



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

*A Response to Women's Economic
Empowerment: A Call to Action for Ontario*

August 2017

About the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

The OFIFC is a provincial Indigenous organisation representing the collective interests of twenty-eight member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. The vision of the Indigenous Friendship Centre Movement is to improve the quality of life of Indigenous people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society and which respects Indigenous cultural distinctiveness.

The OFIFC administers wholistic, culture-based programs and initiatives which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, children and youth, health, family support, long-term care, healing and wellness, education, and employment and training. Recognised as hubs of the urban Indigenous community, Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members requiring culture-based and culturally-appropriate services every day. The Friendship Centres represent the most significant off-reserve Indigenous service infrastructure across Ontario and are dedicated to achieving greater participation of all urban Indigenous people in all facets of society, inclusive of First Nation, Métis, Inuit and all other people who identify as Indigenous to Turtle Island.

The OFIFC assists the Friendship Centres through program delivery and community development support as well as advocacy. Through supporting self-determined activities that encourage equal access to and participation in Canadian society and which respect Indigenous cultural distinctiveness, the OFIFC works to improve the quality of life for Indigenous people living in an urban environment.

As locally-driven organisations, Friendship Centres engage their urban Indigenous communities through culture-based programs and services that shape their cultural components based on their local communities, ensuring cultural efforts are always from and for that community.

Numerous Friendship Centres deliver programs and services to assist Indigenous women and their families. Many Indigenous women and their children maintain long-term relationships with their local Friendship Centres. In addition to direct programs and services, Indigenous women are a significant part of OFIFC consultations, research and training.

Introduction

This document is a submission of the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) to the Ministry of the Status of Women (MSW) on the *Women's Economic Empowerment: A Call to Action for Ontario* discussion paper. This response considers the emerging *Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy*, defines what women's economic empowerment means for urban Indigenous communities and makes recommendations to address issues within the proposed *Strategy*.

The vision of the *Strategy* is that "Every woman and girl in Ontario is empowered to succeed, with their choices supported and sustained by a society that provides equal access to economic and social opportunities."¹ MSW proposes to achieve this vision by starting with four key areas:

- Empowering youth
- Promoting economic opportunities
- Encouraging leadership, and
- Shifting social attitudes.

In addition, MSW proposes to use the following guiding principles to achieve this work:

- Voices of women and girls
- Diversity and inclusion
- Perspectives of Indigenous peoples, and
- Collaboration and partnerships.

Lastly, the proposed outcomes are:

- Educational and career pathways are used by youth and women in all fields
- Increased opportunities to participate in activities that generate economic wellbeing and access to skills development
- Targets set to promote the advancement of women in public, private, and community leadership roles
- Increased awareness and longer-term generational shifts in attitudes about gender; and
- Improved educational and economic status of low-income women and girls in Ontario.

MSW's *Strategy* comes at a critical time with a range of opportunities for greater inclusive economic growth that reflects the priorities of Indigenous women in towns and cities across Ontario.

¹ Ministry of the Status of Women, *Women's Economic Empowerment: A Call to Action for Ontario* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of the Status of Women, 2017).

Understanding the Context: Women's Economic Empowerment in Urban Indigenous Communities

Indigenous women in cities and towns across Ontario are community leaders, drivers of community economic development, knowledge keepers, mothers and grandmothers – and many other roles that women occupy in their communities. Many Friendship Centres are led by highly-skilled Indigenous women who actively advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous voices in local, municipal, regional, and provincial fora. The community-driven nature of Friendship Centres creates space for Indigenous women to be knowledge keepers and skilled professionals, in self-determined ways. The Indigenous Friendship Centre movement continues to be a safe space for Indigenous women to be leaders, gain skills, develop careers, connect with Indigenous culture, and embrace the many aspects of women's economic empowerment.

