

The Strong Women's Circle: Addressing Violence by Restoring Balance, Culture, and Connection

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Indigenization Statements

Valerie Wood is Dene-Sųliné originally from Łue-chok Tué, otherwise known as Cold Lake, and was raised on the Cold Lake First Nation in Treaty Six territory but currently resides on the Saddle Lake Cree Nation where she is a member after marrying into the community. Valerie participated in the Strong Women's Circle with other elders who engaged with researchers from the University of Calgary and also draws upon the work experience that took place at Cold Lake First Nation after the passing of Bill C-92.

Sharon Goulet is Red River Métis and a citizen of the Otipemisiwak Métis Government within Alberta. Sharon has built relationships across Treaty 7 territory; specifically, Siksikaissksahkoyi, Blackfoot land – the ancestral territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy: Treaty 7 signatories, including the Blackfoot Confederacy, consisting of the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai Nations, the Îyârhe Stoney Nakoda, consisting of the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney Nations, and the Dene of the Tsuut'ina Nation. Sharon has also had the pleasure of deepening her connection to Elder and Grandmother Val Wood, a Dene woman and matriarch who has spearheaded this work within Treaty 6 areas including Cold Lake and Saddle Lake.

Lana Wells is a non-Indigenous scholar who lives in Canmore and works across Alberta, primarily in Calgary on Treaty 7 territory, which is the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Îyârhe Nakoda Nations, the Tsuut'ina Nation, and the homeland of Métis communities in the region. Since 2019, she has collaborated with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, researchers, and community leaders through the Strong Women's Circle initiative. These relationships continue to guide her work and reflect her commitment to relational accountability, ethical engagement, and supporting Indigenous self-determination in violence prevention efforts.

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The Strong Women's Circle

The Strong Women's Circle is more than a project—it is the creation of ethical space and truth-telling; rooted in Indigenous teachings, lived experience, and community resilience.

Brought to life by Indigenous Elders, grandmothers, researchers, and community partners, the Circle provides a space for honesty, healing, and advocacy.

At its core, the Strong Women's Circle seeks to address the root causes of family violence and to transform systems that have long harmed Indigenous children and families. It recognizes that prevention begins with restoring balance—reviving language, land-based teachings, kinship ties, and the spiritual and cultural practices that sustain community well-being. Through dialogue, storytelling, and ceremony, participants are shaping a new vision for safety and belonging that reflects Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This commitment to culturally grounded prevention connects directly to the broader conversation about child welfare reform in Canada.

A Legacy of Harm and the Need for Systemic Change

For generations, Canada's child welfare system has been one of the most visible and painful legacies of colonialism. From the residential school era to the Sixties Scoop and beyond, Indigenous children have been removed from their families and communities under the guise of protection. The impacts have been devastating loss of language and culture, fractured identities, and cycles of trauma and violence that persist across generations.

In Alberta today, these colonial patterns remain deeply entrenched. Despite representing a small fraction of the province's population, Indigenous children make up approximately 74% of those in care. This staggering overrepresentation reflects systemic inequities and racism that

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underpin the child welfare system such as poverty, housing insecurity, addiction, and the intergenerational trauma of colonization routinely misinterpreted as parental unfitness.

In our Circle, Elders Valerie Wood and Karen Acuna, both grandmothers and long-time advocates, spoke candidly about the harm this system perpetuates. They described the emotional and spiritual toll of watching children being taken from their communities, and the deep grief of knowing that many never return. They challenge the assumption that removal equates to safety and insist that *real safety* comes from cultural connection, kinship, and collective responsibility.

Indigenous Jurisdiction and the Promise of Bill C-92

The passage of *Bill C-92, An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*, marked a significant shift in Canadian law. It recognizes that Indigenous Peoples have the inherent right to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services—a right rooted in self-determination and protected under Section 35 of the Constitution and upheld by the 2024 Supreme Court.

This legal recognition, however, is only the first step. The real challenge lies in implementation—ensuring that Indigenous Nations have the resources, infrastructure, and autonomy to build and operate their own child welfare systems. Without adequate funding and meaningful collaboration, legal jurisdiction risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

For Indigenous leaders, Bill C-92 represents both hope and responsibility. It opens the door to systems built on cultural safety, kinship, and prevention rather than punishment and separation. The Elders emphasized that child welfare interventions should not begin with removal but with healing and restoration. When families face challenges, the response should be to strengthen, not dismantle, the family unit. This requires wraparound supports—mental health

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care, housing assistance, addiction treatment, and community-based parenting programs—delivered in ways that honor Indigenous knowledge and values.

As Elder Wood notes, the goal is not simply to replace one bureaucracy with another but to restore Indigenous ways of caring for children and families—ways that emphasize teaching, healing, and community accountability over surveillance and removal.

The Role of Lived Experience and Traditional Knowledge

One of the most powerful aspects of the Strong Women's Circle is that it centers the voices of women with lived experience navigating—and resisting—the systems that have sought to control their families and identities. They remind us that effective reform must move beyond “textbook” approaches to embrace Indigenous epistemologies and healing traditions. This means creating space for ceremony, storytelling, and traditional parenting teachings within child welfare practice. It also means training social workers to approach their roles with cultural humility, self-awareness, and respect for Indigenous sovereignty.

Indigenous worldviews understand child well-being as a collective responsibility. Children are not the sole responsibility of parents but belong to a wider network of family, Elders, and community members. Decisions about their care should reflect this interconnectedness.

The Strong Women's Circle demonstrates what this looks like in practice: bringing together communities to share responsibility for safety and healing. Prevention is not a program—it's a way of living in right relationship with one another. When families are surrounded by supportive networks, when cultural identity is affirmed, and when basic needs are met, the risk of violence and neglect diminishes dramatically.

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This approach also challenges the narrow definition of “child protection.” Protecting children means addressing the conditions that lead to harm—poverty, racism, gender inequality, substance use, and colonial disconnection. Prevention, in this sense, is both personal and structural.

Building Indigenous-Led Systems for the Future

True transformation requires shifting power and resources to Indigenous Nations. This includes funding Indigenous child and family service agencies, supporting capacity-building, and ensuring governments uphold their commitments under Bill C-92.

Communities that have already reclaimed control over their child welfare systems offer powerful evidence of success. They have seen **fewer child apprehensions, stronger family reunifications, and greater community cohesion**. These outcomes affirm that when Indigenous peoples design and deliver services based on their own laws, languages, and traditions, families thrive.

The Strong Women's Circle remind us that this is not just about reforming a system—it's about rebuilding relationships, restoring trust, and reclaiming sovereignty. It's about shifting from a mindset of control to one of care.

A Hopeful Path Forward

The messages of the Strong Women's Circle are deeply hopeful. They envision a future where no child grows up disconnected from their family, language, or culture. Where child welfare systems serve as extensions of community healing rather than tools of separation.

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The work ahead is complex and requires courage—from governments willing to share power, from agencies willing to unlearn harmful practices, and from communities continuing to speak truth to power. As Elders Wood and Acuna remind us, Indigenous peoples have always known how to care for their children. The knowledge for healing and prevention already exists—it simply needs to be respected, resourced, and restored.

In the spirit of the Strong Women's Circle, this movement toward Indigenous-led, culturally grounded child welfare reform is not just a policy shift—it is an act of reclamation, resistance, and love. It is how cycles of violence are broken and how a new generation of Indigenous children can grow up surrounded by the teachings, languages, and kinship that have sustained their Nations for millennia.