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Janet Mancini Billson

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# Shifting gender regimes: The complexities of domestic violence among Canada's Inuit

Janet Mancini Billson\*

**Résumé:** Renverser le régime des genres: les complexités de la violence domestique chez les Inuit du Canada

Cet article intègre les voix des femmes inuit dans le discours sur la violence domestique, un problème central dans leurs communautés. Les opinions des femmes inuit interviewées proviennent d'une étude faite à Pangnirtung (Nunavut) entre 1988 et 2002, et sont présentées avec des statistiques sur la violence domestique. Le gouvernement canadien regroupa les Inuit de la toundra dans ce petit village de la Terre de Baffin durant les années 1960. Les sources de la violence domestique sont enchâssées dans le contexte du bien-être des femmes, des impacts de la relocalisation, du changement social rapide et des droits des femmes en tant que droits humains. Les modes traditionnels de violence domestique, tels que décrits par les femmes inuit, sont comparés aux taux contemporains. Les femmes inuit de toutes générations explorent les facteurs qui précipitent la violence domestique et les impacts de cette dernière. Dans la mesure où la violence domestique résulte de régimes des genres renversés et déséquilibrés, amplifiés dans le cas présent par un changement social rapide, ce pourrait être un phénomène transitionnel. Au fur et à mesure que les Inuit développeront de nouvelles formes culturelles et qu'une stabilité politique et économique émergera de la création du Nunavut, les taux de violence domestique devraient décliner. Puisque le bien-être individuel contribue au bien-être social en général et vice versa, les femmes et leurs communautés devraient ressentir un plus bas niveau de bien-être objectif et subjectif tant que la violence domestique ne sera pas réduite.

**Abstract:** Shifting gender regimes: The complexities of domestic violence among Canada's Inuit

This article brings the voices of Inuit women into the discourse on domestic violence as a core issue in their communities. The views of Inuit women interviewed as part of a case study of Pangnirtung, Nunavut Territory between 1988 and 2002 are accompanied by statistics on patterns of domestic violence. The Canadian Government brought the Inuit from the land to this small Baffin Island hamlet during the 1960s. The sources of domestic violence are framed within the context of female well-being and the impacts of resettlement, rapid social change, and women's rights as human rights. Traditional patterns of domestic violence, as reported by Inuit women, are compared to contemporary rates. Inuit women across generations explore the precipitating factors and impacts of domestic violence. Insofar as domestic violence results from shifting (and unbalanced) gender regimes, in this case amplified by rapid social change, it may be a transitional phenomenon. As the Inuit develop new cultural forms, and political and economic stability emerge from the creation of Nunavut, domestic violence rates should decline. Because individual well-being contributes to general social well-being and vice versa, women and their

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\* Group Dimensions International, 6 Otis Shores, Woolwich, ME 04579, USA. jmbillson@gdiworld.com

communities are likely to experience a lower level of both objective and subjective well-being until domestic violence has been reduced.

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## **Introduction**

Domestic violence sounds the alarm that gender regimes—power relations between males and females (Bayes *et al.* 2001:2)—are far from balanced. Shifting gender regimes are the social equivalent of shifting tectonic plates under the earth's surface and are fundamentally related to domestic violence. The social earthquake caused by organised resettlement of the Canadian Inuit from the land into hamlets during the 1960s was accompanied by cultural imbalance, rapidly changing social norms, marginality, economic dependency on a distant central government, and significant changes in gender roles and power (Billson 1990; Billson and Mancini in press). The changes in gender regimes led to increased violence toward women, decreased female well-being, and violations of women's human rights. Violence between intimates occurred "out on the land" with similarly negative consequences, but current rates of domestic violence among the Inuit are the highest in Canada and appear to be higher than in the hunter-gatherer context.