Evidence indicates that Indigenous women living off-reserve have seen rising employment rates and labour force participation since 2007, and have seen sizeable improvements in education attainment over the last 20 years.² A TD Economics Report recently found that Indigenous women saw the largest bounce-back in Canadian employment outcomes after the 2008/2009 economic crisis, and were the only group with a higher employment rate in 2014 than in 2007.³ Additionally, Indigenous women have made significant gains in joining the knowledge-based economy, particularly in higher-paying sectors.⁴ These improving employment outcomes reflect improving educational outcomes – the share of Indigenous women holding a bachelor degree or higher degree more than doubled between 1996 and 2011.⁵

However, gaps in educational attainment still exist. For example, while the share of women with post-secondary education in 2011 was approximately 53% for non-Indigenous women, only 35% of Indigenous women had a post-secondary education.⁶

Indigenous women in Ontario face disproportionately high levels of poverty, discrimination, and violence, which pose significant barriers to the achievement of improved outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. Poor access to social and health services, adequate transportation, and economic opportunity continue to compound the issues and threaten the well-being of Indigenous women and girls. The intersections of race, class, gender, economic insecurity, and sexuality create additional barriers for Indigenous women and must be recognised by government partners, particularly around the ways in which policy frameworks can perpetuate barriers to the economic empowerment of Indigenous women.⁷

² TD Economics, "Aboriginal Women Outperforming in Labour Markets," <https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/AboriginalWomen.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For example, the *Indian Act*.

How History Interacts with Indigenous Women's Economic Empowerment

To understand the significance of economic empowerment from the perspective of urban Indigenous women, MSW's *Strategy* must recognise the history of Indigenous women in Canada and how it differs from the mainstream feminist narrative of women's history in Canada and in Ontario. This understanding can provide guidance to designing and implementing more effective actions to empower Indigenous women.

A stark example of this can be seen in the evolution of voting rights and the extension of the franchise in Canada. Indigenous women with Indian status were not allowed to hold office or vote for local Band governments until 1951, when amendments to the federal *Indian Act* removed the restriction.⁸ While non-Indigenous women were granted the right to vote in federal elections in 1921,⁹ Indigenous women were allowed to vote in federal elections in 1960, when Canadian government extended the right to vote to all Indigenous people.¹⁰

What is often missing from the discourse are stories of empowered Indigenous women who have fought for greater civil rights and self-determination for Indigenous communities. In the early 1970s, Jeannette Vivian Corbiere Lavell, an activist and community leader, challenged the *Indian Act* on the basis that section 12(1)(b) was discriminatory and should be repealed, based on the 1960 *Bill of Rights*.¹¹ Corbiere Lavelle had married a non-Indigenous man in 1970, but was soon notified by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development that she was no longer considered an Indian according to section 12 (1)(b) of the *Indian Act*.¹² The Supreme Court ruled against Corbiere Lavelle's case, but ultimately section 12 of the *Indian Act* was repealed after Sandra Lovelace, following in Lavell's footsteps, brought the case to the United Nations International Human Rights Commission.¹³ These women embody what it means to be empowered – working tirelessly to give Indigenous women the opportunity to define their own lives in the face of extreme racism and sexism espoused by Canadian governance systems. For Indigenous women, economic empowerment is framed by a history of resistance to patriarchal colonialism, as well as the reclamation of culture and identity.

One of the most disturbing realities facing Indigenous communities in Ontario is the shockingly high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. As such, ending violence against Indigenous women is one of the highest priorities of the Friendship Centre movement in Ontario. The OFIFC has worked actively to end

⁸ Library and Archives Canada, "The History of Women's Vote," <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/biography-people/Pages/voting-women.aspx>

⁹ Native Women's Association of Canada, "Voting Guide for Aboriginal Women," <https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2015-NWAC-Voting-Guide.pdf>

¹⁰ Library and Archives Canada, "The History of Women's Vote," <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/biography-people/Pages/voting-women.aspx>

¹¹ Library and Archives Canada, "Jeannette Vivian Corbiere Lavell," <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/030001-1108-e.html>

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

violence against Indigenous women through several policy initiatives, such as the *Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women*, which focuses on strategic directions such as the creation of comprehensive policy and program infrastructure, building and sustaining capacity, building community leadership, and ensuring accountability.

However, Canadian governments have had a major role in the patriarchal and colonial oppression, and resulting violence, that Indigenous women face. Through policy choices riddled with outright discrimination, sexism, and racism, before Confederation and still to this day, Canadian public policy has had an undeniable impact on limiting the economic empowerment of Indigenous women.

