Field research for this paper was conducted during the month of June 2006, and is situated within the existing collaborative research efforts between the members of Gitxaała Nation and Professor Charles Menzies from the University of British Columbia.

Having had their most precious natural resources repeatedly stolen (Lewis 2004; Menzies 2004), First Nations communities have become more reluctant to share their knowledge with researchers (Butler 2004; Nadasdy 1999). Thus, researchers have slowly but steadily come to understand that the history and current situation of First Nations in Canada is one of dispossession and alienation from the natural resources and lands that belonged to them. Refusing to further collaborate in this long-standing history of expropriation of resources, which includes knowledge, social scientists have forcefully proposed and engaged in new forms of research that benefit the communities affected by their studies (Marker 2004; McDonald 2004; Menzies 2001, 2004; Smith 1999). Community-centered research that not only takes place in a certain community, but respects community protocols, addresses community needs, allows for community input into the project, presents the results back to the community, and overall, contributes to the process of decolonization, is nowadays considered the only positive way of conducting research with First Nations peoples (Beck 2006).

Consequently, research for this paper developed within the context of a collaborative service learning project between the University of British Columbia and Gitxaała Nation. Formerly known as Kitkatla, due to difficulties in English language pronunciation (Napastiuk 2003a), Gitxaała is the oldest known village on the North Coast. Located southwest of Prince Rupert on Dolphin Island, this reserve accommodates around 472 residents, while approximately 1,057 members of the Gitxaała Nation live in other surrounding areas, including Prince Rupert (Burghardt 2005b). Thus, research was conducted following indigenous Tsimshian research protocols (Lewis 2004; McDonald 2004). Coming out of a series of needs stated by the Gitxaała Nation, this study along with the projects of five more graduate students underwent a process of permission and consultation regarding both the scope of the study and the best possible strategies to carry it out. Reporting back to the community and offering luncheons were essential components of this protocol (Fox 2006; Kowalsky et al. 1996). This project in particular benefited from the support and direction of Merle Bolton, the Social Development Officer for Gitxaała Nation at the time the field research took place.

As mentioned earlier, my research unfolded in two components: one regarding services in Prince Rupert and the other about how those services impacted (or not)

Aboriginal women. In order to delineate a picture of the services in town, I located as many existing service institutions as possible, which was facilitated by the relatively small size of the city and a dense physical concentration of their offices in just one small area. After making initial contacts, returning phone calls came in. I contacted as many service providers as possible from such different arenas as education, housing, recreation, religion, advocacy, employment, culture, and sports. Due to the specificity of health services, these were not surveyed in this project. Since my efforts happened to coincide with significant events in life of the community, such as Sea Fest and National Aboriginal Day, I was confronted with social timing issues (Ritchie 2006a). Despite hearing phrases like, "Everybody is at Sea Fest" or "I am all booked because of Aboriginal Day" with some frequency, I was gratified that most services providers made themselves readily available for formal interviews and promptly booked the appointments. Interview questions focused primarily on understanding the main characteristics of the existing programs.

Whenever possible, service providers also offered their insights on the most prominent cultural and economic features of the users of their programs. They also provided information regarding the social position of specific programs within the array of other ongoing programs and coexisting institutions, along with their understanding of who had – or did not have – access to them. In addition, interviewed service providers suggested other people I could talk to and, through successive referrals I achieved the goal of mapping out the existing services and ongoing programs in Prince Rupert.

In seeking an answer to the research component regarding Aboriginal women's access to services, I sought contact with both First Nations women who worked as service providers and First Nations women who had been beneficiaries of community services. Aboriginal service providers offered their insights about their particular double position as providers and users of services themselves. In the course of talking to them, they provided further potential contacts. I also searched for Aboriginal women with access to services. Obtaining access to First Nations women was a slow process. Trust and a sense of comfort needed to be developed in order for women to share their personal experiences. When circumstances allowed, First Nations women agreed to talk to me, and let me hold interviews either in their houses, public places, or places of social gathering. In addition, I spent a few days at one Social Housing complex, located on the west side, talking to women both formally and informally. It was in this context that some of my most valuable realizations took place.

