



The graphic features the Cree Association logo at the top left, which includes a circular emblem with a tent, a canoe, and two figures, surrounded by the text "ASSOCIATION". Below the logo is a red banner with a white border, containing the word "women" in large white letters. Other words on the banner include "culture", "nurturing", "wisdom", "support", "equality", "values", "leadership", "courage", "respect", "communication", "change", "beliefs", "sharing", "honesty", "fair", "trust", "encourage", "faith", and "tradition".

Public Inquiry Commission on relations between Indigenous Peoples and certain public services in Québec: listening, reconciliation and progress

Through the ten years of our official existence, we have cultivated a strong relationship with our members through culturally secure spaces and democracy. As a grassroots organization, CWEIA strives to be part of a positive transformation of women's status and roles in Iiyiyuu Istchee, provincial, national and international societies. Today, we are seizing this opportunity not only to share concerns voiced by our members, but also to bring forth a few recommendations to be considered by the commission in charge of this inquiry and, to ensure its successes.

One of the most notable concerns that has come to CWEIA's attention is a general loss of trust *liiyiyuu-liyinuuk Iskwéuch* have expressed toward public services provided by the province of Québec in addition to cynicism regarding political efforts set into motion. Either it be through systemic racism, insensitivity to indigenous cultures or discrimination in general, a lack of awareness can be observed in many instances, often being the source of tensions between indigenous peoples and public service providers. This only begins to reveal the pressing need for change, especially in terms of general education and awareness of indigenous realities.

Due to our specific geographical situation and limited resources, many communities in Iiyiyuu Istchee must rely on urban centers such as Val d'Or, Chibougamou and Montréal for a wide range of reasons. Interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples become unavoidable and sometimes result in traumatic and/or unpleasant situations. Many have



shared personal stories and experiences that have left them reluctant to either come forward or further utilize the public services located in these settings. A lack of neutral and culturally secure ways to file these complaints has also been noted as it often discourages these people to further pursue any forms of justice.

Although the effects are not limited to this sector, health services can be used to demonstrate how these issues and concerns manifest themselves in the relations between indigenous peoples and public services. We take the example of pregnant women who, in their final trimester, are often sent away from their home communities to give birth in one of the aforementioned urban areas. In spite of the fact that an escort often accompanies these expectant mothers, the measures put into place do not reduce unnecessary stress imposed on these women and the children they carry. Additionally, many are unaware of the rights they are entitled to such as the legal obligation of a health care professional to respect an expectant mother's birthing plan. In fact, Article 11 of the Québec Civil Code states that no unnecessary procedures can be carried out without a justifiable motive or the clear consent of the patient. In spite of this, there have been cases where doctors have unjustifiably provoked births with the motive of providing a faster service that does not necessarily suggest better quality or respect of the patient's rights.

For the non-indigenous peoples, an awareness plan should be implemented, making it mandatory for everyone, including public service providers, to learn about these issues that we face on a daily basis. A greater promotion and awareness of our rights is also essential in dealing with such situations. Many *liiyiyuu-liyinu* are still unfamiliar with the extent of their rights when utilizing certain public services, thus not allowing them to benefit from them in a way that should always respect their integrity. This information should be made accessible (i.e. vulgarized) and made available in all indigenous languages such as *liiyiyuu-liyinu ayimun* (Cree language). This way, we may lower the language barriers at the source of certain misunderstandings, and also the lack of denunciations essential to ending the mistreatments experienced through these public services.

It is CWEIA's sincere wish that the provincial commission will lead to the improvement of public services presently being offered to our people. However, for this to be possible, it is important to respect our vision and ensure the cultural security that our people require through this process, and especially in the institutions and services concerned by this inquiry. Our *liiyiyu-liyinu* heritage is one defined by the holistic vision of our ancestors. Everything and everyone is to be taken into consideration. In this case, all sectors must be involved, including education,



which is presently absent from the investigation in course. It is through proper education that non-indigenous peoples involved in these public services become aware of our cultures. A holistic approach also allows for a better, more inclusive assessment of the current situation, thus allowing a better course of action.

So far, many members of our communities have expressed their doubts in regards to politically motivated efforts set forth by governments of colonial heritage. We hope that the processes undertaken by the present inquiry are guided by realistic goals and responds to our expectations in terms of outcome, action and inclusion. Indigenous people are now weary of such ways of proceeding, especially due to shortcomings experienced in the past and even the present. The National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) is an example of the uncertainty such processes are already causing among First Nations people. Following the resignation of many commissioners and the absence of concrete results due to an unrealistic time frame imposed by the government, hopes for concrete results remain uncertain. For this reason, it is important that the means of actions used to bring forth these changes be reflective of our ways and not solely defined by governmental requirements.