## **Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews with Inuit women and men in Pangnirtung on Baffin Island conducted with the assistance of Inuit interpreters from 1988 through 2001 provide insight into past and present domestic violence. Almost 100 women and 20 men participated out of the 1100-1200 Pangnirtung residents (Billson and Mancini in press). The random sample included women from age 14 to 100, homemakers and wage-earners, and all status and educational groups. Respondents were selected using the "snowball technique" in which interviewees were asked to introduce researchers to women (or men) who might have a different experience, history, or viewpoint. The surnames indicate that a wide range of families were involved. Transcripts were coded into categories that participants identified as key issues for Inuit women in Pangnirtung. The Progressive Verification Method was employed (Billson 1991). As each interview closed, respondents were asked to reflect on the linkages between shifting gender regimes and domestic violence, and to contribute to a self-reflexive interpretive analysis of the strengths, challenges, and needs of women in Pangnirtung. This collaborative analysis was presented to subsequent interviewees and refined again, thus becoming "progressively verified." A draft manuscript was submitted to key informants for community reflection.

Inuit participants partnered in the interview process, engaged in interpretive analysis of the data, and read drafts of all data analysis. Interviews were conducted with women and men separately in private settings. Data were coded into key categories using a grounded theory perspective. Billson and Mancini (in press) provide an account of the methodology and a full list of consulting interviewees. A woman who was 44 in 1988 would have been 18 to 24 during resettlement; an elder in her 80s or 90s in 1988 would have memories from the late 1890s. Thus, the research echoes the voices of Inuit women and men across a century; ages have been changed slightly here to protect identities.

Canada's newest and predominantly Inuit Territory had 27,000 residents as of its creation in 1999. Eighty percent or almost 22,000 were Nunavummiut—Inuit residents of Nunavut—who live in 27 communities ranging from about 200 people to over 5,000 in the capital, Iqaluit. These are relatively large enclaves compared to the small camps that formed the crucible of behavioural standards before resettlement. A camp might consist of 40 or 50 people, an elder woman reflected: "A few families—they never go beyond 50 [people]. When we come into communities, it suddenly becomes 200 or 300 people. The culture and our way of living started to change then" (Billson and Mancini in press: 15).

A case study of any community cannot be generalised to the entire Territory or to all Inuit in Canada. Pangnirtung is an officially dry community (into which alcohol and drugs are nonetheless smuggled), has a long history of contact with Anglo-Europeans, and, at about 1200 residents, is smaller than Iqaluit but larger than many other hamlets. These interviews with Inuit women and men suggest, however, that the history of domestic violence before and after settlement is not unique to their community. The experience of Inuit women in Pangnirtung is framed as one instance of the global epidemic of violence against women but also as an issue of 1) the underlying structural damage and strains caused by resettlement and cultural domination (internal colonialism); 2) female victimisation that results in diminished female well-being; and 3) domestic violence as an abridgement of women's rights as human rights.

Violence between intimates is viewed here as a *symptom* of structural factors associated with contact and resettlement that weakened male well-being and threaten female well-being. While domestic violence is also a "problem" requiring solutions, a structural perspective emphasises the inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society that feeds into gender violence related to humiliation and frustration (RCAP 1996).

### **Domestic violence "out on the land"**

Hard data are not available on pre-resettlement domestic violence. Accounts by early anthropologists, explorers, or missionaries were often misleading because of male bias, cultural misinterpretations, and the failure to confirm assumptions with Inuit informants (McGrath 1997). Rates of domestic violence are elusive because a curtain of silence shielded general knowledge of violence between intimates: "Then, and now,

we talk about the weather, about food, about hunting—about anything but what is hurting us” (Woman, 92).

In the absence of official data, Inuit recollections are crucial. Although it is important not to romanticise pre-resettlement gender regimes, elder participants insisted that domestic violence did not come close to post-resettlement proportions. Men “disciplined” their wives (Griffiths *et al.*, 1995); rivalry over women occasionally led to wife stealing, fighting, and killing (Balıkcı 1970). Some elder Inuit men said that it was acceptable for a man to hit his wife, and can still do so if she fails to obey, but elder women countered that argument: “If you look back at our culture, assault wasn’t ‘traditional.’ There wasn’t much wife beating out on the land, because there weren’t all the social pressures” (Woman, 59).

Pangnirtung women old enough to remember life in the camps say that people considered family violence despicable and that it was rare compared to present rates: “We were told not to do things like that. It all seemed like happy families” (Woman, 82). The roles of Inuit men and women intermeshed: “Marriage was not an option, but a matter of life and death, the union of a hunter and a seamstress. Neither could live without the contribution of the other” (Morrison and Germain 1995: 28). The gender calculus was simple. If the Inuit woman did not make clothing from seal and caribou skins, the man would freeze to death as he hunted. If he could not hunt well, the woman could not make clothing that the family required for survival: “Everybody got along, working with each other” (Woman, 79).