We know that the ongoing process of colonisation has worked to strip power from Indigenous women and impose harmful Western cultural conceptions of gender roles and power. From an Indigenous perspective, empowerment can be equated with self-determination – the right to have control of your life and future, as an individual and as a community.¹⁴ In this context, Indigenous women’s economic empowerment is an active exercise of de-colonisation and the reclamation of power from a wholistic, community-based Indigenous perspective.

To meaningfully support women’s economic empowerment in Ontario, government must honour the voices and lived experiences of women across a diversity of communities, including urban Indigenous communities.

It is from this standpoint that the OFIFC provides feedback on MSW’s initial approach to developing the *Women’s Economic Empowerment Strategy*.

Our Position and Priorities

The OFIFC is encouraged by the MSW’s *Women’s Economic Empowerment Discussion Paper’s* recognition that causes of inequity are complex and can vary for different women. As stated in the *Discussion Paper*, women in Ontario face barriers to economic opportunity, including:

- Part-time, low-paid and precarious jobs are often done by women
- Biased hiring and pay practices mean women are unable to achieve fair compensation for their work, and can limit opportunities for advancement
- Limited access to quality, affordable childcare can restrict a woman’s ability to participate in the workforce
- Limited access to safe and affordable housing can result in women, including those fleeing domestic violence, experiencing hidden homelessness and difficulties accessing support

¹⁴ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *Resist, Reclaim, Construct and Act: The OFIFC’s Position on Gender in Policy Work* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2013), 11.

- Newcomer women, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, transgender persons, single mothers and racialised women face a heightened risk of violence, poverty, and are often less likely to find meaningful employment
- Senior women are more likely to live alone, and have lower income than senior men, heightening the risk of social isolation

Indigenous women face these and a range of barriers to participating in the labour market, such as little or no access to self-employment or small business development – a reality that the *Strategy* must respond to this through increased support to women seeking opportunities for economic advancement.

Improving Indigenous women’s labour market outcomes, including closing the gender wage gap, is crucial to enhancing economic empowerment. Research suggests that the biggest wage gap exists for Indigenous workers, earning between 30%-44% less than non-Indigenous workers with the same level of education.¹⁵ Further, it has been estimated that Indigenous women earn 10% less than Indigenous men and 26% less than non-Indigenous men, and that the wage gap increases for Indigenous women with a university degree.¹⁶ Indigenous women with a university degree earn 24% less than Indigenous men with the same level of education, and 33% less than non-Indigenous men with the same level of education.¹⁷ These statistics highlight the reality that many Indigenous women face – that the gender wage gap persists in Canada, even when workers have similar levels of education.

Improving access to education and training support for Indigenous women and girls is an essential component of promoting women’s economic empowerment. Transitions between education and employment need to be supported in early childhood education, K-12, and through to postsecondary to ensure urban Indigenous people have the skills and knowledge necessary to transition into the labour force.¹⁸

Supporting cultural-based urban Indigenous educational initiatives, such as the Alternative Secondary School Program (ASSP), to increase educational attainment will increase labour force participation, reduce unemployment, decrease reliance on income support programs, increase income, and result in higher job retention.¹⁹

Discussions on transitioning Indigenous learners to the labour market must also reflect greater recognition of the breadth of the education to employment continuum, including the supports and services that are needed pre-employment.²⁰ When the continuum is

¹⁵ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, “Narrowing the Gap,” https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2014/10/Narrowing_the_Gap.pdf

¹⁶ Oxfam, “Making Women Count,” <https://oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/making-women-count-report-2016.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *Labour Force and Training Strategic Framework* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2016).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *Response to the Ontario Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework Implementation Plan* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2016).

recognised, investments made in key services such as housing, mental health, child care, and food security are considered vital to transitioning learners to the labour market.

Entrepreneurship is key to economic growth, particularly in today's rapidly changing economic environment, but must be encouraged and supported in order to drive *inclusive* growth. While Indigenous women are increasingly engaged in self-employment,²¹ they continue to face barriers to entrepreneurship, including the inability to access equity and credit through financial institutions, a lack of awareness of existing entrepreneurship supports, and a lack of financial literacy.²² Supports for Indigenous women pursuing self-employment must be expanded to respond to their unique needs and must be communicated more effectively to those who may lack awareness of available supports.

