

**The contributions of Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee women to our ecological well-being:  
Summary for interested local groups**

*The existence of a multiplicity of knowledges is as important for the state and health of the individual knowledges and human knowledge as a whole, as biodiversity is important for the environment .... [M]ultiple knowledges provide the basis and hope for inter-civilizational succession and therefore vaccinate humanity against the possibility of total destruction. (Paulo Wangoola, Williams et al. 2008b: 25).*

**Many would think that women who are indigenous to their homeland and racialized immigrant and refugee women in might have little in common.....However, they**

- Are often highly mobile populations, struggling for their families economic and cultural survival in a global economy that has winners and losers
- Are often underpaid, over worked and juggling multiple roles as partners, mothers, workers, knowledge keepers, caregivers, and leaders
- Experience various forms of violence resulting from race, gender and class inequities
- Are often forced to move (economic reasons, environmental damage, forms of violence) and experience separation from family, land and culture
- Experience mental distress and trauma as a result of these challenges
- Often come from cultures that are often poorly understood by services and mainstream society and end up being pathologized or patronized as a result
- Often come from traditional knowledge systems that have holistic views of well-being and potentially have a lot to contribute to our society and our ecological wellbeing

Women are traditionally nurturers – nurturers of our families and communities, nurtures of culture and our traditions, nurtures of the land.....yet the gifts and stories women have to offer our world often go unrecognized, & unheard – especially Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee women who for many reasons are at the margins of our global worlds. While these communities are each unique and have many differences within them<sup>1</sup>, they also share some things in common. This project is intended to honour and work with both. If you are an Aboriginal, immigrant or refugee woman and:

- Would like an opportunity to explore your life journey, share your experiences with other women while learning about differences and things in common
- Are interested in creating a sense of belonging to people as well as place
- Would like to explore building community and the possibilities for offering your gifts back to community, then this could be for you.....

**This participatory action research project** is part of a larger project that through community-building, new ways of thinking and practical action seeks to reduce mental health disparities for Aboriginal and Racialized immigrant women in Canada and beyond. It is for: 1) leaders of these communities who are passionate about going beyond individual pathology and interested in realizing a collective vision of

---

<sup>1</sup> This project views vulnerability to mental health disparities as complex and layered

human potential and diversity (mental well-being) in ways that support the bio-diversity of our natural world (including humans); and 2) members of these communities who initially moved from their homeland or traditional lands/reserve two or more years ago, self-define as living on a low income and interested in holistic approaches to mental well-being that connect to human and environmental well-being. For both groups it potentially consists of a series of talking circles or hui:

- **Sowing Seeds:** Spending a day (or 2 ½ days/evenings) together getting to know each other and collectively exploring questions of community, identity, land, belonging and well-being;
- **Tending our gardens:** An individual interview/session exploring how these seeds have taken root within our unfolding life journey
- **Sharing the harvest:** Three half day talking circles / workshops sharing our deepening understanding of 'community' and well-being, understanding how our individual stories fit with the bigger picture and exploring opportunities for wisdom-sharing with other communities

**Overall Aims:** **1)** To better understand from an indigenous or depth ecology perspective the ways in which culture, migration and the inter-sectionality of race, gender and class influence sense of belonging and mental well-being; **2)** to influence relevant programming and policies from an ecological perspective through the contributions of participants experiences of well-being; and 3) capacity building of participating organizations as a result of the research process.

**Process:** This research/community action process will begin with "Sowing the seeds" for organizational representatives/community leaders working with these communities. The purpose of these focus groups will be to 1) explore these issues for participants and 2) help shape the research process with women in category two (generally more vulnerable to experiencing mental health disparities). The remainder of the research will progress from this point. The ethics proposal has been shaped according to the principles of ownership, control, access and protection for these communities.

**Why an ecological approach to mental well-being and migration?** Conventional approaches to mental well-being tend to individualize the problem and pathologize individuals, families and sometimes entire communities – for aboriginal and immigrant populations this problem is made worse because of the western bias of our health, social and education systems. This individualistic way of seeing the world now dominates virtually every major system, including our economy, which treats people (especially people with less power – these communities) as economic commodities, mirroring the extractive relationship we have with the earth. Policies and programs for these groups are often predicated on this dominant paradigm of an extractive economy which is damaging to these communities, our environment the larger ecology of our well-being. Within this reductionist worldview many approaches to migration and well-being are limited in their efficacy regarding collective well-being. *There is also abundant evidence that mental well-being is very linked to our relationship with our built and natural environments (for example access to the use of traditional herbs for healing, issues of environmental racism that often effect poorer and racialized communities, indigenous perspectives on well-being and the earth community – e.g., land, water - and the perspectives provided by terra-psychology). We*

**therefore need new paradigms** within which to explore solutions, particularly paradigms of interconnectedness, long held by societies from which many of these women come.

**Potential Benefits for participating organizations and participants** \*Deepening understanding of holistic approaches to mental well-being, how these relate to themselves and their communities  
\*Healing, and taking ownership of our stories and the wisdom that comes through these; \*The opportunity to tell your story whilst grounded in one's own cultural symbolism, ritual and ways of expression; \*Networking and co-alition building- Being part of building a larger community story and opportunities for sharing with other communities via media and internet technology; \*Opportunities for policy advocacy and skill development in relevant areas.

**This project** is an initiative of the Reducing Mental Health Disparities Project, University of Saskatchewan and the Koru International Network (K.I.N.) [www.kinincommon.com](http://www.kinincommon.com) The Project leader, Dr Lewis Williams has extensive experience working with these communities in both New Zealand and Canada in related areas. Some of her own experiences as a white, indigenous (to Aotearoa New Zealand), migrant women living in Canada and understanding of migration from an indigenous or depth ecology perspective are available in the forthcoming book **Williams, L., Roberts, R., and McIntosh, A.,** (eds) (2011). *Radical Human Ecology: Intercultural and Indigenous Approaches*. Ashgate Publishing Group: U.K. In Press. <http://bit.ly/mEsvSj> ISBN 978-0-7546-7768-0. Details of her work can be found at: [www.kinincommon.com](http://www.kinincommon.com)

**Women.....nurtures, knowledge keepers, leaders.....**