The findings of this project come from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers, as well as a handful of First Nations women who shared their experiences about accessing services in Prince Rupert. Data-gathering methods included formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations. I also participated in some of the service provisions through volunteering at a program run by the Social

Housing complex. Finally, relevant newspaper research served as a backdrop against which I was able to understand historical benchmarks in the local history.

Emerging Issues

What follows is both a description and an analysis of the findings and emerging issues I encountered during this project. I will start out by addressing the research question concerned with the existing services in Prince Rupert and what distinguishes them.

The picture of the services available in Prince Rupert reveals a generous community. Several different types of services are offered to the population, ranging from research and evaluation of social needs, referral to services, and implementation and execution of specific programs. Whereas the North Coast Community Asset Development Initiative embodies a good example of the assessment services, the BC Ministry of Community Services, on the one hand, and the North Coast Transition Society and Salvation Army, on the other, provide examples of referral and implementation of programs, respectively.

The community has a significant number of institutions working within different arenas of social action, such as education, employment, health, advocacy, addictions, counselling, housing, and child and family services. Schools, daycare centres, nurseries, preschools and churches are spread out around the city. Yet, with some notable exceptions, one striking feature regarding available social services in Prince Rupert is that most of the programs and institutions are located in a small area downtown.

Among the existing organizations, I found the Friendship House Association; Northwest Community College; Roosevelt Park Community School; The Salvation Army; North Coast Transition House; the BC Housing Commission; Kaien Island Anti-Poverty Society; the Community Enrichment Society; The Berry Patch; the Unemployed Action Centre; The Ministry of Children and Family Development; The Ministry of Community Services; and The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance. These institutions are responsible for at least one – and often more than two – programs and, since some of them represent crucial sources of help for First Nations peoples in Prince Rupert, they deserve close inspection.

Roosevelt Park Community School
Located right in the middle of a mainly Aboriginal social housing area, Roosevelt Park Community School has been described as "not your average learning space" (Vasallo 2006c:1). Due to its comprehensive child approach, "the school runs programs that deal socially with student's needs" and "has support in place for kids and their families, whereas in other schools they don't have that support" (female service provider, personal interview). During the school year 2005-2006, 184 students out of 205 were First Nations students, making up 90% of the population (male First

Nations service provider, personal interview), and, as a consequence of its location, this figure even sparks some shock: "I'm surprised it's not 100% First Nations" (First Nations woman, personal interview). The school has developed a wide range of programs that include music, outdoor learning, loss grieving, and suicide prevention, but its breakfast and lunch programs are possibly the most relevant ones. The school's success also rests on programs that include both kids and their parents, such as reading groups, a cooking program, and parenting and awareness workshops. Despite receiving recent severe critiques of its performance (Daily News 2006a, b; Mason 2006), this learning centre is probably the one with the most relevance for Aboriginal boys and girls, as well as for their parents, in the city of Prince Rupert.

Friendship House
Located at the heart of downtown, just across from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) and Northwest Community College (NWCC), this institution has established a reputation for over 40 years. Attending mainly urban First Nations people's needs ((Dawson 2000a), this centre runs a multitude of programs under the motto "All Nations Welcome, First Nations Focus." Its programs include the "Parent/Tot Program", an opportunity for learning parenting skills in interaction with children; the "Aboriginal Mental Health Program," a drop-in centre that helps people stay sober; "Alcohol & Drug Counselling Services;" "Planet Youth," a centre where young people they can practice sports and use computers for resumes and workshops; the "Pregnancy Outreach Program," which addresses issues of nutrition, labour, delivery and child rearing; "Futures" and the "Adult Graduation Program," programs that are run in conjunction with School District #52 and offer upgrading courses and courses for completing high school education; "Aboriginal Family Advocate," which provides advocacy, referrals, and resources to ministry and court cases; "Aboriginal Family Support Worker," which provides information on FAS and advocacy; "Aama Goot Aboriginal Women's Wellness Program," designed primarily for the promotion of women's healthy lifestyles; "Friendship House Preschool;" and the "Aboriginal Men's Wellness Program," which delivers anger management workshops.

