

# THE COMMUNITY STORY FRAMEWORK

## A Tool for Participatory Community Analysis



***The Four Worlds Centre for  
Development Learning***

*Box 395, Cochrane,  
Alberta, Canada T4C 1A6  
Ph. 403-932-0882  
Fax 403-932-0883  
Email: [fourworlds@telusplanet.net](mailto:fourworlds@telusplanet.net)*

Copyright ©2000



## **PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMUNITY STORY FRAMEWORK**

Basically, the Community Story Framework is a tool for helping communities to explore what is really happening and what is needed to make life better for everyone. The Community Story Framework has proven to be a very powerful tool for getting community members involved in thinking about and taking action on their own for the improvement of the quality of life for all.

The Community Story tool recognizes that a community consists of many different groups of people with different interests, needs and experiences. One way to think about these different groups is to think about the life cycle:

- children (0 to 12 years of age)
- youth (12 to 25 years of age)
- women (20 to 55 years of age)
- men (20 to 55 years of age)
- elders (55 and older)

The Community Story tool also recognizes that individuals do not live in isolation. They live in families and communities. Families and communities have different dimensions. Some of the dimensions of community life that can be analyzed in order to build a human and community development plan are:

- family life
- political life
- economic life and the care and use of the environment
- social life
- cultural life

The Community Story tool brings people together in small groups to look at these different aspects of life by focusing on the following general questions for each of them:

1. What is life like now?
2. What can we learn from the past?
3. What would things be like if they were good (i.e. in a healthy, balanced future)?
4. What has to happen and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?



## **The Process of Producing a Written Report**

### ***Round one***

1. Small groups (eight to twelve people) meet and talked about the four main questions (What's happening now? What can we learn from the past? What would a healthy future look like? What do we have to do to get to that healthy future?).
2. Groups then bring back their findings to the whole workshop. Everybody listens to each report and then after each one, participants are invited to make additions and comments. It is important to negotiate the consensus of participants on what is "true," so that what is reported is truly a community perspective. If differences between one or more perspectives cannot be resolved, then it is important to report that the community holds a number of differing views, and to say what they are.
3. Everything that is agreed upon by participants is then taken, topic by topic, and written up (by a community research team, or by outside helpers in close consultation with a community advisory team) into themes, and put together in a Round One report. The themes, as written up in Round One may contain ideas given in the groups, but also may contain things that were shared in the many talking circles and other meetings that were held during the research process.

### ***What's next?***

1. The report goes back to the community for further changes, additions and verification. Copies of the report should be available to every household in the community (in small places), or to key community representatives and relevant organizations in larger places.
2. The following processes are suggestions for community consultation mechanisms:
  - a. Part One: Focus on the Person - Using community radio, take a different topic every day that focuses on individual wellness (children, youth, women, men, elders). With each topic, that section of the report being covered that day would be explored in important local languages (if necessary, use bilingual facilitators on the air). Then let people call in and give their comments (talk-back radio).
  - b. Part Two: Focus on the Community - Repeat the on-radio process for the topics related to the collective life of the people (family, political, economic, social, religion and culture). Be sure to explain what was written in the report in easy to understand language.

3. Hold one or more public meetings or focus groups to allow people to talk face-to-face and to come to an agreement on the changes they want added to the document. People can also be invited to send or phone in their comments to a designated contact person.
4. The edited Round One report goes back to the community.

### *After That?*

1. Round Two is all about **moving to take action**. It focuses on (using a similar process as Round One), building on the thinking already done, picking targets, planning action, and actually starting to work on that action. It also involves continuing the healing work and strengthening community support groups.
2. Round Three focuses on learning. In Round Three the personal growth work continues and the community action groups go much deeper into an analysis of root causes and needed action. **A learning/capacity building plan comes from this round.**
3. Round Four continues the personal growth work. The community development work focuses on **building a community organization** to keep the process going for the long haul, uniting the different action groups into a community-wide movement. It also works on building regional capacity to support and backup the community.

### *Later On?*

After about one year, the Community Story process is used again to evaluate progress made to date and to plan the next phase. Information and analysis from the Round One report is used as a "base-line" (a starting point) of comparison to see what has changed after a year of hard work. In this way the community can evaluate whether or not their efforts are getting them where they want to go.

