



## *Commentary*

### *“Persistence and Pride:” A Brief History of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak – Women of the Métis Nation*

Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak

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# **“Persistence and Pride”: A Brief History of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak – Women of the Métis Nation**

Contribution to Literature

Organizational histories in Canada have traditionally been written by longstanding members or devoted employees, or, alternatively, by historians or other academics interested in the corporate, institutional, and organizational history of Canada. These organizational histories have been written predominantly by and about white males, and usually describe through a self-referential, white, male, middle-class lens how privileged members of Canadian society have organized themselves for various purposes.

As a result, histories of Indigenous feminist organizations advocating for social, economic, and political change and equality for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Indigenous persons are largely overlooked or simply absent in Canada’s institutional, corporate and organizational record. In the case of the history of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak–Women of the Métis Nation, this narrative gap in the historical record arguably constitutes an ignoring of “Métis women’s visible contributions to the contemporary landscape of the Métis, and wider Indigenous, politics... [and] entrenches the sexist erasure of Métis women, which is a hallmark of patriarchal colonization” (Adese 2021, 118).

However, the following brief history of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak–Women of the Métis Nation (LFMO-WMN) is not a story of Indigenous feminist organizational victimization at the hands of the colonial patriarchy. Rather, it is an uplifting, strengths-based story of a National Indigenous Women’s Organization advocating, with persistence and pride, for the equality of Métis women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis through a distinctions-based, gendered, intersectional approach reflective of the cultural and feminist values of the Women of the Métis Nation.

Reviewing the history of LFMO-WMN therefore offers a counterbalance to the historical omission of Métis women in Canada and provides a modest contribution to the historiography of organizational histories in Canada. It also contributes to Indigenous public policy discourse by highlighting the place, space, and impact of this small but mighty entity in upholding Indigenous feminist organizational strength in Canada.

## **Métis Motherland**

The Métis Nation, comprising a distinct, rights-bearing Indigenous People, occupied the historic Northwest long before Canada became Canada. At the heart and core of the Métis Nation are Métis women. The history of the Women of the Métis Nation is rich and complex and covers myriad trails of experience connecting Métis women across the Métis Motherland, the Métis Nation Homeland, spanning Ontario westward to British Columbia (LFMO-WMN, n.d.).

Throughout Canada's history, Métis women have not only been the givers of life and the nurturers of a new Nation, they have also been engaged as equal partners in the political, social, and economic life of Métis communities and in the development of the Métis Motherland. Accorded respect, held in high esteem, and occupying honoured roles as Grandmothers, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers, Métis women, like their First Nations female counterparts, were the "women in between" (Van Kirk 1977) First Nations and European cultures and peoples, and they have played an integral role in the development of the Métis people and the growing strength of the Métis Nation in Canada today (LFMO-WMN, n.d.).

### **Early Organizational History**

LFMO-WMN is a National Indigenous Women's Organization democratically mandated to represent Métis women from across the Métis Motherland. Existing in different iterations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, LFMO-WMN was formally established in 1999 and incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 2010. Its early organizational history and attempts by the Women of the Métis Nation to organize themselves politically at the national level have been expertly covered by Métis scholar Jennifer Adese, who notes that "Métis women have steadily increased their political activism and today work as vocal advocates for themselves and the wider Métis Nation and, thus, for Métis nationhood" (Adese 2021, 116).

In the early years following its formal establishment in 1999, LFMO-WMN strove to be considered its own autonomous entity, with an organizational structure, strategic objectives, mission statement, and process for the election of a National Spokesperson (LFMO-WMN 2004). This was an exciting time for the Métis Nation, following the 2003 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in *R. v. Powley*, which recognized the existence of site-specific Métis Aboriginal harvesting rights in the environs of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The *Powley* decision and increased profile of the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians within the then Department of Indian and Northern Affairs ushered in a new era in Métis-Crown relations, and the Women of the Métis Nation were determined to take their well-earned place as one of the three distinct, rights-bearing Indigenous Peoples of Canada (namely, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), whose rights were first recognized and affirmed under section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.

However, establishing LFMO-WMN's presence nationally as more than a secretariat of the Métis National Council required "the persistence and pride of Métis women" – the same cultural traits that ensured their survival in Batoche and other Métis communities across the historic Northwest (Payment, in Saunders and Dubois 2019, 120). Similar organizational dedication, tenacity, and vision were held by LFMO-WMN, as evidenced by resolutions to have the Métis National Council recognize LFMO-WMN as the representative organization for the Women of the Métis Nation and by attempts to secure consultation and organizational capacity funding from the Office of the Federal Interlocutor (and other federal stakeholders) to ensure that Métis Nation women's voices were heard in key federal policy discussions on issues directly affecting them and their families (LFMO-WMN 2005).

