# *Coping with Colonialism*:
## Overview of the Services Available for Aboriginal Women in Prince Rupert, British Columbia

Submitted by
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# Summary

This article is a study of aboriginal urban women and the community services available to them. Coming out of a UBC Ethnographic Fieldschool, this research was conducted during the month of June, in 2006, in the city of Prince Rupert, British Columbia. The paper provides a general overview and brief evaluation of existing community services for First Nations women. Based on qualitative ethnographic data derived from formal interviews, informal conversations, participant observations, and archival research, this research unfolds in two components: first, it includes a general description of available services, and second, it addresses the main issues for aboriginal women with regard to these services. This report 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, and serves as a basis from which to argue that service programming targeted at aboriginal women's needs requires serious further attention. In concludes by suggesting some possible directions future policy-making could take.

# Introduction

The resilient history of colonialism has greatly influenced First Nations peoples' situation in Canada.[1] Coping with colonial legacies, such as material poverty, even now remains a central part of the struggles of aboriginal people in western Canada. Aboriginal women, in particular, continue to be embattled by even more dramatic social and economic disadvantages than there were in earlier times (Fiske 1991; Voyageur 2000), and thus, such assessment research is significantly needed.

*Research Context:* The Northwest Coast has long been a productive location of anthropological study. Such renowned scholars as Franz Boas, William Beynon and Marius Barbeau inaugurated the tradition of First Nations anthropological research in the region by collecting myths and oral narratives, as well as by documenting cultural practices, such as potlatches, feasts, pole-carving, and native languages (cf. Boas, 1889, 1890, 1902, 1916; De Laguna 1972; Garfield 1939, 1966; Maud 1989).

Contemporary anthropological research has continued to pay attention to First Nations' movements towards self-determination, including land claims, ownership and title, and the struggles for cultural revitalization (cf. Campbell 2005; Culhane 1998; Harris 2002; Seguin 1984; Tennant 1990). Taking a political economy approach, other studies have focused on issues of colonialism and its political and economic components (cf. Fisher 1977; Muckle 1998).

Other subjects of study have been 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 (cf. Campbell 1984; Knight 1996; McDonald 1984). Researchers have also examined the fourth-world-like conditions of underdevelopment and extreme material poverty resulting from these exclusionary practices (cf. Barsh 1994; McDonald 1994). Yet, with some notable exceptions

(cf. Bierwert 1999; Dick and Waldram 1993; McDonald 1994, 2003), the critical issues of material poverty, i.e. unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, suicide and sexual abuse, and inadequate housing have been to a large extent, documented mainly through statistics and survey data (cf. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Statistics Canada 1991 apud Bierwert 1999, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2006).

Studies have also given considerable attention to the resource extraction economies of BC, such as the fishery and forestry industries and the effects of the participation or exclusion of First Nations peoples in them (cf. Marchak, Guppy, and McMullen, 1987; Menzies and Butler 2001). The construction and reproduction of social inequality in relation to class, ethnic and racial relations have also been researched (cf. Menzies 1994, 1996, 2004a).

At the same time, however, the growth of urban areas and the social processes resulting from larger populations of aboriginal peoples concentrated around them (cf. Dosman 1972; Nagler 1970), deserves further research (Andersen and Denis 2003). The 2001 Census tells us, for example, that over 70% of the total Aboriginal identity population was living off-reserves and that most of them were living in urban areas (Statistics Canada 2003). Studies addressing issues of material poverty for aboriginal peoples in urban areas have tended to look at large urban areas, such as Vancouver or Toronto (cf. McCaskill 1983; Richards 1994), but despite their contributions at illuminating the linkages between colonialism, material poverty, and its interrelated problems, little attention has been given to the same problems in small and medium size urban cities. Social inequalities in these contexts need to be further mapped out. Incorporating gender into these studies remains critical, as very few studies have simultaneously analyzed the ethnic/racial and gender components in urban aboriginal contexts (cf. Williams 1997).