The male’s provider role cemented the wife into her marriage and role as producer, but informal social control operated against the man who violated her trust. If others heard that a woman’s husband was hurting her, elders or others would chastise the husband:

If you don’t stop that—if you don’t wake up and realise what kind of mistake you’re making—then take a hike! It’s not nice to hit your wife. She’s your *wife*! You’re not allowed to do that. It’s not our nature. If you can’t control yourself, let us help. If you don’t want help, forget it and take a hike (Woman, 44).

The husband would have to change or leave. If the woman was violating the norms, the elders would say, “You’re not being a good wife” (Woman, 44).

### **Domestic violence in post-resettlement Nunavut**

Rates of domestic violence are unclear in the hamlets as well, but recent data indicate that Nunavut’s rate is several times the reported national rate, (Canadian Panel on Violence against Women 1993b; Department of Justice Canada 2002; FPTMRSW 2002; Statistics Canada 2001, 2006). The data are confirmed by elder Inuit women: “We see a lot of [domestic violence] in this generation” (Woman 82). Aboriginal women experience physical abuse and are far more likely than white women to die because of a violent act (Health Canada 1999, 2002: 5). For Inuit women 25 to 44, the death rate by violence is five times the rate for all women in Canada (Health Canada

2001). Inuit female well-being is understood within the context of Nunavut's general health characteristics. Inuit women also experience double marginality (female and Aboriginal), which increases the likelihood of unemployment or underemployment, low income, poor housing, and "poor health status, poverty, violence, substance abuse, child care and over-surveillance" (Dion Stout et al., 2001: i). Nunavut residents have 10 years lower life expectancy than Canada as a whole (Bell 2002).

As with rates of domestic violence all over the world, Inuit rates are undoubtedly underreported in post-resettlement Inuit communities, especially in those with minimal police presence (Archibald and Crnkovich 1999; Flaherty 1997). Health and census agencies provide rates by territory and province, but do not break down the Nunavut data by race/ethnicity (Health Canada 2001; Levan 2001; Statistics Canada 2006). Because Nunavut was part of the Northwest Territories until 1999, rates of domestic violence for the 20<sup>th</sup> century do not pinpoint Nunavut rates.

As in the camps, women will not discuss violence between intimates "even with their families or friends" (Woman, 38). Even in towns where people suspect that rates are high, interviewees said they seldom hear anyone talk about domestic violence: "It's very private. It happened to a couple friends, but it's something that they just don't want to discuss. I hear rumours, and I see the black eyes and the bruises" (Woman, 50).

In spite of these data issues, two trends are identifiable from the available statistical records and the perceptions of Inuit participants: 1) Inuit rates are higher than among other groups in Canada and 2) the rates have increased since the Inuit lived out on the land. Rebecca Kudloo, former Eastern Arctic Vice-President of the Status of Women Council (NWT), believes people tend to ignore the devastating Inuit statistics: "We are living in an epidemic of violence" (Kudloo 1994). Inuit women interviewees, both young and old, named spousal assault as the most pressing problem facing their community: "I would list that as a first priority, because I don't want it to happen" (Woman, 38).

### **The precipitators of domestic violence**

Inuit participants offered various explanations for the perceived increase in domestic violence. The external influence of explorers, missionaries, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), other government agencies, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the church preceded resettlement and followed the Inuit into the hamlets. Patriarchal values associated with internal colonialism began to supplant egalitarian values with an overlay of male domination and control. The major problems come from "other than our culture," a male Inuk minister speculated. At the same time, exposure to the media and to the women's movement empowered Inuit women to resist domestic violence through reporting it and pursuing justice, bringing cases into official view.

The multiplier effects of resettlement, colonisation, isolation, community stress, marginality, and substance misuse have created a crucible for "destructive behaviours"

(Dion Stout *et al.* 2001: 22). Clairmont (1999: 6) explains the comparatively high Inuit crime rates (including domestic violence) in terms of structural and precipitative causes: "Colonialism, patterns and policies of concentrated settlement, and alcohol and substance abuse [...] the major, ultimate explanatory factor is colonialism which set in train other destabilising causes and interacts in complex ways with alcohol and drug abuse [...]." This causal chain is borne out by Inuit interviewees. On top of the social tremors caused by resettlement (an underlying structural factor), they stressed the power of immediate precipitators of violence: alcohol and drug abuse, male jealousy, and difficulties in interpersonal communication. Structural versus precipitative factors cannot be separated—all lay the groundwork for Nunavut's high rates of domestic violence.

