

The State We're In

English > The State We're In > Themes

Strong Mohawk women fight on

by Claire Gorman

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There are 370 million indigenous people in the world who are custodians of 80 per cent of the world's cultural and biological diversity. Despite this, many indigenous people are still fighting for recognition -whether it be cultural, legal or moral. All over the globe indigenous activists seek equity and opportunities in areas of society which others take for granted - areas like education, health and employment.

Someone who knows all about this is Ellen Gabriel, President of Native Women's Association in the Canadian province of Quebec. She's also a citizen of the Mohawk nation.



Ellen has been inspired to fight for indigenous rights by her female relatives, especially her grandmother.



Ellen Gabriel

President of the Native Women's Association, Quebec, Canada

"She was a tough woman, I mean she had seven girls [and] a husband who had seasonal work. They were very poor, yet she was a very kind person who taught her daughters and her grandchildren to be very proud of their heritage and who they are. And my mother and my aunties were part of the fight for equality of rights for Aboriginal women in Canada."

"I think that their pride in who they were, in spite of the discrimination, was given to me in such a subtle way that it became second nature. You know as a child you don't really realise these things but as an adult...one of the things I realised is, they were very strong women. I know now the discrimination that they faced and how they continued to teach us the language and be proud, saying, you know 'Don't forget who you are. You are going to go out and you are going to be educated in the white man's world but don't ever forget who you are'. So that stayed with me."

If a baby Mohawk girl was born today, Ellen says she'd like to see a future for that child where she be proud of her heritage, be free from violence and feel safe to participate in political processes. But according to Ellen, that is "definitely not the kind of future she can expect."

"But she will be tough like other Mohawk women or other Aboriginal women. She'll learn about the history of [Indian] residential schooling and what it did and how they tried to destroy who we are as a people."

In Ellen's view, things are not really getting any better. However, there's one thing that she sees as a slight improvement.

TSWI home



Ellen Gabriel

"More Canadians are aware of what has been happening on the [First Nations'] reserves [and] what their Government has been doing to Aboriginal people to try and to continue to ... destroy who we are as people and deny us our rights to our lands and out territories."

"They don't recognise our rights to our land, they don't the rights of women to pass on our heritage to children. They don't recognise their own accountability for trying to commit acts of genocide against Aboriginal people. I don't see anything that says that they recognise us as sovereign independent or dependent nations with their state."

The Canadian Government has recently set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission which will hear the stories and settle the legal claims of First Nations children who were taken away from their parents to attend Indian Residential Schools.

Ellen says while it is useful for those who have survived the residential schools, but there are other issues.

"It won't address the issues of genocide, it won't address the issues of loss of language, loss of culture, loss of land. It took over 100 years to bring indigenous people in Canada to the state that we're in...and it's going to take another 100 years before we get back to those healthy nations."

Tags: Ellen Gabriel, First Nation, indigenous people, women's rights



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Reaction(s):

White Canadian, 13-10-2008 - Canada

I am Canadian. My parents emigrated from Europe and suffered discrimination after WWII by various segments of societies. My parents worked hard and improved their situation. They also instilled that it is important to take a balanced and fair approach to issues - I don't believe this has been accomplished in this specific article. As a Canadian citizen, I do not have the same advantages or rights as afforded to Status Native Canadians. I would like to share the tip of the ice-burg into the rights of Status aboriginals in Canada at this site <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/pub/ywtk/index-eng.asp#werb> As you will see on this site that first nation peoples do recognize rights to land, and allow women to pass on heritage to their children along with many other advantages that a regular Canadian citizen are not entitled to. I have never discouraged any person native or otherwise to seek their heritage. I have encouraged it and in fact my family adopted a first nation child and arranged and encouraged her to find her indigenous heritage and birth family -despite disastrous results. It is in the power of each individual to make the best of their situation and learn of their personal heritage either on their own or as part of an interested group of people. I found that this item has been a one-sided

presentation with research and questioning being slim. Personally I have had to research and struggle to learn my heritage. I have had to bear all costs to learn my Teutonic heritage. Whereas, the Canadian government has made it possible that in most major Canadian universities there are Native studies wherein a First Nations person can reclaim their heritage for free, however, all other students at Canadian universities must pay for their undergraduate as well as post graduate degrees. To my knowledge, healthcare for Indigenous peoples are 100% free throughout Canada as well as all prescriptions and almost all health related expenses. Employment advantages are also given to indigenous peoples over others as many projects that are remotely near any settlements or reservations give preference to First Nations individuals. Canadians get a very bad reputation in terms of the aboriginal issues. Agreed that the distribution of funding is not necessarily equal and there has been and continues to be unfortunate situations that are grossly unfair. One must keep in mind that this is true for various Canadians, not only First Nations. I find it reprehensible that despite heavy funding and various methods for reparations that nothing but ongoing contempt is given to Canadians and the government. I do not deny the historical fact that residential schools situation existed and did terrible damage to Aboriginal people. Not each and every indigenous person experienced this over Canadian history. My sympathies are with these people who have experienced such tragedies but tragedy strikes everywhere. Each person must take personal responsibility for his or her situation. You cannot blame others or an institution for situations that are within one's ability to change.

Give your reaction

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