When LFMO-WMN received limited organizational financial support, it had to gently remind the Métis National Council of “the importance of, and respect for, the Women’s perspective [that] should be acknowledged and [we] should be made aware of invitations and opportunities to participate in all areas” (LFMO-WMN 2006). During this period, LFMO-WMN also worked to create its own collaborative space within and alongside the Métis National Council, promoting itself autonomously through Métis National Council publications and websites “in order to increase the profile, awareness and potential for women’s representatives to be invited to various meetings at the political level” (LFMO-WMN 2007). Certainly, the participation of LFMO-WMN in the National Aboriginal Women’s Summits (LFMO-WMN 2006, 2007) at the time enabled it to exercise leadership and advocacy in the areas of traditional knowledge, health, education, and family violence, which the organization deemed to be of “highest priority to Women of the Métis Nation” (LFMO-WMN 2007).

It was also during this period that LFMO-WMN began actively recognizing and supporting through outreach, relationship-building, and gift giving other national distinctions-based Indigenous women’s organizations, particularly the Assembly of First Nations’ Women’s Council and Pauktuuitit Inuit Women of Canada (LFMO-WMN 2005, 2006, 2007). Its emphasis on building Indigenous feminist organizational strength through laterally kind, supportive, and respectful relationships with other distinctions-based Indigenous women’s organizations – as opposed to aligning itself with the more amorphous, pan-Indigenous approach of the Native Women’s Association of Canada – became a defining feature of LFMO-WMN’s organizational *modus operandi*.

As Adese notes, “while Métis women ... had worked under the auspices of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), many Métis women felt that the NWAC predominantly focused on First Nations women’s concerns” (Adese 2021, 131). Thus, LFMO-WMN’s organizational gravitation toward other distinctions-based First Nations and Inuit sister organizations was less a rejection of NWAC than an expression of Métis women’s desire to ensure their distinct voices were heard in the broader Indigenous feminist political arena.

However, it was not until its 2010 incorporation and the adoption of its own by-laws (LFMO-WMN 2010) that LFMO-WMN truly came into its own as a distinctions-based National Indigenous Women’s Organization, working hand-in-hand with Métis Nation Governing Members. As Adese notes, Métis women’s growing political organizational strength was witnessed by LFMO-WMN’s emergence as an “autonomous, national collective of Métis women working both inside and outside of the MNC’s structures” (Adese 2021, 136). Thus, LFMO-WMN’s collaborative approach both within and outside the MNC bore fruit and “marked a turning point in that, finally, Métis women had a political body independent of the MNC as well as an entrenched seat in the MNC’s governing structure” (Adese 2021, 136–137).

The longstanding tradition of politically active Métis women both challenging and collaborating with traditionally male-dominated Métis political organizations draws on the cultural strengths of Métis women who have come before (Saunders and Dubois 2019,

120–121). What Adese calls Métis women’s “inclination to action” (Adese 2021, 125) is premised on a strong, vocalized sense of the role and responsibility of Métis women in ensuring the survival and strength of all Métis across the Motherland. As Adese notes, “Métis women are not now nor have they ever been quiet. Métis women have persisted in organizing to give voice to their experiences but also to ensure that all voices are heard within the Métis Nation. They recognize that it is their responsibility to build a Nation in which all future generations of Métis are respected and valued” (Adese 2021, 139).

LFMO-WMN’s approach of collaborative challenge therefore speaks to organizational values that reflect an enduring cultural vision held by Métis women – namely, that the success of the Métis Motherland depends on its women upholding and working together in complementary strength with all members of the Métis Nation. As the only recognized representative body to speak on behalf of Métis women at the national level, LFMO-WMN serves as the current political manifestation of “the historic centrality of [Métis] women ... in the birth of Métis identity and nationhood [that] lives on in contemporary political practice” (Saunders and Dubois 2019, 121).

### **Current Organization**

Throughout LFMO-WMN’s nearly twenty-three years of existence, its direction has been determined by the Women of the Métis Nation through their provincial representative organizational bodies. Operating in a democratic, transparent, and fiscally accountable manner, the organization has sought to influence public policy and decision-making related to the concerns and aspirations of Métis women at all levels of government.

LFMO-WMN’s organizational structure consists of a national President, elected for a three-year term, and a Board of Directors, comprising provincial regional Board Members from the Métis Nation’s membership. LFMO-WMN works in collaboration with the Métis Nation’s provincial Governing Members and representative women’s organizations to promote the leadership of Métis women in representing their unique needs and interests at the local, community, regional, provincial, national, and international levels (LFMO-WMN, n.d.).