North Coast Transition Society
Having just celebrated its 25th anniversary, North Coast is "an organization committed to address issues brought up by the UN CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)" and "to close the gap between the laws and realities that women face" (Vasallo 2006a:3). Transition Society provides services for women and their children that include "Transition House," a safe emergency shelter for women escaping from abusive and violent relationships; "Crisis Line" – 24-hour-a-day confidential support; "Child Support Program" for children residing

at Transition House and "Sexual Abuse Intervention Program for Children" for children who have been sexually abused; "Women Supporting Women Program" based on women-to-women sharing of stories and time together; "Supportive Recovery Program" for women with alcohol or drug addictions; "Changes Program" aimed at making positive changes towards abuse-free life styles; "Women's Outreach Program" which offers advocacy and support services; and "Stopping the Violence Counselling Program," for women who have been sexually abused or assaulted. All of the programs offered by North Coast Transition Society are specifically targeted at women in Prince Rupert. This is the only institution that aims at women as their main target users.

The Salvation Army

An institution that offers both community and church services – "because we are church first and foremost" (male service provider, personal interview). They offer a breakfast-and-lunch "Soup Kitchen," "Food Bank," "Counselling programs," and "Christmas Hamper." The Salvation Army also provides emergency shelter for men, women, and families in need of short-term shelter accommodations. Also located downtown, this institution's feeding program is one of the most famous among the population, and, thus, in times of peak economic crisis, the number of attendants to the food assistance programs increases considerably (Ritchie 2003b).

Kaien Island Anti-Poverty Society

This society seeks to help people cope with issues of material poverty, such as lack of clothing and furnishings (Lamb-Yorski 2003a). Over the past year, it has developed a couple of successful initiatives aimed at providing children with school supplies and Christmas food and presents. Both the "Backpack Program," run in collaboration with The Salvation Army (Daily News 2005c; Burghardt 2005a; Vasallo 2005, 2006b), and "Christmas Stockings" (Daily News 2005a, b) had needy families in mind. Located in a social housing complex (Ritchie 2003a, 2004), it is also, as one of the volunteers puts it, "a place where people come and sit around. They talk to me. I always have coffee on; people can hang out here for a while" (First Nations woman, personal interview).

Other visible organizations in Prince Rupert are the *Community Enrichment Society* and *The Berry Patch*, both working under the umbrella of the Ministry of Children & Family Services. Whereas the two of them offered children-related services, the former emphasizes family-related services while the latter devotes itself entirely to issues of child caring. The Community Enrichment Society offers programs, such as the "Family Skills Program" and "Support to Parents with Children with Special Needs and to Parents with Special Needs"; Berry Patch, in turn, runs a child-minding program, whose users are social housing inhabitants who call the place "The Nest."

These focal organizations run programs in a variety of areas of work. Some of the most prominent address issues of poverty and unemployment. In the 2001 Census, the population of Prince Rupert was 14,000 (Statistics Canada 2001). Due to serious and constant economic crises, especially in the fishing industry, people estimate that the city's population has come down to 12,000 inhabitants. Scarce employment opportunities have broadened the situation of material poverty, and thus welfare assistance, un/employment centres, and food programs have gained a prominent place among other services. Some of the people I talked to commented: "there are no jobs in town"; "you're really lucky if you get a permanent part-time job" (female First Nations service provider, personal interview).

The BC Ministries of Community Services and Employment and Income Assistance, as well as other advocacy centres, such as the Prince Rupert Unemployed Action Centre, seek to palliate these circumstances by offering access to computer terminals, where people can work on their resumes, or providing work-search workshops, information and assistance about relevant government legislation, and benefits to persons who are unemployed and/or underemployed.

Literacy programs have also been in the minds of community service providers as a way to confront issues of poverty in the long run. According to the Aboriginal Peoples Survey conducted in 2001, one of the paramount reasons given for dropping out of school was boredom. Inclusive curricula programs, such as the recently developed Learning through Understanding Cultural and Inclusive Imaginative Development (LUCID) program, tackle this problem by attempting to increase First Nations students' educational success through "the validation of cultures and shifting of teaching strategies" (female service provider, personal interview).

