Fed-up native women tackle male leadership

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A vocal group of aboriginal women wants to send the male leaders a strong message -- it is they who are largely responsible for the dire problems confronting native Indians.

B.C. representatives of the fledgling National Aboriginal Women's Association (NAWA) assert that outspoken leaders such as Bill Wilson, of B.C.'s First Nations Summit, and Assembly of First Nations leader Matthew Coon-Come, have no right to blame "white people" for native woes.

Rather, they say, it's powerful leaders and band chiefs who must answer for widespread poverty, favouritism and corruption on the reserves. "Aboriginal women don't have a voice," says Wendy Lundberg, a member of the Squamish Nation living in Steveston. "The chiefs haven't been truly representing us."

Ms. Lundberg wonders how her own Squamish Nation, with only 3,000 members -- half of them off reserve -- spends its $32 million annual budget. Band budgets are considered band business, thus there's no public accountability.

"Twenty top councillors and administrators earn approximately $2.5 million, tax-free," she says.

Yet one of the so-called Downtown Eastside missing women, April Lynn Reoch, was a member of the Squamish Nation. "Did they provide any social programs for her?" asks Ms. Lundberg.

Musqueam band member Gail Sparrow, on the NAWA board, said: "We've decided, this is enough.

"We have to get women out there to deal with their own issues. We have to give them a vehicle to speak and be represented without being under the arm of the chiefs."

Angie Todd-Dennis, a member of the Carrier Nation in Prince George who lives in Vancouver, was blunt: "We all recognize the corruption that has gone on. We want to have principled, intelligent leaders." She wonders why Indian chiefs seem to live in the best reserve housing.

Six B.C. women who strongly support NAWA told me last week the historic matrilineal tradition of aboriginal society has been tossed aside by a male leadership that shows disdain for female band members. Indian men have ignored the needs and aspirations of women, they say. Worse, they've ignored family violence, sexual harassment and rape on reserves.

It's pointless to seek help from Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault because he refuses to get involved in internal band affairs. Native women traditionally have been represented by a branch of the AFN, but the six B.C. women dismiss that group as complacent and submissive.

NAWA, established last October, has no established source of money but received a $255,000 federal grant to work with Mr. Nault to overhaul the Indian Act, a project the AFN has rejected.

The six also say they are disappointed in the way the B.C. Liberal government has handled the treaty referendum. Ms. Sparrow, an unsuccessful Liberal candidate in the last election, said

Premier Gordon Campbell broke a pledge to involve aboriginals in formulating referendum questions, which were drafted by a committee of politicians.

The women complained that existing aboriginal groups assigned to represent them don't even keep band members informed about policy and legal matters, let alone allow them to have any say. "They don't lobby on our behalf," says Ms. Todd-Dennis.

Other problems facing aboriginal women the six hope NAWA will address include:

- Off-reserve members are supposed to vote in band elections, but laws regarding proxy voting aren't being respected.
- Legislation ensuring a right of return to reserves for aboriginal women married to non-aboriginals frequently isn't respected. Ms. Lundberg's mother -- who married a "white man" -- for years has been fighting to reclaim Squamish land willed to her by her father.
- Even when women married to non-aboriginals retrieve band land, they can't will it to their children because they aren't considered status Indians.

"The men always say, 'we look after our women,' " scoffs Ms. Lundberg.

Ms. Sparrow issued a powerful warning to the male leadership: "We've been a sleeping giant. We're going to rise up and take our rightful place in society. Until now, we didn't have the vehicle to be politically recognized.

"Well, now we're here, we're not going away and, finally, women are going to have a voice."

About time; they certainly couldn't do any worse than the men have.

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