Research on aboriginal women has analyzed the discriminatory practices of the Indian Act and its subsequent amendment with Bill C-31,[2] women's political practices (cf. Fiske

1990, 1992),[3] and the rise of an aboriginal women's movement (cf. Fiske 1991, 1993, 1996; Ouellette 2002; Simpson 2001). Aboriginal women have also garnered prominent notice in the media, since many of them have gone missing in what is now referred to as the 'Highway of Tears'.[4] But these ignore the equally urgent need for studies that focus on 'living' aboriginal women. Little has been written on women's relations (and access) to services, except in the health area (cf. Browne 2000). A notable exception is the recent work of Allison Williams (1997). Virtually no ethnographic research has been conducted that looks at community services for aboriginal peoples, specifically aboriginal women, in the city of Prince Rupert. The only studies done in this town have been needs assessment research regarding services by community planners (NCCADI 2004), leaving serious gaps in ethnic- and gender-aware ethnographic research.

*Significance*: This article seeks to fill in some of those gaps by providing an overview of the services available for First Nations women in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Looking at existing and non-existing community services in this urban town, my research has revealed that not enough gender-and ethnic-visible social services are offered. Through an analysis of some of the most significant characteristics of—and justifications for—the existing services, this paper argues that more Aboriginal women-related services would help overcome the many negative by-products of colonial history. In so doing, this paper starts off by explaining both the scope of the study and the research processes and sources of information employed in it. After describing the most relevant features of existing services in Prince Rupert, the paper discusses the presence and/or absence of women in service programming and service delivery. It closes by considering the broader implications of particular forms of service programming and suggests options for consideration that could be of potential value for both service providers and First Nations communities.

## Scope of Study

My research project's central goal was to provide an overview of the services available for First Nations women in the northwest coast city of Prince Rupert, British Columbia. This general objective revolved around two interrelated questions: First, what were the services in Prince Rupert offered for the community at large and what where their most relevant characteristics? And second, what were the services available for aboriginal women and how effective were they in dealing with these women's most pressing issues?

The first research question included looking at the most important features of existing programs, the criteria that needed 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 its 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.

Although my initial research focused primarily on aboriginal women's personal narratives regarding their particular experiences of—and responses to—issues of material poverty, acknowledging the fact that there was insufficient information on existing community services for indigenous peoples on and off the reserve, gave my research a 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.

## The Research Process

Research is embedded in the prevalent political economy at large. Having had their most precious natural resources stolen by the government, First Nations communities have become more reluctant to share their knowledge with researchers (Butler 2004; Nadasdy 1999). The multi-repeated 'story of the abalone' speaks clearly to the ways in which research might still turn out to be one more means of extraction from First Nations peoples: Not so long ago a group of government researchers made their way to Lach Klan and proposed conducting a study on the population and location of fishing stocks of abalone. Gaining accurate information on the whereabouts of this species would, they explained, bring in benefits to the local population. Believing that they would manage abalone grounds more effectively, the community agreed and research proceeded. After conducting an extensive collection of data on abalone stocks, the researchers left. But a little time later, a fleet of fishing boats appeared in the area, at the exact maritime spot where the researchers had gathered their information, and, after life-threatening exploitation of the resource, a moratorium on abalone fishing had to be called for (this story is also recounted in *A View from Gitxaała* 2003; Lewis 2004; Menzies 2004).

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 2003, 2004; Menzies 2001, 2004b; Montgomery 2006; 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 (McDonald 2003). As it has been argued, anthropologists "can no longer just impose themselves on colonized or marginal peoples" (Smith 1999 apud Menzies 2001: 20), or as Menzies puts it, if research with, for and about indigenous peoples is to take place, "such research will only make a meaningful contribution if researchers change their approach so that it becomes part of a process of decolonization" (2001: 21).