In spite of this, a key finding in relation to services and women is the dominance of both children and youth-related services and abuse and violence-relief programs. Perhaps as a result of prominent outreach coordinators working in these fields or as an expression of the priority of tackling these critical issues immediately, the high profile and visibility of these two types of services are another notable characteristic of services available in Prince Rupert. It is not difficult, for instance, to find posters on these topics spread throughout the city or brochures that can be picked up at most of the institutional offices.

The offering of food and snacks is an element shared by many of the programs, especially those with a focus on children. Since hunger is omnipresent, there are quite a few programs that provide food assistance, for instance, those run by Roosevelt Park Community School, Annunciation Catholic Church, The Salvation Army, and Friendship House. But other programs also provide snacks and it is not uncommon to find expressions like "healthy snacks are provided" or "the kids get a snack" (female service providers, personal interviews) on the walls of such places. Similarly, there is the Good Food Box program, a community-based initiative

that delivers food to people in need for $15 dollars. From depots strategically located in key centres of wide-spread neighbourhoods, the food box is distributed on a monthly basis. Yet, hunger is ubiquitous. I often heard people say such things as, "kids are always hungry; they find ways to make their way to food programs, sometimes they go to two of them" (female service provider, personal interview). A community service provider speaking of the food programs at Roosevelt Park Community School said: "We have a food program. It is only $1 dollar a day but some of them can't afford it. So we give it for free. The breakfast consists of cereal, a snack, and fruit. After school, all the stuff that wasn't eaten is gathered; the children line up after school to get a snack. We've seen kids who get 3 or 4 sandwiches to bring home. Pretty much everybody uses the breakfast and lunch program: maybe 10 kids go home; the majority stays" (male First Nations service provider, personal interview).

Community-based initiatives speak to the closely connected community of service providers in Prince Rupert, which facilitates mutual referrals, close collaborations and programs run in partnerships. It is not an exception to find programs both sponsored and handled by people working within different institutions and agencies. Take for example the previously discussed Backpack Campaign launched in 2005, in which both the Kaien Island Anti-Poverty Society and The Salvation Army joined forces and provided around 70 children with basic school supplies, such as pencils, notebooks, rulers, erasers, scissors, markers, lined and plain paper, pens, crayons and backpacks. After all, Prince Rupert is a small city: service providers working at one institution usually know the workers at another and they mutually refer their service users. *A Community Resources Directory* put together by the Prince Rupert Community Enrichment Society assists many services providers in their work and helps them provide better and more precise referrals to their users. Also, in an effort to show all the services on offer, as well as to assess existing services, in 2004, the North Coast Community Asset Development Initiative implemented an ongoing mapping project that seeks to gather the voices of the community and to visually evaluate their perspectives regarding services in town (*Daily News* 2004a, b).

I also found that funding shortages and cutbacks are a problem for many programs. As funding cutbacks hit some programs and others are chronically under or unfunded, the struggle for scarce resources is an increasing issue: "There have been cuts in funding from some years to date; it is going backwards. We have a lot of applications to do; there's a lot of bureaucracy" (female service provider, personal interview). Financial dilemmas have imposed restrictions on programs and influenced their direction and duration. Thus, the public library reduced its hours (Ritchie 2006b), proposals for a homeless shelter were halted (Lafleur 2003), and school funding is constantly under threat (Lamb-Yorski 2003b).

The fact that most programs are short-lived and soon disappear is due to many reasons: funding agencies' evaluations are not positive; grant opportunities and moneys are ephemeral; current strategic government planning does not consider certain areas of work a priority; funding agencies change directions in the nature of work they want to see embarked upon; or simply, another program or agency in town attracts resources that were previously allocated to them (Bramhill 2004; Dawson 2001a, b; Smith 2001a).

Accommodating shifting social needs also factors in; for instance, the child care centre, The Nest, started off as a program designed for parents, but since parents brought their children to the meetings, people from The Berry Patch decided to transform the program into a child-rearing facility. Likewise, KAPS Neighbourhood House was initially a youth-oriented program, but since youth already had several options downtown, the House became a childcare centre. The same thing happened with the NCCADI, which began as the Kaien Youth group and evolved into a community development and assets program in Prince Rupert.

