

Why we need a
Fundamental
Understanding of
The
Matriarchy
in BC Public Education

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There are many issues related to Indigenous peoples that are now at the forefront of discussion in our country. Recent focus has been placed on Pretendians, a term used for people of non-Indigenous ancestry who falsely claim Indigenous heritage. The main issue with Pretendians is that they fraudulently take away opportunities for Indigenous peoples, and many high-profile cases of this deceit have been revealed in Canada.

While this issue is important, it is critical as educators that we look beyond the headlines and ensure that we are aware of larger issues that are affecting our Indigenous communities and Indigenous learners, and that may not receive the same level of public attention. One of these issues relates to the Matriarchal systems of governance in Indigenous communities in our province. Many of the First Nations cultures in British Columbia are rooted in a Matriarchal system, and this is especially true for the nations that have traditional hereditary systems of leadership. Not all Indigenous communities are Matriarchal, but many of the nations are; the system that I was born into is proudly Matriarchal.

Both in our public education system, and in our social system, we need to strive to decolonize our views of Indigenous women and girls. To do this work, it is important to understand the history of Indigenous women in our province and country, and to recognize how this troubling history has affected Indigenous girls as learners in our education system. In School District 91 (Nechako Lakes), we are underway with a mission to support our girls and Rematriate our communities. Here is an overview of the history that has led us to our mission.

What is a Matriarchal Society?

A Matriarchy is a social system in which positions of dominance and authority are primarily held by women. In a broader sense, it can also extend to moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. This, of course, is a western description of something that exists within my community, and which is sacred and time-honoured. Given this definition, it becomes obvious why this was problematic for the colonial government, as it was in direct opposition to the patriarchal nature of the settler system of governance.

Women have always held positions of leadership in our communities. Our leadership is hereditary and is passed down through the female Ancestral line. We do this through our Balhats (Potlatch) system, which is – in simple terms – our traditional governance, legal and banking system. In our community, we have four main clans: beaver, bear, frog, and caribou. The clan system will vary from nation to nation, but what is consistent is that the foundation is built on the female lines of inheritance. If you are trying to control and break down a society, especially if their ways of knowing and being are in direct contradiction to your own, then you would look to shift fundamental practices within those communities. There were several ways in which this was done through legislation and policy, and in 1867, the federal government's Indian Act imposed western and patriarchal systems of land registration and governance.

Our land stewardship is tied directly to the Balhats. Hereditary Chiefs that are high-ranking will have

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Courtesy: School District 91, Nechako Lakes

land tied to their titles. It is their responsibility to ensure that those lands are cared for and protected. In our community, the word for this is Keyoh. Both female and male Hereditary Chiefs take on this responsibility of stewardship. Keyohs belong to a distinct clan, and remain in that clan, passed down through the female line. One of the mechanisms in which the government disrupted this practice was through the establishment of traplines. Indigenous-specific traplines were put in place, and tenders for these lines were given out to Indigenous males only, and could only be passed down to the sons of the trapline holder. The mapping of these traplines in BC did not take into account the pre-existing Keyoh boundaries. The Keyoh system is still in place, but it makes governance a lot more difficult in those areas.

Another way that the government undermined the Matriarchal systems of our people was through the Potlatch Bans, and through the establishment of the democratic Chief and Council systems. From 1885 to 1951, the Indigenous ceremony known as the Potlatch was banned by the government of Canada. The government justified their decision to ban the Potlatch because they believed it was preventing the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples. Today, that ban is recognized as an aspect of cultural genocide. Both the trapline systems and the Potlatch bans are recognized as the purposeful marginalization of Indigenous women in communities. There was a very strategic and systemic targeting of Indigenous women, and a reduction of their power and influence within their communities.

Voting for First Nations Women

Another mechanism that was utilized to disempower Indigenous women was the granting of voting rights, or the lack thereof. On May 24, 1918, women were granted the right to vote in federal elections. First Nations women could only exercise their right to vote if they gave up their status or treaty rights: you could choose to participate in the politics of Canada if you would agree to be disenfranchised. Status is often granted through the mother, and by removing their status they could be assimilated into the broader Canadian society. Twenty-six years later, on January 1, 1944, Status Indian servicemen, like my Grandfather Bob Prince, and their spouses were extended the right to vote. In January 1951, as the result of changes to the Indian Act, First Nations women gained the right to vote in Band Council elections. In the first Band Council election of the Lake Babine Nation, they elected a female Chief, Margaret Patrick. Clearly, those female leadership roles were and are still being honoured in our communities. In that same year, First Nations were granted the vote in federal elections, retaining their status and treaty rights. However, they are still excluded from voting in some provinces.