The scope of barriers to economic opportunity must also be understood and reframed in the context of a continuing colonial legacy, which has resulted in an environment where Indigenous women in urban communities experience intersectional discrimination and violence on the bases of gender, race, and sexuality,²³ in addition to the impact of poverty and the consequences of inadequate access to key services.

Shifting Social Attitudes through Decolonisation and More Inclusive Institutions

The *Women's Economic Empowerment Discussion Paper's* focus area on shifting social attitudes should also address the need to eradicate colonial attitudes in Ontario's institutions and should seek to promote increased institutional inclusivity. The legacy of colonialism permeates many areas of daily life for Indigenous women, presenting unique threats to economic empowerment and adding to the social and economic barriers that they face.

For Indigenous women, systemic discrimination is one of the most persistent challenges to achieving economic empowerment and security. Colonialism imposed patriarchal attitudes on traditional societies, which disrupted indigenous cultures that honoured and respected women in their balanced roles with men.²⁴

As described in *Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples* and *Walking Together: Ontario's Long-Term Strategy to End Violence Against Indigenous Women*, systemic discrimination affects Indigenous

²¹ TD Economics, "Aboriginal Women Outperforming in Labour Markets,"

<https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/AboriginalWomen.pdf>

²² ImpaktCorp, "Creating a New Narrative: Empowering Indigenous Women Through Entrepreneurship,"

<http://www.impaktcorp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Creating-a-New-Narrative-1.pdf>

²³ American civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe intersecting experiences of oppression and discrimination tied to social identity.

²⁴ Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, *Walking Together* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, 2016), 10.

women and communities in complex ways that reflect interacting effects of sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia.

Ontario sees a shocking disparity in the level of violence experienced by Indigenous women when compared to non-Indigenous women, with statistics indicating that Indigenous women are significantly overrepresented as victims of assault, sexual assault, spousal abuse, and homicide.²⁵ The Native Women's Association of Canada's *Sisters in Spirit Report* found that:²⁶

- There are a disproportionately high number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada
- A great majority of the women are young
- Indigenous women and girls are as likely to be killed by an acquaintance or stranger as they are by an intimate partner
- The majority of cases occurred in urban areas

The Report also asserted that “violence against Indigenous women and girls is perpetuated through apathy and indifference towards Indigenous women,” and that “systemic racism and patriarchy has marginalised Indigenous women and led to intersecting issues at the root of the multiple forms of violence.”²⁷ As noted in *Walking Together*, “the extreme level of violence against Indigenous women in Ontario has complex roots stemming from deep-seeded colonial attitudes that perpetuate racism and discrimination”.²⁸ These realities shape outcomes across the board and compound the barriers to economic empowerment that face Indigenous women.

A major aspect of shifting social attitudes towards Indigenous women is ensuring that people in Ontario's institutions and decision-making networks are exposed to education and information about urban Indigenous communities, and the challenges that face Indigenous women. People in these spaces must be leaders in charting an improved path to reconciliation that recognises the importance of social attitudes towards Indigenous communities, and Indigenous women specifically.

Shifting social attitudes must also include the recognition of Indigenous leadership, knowledge and expertise across issues and policy initiatives. Through leadership in policy advocacy, development and implementation, Indigenous women have carried the voices and priorities of urban Indigenous communities, which has contributed to the development of a number of progressive policy advancements in Ontario. This work

²⁵ Joint Working Group on Violence Against Indigenous Women, *Progress Report of the Joint Working Group on Violence against Aboriginal Women*, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, <http://ofifc.org/sites/default/files/content-files/Joint%20Working%20Group%20Progress%20Report%20September%202012.pdf>

²⁶ Native Women's Association of Canada, *What Their Stories Tell Us: Research findings from the Sisters In Spirit initiative* (Ottawa, ON: Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010), 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, *Walking Together: Ontario's Long-Term Strategy to End Violence Against Indigenous Women* (Toronto: ON, Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, 2016), 10.

must be supported and recognised in order to truly empower Indigenous women and communities.

