

Inuit Men and Empowerment

Inuit men are in deep trouble. There are many reasons why this is so. One can cite Toxic Shame, Automatic Failure Syndrome, Alcoholism, Depression, or any number of other clinical terms; these do not help. What helps is to understand that the most significant cultural change has occurred for the men in Nunavut, rather than for the women. Women, who faced less of a cultural shift have already begun their collective healing. Women's groups have been going for the past ten years. Support groups of all kinds have sprung up and many women now know that as they break the silence, they end the violence. Men, however, are only just beginning their healing journey.

As we at Ilisaqsivik have worked through the development of a community based Young Men's Healing Program we have discovered that men in our community feel empowered enough to be able to teach restoration of relationship only in one role area traditionally assigned to Inuit men: land skills. All the foundation beliefs of what it is to be a man in Inuit terms have been shaken drastically over the past 3 generations. It seems apparent that only when these fundamental roles of Inuit men are fully addressed, with the men in Nunavut be able to heal from their great sense of loss, abandonment and abuse and fully regain their empowerment, their love and belonging, their freedom and their sense of joy.

Traditional Men's Roles

Builders of Shelter

Men were the builders of the shelter for their family out of materials at hand. A man had to be able to build a snow house before being married.

How the role has shifted

Men rarely build houses for their families. If a man chooses to build a shack for his family out of found materials in a settlement today, the government intervenes, calling it substandard housing. Only at outpost camps do men still have empowerment in this area. The HAP house project for housing was an excellent program that if it had been continued, could have helped re-establish this role at a community and territorial level.

Providers for the Family

Traditionally the men of the family provided almost all of the food, and retrieved wood, bones, skins, metal or other raw materials to make all the items the family needed. Even in more recent times, Christmas presents and store goods were provided by the men, through the sale of skins and furs and by virtue of the fact that one man could go shopping with a dog team or a boat, more easily than a women.

How the role has shifted

In many Nunavut families now, the women are now the main money earners and the providers. It is the women who more and more are taking on the top paying jobs in the communities, because they have been able to be schooled more easily and have excelled in the office and retail jobs that are being put in place in Nunavut. Women also now for the most part do the family shopping and 'hold the purse strings', simply because the cheques come in their name. Even when it comes to Christmas, many men have to rely on their wives for money to buy presents. This is entirely disempowering. The only part of life where men are still the main providers, is as providers of land foods and skins. (This is the heart of the matter, and this is why men's healing work so often does – an must – begin with land based programs.)

Furnished all transportation needs.

The men looked after and trained the dogs. They found and fashioned materials and made kamutiks. They made the kayaks and umiaqs, and told their wives what skins they needed and helped sew on the skins.

How the role has shifted

Today men have to rely on the whim of the southern snowmobile market to design machines, and price them. More and more the machines breakdown and parts are expensive and inaccessible, forcing men to wait through days or even weeks of frustration to repair a snowmachine. It is a very difficult balancing act to hunt enough to keep hunting skills current, and to work enough to pay for parts and new machines. In so many families, hunters have to rely on their wives to provide the money to purchase and maintain their machines. This is a contradiction in terms!

It is presently next to impossible to operate a dog team as a hunter. To acquire the food the dogs require is very difficult, especially now that polar bear quotas have been so drastically cut, leading to a huge influx of starving bears in the summer and fall months (July – December) that clean out all caches of dog food (particularly whale meat and Spring seal caches) and fight and kill dog teams for remaining scraps. In our community this fall over 12 dogs have been killed or badly injured by bears.

There are large wildlife and economic issues to deal with in the restoration of this role.

Excellent Land Skills

Men and women both traditionally had to have excellent land skills. However, the men more than the women had to be able to read the weather, the ice and sea conditions, and to respond appropriately. It was a matter of life and death.

How the role has shifted

Today, because of school attendance regulated by law, young men are unable to learn the land skills in the depth required for survival until they stop going to school. And because of the inability of men to have adequate transportation at their control at hand, many men who should be out hunting and working on the land, are sitting paralyzed by frustration at not being able to fix a machine that hasn't even yet been paid for. This is perhaps the deepest frustration our men feel, because it is interrupting their essential, most basic need of being rightly related to the land. (This is the heart of the matter, and this is why men's healing work so often does – an must – begin with land based programs.)

There is further disempowerment in this area because the environment of present Nunavut communities is almost entirely based on an office driven system. Literacy skills, mathematical skill, and administrative skills are of utmost importance. In most families, it is the women who excel at these things; men are thus further disempowered because it is their women who have the skills best suited to the working environment.

Liasion with other camps/ family members

Because men traveling alone traveled more easily and further than women traveling with children, it was the men who traveled most often to other camps and settlements to talk to other family members and other people.

How the role has shifted

Women are traveling out of the community all the time for medical reasons, and spending long times away while waiting for babies to be born, and so are often the main links between family members and associates who are in other communities or down south. The Nunavut Quest Dog

Team race has reinstated this traditional of men's travel and must be encouraged and supported greatly if only for this fundamental reason of supporting the men's role of traveler. Meetings of all kinds have become important to men as well as to women under present conditions because in some ways, it fulfills the meeting role of people traditionally met by visiting camps.

