

## Background

Gaps in education and employment continue to exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in BC. Aboriginal women tend to have lower levels of education, earn less money, and are underrepresented in many fields when compared to non-Aboriginal women. Although more Aboriginal women have recently been taking on leadership roles, more work could be done to make sure that their voices are heard and valued.

To address these challenges, the Minerva Foundation created **Combining Our Strength (COS) program**, which focuses on education, leadership, development and economic security to empower Aboriginal women to become leaders and to create opportunities for future generations. This report summarizes the results of a **needs assessment** that was completed to better understand the needs of Aboriginal women in education, employment and leadership today.

The Minerva Foundation is committed to improving the lives of women in BC through empowering programs.

### OUR VISION

The Minerva Foundation is changing the face of leadership in BC.

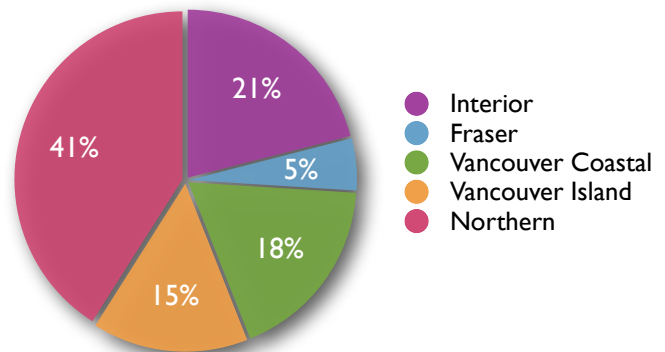
### OUR MISSION

To elevate the visibility, influence and contribution of women leaders.

## Who did we talk to?

- We talked with a total of 232 people throughout British Columbia about the needs of Aboriginal women in education, employment, and leadership.
- The majority of participants self identified as **female** and **First Nations**, and were from various regions of BC (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proportion of participants by BC region



## What areas should Aboriginal women leaders focus on?

*“Children are our future, so leaders should strive to give them every opportunity they possibly can, building a strong foundation for them to grow upon. Another area of focus should be personal healing as we all carry baggage from the past, even ancestral, that can have huge effects on our lives and those of our children”.*

Participants identified three key areas that they felt Aboriginal women leaders should focus on:

### 1. Health & Healing

Focus on physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health.

### 2. Education

Focus on closing the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and having more Aboriginal-specific education.

### 3. Children & Youth

Focus on early childhood development and the child welfare system.

# What does leadership mean to you?

Every participant mentioned at least one trait that describes a person as a leader. Here are the top 10 leadership traits that were mentioned:

## ✔ **Honesty, Truth & Integrity**

A leader is someone who is honest with themselves and with others. She values truthfulness and stands up for what she believes is right. Her values and morals guide her life.

## ✔ **Strength**

A leader has strength of character and strengths in particular areas (e.g., leadership skills). She uses her skills to achieve something purposeful such as strengthening a community or a culture.

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*“Leadership means guiding others to be the best they can be, and using their strengths to achieve a greater purpose ... leadership has an element of selflessness to it - it is the ability to stand in front of a crowd but also to sit back and be an observer.”*

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## ✔ **Listens**

A leader takes the time to actively listen to others about their concerns and needs.

## ✔ **Open-minded**

A leader is open-minded, considers all perspectives and is willing to learn in order to improve.

## ✔ **Self-aware**

A leader understands herself; she is aware of her role as a leader and how she influences others.

## ✔ **Participatory**

A leader includes everyone in important decisions and everyone is heard equally.

## ✔ **Motivating**

A leader motivates herself and others to do good things and achieve success.

## ✔ **Non-judgmental**

A leader listens and discusses without judgment. She is non-biased in leading others.

## ✔ **Humble**

A leader conducts herself with humility. She is not overconfident.

## ✔ **Self-confidence**

A leader is confident in her abilities and does not feel threatened by others.

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*“Leadership starts with self - you have to have worked on yourself - self-awareness - what are your triggers, strengths, how do you learn, process information ... knowing your culture etc.”*

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# What are the challenges and needs in communities?

- The greatest challenge to Aboriginal women advancing in leadership roles was found to be the **effects of colonialism**.

*“The effect of the legacy of residential schools on Indigenous culture and families and of institutional oppression through the 60's scoop”.*

- **Financial assistance** was found to be a critical need for Aboriginal women to get their post-secondary education.

*“For those living out of the Lower Mainland...access to education is problematic. Even if a cohort were established in nearby locations, there'd still be difficulties to attend daily”.*

- In terms of employment, respondents mentioned a **need for accessible programs and training** for Aboriginal women.
- **Training and programs** were also described as a main resource that Aboriginal women need in order to build leadership (i.e., delegation skills, conflict resolution, and facilitation).

# How can we overcome and address the challenges and needs of Aboriginal women?

Challenges	Solutions
<b>Programs, Trainings &amp; Workshops</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Access to services in rural areas</li> <li>● Lack of cultural and traditional learning in education and training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aboriginal led programs &amp; services</li> <li>● Bridging programs: prepare women for education</li> <li>● Cross-cultural programs</li> </ul>
<b>Employment</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fear of the unknown, failure, success, etc.</li> <li>● Feelings of low self-worth</li> <li>● Unemployment, job availability &amp; low salaries</li> <li>● Low job-related skills</li> <li>● Racism &amp; sexism in the workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Career coaches</li> <li>● Hold career fairs &amp; seminars</li> <li>● Training programs for job-related skills</li> <li>● Job creation</li> </ul>
<b>Family Life</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Accessible &amp; affordable childcare</li> <li>● Multiple responsibilities of primary caregivers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide easy access to daycare for women in school by offering on-site daycare facilities, flexible hours, and a reduced cost for students</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Completion of high school: not having a CED or Dogwood can hold women back from jobs</li> <li>● Access to post-secondary school outside the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Offer Aboriginal support groups and support from Elders at school</li> <li>● Aboriginal women role models, mentors &amp; educators</li> <li>● Increase awareness of funding available to Aboriginal students</li> </ul>



## Moving forward: Considerations for next steps

- 1) **EXPAND PROGRAMMING**
  - Expand the cultural components of all of the programming to address the intergenerational effects of colonization and to revitalize and sustain Aboriginal culture.
- 2) **CONTINUE PROVIDING TRAINING**
  - Continue to provide skill-building workshops. Focus on employment, communication and leadership skills.
- 3) **SUPPORT COS ALUMNI**
  - Create a COS Alumni group for networking and support.
- 4) **ADVOCATE FOR ABORIGINAL WOMEN LEADERS**
  - Advocate to change the face of leadership for Aboriginal women – have more visibility, contribution and influence of Aboriginal women leaders.

Thank you to all the participants who generously shared their valuable thoughts and insights with us.

For more information visit The Minerva Foundation for BC women at: [www.theminervafoundation.com](http://www.theminervafoundation.com)