Promoting Economic Opportunities through Access to Adequate Services and Employment

For urban Indigenous communities, promoting economic opportunities must include a focus on enhancing access to adequate services and employment. This means not only improved service delivery, but also supporting community-driven programs that seek to close crucial service gaps at the local level.

One of the most pressing barriers to Indigenous participation in the economy is a lack of cultural competency and respect for Indigenous ways of being on the part of various mainstream program and service delivery organisations and institutions. Communities have expressed that racism and discrimination is often experienced when accessing services ranging from health care providers to housing and employment, and is found in key educational and justice institutions. These experiences of racism and cultural conflict often result in strained relationships between service providers and Indigenous clients, and as such, Indigenous individuals may disengage from such service providers in order to avoid uncomfortable, disempowering and sometimes hostile situations.

The result of these experiences, combined with the lack of crucial services in many communities, is often inadequate access to services that reflects a lack of community infrastructure and unsafe spaces for Indigenous women. Faced with this reality, Friendship Centres have developed into key community infrastructure that provide safe spaces in which Indigenous women can access culturally-driven, wholistic, wraparound services locally.

Supporting social infrastructure at the local level, such as Friendship Centres, helps improve local capacity to address the needs of Indigenous women in safe spaces that allow Indigenous people to connect with culture and non-Indigenous people to learn about Indigenous culture. Additionally, Friendship Centres allow Indigenous women to connect with culture in community hubs where Indigenous culture is celebrated and people are empowered to embrace Indigenous identity.

Indigenous women also access services in Ontario's schools and health care facilities, the housing and shelter services system, use public transportation, seek employment and interact with the justice system. Improving support for service delivery sites to offer culturally-safe, adequate services is crucial to ensuring that Indigenous women are empowered to have the right to determine their own lives. For Indigenous women who experience violence, many of these services, particularly affordable housing services, can make the difference for survival.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous people in deep-core housing need, the homeless population, and in systems that contribute to homelessness (justice and child welfare), calls for increased support for Indigenous women to access safe, adequate, and

affordable housing. Socially-inclusive housing for Indigenous people must include cultural safety and culturally-integrated transitional, supportive, housing options, and must respond to the priorities of urban Indigenous communities to lead the design and delivery of housing.

While the provincial government has demonstrated its support for inclusive growth and the building of social infrastructure in Ontario in some communities, the reality of significant service gaps in many communities still have a disproportionately negative impact on Indigenous women.

Friendship Centres are also key drivers of community economic development, sustainable economic growth that is inclusive of the priorities of Indigenous women. One such initiative is the Urban Indigenous Homeward Bound (UIHB) model, which is in development in seven Friendship Centres across Ontario. UIHB seeks to address systemic barriers faced by Indigenous women by facilitating access to housing and childcare, as well as employment and skills training programs. This is a community-driven program that is taking the initiative to close the service gap for at-risk Indigenous women. But innovative, multi-service programs such as UIHB are challenged to secure funding and find resources to sustain necessary service levels. To promote economic opportunity, the *Strategy* must respond to the practical needs of all urban Indigenous women, including the most vulnerable, by supporting locally-driven solutions – this is true economic and social inclusion.

Encouraging Leadership by Building Leadership Capacity in Communities

Building leadership capacity in communities is a crucial investment in people that can transform outcomes locally, and more broadly for urban Indigenous communities in Ontario. Indigenous women have long been champions of progressive change, advocating for the reclamation of rights and culture that successive Canadian governments have attempted to strip away. Indigenous leaders such as Corbiere Lavell and Sandra Lovelace have all demonstrated the outstanding and transformative leadership capacity in Indigenous women.

Building the leadership capacity of women in urban Indigenous communities means creating supportive, safe, inclusive environments where Indigenous women are not forced to navigate and overcome colonial or patriarchal views about their lives. Evidence of this can be seen across Friendship Centre communities, where Indigenous women take leadership roles across sectors in community economic development, advocacy, service delivery, and traditional knowledge, in culturally-safe environments that seek to empower women.

It also means supporting Indigenous women and youth to pursue commercial or social enterprise endeavors, with access to mentorship and funding to access opportunities that may otherwise be out of reach. Local economic development can improve choice in the labour market and access to meaningful work.