Finally, it is significant to note the goals of the Strategic Government Plan and Service Plan outlined for the province of British Columbia and its Ministries, given that those BC Liberal cutbacks have either forced new directions on existing programs or put some programs in jeopardy. For instance, as a section within the BC Ministry of Community Services, women's services are equated to senior's services. Only programs that support abuse-and-violence-free lives for women have continued to be supported under these plans.

It is time to turn to the research question concerned with services and how they impact (or not) Aboriginal women. Since the colonial system and its resilient outcomes have affected both Aboriginal men and women, first, we will look at the programs offered to both of them and then delineate the specific characteristics of the services available for Aboriginal women.

It seems that service providers realize the potential benefits their programs can get from operating in a city with a significant number of Aboriginal people. According to a 2001 Aboriginal Population Profile (Statistics Canada 2001), Aboriginal identity population in Rupert made up over 4,500 people, a bit less than one third of the population as a whole. Using Aboriginal peoples as services' potential targets on grant applications definitely expands the array of institutions they can apply to, and these include, for instance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSD), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, Urban Aboriginal Homelessness (UAH) and the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI): "Prince Rupert gets money from UAH. Rupert qualifies as a city because of that, because of its Aboriginal population" (female First Nations service provider, personal interview).

At the same time, however, one of the most interesting issues that emerged from this research is that few of the services and programs available in town are targeted exclusively to Aboriginal peoples. Notable exceptions are the programs at Friendship House, which are unambiguously directed at First Nations peoples.

Although programs and institutions have Aboriginal peoples in mind as among their potential users, most services in Prince Rupert are not limited to them. Usually services have broader targets that include women, men, and children from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but Aboriginal people comprise the greatest proportion of their users. Service providers estimate that First Nations people make up approximately 60%, and in the most dramatic cases, 95% of the users of soup kitchens, social housing, shelter and transition accommodations, inner-city schools, food boxes, and welfare assistance. One consistent important finding, in fact, was precisely that while service users are mainly Aboriginal, programming often does not reflect the particular needs of First Nations people. Furthermore, with the exception of educational institutions, such as Roosevelt Park Community School and Prince Rupert Secondary School, popularly known as "PRSS," there is usually no accurate ethnic breakdown of service users. Yet, as mentioned above, service providers' estimations position First Nations people as well above 50 percent of "their clients," as they would sometimes call them. Interestingly, sometimes service providers invoke an ethnic-blind approach as a means of fighting against racism. In fact, the Charter against Racism, an initiative of the Multicultural Policy of British Columbia appears on one of the walls of City Hall. It seems that the popular Canadian institutional emphasis on multiculturalism prompts service providers to seek to include culturally-different populations into their programs (Smith 2001b).

On one occasion, I was told the following narrative about equality:

I don't keep records like that [those distinguishing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal users of programs] because there is no distinction. I don't look upon distinction. We don't differentiate between people. People are people, whether you are white, whether you are black, whether you are brown, yellow…we are all people. And when we start to bring in these distinctions, we start separating people. And that's not the way it should be. They are not meant to be separated; they are meant to be together, unified, so I don't bring in distinctions. I don't see any Aboriginal; I don't see any white, any… I see them as persons; I see people. [male service provider, personal interview]

Narratives like the above, though meant to rectify exclusion and overcome segregation and other injustices from the past, are simply well-intentioned ideological narratives (Clarke 1998). As a matter of fact, previous research has consistently shown that conflicting ethnic dynamics prevail, and that many socioeconomic processes are class- and ethnic-specific in Prince Rupert (Menzies 1994). Social housing is a

case in point: though potential receptacles for diverse ethnic populations, the field research indicates that subsidized housing for people with low incomes is mainly accessed by First Nations people. The debates that arose among the population when a school was given the indigenous name, Lax Kxeen (Dawson 2000b), has been further evidence of the veiled ethnic and racial tensions underlying the surface of everyday life in the city.

I was also told, on another occasion, that the reason First Nations peoples made up the majority users of services in Prince Rupert was "probably reflective of our demographics" (female service provider, personal interview), dismissing the fact that, even though some Rupert dwellers estimate a decline in the population over the past few years, the First Nations population has remained stable and makes up no more than 1/3 of its total. This shows that while poverty is a product of colonial history and is indeed racialized, service programming seems to look at social problems from a colour-blind perspective. As a result, the ethnic-blind approach taken by many service providers obscures the reality of the situation and prevents them from delivering culturally-sensitive programs to the First Nations community they are supposed to serve.

