

FACT SHEET



AND STILL WE RISE !

**UNION SISTERS
ORGANIZE !**

Aboriginal women

In Canada, 43% of Aboriginal women live in poverty, double the percentage of non-Aboriginal women and significantly more than the number of Aboriginal men. The average annual income of an Aboriginal woman is \$13,300 – about \$6,000 a year less than \$19,350 for a non-Aboriginal woman. Only

41% can find paid work, compared to 53% of non-Aboriginal women; 30% work part-time. Aboriginal women are stuck in low paid jobs – sales, service, clerical, administration – like their non-Aboriginal sisters.

As well as being over-represented among the poor, the economic contributions Aboriginal women do make are often minimized or ignored. Despite a tragic history and the stereotypes that surround Aboriginal peoples, they continue to make tremendous economic contributions. Aboriginal women in particular are integral contributors to both the paid and unpaid economy.

Aboriginal peoples make strong contributions to the informal economy. In one study, Winnipeg economist John Loxley found that 17% of Aboriginal peoples in the inner-city earned income by making arts or crafts or engaging in auto or electrical repair and 35% sold services such as child care, cleaning or carpentry. Loxley also found that 72% of Aboriginal peoples wanted full-time work and 53% would take part-time work.

Aboriginal women face multiple obstacles in finding and keeping paid employment facing the combined factors of race, class, and gender. Aboriginal women bear the brunt of the social dysfunction placed on Aboriginal peoples. Their work of caring for families, communities, and the earth is done without any monetary recognition or support, yet is an essential part of economic life. Higher than average family size increases Aboriginal women's caregiving and household demands.

The higher rates of single parenthood, especially single mothers, means that the lack of adequate child care affects Aboriginal women more than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Child care costs are an often insurmountable barrier to participating in the wage economy.

Aboriginal women confront additional obstacles seeking employment. Many must leave their homes and communities in order to find work, something no other segment of the Canadian population is asked to do. Ardyth Wilson of Manitoba's Mother of Red Nations points to another barrier Aboriginal peoples face, namely fitting in with white ways of doing things: "You have to subordinate your own value system in order to be a player." To be economically viable, they are often forced to let go of at least part of their culture.

Education levels of Aboriginal peoples tend to be much lower than those of the general population. Although Aboriginal women have made gains in recent years, large gaps still exist. For example, in 1996 over half (54%) of Aboriginal women had not completed high school, compared to 36% of non-Aboriginal women; 29% had some post-secondary, compared to 39% of non-Aboriginal women. The education system is not doing a good job of providing for the needs of Aboriginal students. Lower education levels restrict Aboriginal peoples to low-wage jobs with few opportunities for advancement. Many people coming from First Nations also lack previous work experience. Job training programs fail to reach the Aboriginal population and information about jobs is often unavailable to members of the Aboriginal community.

Racism is a key factor working against Aboriginal employment. Many employers are prejudiced against hiring Aboriginal people, reflecting the racism that prevails in this country, both personal and systemic.

THE WAY FORWARD

- ♀ Organize, organize, organize. Our unions need to organize in the service, sales and clerical sectors of the economy, where Aboriginal women work.
- ♀ Support and negotiate employment equity programs and laws; strengthen anti-discrimination and anti-harassment language in our agreements.

- ♀ Fight for proactive pay equity legislation to combat systemic sex and race-based wage discrimination.
- ♀ Support organizations which fight for the rights of Aboriginal women such as the Native Women's Association of Canada, Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, and the Metis National Council of Women.
- ♀ Encourage the participation of Aboriginal activists and support Aboriginal women leaders at all levels.
- ♀ Educate ourselves and others about the history and current situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and support the struggles for self-determination.