Income security is key to empowering Indigenous women in Ontario. As Ontario's social assistance system undergoes reform and potentially adopts innovative policy such as the basic income guarantee, policy choices must be carefully examined through the lens of gender, along with intersections of race, sexuality, and class. Income supports must reflect the reality of the true cost of living and must be re-positioned to facilitate meaningful improvement in Indigenous women's economic outcomes.

Empowering Youth: Creating Space for Youth Voices

Indigenous youth is the fastest growing population in Canada, with 42% of Indigenous people in Ontario under the age of 25 and a median age of 29.8 in off-reserve communities (compared to a median age of 40.2 for non-Indigenous people).²⁹ Further, youth under the age of 25 account for approximately 48% of the Indigenous female population in Ontario, based on the 2011 National Household Survey.³⁰ This indicates the significant potential in urban Indigenous communities, and the urgent need to better support young Indigenous women to build their careers, connect to their culture, and build their communities.

Indigenous youth in Friendship Centre communities continually call for more support to facilitate community development, healthy living, and connection to culture. A crucial aspect of this is the creation of safe spaces for urban Indigenous youth and children, which positively impact learning, as well as facilitate social and personal development as Indigenous people.³¹ Investments in both culture-based programming in urban Indigenous communities and culturally-informed spaces in recreational, and before/after school programs are needed to ensure children and youth are supported in their cultural development and general well-being.

Some of the most vulnerable urban Indigenous young women are involved in systems where Indigenous people are overrepresented and experience disproportionately poor outcomes, such as the child welfare system and the justice system. For example, national statistics indicate that female Indigenous youth accounted for 49% of female youth in provincial/territorial custody admissions, and that the proportion of Indigenous youth in provincial/territorial custody relative to their proportion in the population was about 7 times higher for Indigenous female youth in 2014/2015.³²

Investment in prevention programs and services are crucial to reducing the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in institutional settings, such as the child welfare system. Friendship Centres deliver key prevention services, but have expressed that

²⁹ Statistics Canada, "Aboriginal Peoples: Fact Sheet for Ontario," Government of Canada, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-656-x/89-656-x2016007-eng.pdf>

³⁰ Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey: Aboriginal Population Profile, Ontario, 2011* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2013).

³¹ Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, *We are Lil Beavers: Reflecting on a Program that Created Safe and Culturally-Grounded Spaces for Indigenous Children and Youth* (Toronto, ON: Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, 2015).

³² Department of Justice, "JustFacts: Indigenous Overrepresentation in the Criminal Justice System," Government of Canada, <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2017/jan02.html>

limited physical space and access to transportation are two key barriers to offering new child care programming and expanding existing child and family supports. The lack of sustained infrastructure support from all levels of government has not met the increased service demand of growing urban Indigenous communities and has limited the Friendship Centres' ability to grow its workforces and support all community members. Proposed infrastructure commitments must prioritise investments in Friendship Centres to enhance child-centred service delivery that is informed by Indigenous community priorities and current service barriers.

Systemic challenges also have a significant impact on the transitions along the education to employment continuum. These include racism and the lack of culturally-inclusive educational and work spaces. The underlying discrimination, lack of awareness of Indigenous culture among the non-Indigenous population, and lack of culturally-relevant spaces make it difficult for urban Indigenous people, especially, youth, to foster positive Indigenous identities, which impacts the transition to employment and retention within employment. Additionally, poverty, housing insecurity, and homelessness have been found to have a reinforcing effect on the barriers to education and employment.

Governments must make more preventive investments in youth supports at the local level to mitigate the risks to empowerment that young Indigenous women face. Young Indigenous women in institutional settings must be adequately supported in their transition to independence. Additionally, access to family well-being supports are crucial in the prevention of the separation of youth from their families, which can create additional barriers for the economic empowerment of young Indigenous women.

The Friendship Centre movement has shown that Indigenous youth are active in community leadership. The OFIFC's Youth Council includes youth representatives from local urban Indigenous communities that engage in community development, cultural reclamation, and leadership in addressing local issues. More young Indigenous women can be brought into leadership spaces with greater investment in programming for the development of leadership skills and greater exposure to policymaking at local and provincial levels.