One of the recommendations we wish to bring forward, is the creation of mechanisms that will ensure that the final reports of this commission reflect the needs of First Nations, such as the *liiyiyuu-liyinuuk Iskweuch* that are represented by CWEIA. It is also important that the process continues beyond the submission of this final report in question. Focus groups and reviewing committees need to be established to ensure that the recommendations be put into place in an inclusive manner, thus putting our words into action. It is essential that a variety of indigenous of all levels be involved in this plight toward reconciliation. Taking this into consideration, measures need to be taken to include the variety voices concerned by making this process more accessible to grassroots organizations such as ours.

It is also important to take a moment to assess the current standing between indigenous peoples, the public service providers and the government. Generally speaking, the necessity of decolonizing our structures is a reoccurring theme regarding this issue. As we have already mentioned, language barriers are an example of the ways we are being excluded from certain processes and services. We think and speak like *liiyiyuu-liyinuuk* people, however CWEIA must carry many of its operations in English. Considering the province's stance on the French language, we are often subject to an additional language barrier notably in the availability of forms, services and resources. Colonial languages prime over our own languages, in turn revealing the lack of value our cultural heritage has in non-indigenous societies. It is important



that these elements of our cultures be embedded in the legislation of our province, and even this country as a whole. Throughout the 3148 articles of the Québec Civil Code, the First Nations people are mentioned only once, leaving no mention of our specific realities and rights as indigenous peoples. A better inclusion of these realities is key in the elimination of any prejudice we presently live.

This brings us to wonder if the government is truly willing to bring forth these necessary changes which will involve major concessions on their part in addition to admitting their role in this situation. Recently, the current Premier of Quebec, Mr. Phillippe Couillard, has expressed his doubts regarding the Commission on Systemic Racism in Québec, going as far as to remodel its format to a forum. In addition to reducing the mandate of another inquiry treating of an issue that impacts us, the government has changed wordings to alleviate the gravity of the situation. They speak now of “valuing diversity and fights against discrimination” instead of referring to the harsh truth of systemic racism created by the colonial heritage of this government. We mention this as an example of the lopsided relationship that is presently maintained and also in hopes that the government of Québec will not downplay the results of this commission.

With the Québec provincial elections approaching, we fear the potential candidates who wish to gather indigenous votes will use the results of this commission for political gain. From an indigenous standpoint, reluctance to share our solutions is often motivated by the fear that other instances will appropriate our solutions to their own interest and leave the First Nations out of the process. This brings us to mention the paternalistic ways that are still common practice. This includes the political intentions with which we are being approached by non-indigenous entities, often characterized by the colonial power coming to the rescue of the indigenous peoples. It is important that we approach these issues together in a way that allows the First Nations communities of to bring their input in the implementation for solutions.

Before colonization, our people governed themselves in a way that was self-sufficient and reflective of their ways. Now, after assimilation efforts, we have been deprived of the means and resources necessary to our self-determination. Our own *liiyiyuu-liyinu* institutions have become carbon copies of the ones found in colonial societies. Slowly, we are reclaiming our ways to ensure a better future for the upcoming generations. Let us not forget that we, as indigenous peoples, hold the solutions to the improvement of our conditions. It is important that we be allowed the means to achieve their implementation, hopefully through partnerships that are defined by equality between our societies.

As bearers of these future generations, *liiyiyuu-liyinu Iskweuch*, must reconnect with their roots based on their culture and identity. The recommendations we bring will hopefully contribute to the progress necessary to move forward.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The implementation of an awareness plan
 - a. Make it mandatory for non-indigenous service providers to receive proper education about indigenous peoples, our history and our current realities
 - b. Promotion of our rights by making them accessible and easy to understand
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2. Ensuring cultural security
 - a. Eliminating language barriers to ensure comprehension and better understanding
 - b. Integrate our holistic vision within the institutions
 - c. Secure, culturally reflective spaces that are depoliticized
3. Mechanisms to ensure the final report and actions of this commission reflect the people concerned.
 - a. Implement a reviewing committees and focus groups to analyze the final report before final submission. In all cases, indigenous people of all walks of life are to be included. In other words, this should be open to the public and transparent.
4. Decolonizing our structures
 - a. Our cultural rights need to be included in our legislation, notably the Québec Civil Code.
 - b. Revise and integrate in the frameworks and policies respecting First Nations people's identity, culture, and way of life.