Helper with birthing and with sick children:

Traditionally in the camps, women primarily looked after child birth needs and sick children. However, there are many stories of a man and wife alone in camp, where the husband helped his wife give birth, and was responsible for knowing a great deal about traditional healing methods as well.

How the role has shifted

Women primarily run the Health Centres, this takes the responsibility for family health away from the families, and more specifically the husbands/ fathers of a family. Women are taken away from the community for birthing – usually for an average of 3 weeks. Sick children are whisked away to hospitals, usually in the company of mothers. Husbands are thus completely distanced from childbirth and fathers from sick children. Both roles are thus greatly undermined.

Deciding when to move and where

Men with input from their wives decided where and when to move camp. It often depended on the family's historic camping sites and hunting grounds.

How the role has shifted:

Today it is often the job of the wife that dictates where and when a family moves.

Husband and Father

Men are the male partners in committed relationships. Men are the fathers of the children of the family. As father, they are responsible for the safety, guidance and nurture of their children. In healthy relationships both traditionally and presently men were/are equal partners with their wives in their relationship (marriage), and in looking after their children.

How the role has shifted:

Men are often now more in the role of housekeeper and babysitter.

When these shifts or changes in role are understood, and when men will begin to heal and turn away from their patterns of abuse, their addictions, their violence and their self-destruction. They will be able to move ahead into restoration of their families, construction of their family's homes, providing for the needs of their family, and the fulfillment of their new role as the Men of Nunavut.

Empowering Men

When men cannot get the empowerment they need through action and thinking in the traditional sense of an Inuit man's role through internal control (following their cultural, family and personal beliefs) they seek inappropriate empowerment through other, more externally controlling, and often destructive (to self and others) means. Drug and solvent abuse, and non-violent alcohol abuse are the more passive ways of seeking false empowerment. Alcohol abuse leading to violence, family violence, sexual abuse, suicide, and drug dealing and gang participation are the more anti-social ways men deal with this grab for power.

At times the young men in particular who go into these self destructive behaviors say that they are seeking freedom or simply fun. It is true that drug and alcohol involvement, or even gang

participation or drug dealing are perceived as meeting freedom needs. When asked why they use hash or alcohol, many young men will even report that 'it's fun'. However, if we view these behaviors as being simply freedom or fun fulfilling, we miss the root of the problem, which is empowerment.

Inuit men are not unaware of empowerment; every time one goes hunting and successfully takes an animal and then feeds his family, there is a true sense of empowerment. Hunting alone is one of the most empowering activities known to man, and is primary in nature. City men who do not have either the knowledge or the opportunity to hunt are very disempowered in this aspect. However, it is easy to understand why the empowerment need is so strong in Inuit men: they are very familiar with true empowerment through hunting, and intuitively seek to have the same level of empowerment in each aspect of their lives.

The question remains, how can men today become fulfilled, and meet their need for power?

There are three levels of empowerment that face men and women, but men more particularly. The first level of empowerment is in the area of relationships. When a man begins to understand his own needs and to work on personal development and self-care, he will become empowered from the inside, and will be able to become internally controlled. Understanding and developing his various roles in action, thinking, feelings and physiology will further empower him. Each man has multiple roles, and must address each individually: son, father, grandfather, uncle, etc. Tied into these roles are skills such as building a house, being a provider, and having a certain base of knowledge. It is also key that young men in particular develop a close and healthy relationship with the mentor/ instructors/ masters/guide in their lives, the men who teach and guide them. These are sometimes older men in the family but are also sometimes people who are not related to the man.

The second level of empowerment is seated in a man's ability to use the environment. Learning to drive a vehicle or a dog team, swimming, hunting, climbing, skiing, boating, all of these pursuits help one to be empowered in terms of the environment. Survival techniques, Reading weather, learning about ice conditions and developing a strong sense of navigation are also critical pieces to if one is to be able to travel safely any distance required. Information on animal, bird and sea life habitats, migrations, and habits, as well as environmental care add to a man's sense of empowerment as he travels on the land.

The third level of empowerment in the world as we live today is the level of being in control of the social systems and human technologies that organize our lives. As men become skilled in using modes of public transportation (airlines, busses, trains, subways, ships) and in repairing small engines such as snowmobiles, boat motors and dirt bikes, they become more able to control their travel and financial options. As they learn basic construction, electrical and plumbing skills, they become capable of building and maintaining their own dwellings. Learning to manage money and setting up bank accounts or buying insurance and savings bonds all lead to getting control of personal finances. Developing cooking, shopping or other household skills also can lead to a sense of independence and empowerment. Similarly learning to use a library, the Internet or computer programs can give a man a rounded sense of empowerment.

Any man or group of men has many avenues of activity and thought, as noted above, to develop a clear and lasting sense of real empowerment.