### ***Resettlement***

Inuit interviewees reported that resettlement stripped away the relative balance between "the home and the hunt." Social vitality diminished as traditional methods of food harvesting led to serious reductions in hunting. The male role as provider became problematic from the very first days of resettlement. Elder Inuit recalled that in the Pangnirtung area men were told to leave their dogs, sleds, and hunting equipment in the camps because they would not fit into the small RCMP planes. Women, by contrast, were allowed to bring their sewing paraphernalia, *ulu* (the woman's knife), and other small household items that allowed them to pursue historically female roles. Inuit men found themselves facing a serious predicament as hunting in the new style, with motorised canoes and rifles, became prohibitively expensive and paid jobs tended to go to white "southern" Canadian males, who had more formal education and training. Even the most experienced hunters could not provide "country food" as consistently as they could before resettlement (Wenzel 1991). Traditional skills, which were less relevant for the few wage-earning jobs that were available, began to disappear.

A sharp and inevitable shift in the gender regime was observed by the mid-1970s, the first post-resettlement decade. Although men initially received most of the paid jobs, by 1999 many Inuit women—who compared to men had embraced schooling and did not as often succumb to alcohol and drugs—began to work outside the home.<sup>1</sup> As male self-esteem plummeted and their rates of alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and suicide skyrocketed, women held onto their traditional domestic roles *and* paid employment (Billson and Mancini in press). Some women moved into the role of primary provider, upsetting the balance of earlier times, a trend noted in some families soon after resettlement. This pattern continued into the millennium, as Aboriginal women outpaced their male contemporaries in completing some post-secondary education (Statistics Canada 2000).

The trend toward transposition of gender roles generates positive consequences in that women have enjoyed role expansion, but negative consequences in terms of

<sup>1</sup> In 1991, of Aboriginal women age 24-34, only 2.6% had obtained a university degree, compared with 11% of those with English ethnic origin and 15.7% overall. For Aboriginal men, the completion rate was even lower—only 1.9% had earned a degree, compared to the overall male rate of 15.9%. The rate is even lower for Inuit men (Guppy and Davies 1998).

increased domestic violence. Although Inuit men have dominated hamlet councils and Territorial politics, and until recently the more visible professional and semi-professional positions such as RCMP constables, outfitters, park wardens, or town workers, Inuit participants were clear about the phenomenon of role reversal in many families and its frequent negative effects. Many Inuit connected the higher rates of substance abuse, depression, and violence among males directly to role reversal and the loss of the major provider role—immediate consequences of resettlement. The gender calculus has been disrupted:

I don't really know why men beat up their wives now, but in the old days, men used to go hunting every day if it was good weather. If the weather was bad and the men had to stay home, they became irritable and angry. More men are staying home nowadays, and some even baby-sit—maybe it makes them feel weak. Maybe they get angry (Woman, 92).

A man might exert abusive power when he sees a woman as the dominant force: "In my case, I was working and he was not, so the relationship didn't work out. It seemed like he was threatened about anything" (Woman, 33). As one consultant hypothesised, "Maybe the wife beatings became more prevalent as the social pressures increased. Then we accepted it. I can beat on her—she's my property and she's supposed to obey" (Man, 48). Similarly, the Canadian Panel on Violence against Women (1993a) found that a fundamental imbalance of power between men and women is likely to spawn domestic violence. Presumably this is possible regardless of the direction in which the imbalance falls.

### *Economic stress and dependency*

Poverty and dependency on government transfer payments are now high among the Inuit of Nunavut, in spite of economic development efforts that theoretically at least are designed to expand capabilities and positive freedoms (Sen 1993). Poverty results when expansion of opportunities fails to occur. For the Inuit, development took place literally overnight with resettlement, so that economic underdevelopment is difficult to separate from the structural impacts of relocation and resettlement. Dependency on government transfer payments replaced economic self-sufficiency (Hicks 1999; Matthews 1983), which contributed to erosion of the male role and an imbalanced gender regime.