A look at women and their relation to community services reveals a similar picture: Aboriginal women suffer from a gender-blind approach, just as Aboriginal peoples suffer from ethnic-blind service programming. Only those programs included within Friendship House's *Aama Goot* Aboriginal Women's Wellness Program (Napastiuk 2003b) and those offered by North Coast Transition Society, though they also include children, aim primarily at serving women in Prince Rupert. As Transition House's Executive Director has expressed to the local newspaper: "In Prince Rupert, the main issues facing women are isolation, lack of access to services (especially for those living on the reserve), poverty, violence, historical violence, residential schools, alcohol and drugs, disabilities (and) racism" (Vasallo 2006a:3). While many programs are not specifically designed for First Nations people, the picture of services available for Aboriginal women is slightly more visible, although it takes on a peculiar attribute: programs aimed at women are those that address pregnancy, healthy life styles, and issues of violence. It was particularly clear that, since the most visible programs available in town for Aboriginal women are those related to children, youth, and violence, women have access to some kind of support, so long as they are either pregnant, have kids, or are victims of violence. This issue was confirmed by the accounts of most of the women, who only recounted experiences with services related to these issues.

A key finding that has emerged rests on the fact that service providers do not often have a breakdown of how many men and women use their services, respectively. While it is undoubtedly true that "sexual abuse and abusive relationships happen across the board" (male service provider, personal interview), it appears that First Nations women have access principally to the services associated with these problems.

At Hope Haven Transition House, for instance, the estimations state that "95% of the women in the shelter are First Nations and it could probably be higher" (female service provider, personal interview). Aboriginal women do use economic support services and sometimes seek to pull in resources by returning to school. As students in upgrading programs, Aboriginal women have found another way to cope with their economic constraints. Furthermore, not only did service providers in general not pay heed to an accurate gender breakdown of those who use their services, but I faced some discomfort and reluctance in even talking about potential differences between the genders. Every so often I heard replies of this sort: "men are more at risk than women"; "it is easier for girls than boys"; "there are single dads as well"; and "more services for men are needed, such as a men's shelter" (male service providers, personal interviews). These predictable responses that emerged during the process hinted at the idea that, since men were now more often using the services once set up for women, that, somehow, women no longer needed them. In other words, women's needs became invisible. I will use the case of an increasing number of male single parents to illustrate this research finding further.

In the 1981 Census, over 700,000 people reported being single parents. The number increased to around 950,000 in 1991, and in 2001, there were approximately 1,300,000 single-parent families in Canada. Whereas male single-parent families have certainly increased during the past three decades, making up about 245,000 in 2001, female single-parent families have consistently had higher numbers. Census 2001 stated that approximately 1,000,000 families were headed by females (Statistics Canada 2006). Claims of a rise in male single-parents have become popular in Prince Rupert. Service providers say they see more male single-parents coming in and using their children-related programs. But taking the statistical information as a backdrop against which to make sense of these statements, it is surely true that women still comprise the majority of single parents. Moreover, Aboriginal Profiles (Statistics Canada 2001) claim that a disproportionate number of these female-headed households live in conditions of extreme material poverty, rendering flawed the suspicion that women's issues had been solved and now programming needed to concentrate more on men's issues. It seems, however, that people are more aware of men's experiences and that their needs take higher priority when it comes to service programming. Conversely, women's needs seem to have undergone a process of erasure, consisting of the normalization and consequent invisibility of persistent issues of gender inequality. Female lone-parenting is not a new issue; yet they seem not to share the same level of visibility as male lone-parents. While men's indisputable emerging needs and problems are more often coming to light, women's unremitting setbacks seem to be fading to invisibility. Ironically, women do gain visibility when they become victims of that structural gender imbalance. It appears that they have to be missing women on the Highway of Tears before their

trials steal the spotlight in newspapers and have forums set up in response to their needs (Vasallo 2004).