## **PART TWO: THE COMMUNITY STORY FRAMEWORK TOOL**

The following section contains guiding questions for each of the ten theme areas covered by the Community Story Process:

- children
- youth
- women
- men
- elders
- family Life
- economic life
- social Life
- cultural and spiritual life
- political life

### **A) CHILDREN (ages 0 to 12)**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has to happen and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

#### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is life like now for our children?
2. How healthy are they: mentally? emotionally? physically? spiritually?
3. Are they safe? (specify problems or dangers)
4. Are they learning what they need to? (specify learning needs)
5. What problems/obstacles do children face today?
6. What needs do children have that are not being met?
7. How were things different for children in the past? What was expected of children then?
8. What is expected of children today?

#### ***The Future***

9. What would it be like to be a child in a healthy family and community?
10. What needs to change in the way things are now in order to achieve that future?
11. Who has to be involved in making those changes
  - Personal level (i.e. the self of the child)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. the significant relationships the child is involved in)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
12. What parts of the changes needed can communities do on their own with little or no help from outside? What actions are needed?
13. What sorts of help do communities need to bring about the changes that are needed?

### ***Goals***

14. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years to improve the future of our children?

### **B) YOUTH (ages 12 to 25)**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

#### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is life like now for our youth?
2. How healthy are they: mentally? emotionally? physically? spiritually?
3. Are they safe? (specify dangers)
4. Are they learning what they need to learn? (specify learning needs)

5. What problems/obstacles do youth face?
6. Is it different for girls than it is for boys? If yes, how?
7. What needs to youth have in order to be healthy or balanced?
8. How were things different for youth in the past? What was expected of youth then?
9. What is expected of youth today?

### ***The Future***

10. What would life be like for youth in a healthy family and community? What would a healthy youth be like?
11. What are the key things that will need to change in the way things are not in order to achieve a healthy future for our youth
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. interpersonal relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
12. Who has to be involved in making those changes?
13. What parts of the changes needed can the community do on its own with little or no help from outside? What actions are needed?
14. For what parts of making the changes that are needed to communities need outside assistance? What kinds of help are needed? What sorts of learning are needed?

### **Goals**

15. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years to improve the future for today's youth and for the next generations of youth coming up?

### **C) WOMEN (ages 20 to 55)**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is life like now for women in our communities: mentally? emotionally? physically? spiritually? socially? family life? economic life? cultural life?
2. What are the main issues/problems/challenges women are facing today in our communities?
3. How was it different for women in the past?
4. What are the main needs women have in order to be healthy and balanced? Are these needs being met? What are the obstacles?
5. Which groups/categories of women are having the hardest time getting their needs met? Why?

### ***The Future***

6. What would life be like for women in a healthy family and community? What would a healthy woman be like?
7. What are the key things that would have to change in the ways things are now in order to achieve a healthy future for our women?
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. interpersonal relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
8. Who has to be involved in making these changes?
9. What parts of the changes needed can communities do on their own, with little or not help from the outside? What action are needed?
10. What sorts of help are needed from outside the community to support the process of making the changes that are needed?
11. What sorts of learning are needed in order for these changes to occur? Who needs to learn?

### ***Goals***

12. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years to heal, transform, and improve the lives and conditions of women?

## **D) MEN (ages 20 to 55)**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is life like now for men in our communities: mentally? emotionally? physically? spiritually? socially? family life? economic life? cultural life?
2. What are the main issues/problems/challenges men are facing today in our communities?
3. How was it different for men in the past?
4. What are the main needs men have in order to be healthy and balanced? Are these needs being met? What are the obstacles?
5. Which groups/categories of men are having the hardest time getting their needs met? Why?

### ***The Future***

6. What would life be like for men in a healthy family and community? What would a healthy man be like?
7. What are the key things that would have to change in the ways things are now in order to achieve a healthy future for our men?
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. interpersonal relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
8. Who has to be involved in making these changes?
9. What parts of the changes needed can communities do on their own, with little or not help from the outside? What action are needed?

10. What sorts of help are needed from outside the community to support the process of making the changes that are needed?
11. What sorts of learning are needed in order for these changes to occur? Who needs to learn?