Although domestic violence occurs in families that enjoy relatively greater economic security (even employed males, respected politicians, and good hunters might engage in spousal assault), economic blows have contributed enormously to the high rate of Inuit male violence against women. In Canada as a whole, low-income women experience higher rates of violence than do higher-income women (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2000: 16), a pattern that is difficult to substantiate but likely to obtain for Inuit women as well. Inuit participants said that the government guaranteed survival with both positive and negative effects. Widespread starvation and tuberculosis in the Baffin region were controlled through resettlement, but dependency and chronic economic pressure persist: "The government totally makes you a wimp. You can't do anything—you might as well dry out. That's the image we were given.

We didn't ask for it, but that's what the men say—"I've been hanging on a clothesline too long" (Woman, 44). Some economically disenfranchised men feel they can restore the balance of power by abusing women, consultants hypothesised.

### *Alcohol and drug abuse*

Health Canada (2002: 5) stresses risk factors for spousal abuse, including involvement with a partner between 18 to 24 years of age who is unemployed, has little education, is a heavy drinker, and/or was exposed to violence against his mother. Other factors include being in a common-law rather than a formalised marriage, pregnancy, and threatening to leave or leaving the relationship.

Clairmont emphasises, as did Inuit interviewees, the disproportionate contributions of (especially young) males to criminal and deviant acts, incarceration, and suicide:

Males are, in very significant numbers, reportedly angry, confused, ill educated, and underemployed compared to their female Inuit peers, striking out at themselves and others, and locked in anti-social alcohol and drug abuse adaptations. There appears to be no effective justice system response to their behaviour and very few therapeutic resources have been targeted at this status group [...] that makes it the lightning rod for the negatives of colonialism, decline of family and community controls and ineffective justice system response (Clairmont 1999: 6).

Many Inuit consultants pointed to substance abuse as the major precipitator of violence against women because it magnifies other problems such as economic stress or family conflict: "The problem is alcohol or drugs, but when they get too much on their minds because their kids are up to something bad, they start worrying and fighting" (Woman, 79). In fact, rates of alcohol and drug abuse have skyrocketed in Baffin communities since resettlement (even in ostensibly "dry" Pangnirtung) and ballooning rates of domestic violence have exactly paralleled the rising availability of alcohol and drugs in the Canadian Arctic (Stern and Condon 1995; Wood 1997).

The Inuit have been exposed to alcohol for over 140 years, since the days of the Scottish and American whalers: "Inuit people never invented alcohol, so when an Inuk man drinks, he easily drinks his senses away. When he doesn't know what he's doing, he can beat up his wife" (Woman, 44). Being an officially dry town does not protect a community from domestic violence as much as the amount of alcohol available at any given time. An Inuk constable acknowledged the linkage between alcohol abuse and domestic violence, but offered the possibility that some people use alcohol to justify violence:

Hitting your woman is a criminal act that is not acceptable to the community. Supposedly, you will be punished. Meanwhile, people say, "Maybe she deserved it. A guy has the right to knock his wife around a little bit." The woman may buy into that rationalisation, thinking, "You were drunk. I understand, honey, and I know you won't do it again. We'll just wait this one out" (Man, 29).

As with economic stress and dependency, substance abuse may be a direct result of resettlement, and therefore is a symptom of rapid social change as well as a cause of domestic violence.

### *Disagreement and jealousy*

Being compliant will not necessarily protect a woman from domestic violence if the gender regime casts the “man as boss” in spite of reversals in role and power. Disagreement and jealousy can trigger the violent act, especially when a woman who has “obeyed” finally speaks up: “If I married this guy, and all the time I said yes to him even if I didn’t want to obey him, then I got tired of it and started saying no, he would beat me. That’s what happens” (Woman, 35). If a man believes that “his woman is having an affair” and views the woman as his property, he may become violent: “The thing that used to make him abuse me was that he thought I was with somebody else. Jealousy! He wasn’t drinking when he hit me—he has never touched a drop” (Woman 54). Another woman of the transitional generation concurs: “Men hit their wives for different reasons. Maybe he’s jealous or the woman cheated on him. If he had a problem and didn’t talk to anyone, it’s all bottled up inside. He gets angry and takes it out on the wife” (Woman, 50)

### *Lack of communication*

Poor communication weakens relationships under any circumstances, but during times of rapid social and economic change, anger, self-doubt, fear, and guilt may be expressed as family violence and abuse: “Guys who hide their feelings usually beat up their girlfriends. If a guy is too shy to express his feelings and something happens, he starts beating her and goes to jail. People start blaming the girl” (Woman, 20). It is widely assumed that keeping the relationship on an even keel is by default the female’s responsibility.