Additionally, it appears that most women only become aware of – and gain access to – certain services and programs through word of mouth, that is, if they know someone who has accessed that service before, such as a friend, a sister, their mother, or another family member. Schools figured as a potential place of referral to specific services that help them cope with chronic unemployment and underemployment, insufficient social assistance, and inadequate housing. One last way in which women found themselves enrolled in programs was because they were mandated to do so by a Ministry or the courts. Women taking workshops on parenting or anger management were likely to have been required to do so by a provincial or federal institution, under threat of losing rights over their children.

Inadequate economic support and lack of trust figured among the most constant barriers to women's successful use of services. Lack of information due to weak or non-existent outreach programs was another contributing factor. Lack of transportation was also a key barrier to service access and this was equally true for on- and off-reserve women. The success of some programs was determined by their location and thus Aboriginal peoples were more likely to use services if programs moved out from the downtown area, facilitating access to them. The Nest is a case in point: while initially located downtown, it only took off when it was moved into a social housing complex.

Scarcity of available programs targeted at First Nations women also factors in. The virtual non-existence of programs aimed at women as individuals contributes further to the exclusion of some Aboriginal women. It seems that the only way for women to get access to services is either as mothers, wives, or as victims of violence or addiction (to drugs, tobacco, or gambling, for example). Since existing programs appear to be constructed around values of victimization or motherhood, it seems Aboriginal women are always seen, first and foremost, in relation to their children, their husbands, their families, or their communities (Fiske 1992, 1993, 1996b). From this perspective, the issue of the ways in which childless women or senior and elderly women, attract resources and manage to cope with poverty, remains largely overlooked. While unquestionably important, not all women's issues are about reproduction and parenting.

Nevertheless, one strength of the current system is the way it makes use of extended familial and community networks to help First Nations women with their most urgent economic needs. The Aboriginal women I talked to always made this clear: it was through their families and their closest social networks that they received help with child caring or migrating to the city if they were living on-reserve before, or in providing money if resources were tight or nonexistent. For all of them, family support had been central in coping with issues of poverty and lack of adequate housing.

Conclusion

Drawing on the issues that have emerged from this fieldwork research project on services available for First Nations women in Prince Rupert, we can conclude that, despite a variety of services offered in town, adequate attention to the needs and specific historic, social, and economic circumstances of Aboriginal people was rarely encountered. Nonetheless, First Nations peoples are the major users of social services in town – not a surprising fact considering the long-seeded and resilient history of systematic marginalization, exclusion and alienation from the benefits of the system. Looking at this situation in gendered terms, this research study has also shown that there were not enough available programs for Aboriginal women. The few programs available for Aboriginal women either focused on pregnant women, women with children, or on female victims of addiction and violence. Women with no children did not have preference when applying to social housing, for instance, and, hopefully, this research project will help illuminate this situation.

A couple of interesting contradictions emerged during the analysis of the research findings: on the one hand, while Aboriginal men and women were primary users of services in town, the people running the services and programming were reluctant to address the ways in which their Indigenous identity shaped their realities in particular ways. On the other hand, Aboriginal women's needs were consistently present, yet men's experiences seemed to have a higher profile and visibility. In revealing a systemic reluctance to acknowledge issues of structural gender inequality at play, this paper provides further evidence that women's specific problems have not yet been solved. If it were true that poverty was the single major cause of women disappearing on the Highway of Tears, men and women would have gone missing in equal numbers (Lheidli T'enneh First Nation et al. 2006). This is not the case.

In closing, the findings of this research suggest that the analysis of the similar and distinct effects of colonial marginalization on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and men need to be consistently taken into account when designing and delivering community social services. Furthermore, they suggest that broadening the type and scope of community services to include prevention and long-term solutions to issues of poverty and violence against women, would assist in other women's needs besides those of mothering, parenting, or short-term support. This paper ultimately argues for making service programming both ethnic- and gender-distinct (Creese and Stasiulis 1996; Stout and Kipling 1998).More research concerning the particular racial and gender workings of poverty – and the services that intend to palliate it – is also clearly needed. A colour-blind approach is not necessarily a non-racist approach. Likewise, a gender-blind perspective is not necessarily a baseline for equal gender inclusion and participation. How, if not by making gender and ethnicity visible, can we achieve an equal society, in which gender and ethnic categories are no longer necessary?

Acknowledgements

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