### ***Goals***

12. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years to heal, transform, and improve the lives and conditions of men?

### **E) ELDERS/SENIORS (ages 55 and over)**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

#### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is life like now for the elders in our community?
2. What are the main problems/issues our elders are faced with?
3. How healthy are our elders: mentally? emotionally? physically? spiritually?
4. What was different for elders in the past? How have things changed to today's elders?
5. What are the main needs our elders have in order to be healthy, balanced and fulfilled as human beings?
6. Are these needs being met? What are the obstacles?

#### ***The Future***

7. What would a truly healthy elder person be like (mentally, emotionally/socially, physically, spiritually)?

8. What would it be like to be an elder in a healthy family and community?
9. What would have to change in order to achieve a healthy future for our elders
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. interpersonal relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
10. Who has to be involved in making these changes?
11. What parts of the changes needed can communities do on their own, with little or no help from the outside? What action are needed?
12. What sorts of help are needed from outside the community to support the process of making the changes that are needed?
13. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

### **Goals**

14. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years to heal, transform, and generally improve the lives and conditions of this and future generations of elders?

### **F) FAMILY LIFE**

*Something to think about: Families are the foundation institution of any community. If families are strong and healthy, the community will also prosper. If families are dysfunctional, disunited and unhealthy, there is no way our communities can be healthy.*

*Families are made up of many relationships. The relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters children and grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunties, nephews, nieces ... all of them make up the web of relationships that make up our immediate and extended families.*

*In many cultures, the family is the primary political and economic, as well as social and cultural grouping. it is impossible to effectively become healthy people and to build healthy communities unless we have healthy families.*

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*

4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is really happening to family life in our communities? Is it healthy? Strong?
2. What is happening in the key relationships that make up strong healthy families such as:
  - husband and wife?
  - parents and children?
  - grandparents and children?
  - between children (brothers, sisters, cousins, etc.)?
  - extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins nephews, nieces)?
3. What has changed from the way families used to be in the past? What can we learn from the past?
4. What are the basic minimum needs that have to be met for a family to be healthy?
5. Are our families getting their needs met? Explain.

### ***The Future***

6. What would a truly healthy family be like (mental, emotional, spiritual, physical)?
7. What are the key things that will have to change in order to achieve a healthy family life for our communities:
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. the significant relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
8. What other development issues are connected to building healthy families (political, economic, social, and cultural/spiritual). Be specific.
9. What part of the changes needed can families and communities do on their own, with little or no help from the outside? What actions are needed?
10. What sorts of help are required from outside the community to support the process of making the changes that are needed?
11. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

## ***Goals***

12. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years in order to heal and develop our families so they are healthy and strong?

## **G) ECONOMIC LIFE**

*Something to think about: Based on how most societies have lived and prospered in the past, true economic development is based on harvesting from the earth, manufacturing (i.e. making things), providing services others need, and cooperating and trading with neighbors.*

*Consider this; true economic development is paid for (powered or driven) by hard work and healthy economic relationships with the earth and other people.*

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. How are people getting what they need to live (to meet their basic needs)?
2. How is what is happening today different from the way it was in the past? What if anything was lost that we need today?
3. How are the people's personal, social, spiritual and other kinds of development being affected by the way they are obtaining money and the material things they need to live?
4. How well off are people in our communities today? Do people have what they need in order to live a healthy, balanced life? Can people afford the basic necessities?
5. What are the main economic barriers, obstacles and problems our communities face?
6. Who are the worst off economically in our communities? Why?
7. How is the way people are earning a living affecting the natural environment (air, water, earth, plants, animals)? How is the environment influencing the people's economy? What is happening with the people's relationship with the natural environment?

### ***The Future***

8. What would a truly healthy community be like economically?

9. What are the key things that will have to change in order to achieve a healthy economic future for our communities:
  - Personal level (i.e. the self)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. significant relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the government, agencies and businesses do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself)?
10. What other personal and community development issues must be addressed in order to effectively address the challenge of economic development?
11. What do we have as people and as communities that we can build on for a better economic future?
12. Who has to be involved in making the changes that are needed?
13. What part of the changes needed can communities do on their own, with little or no help from the outside? What actions are needed?
14. What sorts of help are required from outside the community to support the process of making the changes that are needed?
15. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

### **Goals**

16. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years in order to develop ourselves economically toward a sustainable future?