### *The impacts of domestic violence*

Acts of violence against women and girls, whether out on the land or in settlements, indicate unbalanced gender regimes, compromise female well-being, and deeply affect Inuit communities. The social consequences mirror the statistics since resettlement: Inuit women consultants expressed their reluctance to marry in order to escape potential violence without legal complications. As Nunavut Status of Women Council President Madeleine Qumuatuq suggests, “Family violence [...] wounds families, children and overall community development” (Hill 2002). The impacts of domestic violence in one generation translate into the precipitators of violence in the next generation, creating a downward, negative and self-reinforcing spiral. As one participant stated: “It really hurts me when children see fights. It is one of the most serious concerns [...] the kids are exposed to violence. That’s where it hurts the most—the children are caught. When they see anger between their parents, they get afraid and confused” (Woman, 38).

Health Canada (2002: 6) has documented negative impacts of domestic violence, from physical injuries to lost pregnancies to serious mental distress. Pauktuutit's *Nuluaq* Project cites trauma, the continuing cycle of abuse, parenting and family problems, and substance abuse as both causes and consequences of family violence (Dickson 2006: 11).<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal women's mental health suffers (Dion Stout 1995) and some women may become abusive to others, perpetuating the cycle of violence.

### **Domestic violence as an assault against well-being: Some principles**

Well-being refers to an optimal condition that entails some measure of satisfaction, confidence, physical fitness, and health and implies the opposite of isolation, poverty, disenfranchisement, poor health, alienation, or powerlessness (Billson and Fluehr-Lobban 2005). Well-being and ill-being are rooted in social structures; ill-being is closely associated with poverty, which is both a cause and an effect of structure (McGregor 2004: 6). Dion Stout *et al.* (2001: 22) argue that the "everyday experience of unequal power relations and sexual, physical and emotional exploitation contributes to a decrease in the health of Aboriginal women." Theoretically, domestic violence threatens both victims and perpetrators, which is why it is not just a "women's issue" but a political and community issue.

Clark and Gough (2003: 17) define well-being in terms of positive "physical and mental states," which are placed in jeopardy by domestic violence and abuse. In a global study of well-being, Narayan *et al.* (2000: 22-43) found that well-being has to do with "happiness, harmony, peace, freedom from anxiety, and peace of mind," factors that stem from having enough to survive physically but also from good relations with others. Well-being and quality of life are also integrally related. Sen (1993) defines quality of life in terms of one's "capability" to lead a flourishing life or to have "positive freedoms" (Nussbaum and Glover 1995; Nussbaum 2000). Nordstrom (2004) argues that gender-based violence complicates the picture of well-being for females in time of war or in societies that allow gender violence even in peace time. Several observations flow from the connections among structural factors (such as resettlement and poverty), domestic violence, and well-being:

- ◊ Powerlessness (lack of capability) that stems from underemployment, unemployment, and internal colonisation complicates gender regimes.
- ◊ Poverty, gender, and violence mix inextricably with powerlessness, frustration, anxiety, depression, and anger (Brock 1999).
- ◊ When prejudice, discrimination, or other barriers to full participation restrict capability for females, their quality of life is jeopardised.

<sup>2</sup> Dickson's presentation is a distillation of Pauktuutit's knowledge garnered from various sources, including talking with Inuit women. Pauktuutit has followed domestic violence closely; many of the organization's publications appear in non-academic forms (as is true for much emerging Aboriginal literature).

