

Involving Aboriginal Women in WITT

by Shirley Boucher and Janis McKeag

On a cold and rainy Saturday in October, a small and enthusiastic group of women from Saskatchewan and Manitoba met for the workshop "Involving Aboriginal Women in WITT." We were immediately warmed by the coffee and muffins supplied by the Native Services Division of SIAST. And while we sipped and munched, we viewed the new video "She's Got A Ticket" produced by SaskWITT. On this positive note we began our workshop.

Donna Racette, Director of the Regina Friendship Centre, was our invited speaker. Her opening remarks began with some familiar statistics about the workforce; decreasing career opportunities for women in white collar and pink collar areas, de-skilling, automation, etc. She also mentioned a new trend of employment opportunities which are part-time, minimum wage, with minimum job satisfaction, and no job security, found particularly in the fast food and service industry. She called these "McJobs". What was interesting is the fact that Aboriginal people did not factor into these statistics at all. She stated that whereas retention in the workforce is not currently a major problem for Aboriginal people, employment opportunity is. Retention in the educational system is a major problem. Less than 5% of Aboriginal students entering high school, successfully complete.

This workshop was timely for WITT Aboriginal women's groups to begin exploring ways and means of developing cooperative partnerships to improve the recruitment and retention of

Aboriginal women in the trades, technologies, operations and blue collar work. The workshop began with some cultural and language sensitization. It was brought to our attention that while the term Aboriginal was correct when referring to all Aboriginal people, when addressing a specific Aboriginal people, like Indian, Métis, and Inuit, use the specific reference. It was also suggested, that the terms such as advisory, meetings and featured speaker based upon business and dominant society models, be replaced with circle and circle discussion, to reinforce the idea of participation and partnerships.

To help make WITT groups less intimidating for Aboriginal women, the following points were discussed. When inviting Aboriginal women to speak or facilitate a workshop, ask the women to participate in a circle discussion. Another point that was made is that there is often an unspoken expectation when you are Aboriginal, you are expected to be able to speak to all Aboriginal issues, and this is not reasonable.

After these general ideas were discussed, the group began to consider ways of developing networks between the two groups. Cultural sensitivity and in-house workshops should be implemented to educate and inform WITT members about Aboriginal issues. Also, steps need to be taken to increase awareness and support for WITT initiatives within Aboriginal women's groups. This could be accomplished through covering letters of introduction to different Aboriginal groups in the province. This could be followed by notices of meetings and programs/projects of WITT to be published in different Aboriginal newsletters. WITT could also request information about employment oriented programs and projects sponsored by Aboriginal women's organizations and offer to present a workshop on career opportunities in the trades, technologies, operations and blue collar work. Ultimately a goal, for this group, would be to hold a partnered conference, where participants could be brought in from all areas of the provinces.

The area which elicited the most discussion was that of role modelling. It was agreed that it is a most effective way to encourage Aboriginal women to explore non-traditional careers.

One of WITT's difficulties is being able to identify Aboriginal women in the field, and to let them know that this organization exists. Work will have to happen on the local level to develop contacts and networks which will help identify Aboriginal women in the trades who will be willing to serve as role models. It would be good to be able to publish their stories in the newsletters. This area also has potential for another partnered project - developing posters to promote Aboriginal women working in the trades, technologies, operations or blue collar work.

Major problems of programs and projects were also discussed. These included items such as limited lead time to get the word out, limitations place on who can participate, incentives needed to get single parent women on social assistance interested in training, gaps in programs which don't take into consideration the realities of women's lives, and child care. All of which are common to both groups.

There is much to be done to accomplish our goal of involving Aboriginal women in WITT. Working in partnership is a way to help us realize this goal. This workshop was a positive first step.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

The Women's Bureau of Labour Canada recently released *What About You?* (in French, *À toi de choisir!*), an excellent video profiling six women working in occupations in which women are currently underrepresented. The 19-minute video highlights the training, work setting and aspirations of a pilot, a research scientist and manager, a television camera operator and producer, a firefighter, an aerospace systems engineer, and an electronics technician. These women share their experiences and talk about the benefits and challenges associated with working in these jobs.

What About You? was commissioned by the Women's Bureau to increase awareness of the many opportunities available to women and to stimulate their participation in a wide range of jobs.

The video will appeal to a wide audience: young people considering their future, individuals who are entering or re-entering the workforce or who are considering changing careers, as well as unions, employers, educators and guidance counsellors. It could be used in a number of educational and informational purposes.

A User's Guide containing background information has been designed to facilitate discussion.

For further information on *What About You/À toi de choisir!*, please contact the Women's Bureau, Labour Canada, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0J2, (819) 953-0055.

WITT thinks this is one of the best role-modelling films available!