Developed within the unfolding of a UBC Ethnographic Fieldschool, this research was conducted according to indigenous Tsimshian research protocols (Lewis 2004; McDonald 2004). Coming out of a series of needs stated by the Gitxaala Nation,[5] this study initially engaged in a process of permission and consultation regarding both the scope of the study and the best possible strategies for undertaking it. Reporting back to the community and offering luncheons were essential components of this protocol.[6] All of the studies developed within the fieldschool underwent that process and this project, in particular, also sought guidance on the topic of on-reserve community services and aboriginal women's participation in them. At every moment of this research, I sought consultation and tried to cultivate respectful research relationships (Kowalsky, Verhoef, Thurston and Rutherford 1996).

As mentioned above, 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, health, recreation, religion, advocacy, employment, culture, and sports. Since my efforts happened to coincide with significant social events, such as Sea Fest and Aboriginal Day, I was confronted with social timing issues. Despite hearing phrases like, "Everybody is at Sea Fest" or "I am all booked because of Aboriginal Day"[7] 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 my 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. Since "anthropological research begins with immersion in local experience and local knowledge" (Butler 2004: 37 *apud* Wolf and Silverman 2001: 51), I also participated in some of the service provisions through volunteering at a program run by the Social Housing complex. Finally, archival newspaper research served as a backdrop against which I was able to understand historical benchmarks in the local history.

## Findings: 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 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" (*Daily News*, February 24, 2006).[8] Due to its "whole 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".[9] During the school year 2005-2006, 184 students out of 205 were First Nations students, making up 90% of the population[10] and, as a consequence of its location, this figure even sparks some shock: "I'm surprised it's not 100% First Nations".[11] 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 (*Northwest this Week*, May 18 & May 25, 2006; *The Globe and Mail*, June

13, 2006),[12] 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 (*Daily News*, April 16, 2000),[13] this centre runs a multitude of programs under the motto "All Nation's 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" (*Daily News*, March 7, 2006).[14] 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".[15] 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 (*Daily News*, December 10, 2003).[16]

*Kaien Island Anti-Poverty Society*: this society seeks to help people cope with issues of material poverty, such as lack of clothing and furnishings (*Daily News*, January 13, 2003).[17] 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*, March 2005, August 23, 2005, September 12, 2005),[18] and "Christmas Stockings" (*Daily News*, November 28,

2005, December 9, 2005)[19] had needy families in mind. Located in a social housing complex (*Daily News*, April 23, 2004, December 24, 2003),[20] 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".[21]

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 employment. 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".[22]

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".[23]

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" [24] 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".[25] 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".[26]

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 last year, 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*, April 29, 2004 & September 9, 2004).[27]

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".[28] Financial dilemmas have imposed restrictions on programs and influenced their direction and duration. Thus, the public library reduced its hours (*Daily News* March 14, 2006), proposals for a homeless shelter were halted (*Daily News* March 31, 2003), and school funding is constantly under threat (*Daily News* January 23, 2003).[29]

The fact that most programs are short-lived and soon disappear is due to many reasons: funding agencies' evaluations are not positive; grants 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 (*Daily News*, April 4, 2001, April 27, 2001, November 29, 2001 & September 17, 2004).[30]

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 ended up becoming 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 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 1/3 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".[31]

At the same time, however, one of the most interesting issues that emerged from my 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% 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.[32] It seems that the popular Canadian institutional emphasis on multiculturalism prompts service providers to seek to include culturally-different populations into their programs.[33]

On one occasion, I was told the following story of 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".[34]

Narratives like the above, though meant to rectify exclusion and overcome segregation and other injustices from the past, are often nothing more than well-intentioned ideological devices. As a matter of fact, there are certainly touchy ethnic dynamics at work. Many

processes and locations are class and ethnic-specific in Prince Rupert (Menzies 1994). Social housing is a case in point: though potential receptacles for diverse ethnic populations, subsidized housing for people with low incomes is mainly accessed by First Nations people.[35] The debates that arose among the population when a school was given the indigenous name, Lax Kxeen (*Daily News*, May 14, 2000),[36] 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",[37] 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. 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 (*Daily News*, June 19, 2003)[38] 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" (*Daily News*, March 7, 2006).[39] 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 issue 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",[40] 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".[41] 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".[42] 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 strategy 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 (*Daily News*, September 17, 2005).[43]

It also appears that 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 1993, 1996). 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 and Possible Applications

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 paper 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 research process: 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 has proven 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 (Report and Recommendations Highway of Tears 2006). This is not the case.