- ◊ Conversely, unbalanced power relations between males and females contribute to both domestic violence and a sense of ill-being (for both partners).
- ◊ Having physical and mental health implies freedom from violence.
- ◊ Domestic violence restricts positive freedoms for women and children. A culture of fear limits rather than fosters freedom.
- ◊ When categories of individuals (*e.g.*, women) fall into a chronic state of ill-being because of victimisation and violence, the well-being level for society as a whole is compromised (Helliwell 2002). Diminished well-being for a community feeds back into negative structural factors.
- ◊ Female well-being tends to be extremely sensitive to deterioration or blockage from discrimination but also to male backlash when women take on the provider role.
- ◊ Denial of access and opportunity creates gender stratification, characterised by barriers that serve to threaten female well-being. At the same time, Inuit interviewees said that success in moving out of the domestic sphere can feed into violence.

Three more principles derived from gender regime research in other cultures are of particular importance for Inuit women:

- ◊ “The more powerful and independent women become, the more likely powerful males will abuse, ignore, ridicule, or physically harm them—as a way to rebalance their real or perceived lost power” (Billson and Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 383-384). Explanations of domestic violence require explicit attention to the power relations between perpetrators and victims; special vigilance is needed when women are in relationships with relatively disenfranchised and powerless males. The implication for Inuit women derives from this principle: “Social change in economic, political, and educational institutions depends in part on the ability to change unbalanced, male-dominated gender regimes in family and intimate relations” (*ibid.*: 384). For the Inuit, the challenge is to re-embrace certain positive traditional ways and values while adapting to and proactively creating new ways and values (Rasing 1994).
- ◊ “Social change affecting females is rooted in power relations” (*ibid.*: 389). That is, changes in female well-being across cultures are clearly tethered to changes in the gender balance of power. The social rules governing gender relations may be suspended out of necessity during a time of crisis, wartime, or, for the Inuit, managed resettlement. The corollary is that it is difficult to reinstate the rules when the “crisis” is over. In the Inuit case, the crisis (or at least the transitional period) continues, contributing to role confusion, role reversal, and domestic violence.

- ◊ “Token involvement of women in the political process or in the economy does not constitute fundamental social change” (*ibid*: 391). When the gender parity referendum was voted down in 1997, prior to Nunavut’s inception, some Inuit argued that women should be elected to the legislature in their own right. Unfortunately, the vast majority of legislators in the new Territory were and are male, and males continue to dominate the senior levels of government (Billson and Mancini in press; Minor 2002). Thus, analysis of Inuit gender regimes must distinguish between full empowerment of women politically and economically versus restricted or conditional participation, which is the present situation. The fact of participation may be emblematic or indicative of future significant change, but it cannot be counted as fundamental social change until it is equal and without the penalty of domestic violence and abuse.

### **Domestic violence as a violation of human rights**

Finally, as for women everywhere, the interplay between imbalanced gender regimes and domestic violence not only threatens female well-being but it constitutes a violation of women’s rights as human rights. Worldwide recognition of the pervasiveness of various forms of violence against females peaked in 1979 when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW defines discrimination as

[...] any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (UN 2003).

Gender violence as a violation of women’s rights and human rights was placed on the global agenda at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. The linkage was made again at the Beijing Women’s Congress in 1995, which defined domestic violence as “any act or threat of an act that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm” (Bunch 1995:10). This conceptual link between domestic violence, compromised freedom, and women’s rights as human rights was incorporated into the Beijing Platform for Action 1995-2000. The declaration defines violence as battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, other traditional practices harmful to women, and non-spousal violence related to exploitation (Merry 2001). It also resulted in the Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women; since 1995, such acts are prosecutable under the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women, as well as local and state laws in some countries.

Countries that sign on to CEDAW, as Canada did in 1980, are committed to work diligently to end discrimination, exploitation, and trafficking of women. Canada has also signed other agreements that have implications for female well-being such as the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention on the Rights of

the Child. Tolerance of domestic violence, then, becomes an act of discrimination against women and a violation of their human rights.

Even if male violence against women occurred to some extent out on the land, it was generally not tolerated by the Inuit communities or known to authorities. Therefore, even though it was technically a violation of women's human rights and a degradation of their well-being, the present rate of domestic violence in Inuit communities raises a different ethical, moral, and human rights question. Indeed, can failure to educate the public about the impacts of domestic violence on female well-being, failure to aggressively pursue perpetrators of domestic violence and bring them to justice, and failure to protect females from those who would harm them, be interpreted as a violation of the CEDAW commitment?

