

Declaration by BC Indigenous Women
BC Assembly of First Nations
Women's Dialogue Session held on March 16-17, 2017

1. **Development and Goal of the Declaration:** We, Indigenous women from the BC region, met at the Women's Dialogue Session hosted by the BC Assembly of First Nations on March 16-17, 2017 on the traditional territory of the Musqueam people. The purpose for the Session was to bring together First Nations women in leadership to discuss challenges, successes, and strategies to support and enhance our wellbeing and development.
2. **Where We Come From/Our Cultures and Traditions:** We acknowledge that we are here because of the strength of our diverse cultures, traditions and teachings of our ancestors, which have sustained our people since time immemorial. As our teachings tie us to the land, we affirm our responsibility to protect, defend our children, and secure our rights to our lands and waters, as they provide the essentials of life for our people. As women, we are the givers of life and bring future generations into being. We commit to raising and nurturing our children, especially our sons, to be respectful of Indigenous women.
3. **What We Have Lived Through:** Colonization and assimilation have existed since the time of contact and continue to this day. Indian Residential Schools, the reserve system, the 60s Scoop, the *Indian Act*, and countless pieces of legislation have impacted the legal, social, and political contexts that women have had to navigate to survive.
4. **Where We Are Today:** Indigenous women and girls are five times more likely to experience violence than any other population in Canada and three times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be victims of violence. Despite the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guaranteeing gender equality since 1982, the *Indian Act* continues to discriminate against Indigenous women because of their gender and has cut off women from their communities, entitlement to Status and the benefits that flow from that entitlement, and created familial tensions that have resulted in exclusion and isolation.

Indigenous women continue to suffer from a multitude of traumas, which largely flow from the effects of colonization. The continued silence about these traumas impede healing and are killing our people. We commit to breaking the silence and working together to facilitate healing among our peoples. When we are faced with or observe violence against Indigenous women and children, lateral violence, abuse, discrimination, sexism or racism, we commit to call it out and address it in a good way, which includes ensuring that adequate supports are in place for all impacted individuals.

Indigenous women are underrepresented in political processes at the local, regional and national levels. We commit to continue promoting the full and effective participation of Indigenous women in political processes. We commit to supporting one another to address the unique challenges that face Indigenous women leaders. We commit to creating space encouraging and mentoring young Indigenous women to become involved in political processes and to flourish. We will encourage mentor and support our young women to pursue their personal, educational, and social goals without judgment or reservation.

5. **Where We Are Going and How We Will Get There:** We have the right to health and wellness, and respect, a responsibility to ensure the health and wellness of our children and of our families. We commit to fostering healthy homes, communities, and spaces to go where our children and families feel safe, secure and loved. We will support our community members to overcome their addictions to drugs and alcohol, as we recognize the damage that substance abuse has done, and continues to do, to our people. We will support and embrace our people who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and recognize it can come in many forms: physical, emotional, mental, and financial. We must make space and keep widening the circle to include our people who are returning from prisons and institutions, and commit to finding community-based solutions to promote healing and forgiveness to bring them back to our traditional ways. We honor and respect our ancestors and women leaders who have passed on their strength, courage, wisdom and teachings to us. We acknowledge that the path to healing is often a long one, and we will forgive ourselves and others for our shortcomings as we continue on our paths.

Reconciliation and decolonization will not be achieved until our way of life, our languages and cultures are revitalized and thriving; until our rights to our lands and resources are recognized; until our rights to self-determination are recognized and implemented; and until the physical, mental and spiritual health and well-being of our peoples are restored.

6. **Resilience and Respect:** We acknowledge the tremendous strength and resilience of Indigenous women in overcoming challenges and reclaiming our distinct roles and responsibilities in our societies. We will support each other, and vow to connect with one another when we need support. We will continue to build our networks to ensure we have the support we need to achieve our goals. We commit to bringing each other into the circle, to be inclusive, because we know we are stronger together than apart. We are as strong and resilient as mighty cedar trees; we move with what is going on, but we are always rooted in our culture and will not get knocked over. We have a responsibility to share our knowledge and strength with women and girls who need mentors and support to bravely realize their potential. We agree that education and experience will come, but attitude is the most important.

We honour and respect ourselves and one another. And will be role models to our children youth, families and communities. We are one in love and prayer. We will teach the boys in our communities how to be men who respect and honour our women and girls. We will continue to honor the memory of those murdered and missing First Nations people we have lost in our families and communities, and respect their memory by living each day with purpose and compassion.

We call upon our men to join us, as they are part of our families and communities. We need to have balance in our communities, and we need the men to stand beside us as we step into a new chapter of healing and reconciliation.