Young Indigenous women require safe environments to play, learn, work, and live. Empowering youth through the *Strategy* will mean expanding opportunities for all young Indigenous women to reclaim their culture, access opportunity, play a meaningful role in their communities, and achieve improved well-being.

Measuring Progress

To understand its impact on women and girls in urban Indigenous communities, the *Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy* must be accompanied by an outcomes measurement strategy that is developed in collaboration with the OFIFC and Friendship Centres.

The OFIFC calls for the MSW to take a collaborative approach to the development of key performance indicators and outcomes specific to urban Indigenous women. The OFIFC also calls for the use of “disaggregated data” to provide evidence of progress toward the *Strategy’s* proposed outcomes and goals.

Women in Friendship Centres and their communities are crucial knowledge keepers and have important lived experience that would enable a clearer picture of how the government can support the economic empowerment of women in an inclusive, more informed manner. Indigenous women are also well-positioned to support the government’s effort to evaluate progress towards the proposed outcomes of the *Strategy*.

Working in collaboration with urban Indigenous communities to design the measurement of the *Strategy* is an important relationship-building exercise towards reconciliation that can enable more effective implementation of the *Strategy’s* actions. Taking this collaborative approach to outcomes measurement would also breathe more life into the “perspectives of Indigenous people” proposed guiding principle of the *Strategy*, demonstrating the government’s commitment to honouring the voices of Indigenous communities.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the MSW, through the *Women’s Economic Empowerment Strategy*:

1. Amends the MSW’s documents and approaches to specifically acknowledge Indigenous women’s unique, historic experience of discrimination.
2. Adopts a government-wide approach and includes the input of several ministries to adequately address the issue of women’s economic empowerment, particularly for women in urban Indigenous communities.
3. Expands the scope of women’s economic empowerment to reflect the core issues for Indigenous women in urban areas.
 - 3.1. The intersections of race, class, gender, economic insecurity, and sexuality create additional barriers for Indigenous women and must be recognised by government partners, particularly around the ways in which policy frameworks can serve as barriers to the economic empowerment of Indigenous women.
4. Expands the conception of *Strategy* goals of empowering Indigenous female youth, promoting economic opportunities, shifting social attitudes, and encouraging leadership to reflect the priorities of urban Indigenous communities.
5. Applies a gender-based analysis to the review of current and future policy and program frameworks utilised by the provincial government and the broader public sector.
 - 5.1. Policy choices must be carefully examined through the lens of gender, along with intersections of race, sexuality, and class.

6. Supports UIHB as a culture-based, community-driven, multiservice program that seeks to close crucial service gaps for urban Indigenous women and facilitates enhanced economic participation.
7. Recognises and supports the leadership of Indigenous women across policy and program development in order to shift social attitudes.
8. Supports social infrastructure at the local level, such as Friendship Centres, to help improve local capacity to create and expand safe spaces that allow Indigenous women to connect with culture.
9. Supports Indigenous women and youth to pursue commercial or social enterprise endeavors, with access to mentorship and funding to access opportunities that may otherwise be out of reach.
10. Supports community economic development to improve choice in the labour market and access to meaningful work.
11. Incorporates more progressive approaches into the income security system, in recognition and consideration of the reality of the true cost of living, and to support meaningful improvement in Indigenous women's economic outcomes.
12. Improves access to, and effectiveness of, Ontario's education system to response to the cultural needs of urban Indigenous girls and women, and to the changing economic environment.
13. Improves access to education and training support for Indigenous women and girls.
14. Brings more young Indigenous women into leadership spaces with greater investment in programming for the development of leadership skills and greater exposure to policymaking at local and provincial levels.
15. Works with the OFIFC to design and implement the *Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy* - breathing more life into the "perspectives of Indigenous people" proposed guiding principle.
16. Works with urban Indigenous communities to design key performance indicators and outcomes specific to urban Indigenous women, towards the achievement of the *Strategy's* desired outcomes.
17. Builds community infrastructure through enhanced support for partnerships and collaboration with community-based, urban Indigenous organisations, including through increased funding for their unique services and supports.
18. Work with OFIFC and other Indigenous groups to establish priority areas for implementation and targeted supports.