### **The solutions to domestic violence**

Domestic violence among Inuit raises issues about how to resolve such conflicts in a way that is compatible with their culture, both traditional and emergent. Many agencies and organisations have committed to addressing family violence as Nunavut matures, but theoretically these efforts will fail or flag if gender regimes remain unbalanced. In other words, addressing domestic violence as a *problem* rather than as a *symptom* of structural power differentials between females and males, as a threat to both male and female well-being, and as a violation of women's rights will only scratch the surface. Solutions that centre on expressions of political will, legislative protection of victims and their rights, cautious integration of modern and "traditional" Inuit healing strategies, education, affirming the empowerment of Inuit through Nunavut, and addressing the contextual issues of poverty, isolation, and unemployment will have the greatest chance of succeeding (Burkhardt 2004). Significantly, the *Nunavut Human Rights Act* came into effect Nov. 5, 2004, which embeds rights for women; the new Nunavut Human Rights Tribunal will be a place for Inuit women to turn for legal solutions (Irniq 2004). The three northern territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon) announced in 2003 that the ministers responsible for the status of women would develop solutions to end domestic violence (Anonymous 2003). Many communities are passing resolutions to reduce family violence (Rideout 2002; Younger-Lewis 2005). Whether these institutionalized mechanisms to address violence against women will have practical results remains to be seen during the coming years.

### **Discussion**

Just as the causes of domestic violence are complex, so too are the solutions. Inuit interviewees said that the formal systems of criminal justice, including rehabilitation, have not worked especially well in diminishing domestic violence. As many elders stated very simply, if contemporary Inuit were to follow traditional Inuit practices, the need for courts, prisons, and shelters system would not exist in the first place (Angmarlik *et al.* 1999: 285). This supports the hypothesis that the shock of resettlement weakened social bonds and traditional social controls over all types of

violence. On the other hand, few elders remain who experienced first-hand the traditional approaches nor is there any guarantee that they will fit the contemporary context.

Many younger women are listening to these new messages. Perhaps tolerance of abuse will weaken to the point that the system will be forced to respond differently to domestic violence. Treating the symptoms (domestic violence and other criminal behaviour) with counselling, shelters, and incarceration will not solve the underlying structural problems facing Inuit communities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While attention to precipitating factors is important, it is critical not to lose sight of the structural factors (*e.g.*, poverty and rapid social change spawned by resettlement) that serve as the crucible of violence between intimates and nurture the immediate precipitators as well. If the theory is correct that domestic violence results from shifting (and unbalanced) gender regimes that are a symptom of resettlement-induced rapid social change, then domestic violence should not remain an immutable shadow on the Inuit cultural landscape. As new cultural forms are created, economic stability emerges, political control over the territory's destiny becomes a reality, and public education reshapes attitudes toward women, domestic violence rates should steadily spiral downward. As Nunavummiut gain more control over their destiny and engage in culturally relevant economic development, poverty should be reduced and well-being should increase for everyone; this should support enhanced opportunity and more evenly balanced gender regimes. Given the isolation of Nunavut communities, the recent history of dependency, and the realities of climate, economic development may be limited in reducing poverty (Billson and Mancini in press; Young and Young 1985: 123-145). At the same time, as long as domestic violence persists, poverty reduction alone will not result in enhanced well-being for either gender (Brock 1999). The next five to ten years will serve as bellwether years in this regard. On the other hand, to the extent that power imbalances persist between Inuit men and women, it is likely that both domestic violence and its impacts will persist.

Since individual well-being contributes to general social well-being, and vice versa, both females and their communities are likely to experience a lower level of both objective and subjective well-being until the symptom of domestic violence has been alleviated. A "global standard of female well-being" against which Nunavut's capacity to address domestic violence can be measured includes: equal educational access; equal political access; equal economic access; quality health care; freedom from violence; and protected human rights. If this standard underpins future law and policy construction, Nunavut's territorial legislation will at the very least be gender neutral and most desirably will promote female well-being. Female well-being entails unquestioned rights, equal access to opportunity, and reciprocally supported freedom for females and males. Caring and rights will eventually merge into individual and community values that create a society of mutually validated capability. Economic policies and social programs that enhance Inuit self-sufficiency and reduce dependency on government transfer payments will help rebalance power relations between Inuit men and women. Providing opportunities and self-respect for both men and women will help balance gender regimes and reduce domestic violence.

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