Bill C-31 – Indian Act Amendment

On June 17, 1985, Bill C-31 was passed, and amended the Indian Act. Since the mid-1800s the status of women had been tied to that of their husbands. If a Status Indian woman married a non-Status Indian man, she would lose her status, and if a non-Status Indian woman married a Status Indian man, she would acquire status. Bill C-31 removed these discriminatory provisions. Women – like my grandmother Evelyn who married my Irish grandfather John – lost their status and were forced to move off the reserve. Indian Agents would pay

people from the community to report women who tried to return to the reserve to see their families. This would be one of the precursors to the lateral violence we witness in our communities. This history of betrayal has had a lasting impact on our communities. Many women had to sneak onto the reserve at night to visit with family. It wasn't until the passing of Bill C-31 that my grandmother, my father, and his siblings were reinstated and gained the status that my grandmother relinquished for loving my grandfather.

The Legacy of the Policies and Practices

History shows that there was a targeted approach to disempowering Indigenous women. In addition, there is the aspect of dehumanization through assimilation. Women who were never seen as 'lesser than' now were seen as the weaker sex and subservient. It is then no surprise that crimes against Indigenous women are so prevalent. We wonder why there is an epidemic in this country, and yet we are well aware of the history of marginalization that has torn at the fabric of our communities. We currently face these statistics for Indigenous women in Canada:

- **Between 2009 and 2021**, 490 Indigenous women and girls were killed, at a rate that was six times higher than among non-Indigenous women and girls.
- June 3, 2019 - The National Inquiry's Final Report reveals that persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada's staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls.

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- **October 10, 2023** - At both the policing stage and when charges were completed in court, homicides of Indigenous women and girls resulted in charges of manslaughter instead of murder more often than when the victims were non-Indigenous women or girls.¹

We clearly have a problem that needs to be addressed, but this cannot just be done by governments and agencies alone; this will also take public awareness and education. By presenting the historical context for what we are witnessing, my hope is to help educators begin to decolonize our views of Indigenous women and girls.

What are We Doing About It?

In 2019, we conducted research in School District 91 (Nechako Lakes) with Indigenous females from Grade 8-12, asking them about their experiences in the K-12 education system. Through this research, we were able to identify the areas of support we needed to address with this demographic of our student body. The solution, drawn from the voices of our youth, was to develop a Rematriation program. After reviewing our research, we concluded that the girls were lacking knowledge and skills in areas that were traditionally taught through our Rights of Passage, which was rooted in our Balhats. The young women identified these areas where they needed support:

- Culture and Language
- Leadership
- Mental Health
- Physical Literacy

Traditionally, these are the areas of teaching that are covered through the Rights of Passage practices

¹ Court outcomes in homicides of Indigenous women and girls, 2009 to 2021, Burczycka, M. & Cotter, A., 2023, Statistics Canada.

Hundiyyin

This term is from the Nedut'en dialect and is a word used only for the women in our community. It loosely translates into English as 'sharp like a knife', but refers to the strength, mental clarity, and ability for our women to speak for our community.

when a girl became a woman. The young women would be mentored, and would then assume their places in our system of governance. To do our part as an education system, and to help revitalize what has been forgotten, we designed the Hundiyyin Indigenous Girls' Group to support our Indigenous female youth.



Hundiyyin Indigenous
Girls' Group

This is the second year of our program, and the girls have learned that this is a system that they can trust, that cares for them, and where they can see themselves. The program is based solely on a design driven by the youth, and it continues to grow each year. By the end of this school year, we will have established Indigenous Female Leadership programs in each of our high schools, and this is how we are going to Rematriate our communities.

I strongly believe that if you lift up our girls, your lift up our communities. I encourage each and every educator to inquire about the social organization of the Rights Holders of your territories, and to see if there are ways that you can first learn about local structures, and how you can support revitalization efforts. The work is both rewarding and healing, and will support the Indigenous girls in our schools to rise and thrive.

To learn more about our programming visit www.hundiyyin.com or email me at lprince@sd91.bc.ca