## **H) CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE**

*Something to think about: This area refers to the general pattern of life by which people live. It includes their sense of identity, their customs, beliefs, values, morals, ideals, ceremonies and spiritual practices, as well as their traditional language, ways of knowing, technologies, arts, crafts and sciences.*

*We refer to "culture" and "spirituality" within development mostly to talk about the "software" of development, i.e. the guiding principles and the vision which call us to a possible and desirable future, and which shape how we go about the processes of change.*

*For many peoples, conflict between the dominant culture (European capitalism, materialism and commercialism) and indigenous or "traditional" cultural ways is an important part of the struggle for health and balance.*

*When we talk about "spirituality" we're not talking about any particular religion. Rather, we are talking about our human capacity to know and love the Creator, and to choose ways of living that are life-promoting and life-enhancing. We talk about spirituality together with culture because spirit animates the heart of all living culture, and because without spirit, cultures, like individuals, become dead things, unable to grow and change.*

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. Do we have a healthy sense of who we are as human beings and do our communities have a sense of their identity?
2. What is the current condition of our traditional culture (such as language; spiritual knowledge and practices; healing arts and knowledge; survival technologies and knowledge; music, arts and stories)?
3. Do our young people respect and learn about the old ways from the elders?
4. What is the relationship like between our traditional ways and the churches? What impact are the churches having on life today? What is good and what needs to change about the way the churches work in our communities?
5. To what extent are we drawing on the cultural knowledge, wisdom and resources from the past to help us solve critical problems of today? Is it useful or important to do so? Explain.
6. Do our people have a shared/common vision of what kind of communities we want to build and of who we want to be in a healthy future? Do we have a clear idea of what moral and philosophical principles we need to live by in order to develop our potential as human beings? In short, do we know where we need to go (as human beings and as communities) and how to get there?

### ***The Future***

7. What would a community be like if it were truly healthy and strong in the area of culture and spirituality?
8. What will have to change in order to achieve this ideal
  - Personal level (i.e. personal growth, healing, learning)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. the nature and quality of our relationships)?

- Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies, community organizations and churches do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself and how it relates with the outside world)?
9. What parts of the needed changes can/must communities do on their own with little or no help from outside? What actions are needed?
  10. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

### ***Goals***

11. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years in order to create culturally and spiritually healthy communities?

## **I) POLITICAL LIFE**

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*
2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is the current political reality we live with: inside our communities? between ourselves and outsiders? in the world?
2. How is the current political reality affecting the human and community development of our people?
3. What is the quality of ordinary people's participation in shaping the worlds within which we must live?
  - Who has the power inside our communities?
  - Who decides about money and important things?
  - Does everyone have a meaningful voice in shaping decisions that affect them? Who does not?
  - Are some people prevented from influencing what is agreed upon and decided?

- To what extent do the people being "helped" or "served" by programs get asked to help design, implement and evaluate those programs?
  - To what extent do people control the processes of development in their own communities?
4. What was our political life like in the past? What can we learn from that past?
  5. Are there tensions between the culture of the community and the culture of government systems and programs? Explain.

### ***The Future***

6. What would a truly healthy community be like politically? (list its features)
7. What will have to change in order to bring about this politically healthy future?
  - Personal level (i.e. personal growth)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. the quality of our relationships)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the government and agencies do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community inter-relates and organizes itself and how it relates to the outside world)?
8. What parts of the changes needed can/must community do on their own with little or no help from the outside? What actions are needed?
9. What sorts of help are required from outside the community to support the processes of making the changes that are needed?
10. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

### ***Goals***

11. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years in order to create a politically healthy future?

## **J) SOCIAL LIFE**

*Something to think about: The social life of the community refers to the nature and quality of how we live together. Western society has organized social development into three main categories of work: 1) health, 2) education and 3) welfare. The questions that follow touch on those three areas, but also on the more basic issues such as unity, caring, sharing and community identity.*

The following four general questions are designed to help you think more deeply about the theme:

1. *What is it like now?*

2. *What can we learn from the past?*
3. *What would it be like if it were good (in a healthy, balanced future)?*
4. *What has happened and what do we have to do to get from where we are now to where we want to go?*

More detailed questions are provided below to help guide your discussion about each of these general questions.

