

Human Trafficking Prevention: PACT-Ottawa's Project Northern Outreach

By Sheila Smith, RSCJ

Project Northern Outreach is a partnership between PACT-Ottawa (Persons Against the Crime of Trafficking in humans) and a core circle of twelve Ojibwe Nookmisak (Grandmothers) from Manitoulin Island and the north shore of Lake Superior.

Head grandmother, Isabelle Meawasige, from Serpent River First Nation in Ontario, and I began to talk about a potential partnership during the summer of 2014 when we were together in India to participate in Women's Worlds Congress. Grandmother Isabelle shared about the need for human trafficking prevention in the remote Anishinabek¹ communities in Northern Ontario. "We don't want to lose any more of our girls," she said to me.

It is well-known by Aboriginal² peoples in Canada and backed-up by academic research that one of the key root causes to trafficking in Aboriginal women and youth is the breakdown of their societies and cultures due to the imposition of colonialism. One example of a colonial policy in Canada is the Indian residential school system, which caused great havoc in Aboriginal communities. However, the disparities caused in the past continue today through the imposition of government structures and policies that still disfavour Aboriginal peoples in Canada. For example, discrimination is evidenced in the research, which shows that Aboriginal women and youth are highly overrepresented in human trafficking, i.e., anywhere from 15 to 50% of persons trafficked in Canada are Aboriginals, although they represent only 4% of the population.

After many months of proposal writing with a team from PACT-Ottawa, Project Northern Outreach received some short-term funding from Public Safety Canada to address sex trafficking in Anishinabek communities. The Project respects the Anishinabe view that Nookmisak are the highest



The Nookmisak and Pact-Ottawa holding the talking stick in recognition of the mutual partnership and the support of the Nookmisak circle.



The PACT Mission: To recognize the human dignity and promote the well-being of all trafficked persons.

authorities, educators and keepers of cultural and foundational laws. Project Northern Outreach supports the core circle of twelve Nookmisak as they come together to understand the nature of human trafficking in their communities, to work as a collective to raise awareness, to prevent human trafficking, to support and help those who have survived.

The core circle of twelve Nookmisak, along with three representatives of PACT-Ottawa, gathered in February 2016 and twice in March. The goals of these meetings were to support each other, pray in ceremonies, learn, share stories, gather resources, and decide on action steps for the way forward. The Nookmisak welcome frontline service workers, students, Chiefs, et al. into the circle and create partnerships to learn from one another and work together.

One of the aims of Project Northern Outreach is to adapt PACT-Ottawa's existing educational material to make it more culturally relevant for Anishinabek audiences. Revising the educational materials is not only necessary for information transmission in communities. It is also essential for training frontline service workers, police, educators, medical personnel, child welfare workers et al., so that they understand how to work within Anishnabek systems and cultures when confronted with situations of human trafficking.

The funding for Project Northern Outreach came to an end on March 31, 2016. However, the work does not end. The Nookmisak continue to organize themselves in phase two of the project, which is now called Nookmisak Nangdownjgewad (Grandmothers Taking Care). This change in name expresses a shift toward greater understanding of mutual recognition, as PACT-Ottawa becomes aware that their role is not to do *for* the Nookmisak. Rather, they participate in a more solid partnership that recognizes the role and contributions of each.

The mutual partnership between the Nookmisak and PACT-Ottawa was solidified when a talking stick, carved from white willow was given to Project Northern Outreach.



Head grandmother Isabelle Meawasige and Sheila Smith, RSCJ, building a partnership.

It was a gesture of recognition that symbolized and actualized the experience of mutuality being lived between the Nookmisak and PACT-Ottawa. The purpose of the talking stick is to help support the work of the Nookmisak circle, which became the core of Project Northern Outreach.

I was presented with the talking stick³ and asked to be its keeper. This honour and responsibility involves recognition that the keeper of the stick is a bridge between PACT-Ottawa and the Nookmisak. The keeper of the talking stick has the responsibility to care for it, use it, and bring it each time the Nookmisak gather.

The talking stick is passed around the sharing circle at each meeting. The gift of the talking stick is a gesture of mutual recognition. It symbolizes hope that the cultural struggles between PACT-Ottawa and the Nookmisak in their work together to help end trafficking in Aboriginal women and girls in Canada are worthwhile; and the gesture was a real experience of the gratitude in which we all participate.

As the work continues, the Nookmisak have identified the following priorities to prevent and address trafficking of Anishinabek women and youth: to raise the importance of the teaching and healing roles of the Nookmisak; to advocate, educate and create awareness about human trafficking; to strengthen cultural competency; to further develop Anishnabe-centered educational material; to present at community-based educational events; to work with persons who have survived and their families; and to continue to support one another in this work. ❖

1. Anishinabe, Anishinabek (plural): used by the Ojibwe/Chippewa, Odawa, Potawatomi, Algonquin, Delaware and Mississaugaa Tribal Nations to self-identify as individuals or collectives.
2. Aboriginal peoples in Canada comprise three groups: First Nations, of which there are approximately 614 nations, Inuit, and Metis.
3. Ontario Federation of Friendship Centres, "I Am a Kind Man" www.iamakindman.ca/IAKM/YouthSite/the-healing-circle.html (accessed March 30, 2016). In the Anishinaabe clan system of governance, a talking stick or feather is used to facilitate talking, sharing, or healing circles, and is used in decision-making. The stick or feather is passed around the circle, and the person holding it has the opportunity and responsibility to speak his/her truth. "Using a talking stick or feather in a healing circle can help the person focus him or herself to have a deeper awareness into their inner world, or inner feelings. As each person has the opportunity to speak, the object gets passed to the next person. It doesn't have to be in any certain order."