LFMO-WMN’s Board of Directors meets a minimum of four times a year and holds regular Annual General Meetings, although the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to its convening abilities to bring provincial regional Board Members and provincial Métis women’s representative organizations together in person. Nonetheless, LFMO-WMN’s democratic leadership and regional representation are reflected in the current description of its organizational structure: “The Métis Motherland is vast and vibrant, stretching from British Columbia to Ontario. LFMO’s Board of Directors is made up of representatives from each of these provinces ... to ensure our direction, vision and work are grounded in diverse Métis women’s experiences and realities” (LFMO-WMN, n.d.).

Before and throughout the global pandemic, LFMO-WMN has consistently upheld the role and integrity of the provincial Métis women’s representative organizations, which it sees as “essential in advocating for and engaging with Métis women and 2SLGBTQIA+ folks especially at the grassroots level. With their collective wisdom, hard work and vision,

LFMO more fully understands the unique and diverse realities of Métis women and can confidently represent their perspectives at a national level” (LFMO-WMN, n.d.).

### **Organizational Vision and Values**

LFMO-WMN has also worked tirelessly to realize a vision and mission for the organization that reflects Métis feminist values and a strong sense of the history, place, and role of Métis women in the development of the Métis Nation in Canada. Its contemporary vision and mission are as follows:

Our Vision – Since our founding in 1999 and our incorporation in 2010, our vision is to be the National Indigenous Women’s Organization (NIWO) for the Women of the Métis Nation, advocating nationally and internationally for the equal treatment, health and wellbeing of all Métis people, with a focus on the rights, needs and priorities of Métis women, youth, children, and 2SLGBTQQA+ Métis.

Our Mission – Our mission is to ensure that Métis women from across the Motherland are safe, respected, connected, and empowered, and have the capacity to work with Canadian and Métis governments and organizations, to help create the conditions for healthy, vibrant and productive communities throughout the Métis Nation. (LFMO-WMN, n.d.)

Further, the overarching mandate of LFMO-WMN is to

...offer committed leadership and support on behalf of Métis Nation women from a strengths-based perspective, and advocate for equitable access and equality of outcomes for all Métis through a Métis gendered lens. We continue to implement our mandate, vision, and mission through national advocacy for distinctions-based, culturally relevant, gender-sensitive policies, programs and services to improve the lives and wellbeing of Métis women, children, families and communities, and to uphold the dignity and resilience of Métis women and 2SLGBTQQA+ Métis across the Motherland. (LFMO-WMN, n.d.)

This knowledge of and confidence in the Women of the Métis Nation and their unique lived experiences as Métis women have not only defined LFMO-WMN’s organizational *raison d’être* and Michif-inspired branding of “We Own Ourselves”, but it has also helped guide the organization’s values and guiding principles. The organization’s website notes:

As Métis women, we hold dear and sacred the teachings and wisdom of our Grandmothers and Knowledge Keepers. We honour the responsibility of the sacred bundles that we carry. We share these bundles when we gather to impart the knowledge that is bestowed to us as stewards and caretakers. The first bundle we carry is that of the Grandmothers’ Wisdom Circle. We sit in council and consensus, and look to the gifts of the generations before us. We trust that the knowledge and teachings that come to us will guide our steps as we move forward with our mandate, vision and mission. (LFMO-WMN, n.d.)



LFMO-WMN's values and guiding principles, based on Michif/Cree understandings passed down by Métis Grandmothers, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, have also helped inform the organization's strategic objectives, which seek to maintain and preserve the cultural distinctiveness and identity of Métis women, as Métis women (LFMO-WMN, n.d.). This fundamental conviction in the integral value, honour, and sacredness of Métis women has guided LFMO-WMN's work in maintaining and promoting the health and cultural integrity of Métis families and communities across the Métis Motherland.

Since its establishment, LFMO-WMN has consistently sought to advance and advocate for the equality and empowerment of Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis. Its steadfast commitment comes from the knowledge of the Métis Grandmothers, Elders and Knowledge Keepers who have come before – that the Women of the Métis Nation know who they are, and that they welcome into their circle *all* Métis and their Indigenous feminist allies. This enveloping, strengths-based, positive, and inclusive approach has served as a surprisingly effective technique of Indigenous feminist advocacy, as witnessed by its impressive leadership, advocacy, and outreach efforts.

### **Organizational Leadership, Advocacy, and Outreach**

LFMO-WMN focuses its advocacy and outreach efforts on ensuring a distinctions-based, gendered, intersectional approach that reflects the unique cultural and feminist approach of the Women of the Métis Nation. From an organizational perspective, LFMO-WMN has worked diligently to ensure that the democratic leadership and participation of Métis Nation women are afforded equal place in contributing to the strength of the Métis Motherland. In this respect, the more than a decade-long presence, constancy, and advocacy of LFMO-WMN's sitting President, Melanie Omeniho, has provided a degree of organizational leadership and stability not always seen in Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations.