### ***The Present and the Past***

1. What is the current reality of social well-being in our communities? Following are some things to think about in answering this question: family well-being/health; levels of substance abuse; levels of communal violence; levels of crime against property and people; levels of physical and sexual abuse; levels of mutual support and a climate of encouragement; levels of gossip and backbiting; levels of cooperation and volunteering; how the community responds to emergencies or crises; how the community accepts outsiders; how the community forgives those who break the rules or offend people; how the community deals with diversity, minority views, and those who are different;
2. Is the community unified or divided (common vision, shared plans, sense of identity, feelings of belonging, mutual support and love)?
3. Does the community have control over those things that lead to health (mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, environmental, etc.)?
  - Is there a strong sense of collective awareness, decision making and action related to health?
  - Is there a strong emphasis on the promotion of human wellness (mental, emotional, physical, spiritual) and the prevention of sickness or injury, or is most "health" money and energy focused on the medical mission of sick care?
4. Is education as it is now meeting the learning needs of the people?
  - Are kids dropping out of school?
  - Are school leavers able to contribute usefully to their own (economic) upkeep and to community development?
  - Is there a portion of the population that education is not serving well?
  - Does the community provide opportunities for life-long learning for its members?
  - What needs to change about the educational system?
5. Are current social welfare and child protection programs effective? Why or why not? What needs to change?
6. Is the justice system (i.e. the police and the courts) working? If not, what changes are needed?

7. Do health, education, welfare or justice program initiatives address the people's real social development needs? What should change in the way these programs work?

### ***The Future***

8. What would a socially healthy community be like?
9. What will have a change in the way we live and carry on our community life in order to create socially healthy and viable communities?
  - Personal level (i.e. personal growth, healing, learning)?
  - Interpersonal level (i.e. the way we relate to one another)?
  - Organizational level (i.e. what the agencies, programs and community organizations do)?
  - Community level (i.e. how the community organizes itself, interacts and relates to the outside world)?
10. What can/must the communities do for themselves without much outside help?
11. What sorts of learning are needed? Who needs to learn?

### ***Goals***

12. What are the main goals to be achieved in the next seven years in order to create a socially healthy future?

## **PART THREE: SAMPLE COMMUNITY STORY DATA GENERATED BY THE THEME "WOMEN"**

*Note: The following is a sample of the kind of data generated by the community story process. This sample was taken from an actual community process done in 1995. References to the name of the community have been removed. The data is shared with permission of the community .*

### ***Introduction***

Traditionally, women played a very important role in (any people) communities and women still have a vital role to play in building a healthy future for the people. Currently, however, there are some concerns and issues which are making it difficult for women to live up to that role. Although some very positive things are happening and some strong women's leaders are making a big contribution to community life, the community of (anyplace) also faces some challenges which need to be overcome. The following section describes some of these challenges. It also suggests a simple plan for working with those challenges in a positive way which will improve the quality of life for women and their families.

### ***The Present Situation***

The participants of the August, 1995 Community Story workshop in (anyplace) identified six major themes which can be used to describe the present situation for women in that community. These themes summarize what the participants felt were the major needs and issues facing women. They felt that these concerns and issues needed to be described so that they could be worked on in a united way. The workshop participants also identified some resources and assets which already exist in the community and which can be built on to improve the situation for women and their families.

#### **1. The Need for Building a Network of Support**

1.1 Women in (anyplace) need a support network which will provide **opportunities for personal growth and healing from all forms of abuse**. Both physical and

sexual abuse of women is occurring and there is very little help to deal with these problems. Women often don't report abuse because they are ashamed and feel they are to blame. Presently there is **no women's center or shelter** and women's societies are not active. Many women are not aware of those programs which do exist to help them.

1.2 **More women drink than before**, especially young women. It is hard to find a young woman who hasn't partied a lot. Life is shorter. If you are over twenty-seven years old, you've lived a full life.

1.3 **Women also need opportunities to learn**--to gain new information and skills in a supportive environment. One important area in which learning needs to occur is **gender issues**. How to build healthy relationships with men and how to handle situations in which men are behaving in ways which are not acceptable are some of the important issues in this regard.