This leads me to the possible implications this study presents for policy-makers, service providers, and First Nations communities (cf. Stout and Kipling 1998): First, it is a call for integrating gender mainstreaming—or an analysis of the effects of marginalization on women and men respectively—into all programs and decision-making processes regarding services. It also suggests 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.

In closing, this paper ultimately argues for making service programming both ethnic- and gender-distinct (Creese and Stasiulis 1996). 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?

## Notes

[1] 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.

[2] Some examples of this in Prince Rupert's local newspaper are: Aboriginal women fleeing husbands often leave reserve with nothing, *Daily News*, September 17, 2003; 'Archaic' Indian Act under review, *Daily News*, February 20, 2003.

[3] Some of the local newspaper articles addressing issues of aboriginal women and politics are: Sue Bailey, National native women's group boycotts Indian Act consultations, *Daily News*, July 30, 2001; Women who lead a First Nations community face tough gender stigma: study, *Daily News*, February 14, 2003.

[4] Aboriginal women in Prince Rupert's local newspaper, *Daily News* from 1999 to 2006 at a glance: Earle Gale, Highway 16 communities desperate for answers, *Daily News*, March 1, 2006; James Vassallo, Remember Alberta as we try to take back the night, *Daily News*, September 17, 2004; James Vassallo, First Nations groups demand Highway 16 action, *Daily News*, February 23, 2006, James Vassallo, Highway 16 walkers hope to find answers, *Daily News*, March 13, 2006; James Vassallo and Leanne Ritchie, Coons calls for more Highway of Tears forums, *Daily News*, April 6, 2006; Sarah Fox, Walkers will have minds on missing women, *Daily News*, June 9, 2006; 'Prejudice puts Native women in danger', report, *Daily News*, October 6, 2004; Stuart Hunter, Native women want inquiry into highway killings, *Daily News*, February 27, 2006.

[5] Formerly known as Kitkatla, due to difficulties in pronunciation (Pavlina Napastiuk, Gitxaała Nation re-takes its name, *Daily News*, March 20, 2003), 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 Gitxaala Nation live in other surrounding areas, including Prince Rupert (Hilary Burghardt, "Kitkatla hopes to take full control of sacred land", *Daily News*, August 8, 2005).

[6] Sarah Fox, Students put North Coast life under the microscope, *Daily News,* July 6, 2006.

[7] These festivals form an important aspect of the social life of the community. Local headlines stated: Fishing theme is sure to have many hooked, *Daily News*, June 2006; Ritchie Leanne, Excitement builds as Aboriginal Day looms, *Daily News*, June 2, 2006.

[8] James Vasallo, School is a natural hub for the community, *Daily News*, February 24, 2006.

[9] Female service providers, personal interview.

[10] Male First Nations service provider, personal interview.

[11] First Nations woman, personal interview.

[12] Report challenges Rupert's schools, *Northwest this Week*, Prince Rupert, B.C., May 18, 2006; Institute defends Rupert report card, *Northwest this Week*, Prince Rupert, B.C., May 25,

2006; Gary Mason, B.C.'s worst school just may be its best, *The Globe and Mail*, June 13. 2006.

[13] Donald Dawson, Friendship House Society: A place where the door's always open, *Daily News*, April 16, 2000.

[14] James Vassallo, Day marked with bread, flowers, *Daily News*, March 7, 2006.

[15] Male service provider, personal interview.

[16] Leanne Ritchie, Welfare cuts begin to bite, *Daily News*, December 10, 2003.

[17] Monica Lamb-Yorski, Anti-poverty group prepares to become society, *Daily News*, January 13, 2003.