First elected in 2010, President Omeniho is a descendant of the historical Métis community of Lac Ste Anne and is a former President of Edmonton Métis Local 1886 for nearly thirty years, as well as a former President of the Women of the Métis Nation in Alberta. As noted in her biography, President Omeniho draws on the strength and tradition of the strong Métis women leaders who have preceded her:

As a young person, Melanie attended meetings and assemblies alongside her mother and other strong Métis women role models who set the stage in creating spaces for Métis women's voices to be heard. Her political and advocacy career led her to play a role in the development and incorporation of Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak ... and to her four terms as President, elected by Métis women across the Homeland. (LFMO-WMN 2019)

Thanks in large part to Omeniho's unwavering and committed leadership, LFMO-WMN has successfully accelerated the advancement of its policy, advocacy, and outreach efforts on numerous fronts, including the economic empowerment and security of Métis women in the area of financial literacy, entrepreneurialism, and housing and home ownership supports; early learning and child care, education, and training using

environmental, land-based teachings and cultural assets; and upholding, through culturally competent Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) and intersectional approaches, the rights and needs of all Indigenous women, at work, at home, in their communities, nationally and internationally. On all these fronts, LFMO-WMN has actively worked to ensure that its policy and advocacy efforts prioritize understanding and advocating for the distinct needs and priorities of Métis women and their families.

Some of LFMO-WMN’s most impressive leadership and advocacy efforts of the last decade have concerned the human security of Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis, including gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, family violence, sexual labour violence, and missing and murdered Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis. Under Omeniho’s leadership, LFMO-WMN stood strong during the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, advocating for an appropriate and respectful place and space for Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis affected by this ongoing national tragedy.

This was not always an easy stance, as the exclusionist and discriminatory biases underpinning the National Inquiry process saw Métis women leaders’ voices excluded at key federal meetings and Métis participants and attendees facing marginalization and shunning at Inquiry hearings. Nonetheless, like the strong Métis women leaders who preceded and surrounded her, Omeniho refused to be silenced or immobilized by the deeply flawed Inquiry process. Instead, stated Omeniho, “Since the national inquiry is not including Métis, we will do the work ourselves. We will make our own recommendations to the Minister based on work done by the Métis Nation, for our Métis women, families, and communities... We are not under any delusions. We have continuously been reminded what a train wreck that the inquiry became” (Ward 2019).

The final work that LFMO-WMN published, entitled *Weaving Miskotahâ* (Michif for “Change”), serves as a model for a distinctions-based, gendered approach to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ persons. It is an approach in which affected Métis women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ Métis can find safe space and place to share voice within the context of Métis cultural and feminist values, understandings, and ways of knowing and being. Organizationally, the publication of *Weaving Miskotahâ* was a defining moment for LFMO-WMN as a National Indigenous Women’s Organization, whose leadership was not then (or now) content to simply remain quiet.

### **LFMO-WMN Today and Tomorrow**

LFMO-WMN continues to grow in organizational and governance autonomy, accountability, and recognition, as evidenced by its 2021 signing of the *Canada-Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak Declaration*, which effectively placed LFMO-WMN on par with other National Indigenous Organizations and National Indigenous Women’s Organizations that had signed similar Accords, Memoranda, and Agreements with Canada on a Nation-to-Nation basis.

The growing profile and presence of LFMO-WMN is a testament to its Métis cultural and feminist values of democratic leadership that continue to hold strong during tumultuous



times. As noted in its most recent Communications Strategy, the organization will only continue to grow stronger:

Over the past several years, Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak (LFMO) has grown in size, strength and prominence as an organization. LFMO has earned the trust and support of both government and non-government partners to undertake important work to serve Métis women of the Motherland, as well as being a powerful voice for all Indigenous women through its strengths-based and distinctions-focused approach... Above all, LFMO has shown that it is the organization to raise the issues, struggles and stories of Métis women in a positive strengths-based way that creates real benefits for Métis women and Métis communities in Canada. (Spruce Creative 2021, 3)

For LFMO-WMN, the Women of the Métis Nation matter *because* they are Métis Nation Women. The two identities are inextricable, just as Métis mothers have always known that the Métis Nation – like Métis family ties – are inextricable. It is at this organizational, political, cultural, and spiritual juncture of distinct Indigenous and feminist identification that LFMO-WMN derives its organizational resilience and tenacity.

Today, LFMO-WMN is well-placed to continue as a major torchbearer and fire-keeper of distinctions-based Indigenous feminist organizational strength in Canada. Its leadership and allies expect nothing less from themselves: “As the keepers of the family and Motherland, Métis women carry the stories our grandmothers told. We carry them and we survive” (Saunders and Dubois 2019, 120). Going forward, the LFMO-WMN of tomorrow will continue to stand for and assert what the Women of the Métis Nation have always known:

“We are the best representatives to serve our needs. When it comes to our issues, there must be no conversation about us without us. We own ourselves” (Spruce Creative 2021, 8).

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