1.4 A women's support network can also be effective in **helping women assume more political, economic and social influence in the community** because it will help them gain a greater level of unity. It can also help women find ways to take care of special needs like the lack of appropriate child care in the community.

1.5 A women's support network could take the form of **support groups, women's societies and women's shelters**. These opportunities need to be open to **all women**, regardless of age, cultural background or life circumstances.

## **2. The Special Needs of Single Mothers**

2.1 It was estimated by the participants at the workshop that up to **eighty percent of the households in the community are headed** by single mothers or **by women** who are bearing most of the burden of caring for their families (i.e. households in which the father and extended family are not really sharing the load of caring for the children and the home). Many couples are not married, and there is no real, lasting commitment. Women are trying to take on both the mother and the father roles. Very few male relatives are willing to take an active role in guiding the children and making sure the mother's needs are met.

2.2 In many instances these **women are living in poverty**. They are either unemployed or are spending a high proportion of their income on child care costs. Many

of these women have **low levels of education** and little or no training which will assist them to find employment. **Few training opportunities exist** and there are many obstacles which make it difficult for young mothers to go to school. Each year the programs which do exist are short of materials and resources for the students.

2.3 As a result of these circumstances, many women in (anyplace), especially young mothers, suffer from **low self esteem and are involved with alcohol and/or other drugs**. They have not received training in parenting skills. Presently there is very little support and assistance for these women.

### **3. The Special Needs of Elderly Women**

3.1 Elderly women are another group which has special needs. They need support from family and friends, as well as contact with other people in order to meet their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs. But many of them are not receiving this support. **They are relatively isolated**. They may live quite a distance from other people and not have access to transportation to visit their friends and neighbors. Some may also be handicapped and this makes it even more difficult to get around. Others may be living in some type of foster care which does not always meet their needs.

3.2 Elderly women have often **experienced drastic changes in their lifetime** as well as suffered the loss of family and friends. They may not have received much assistance in dealing with the psychological and mental effects of loss and change.

### **4. Poverty**

4.1 It is clear from the above discussion that too **many women in (anyplace) suffer from poverty**. When women are isolated and do not have the family support they need to care for their children and homes, they are often also poor. Poverty especially affects single women and the elderly.

4.2 With **low levels of training, education and employment**, women are finding it hard to meet their own basic health needs and those of their families. They may not be able to afford the cost of other important expenses (such as the fees for school field trips or recreation). The **welfare system has become a type of trap** for those women without family support or without employment which leaves them feeling helpless

and unproductive. Even those women with jobs are often poor, since they do not have the skills or opportunities to work in jobs which pay more than the minimum wage.

4.3 **Poverty creates tremendous stress for women.** They are under pressure to get work and to find affordable, good quality daycare for their children. They have a twenty-four hour a day, lifetime joy of raising their children and now they also need to work to financially support the family.

## 5. Women's Health Needs

5.1 Women in (anyplace) have some specific health needs. Many have **low levels of physical fitness** and not all women have a **balanced diet** which meets all their nutritional needs.

5.2 **High levels of substance abuse** exist, both among women and among their family members. Related health problems for women include **depression and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**. As well, some children in the community have been affected by the mother drinking during pregnancy (**FAS and FAE**).

## 6. The Lack of a Sense of Purpose, Role or Direction

6.1 Because of the **rapid changes** experienced by the people of (anyplace), some **women do not feel a clear sense of purpose**. The traditional roles played by women in society do not quite seem to fit any more, but no other appropriate alternative has been found either. In some instances the role that women are playing in the community is not being respected and valued by the community as a whole.

6.2 As a result some women are suffering from **low self esteem and a poor self image**. This can be reflected in the lack of care and dignity in the way they present themselves in public. Some young women are morally more loose than in the past and this makes it difficult to respect them.

6.3 As well, much of the **traditional knowledge and skills** used by women to play their very valuable role in their families and communities **is being forgotten**. This is making it difficult for women to effectively support each other or to work out their role in family and community life. Without a strong foundation from the past to build on, they are having trouble finding a clear sense of purpose and direction for the present and the future.

Women in (anyplace) need to reclaim their traditional cultural knowledge and to use it to build a healthy future.

