

**UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Fifteenth Session
Thursday, May 12, 2016
Agenda Item 5**

**Statement by Dr. Dawn Lavell Harvard
Native Women's Association of Canada**

[Dawn will introduce herself]

INTRODUCTION:

We are very pleased that Canada has adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples fully and unconditionally.

This decision will have a significant impact on the ability of Indigenous women to exercise their basic human rights. As Indigenous women, it is our basic human right to lead and centrally participate in the decision-making processes that impact our lives. As outlined in Article 18,

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

What matters to Indigenous women? The health and well-being of our families. The health and well-being of our communities and our nations. The restoration of our traditional roles in our communities and governance structures.

To restore our place in decision-making processes, Indigenous women have a lot to reclaim and make visible. We have to reclaim our traditional gender balance in our communities and families, restore the leadership roles of Indigenous women in governance structures and restore our roles as mothers, knowledge keepers, lifegivers, medicine women and human beings.

In Canada, the Indian Act denied and sought to destroy all of these roles. As a result, we see gendered violence running rampant in our communities. We live in governance, social and family structures that replicate colonization.

To heal our families and communities, we must reclaim our leadership roles. As Indigenous women we are the givers of life and the first teachers of our future generations, it is our traditional role to ensure the continuation of an Indigenous worldview.

The right to speak for ourselves as Indigenous women and not have others speak for us, is of particular importance in light of Article 8, section 1 of The United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples which states that:

Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

Through the adoption of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples we can take the next step further to ensure leadership of Indigenous women at all levels including international, national and traditional governance structures.

The forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples around the world remains a deeply gendered project, with the imposition of colonial heteropatriarchal systems continually pressuring and silencing and making invisible Indigenous women. The forced replacement of traditional gender equality with colonial governance structures is a violation of inherent Indigenous rights internationally, and has led to the appallingly high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Family breakdown and identity loss go hand in hand. Indigenous children are vastly overrepresented in state colonial systems and strengthening Indigenous women as mothers, aunties, grandmothers and leaders in their families is central to the restoration of our families and our nations. Without the family we have no nations and treaty rights become meaningless if we have nobody left to exercise them.

It is not enough to say that Indigenous women have the same opportunities as Indigenous men to compete for space in decision making bodies. We need to ensure that Indigenous women have their own governance structures and opportunities for leadership.

As Indigenous women, our traditional Women's circles and counsels have functioned well since time immemorial. We now have to revitalize these traditional governance structures. This revitalization has to include the protection of Indigenous women's roles and responsibilities as mothers, clan mothers and leaders. As stated in Article 7, Section 2.

Indigenous peoples have the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence, including forcibly removing children of the group to another group.

Therefore we strongly recommend that the whole-hearted adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be fully implemented by all governments with the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous women's rights both individually and collectively.

We also strongly recommend that the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues develop and implement gender equity targets.

Nothing about us without us.

There is no true reconciliation until the traditional gender equity in our communities is restored. There is no true reconciliation until balance is restored.

Thank you for listening to me.