[18] Hilary Burghardt, Kids get help with start of school *Daily News*, August 23, 2005; James Vasallo 2005, Backpacks ease first week of school for 40 families, *Daily News*, September 12, 2005; James Vassallo, Sally Ann backs the backpack campaign, *Daily News*, March 23, 2005; Program puts kids on same page, *Daily News*, August 23, 2005.

[19] Christmas stocking campaign, *Daily News*, December 9, 2005; KAPS stuffs stockings for kids, *Daily News*, November 28, 2005

[20] Leanne Ritchie, Anti-poverty society finds home, *Daily News*, December 24, 2003; Leanne Ritchie, Earth Day open house at KAPS new home, *Daily News*, April 23, 2004.

[21] First Nations woman, personal interview.

[22] Female First Nations service provider, personal interview.

[23] Female service providers, personal interview.

[24] Female service providers, personal interviews.

[25] Female service provider, personal interview.

[26] Male First Nations service provider, personal interview.

[27] Mapping project aims to show services on offer, *Daily News*, September 9, 2004; Rupert gets co-ordinator to build community assets, *Daily News*, Apr, 29, 2004.

[28] Female service provider, personal interview.

[29] Leanne Ritchie, Funding cuts force library to slash hours, *Daily News*, March 14, 2006; Lynda Lafleur, Friendship House left out in cold on homelessness funding, *Daily News*, March 31, 2003; Monica Lamb-Yorski, Roosevelt fears for funding, *Daily News*, January 23, 2003.

[30] Don Smith, Friendship House homeless project faces axe Friday, *Daily News*, November 29, 2001; Donald Dawson, Homeless shelter sought for temporary stays here: Friendship House, *Daily News*, April 4, 2001; Donald Dawson, New homeless shelter planned, Daily *News*, April 27, 2001; Vanessa Bramhill, We need more choices for poorer families, *Daily News*, September 17, 2004.

[31] Female First Nations service provider, personal interview.

[32] Field notes, June 2006.

[33] Don Smith, Multicultural project looks to improve services, *Daily News*, November 23, 2001.

[34] Male service provider, personal interview.

[35] This statement is based on personal observations, interaction and volunteering in social housing areas of Prince Rupert. Field notes, June 2006.

[36] Dawson Donald, What's in a name, *Daily News*, May 14, 2000.

[37] Female service provider, personal interview.

[38] Pavlina Napastiuk, Wellness group seeks perfect fit, *Daily News*, June 19, 2003.

[39] James Vassallo, Day marked with bread, flowers, *Daily News*, March 7, 2006.

[40] Male service provider, personal interview.

[41] Female service provider, personal interview.

[42] Male service providers, personal interviews.

[43] James Vassallo, Remember Alberta as we try to take back the night, *Daily News*, September 17, 2004.

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## Video

*The View from Gitxaala: The Forest for the Future Project* 2003. Gitxaala Band Council / UBC. 15 min.

## Brochures & Pamphlets

*Aama Goot Aboriginal Women's Wellness Program*, Friendship House Association

*Aboriginal Family Advocate*, Friendship House Association

*Aboriginal Mental Health Program*, Friendship House Association

*Adult Graduation Diploma & Futures Program*, School District # 52 and Friendship House

*Alcohol & Drug Counselling Services*, Friendship House Association

*Community Enrichment Society*, Prince Rupert Community Enrichment Society

*Good Food Box*, Good Food Box

*North Coast Transition Society: Services for Women & Children*, North Coast Transition Society

*Northwest Band Family Counselling Program*, Northwest Band Social Workers Association

*Parent/Tot Program*, Friendship House Association

*Planet Youth*, Friendship House Association

*Pregnancy Outreach Program*, Friendship House Association

*Residential School Abuse Outreach Program*, Northwest Band Social Workers Association
*Service BC*, British Columbia

*Unemployed Action Centre*, Prince Rupert Unemployed Centre Society, Prince Rupert Labour Council

*Your Guide to Employment and Assistance*, BC Employment and Assistance, Ministry of Human Resources