## **7. Family Breakdown**

7.1 Many of the issues described above are **the result of a breakdown of the basic family unit**. Because women do not have the support of a strong extended family, they must carry too much of the burden of caring for the household. They are under tremendous economic pressure and are feeling the effects of increasing poverty. Religious disunity is also contributing to the breakdown of the extended family and is a major issue which needs to be addressed in order for the social and economic conditions in the community to improve.

## **8. Existing Strengths Which can be Built On**

8.1 The community of (anyplace) already has resources which can be used to improve the situation for women. **Meeting places** which can be used for women's support groups or for learning activities **are available**. There are some **strong women's leaders** in the community who are working hard to make a difference. As well, the community has many **cultural resources** which women can draw on to explore traditional skills and knowledge in the light of today's world and to rediscover a clear sense of purpose and direction.

8.2 The community of (anyplace) also has some **professional resources** (such as social service agencies) which have a mandate to serve the needs of women and their families. The **Peacemakers Program** is another very valuable resource for building and maintaining family unity and for strengthening the partnership between women and men in family and community life.

## ***What Can be Learned from the Past in Order to Build a More Healthy Future***

9.1 The participants at the (anyplace) Community Story workshop felt that in the past **women played the most important role in that group's history**. They had a strong and valued role in their families and community.

9.2 Among the (any people), society was somewhat **matriarchal**. In a sense, women were considered the fire, the head of the household. When a woman got married, the man came to her household. In terms of an economic role in the family, women had a **strong role** in terms of taking care of the sheep, shearing and dyeing the wool and doing the weaving.

9.3 When **girls** were growing up, **the whole family took an active role in their upbringing**. The grandparents were the authority and aunts and uncles were the disciplinarians. Parents didn't really set the rules. Girls and young women were educated and counseled about their roles. They had strong role models.

9.4 **Marriages were arranged** and women were taught to stay with their husbands. People lived in bands and the way of life was **nomadic**. Because of intermarriage, there was a mingling between the bands.

9.5 In the past, **abuse occurred in some families**. There was, however, a process to deal with this problem. Family representatives and witnesses came together to talk about what had happened and to help the family restore harmony.

9.6 After (a particular event in this community's history), a lot of things fell apart. Traditional codes and beliefs were oral and a lot of them were lost at that time. There are still pockets of (any people) elders who know the codes, but **now you have to go "underground" to find the sacred, historical code of the people**.

### ***What Life would be Like in a Healthy Future***

10.1 In a healthy future, both men and women would **take more responsibility for their lives**. They would be guided by **strong moral values**.

10.2 In order to be strong, **women would take good care of themselves** and develop a healthy, positive self esteem. They would use traditional **spiritual practices** in the morning and any time during the day to meditate and to help them become psychologically strong and self-reflective people. They would also combine traditional methods with alternative health practitioners (such as chiropractors) to **stay healthy physically**. They would control their drinking.

10.3 In a healthy community, **women would be much more involved in all aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life.** They would become better informed and participate actively in Chapter meetings. They would also be much more involved in all departments and agencies to insure that they meet the real needs of all women and their families. Women need to help the agencies become better organized and to make presentations at the Chapter House to help the Chapters get the training they need and to make decisions based on social needs (such as the youth).

10.4 In a positive future, **the sovereignty of the (any people) people would be stronger.** The education system would be governed by the reservation. Both grandparents and men would be involved in child care facilities to help give the children a balanced, healthy and culturally strong start in life. The Chapters would use the media (e.g. radio and television) to educate the people in issues which promote human and community development and to communicate important information and news.

10.5 **Women would have a strong support and self-help system.** They would have a women's center in which they could gather to talk about the issues which affect them and participate in self-help groups. The center would be in a good location (not remote) and would offer on-going (continuous) programs and help. Women's activities and meetings would be open to all women and the remote, rural women would be given special encouragement and help to be involved. A key person would be invited to help start the women get organized through an initial meeting. Follow-up meetings would be held to make sure that the momentum isn't lost.

10.6 In a healthy (anyplace), **whole families would be much more involved in raising the children.** Families would have opportunities to learn how to be stronger. People would understand that it takes sacrifice to make a change. Parents would understand that programs designed to help children and families are not "free." They must invest their time and energy in them in order to make them successful.

### ***First Steps Which Need to be Taken***

The participants of the (anyplace) Community Story workshop and the women's meeting which was held on Wednesday evening agreed that the following steps need to be taken in order for the situation for women to improve and for women's and family life programs to be effective.

## 1. Establish a Foundation of Unity

11.1 It was agreed that women need to begin to reach out to each other, especially to those women who are the most isolated because of geographic distance or because of poverty and other social problems (such as substance abuse). They need to **overcome the fear of rumors and criticism** by acting in a unified way and by establishing a clear code of ethical behavior. **Old grudges** which may exist between women from different families or even within the same family **need to be resolved and left behind.**

11.2 Women need to **learn how to organize** and to establish a foundation of unity. The barriers between working and professional women and those who are dependent on welfare or other types of financial assistance need to be overcome.

## 2. Build up a Team of Resource People for Women's Development

12.1 It was felt that a good starting point would be to hold a **one-day session for women's leaders.** Women who serve as community resource people (e.g. volunteers or staff in social service, education or health agencies) as well as the "natural" leaders around whom other women gather would all be invited to attend. Some special resource people from outside the community could be invited to help facilitate this meeting if appropriate.

12.2 This session would have three purposes:

- a) to give the women who attend an opportunity to **build up their own support network** by sharing with each other in a supportive, confidential environment;
- b) to provide **some basic training** in techniques for running successful support groups and talking circles; and
- c) to make **a simple plan** for helping the participants to start support groups and/or talking (healing) circles with the women with whom they have contact (through their jobs or volunteer work or through family and friendship ties).

12.3 **This same group of women would meet periodically** (every few months) to discuss the success of their efforts, to receive more leadership training and to continue to provide support to each other in a like-minded group of women.

### **3. Establish a Network of Women's Support Groups**

13.1 By following up on the plan which was developed in step #2 above, as **many small women's support groups as possible would be established all over the Reservation**. These groups would meet regularly to provide an opportunity for women to meet with each other in a supportive and confidential environment.

13.2 The groups could also offer some **basic skills training** (e.g. in self-care strategies, in parenting skills, or in crafts). Over time the groups could also evolve into taking more direct **social action** or to taking on **economic development ventures**. The primary emphasis of these small groups, however, would remain the **personal development and healing** of the participants as well as the establishment of a strong **sense of sisterhood** and support among women.

13.3 If appropriate, these support groups could evolve into **women's societies** which would participate in activities and be governed by a **code of ethics** similar to the ones which existed in the past.

13.4 **Special efforts need to be made to reach out to the most needy, isolated women**. This can be done through the service providers who have contact with them, through personal invitation, through the media, and through notices in stores, the post office and the schools.

### **4. Hold Larger Quarterly Women's Activities**

14.1 Once every quarter (or so) the women participating in these smaller support groups would be invited to participate in a **larger women's program** (e.g. an afternoon, day-long or weekend) workshop. These larger sessions would be an opportunity to receive **training** on specific issues which face women, to **recover traditional knowledge and skills**, to **meet women from all across the Reservation**, and to **make plans** for larger social, cultural, or economic projects.

### **5. Establish a Women's Resource Center and Women's Programs to Meet Specific Needs**

15.1 Besides the need for a network of women's support groups in all parts of the Reservation, **some specific women's programs are needed**. An example of this

type of program could be parenting skills training for young girls or a transportation service or elderly women. The nature of these programs should arise out of participatory consultation through the women's support groups and activities described above.

15.2 A **women's resource center** would be an ideal focal point for these types of activities as well as place where resource materials could be collected and distributed. A women's resource center could also serve as a location for experimental economic development projects designed to help women find ways to earn an income without putting too much pressure on themselves and their families.

## **6 . Education for Men and Other Family Members**

16.1 **Unless husbands, fathers, boy friends, political leaders and other males in the community understand the needs and concerns of women, they will not support their development efforts.** As women become more unified and active in the community and with respect to their personal development, resistance can come from the men and even from other women. This type of response can be anticipated and overcome through education, social and cultural activities which involve the whole community in better understanding and appreciating the role of women and the efforts they are making to improve themselves and their families.