

# Matriarchy in practice: Lessons from Anishinaabe Kweok in community programming

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## Abstract

Biindigen families is a grassroots group in Sudbury that offers community programming that is culturally grounded with language, ceremonies, activities, crafts that focus on Indigenous resurgence of cultural knowledge in Sudbury for Indigenous parents, children and families. Led by two powerful matriarchs, Nicole Wemigwans and Paula Pelletier, and supported by an all Ikwewag- women (women) staff, Biindigen Families has made great strides in restoring traditional matriarchal leadership in community health and development through community programming. In Anishnabemowin (Ojibwe language), the word for old women (leader, clan leader, seed source/carrier), 'mindimooyenh', the one who carries, or holds it together. With great respect to the women that came before us, the goal of this paper is to illustrate lessons learned in the conception, growing and being stages of Biindigen families for social workers that are rooted in traditional Anishinaabe matriarchy.

## Keywords

Indigenous, language, family caregiving, culture, matriarchy, culture programming

With great respect to the women that came before us, the goal of this paper is to illustrate lessons learned in the conception, growing and being stages of Biindigen Families for social workers that are rooted in traditional Anishinaabe matriarchy. The paper will first begin with an introduction of Nicole Wemigwans and Paula Pitawanakwat, the founders

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Biindigen Families. Biindigen Families is a grassroots organization that is in N'Swakamok, which is colonially known as Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. The lessons learned throughout the stages of Biindigen Families are united by resurgence, reclamation and reimagining the future.

## **Origin**

### *Nicole*

Arnelda Jacobs-baa was a community matriarch within Serpent River First Nation who had 11 children and numerous grandchildren. I am a proud granddaughter of hers and remember my childhood with her as the decision maker and glue that held our family together. We would have numerous family gatherings, she would make the best homemade bread ever, and she would share knowledge about ceremonies and cultural items. She shared her gifts freely with Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies who wanted to learn about culture. She was a strong leader in the community and pushed for cultural ceremonies. Her emphasis on family was evident through her children and grandchildren. Her legacy is caring for the community, which I carry on for my son and the generations to come.

### *Paula*

Matriarch means holding on to our connection to the caregivers of our community, who paved the way for resilience and strength for our survival. Within my community, Serpent River First Nation, we greatly respect our grandmothers and matriarchs of our community as they hold the knowledge of generations past. I lost my grandmothers at an early age, but I always recall the wisdom, kindness and strength they carried in many of the stories passed down to my mother that was shared with me. I am so proud of Biindigen Families' work over the years; it is a testament to the return of our old ways and challenging the stereotypes placed on us as women.

## **Conception**

Biindigen Families is a grassroots group in Sudbury that offers community programming that is culturally grounded with language, ceremonies, activities, crafts that focus on Indigenous resurgence of cultural knowledge in Sudbury for Indigenous parents, children and families. Biindigen Families is by and for Indigenous people. The programming though Biindigen Families is aimed at strengthening the families bundle. Consistent with Anishinaabe teachings, a family may be many people, or a single person looking for a family of their own. Biindigen Families provides a space for anyone wanting to add on to their bundle. Led by two powerful matriarchs, Nicole and Paula, and supported by an all Ikwewag- women (women) staff, Biindigen Families has made great strides in restoring traditional matriarchal leadership in community health and development through community programming. In Anishnabemowin (Ojibwe language), the word for old women (leader, clan leader, seed source/carrier), 'mindimooyenh', the one who carries, or holds it

together (L. Fox, personal communication, 2022). Matriarchal leadership systems have always existed in Indigenous cultures (Defriend and Cook, 2023). Matriarchs care through relationality and lead with an understanding of how their current actions will impact generations to come (Defriend and Cook (2023)).

Women are intrinsically connected to water. In fact, according to Anishinaabe teachings, the water is definitely feminine (Longboat, 2015). Anishinaabe women's relationships with water is based on social practices, cultural beliefs, economic contexts, and women's role in reproduction (Craft and King, 2021). Anishinaabe teachings explain that women are deeply connected to waters as new life begins from the waters in which women carry new life (Longboat, 2015). According to Longboat (2015), Anishinaabe women are the "Keepers of the Water" and this is related to the roles and responsibilities that women have. Part of those roles include praying for the water and ways that we must take care of the water for future generations (Longboat, 2015).

Two key teachings were pivotal in the conception of Biindigen Families. Firstly, matriarchs have the obligation to make decisions based on a loving responsibility (McGregor, 2015; NCCAH, 2012), which allowed Biindigen Families to grow. Second is the necessity of caring for the generations to come, which will allow Biindigen Families and the cultural reclamation to be, for generation to come. Community based programming has been shown to improve the overall health of families (Gerlach et al., 2017; NCCAH, 2012). Specifically, community programming this is focused on the passing down of language, culture and customs by Ikwewag in kinship roles has been shown to support the healthy development of children- and by extension the community (NCCAH, 2012).

## Growing

Coming from a philosophy rooted in the responsibility to make decisions based on love, we honour all our relations. The decisions regarding the operations, the being, of Biindigen Families are grounded in these responsibilities by honouring motherhood, the dismantling of patriarchal and colonial influence and supporting the family as whole, growing their bundle. To grow in an authentic way, the founders of Biindigen Families had to critically evaluate the Westernized structure that often guide family programming. By challenging the colonial and patriarchy influences that impact family programing, Biindigen Families is able to grow freely, honouring all Anishinaabek (Indigenous people), and Anishinaabe was of being.

Westernized community programming is often modeled after normative, non-Indigenous philosophies (Gerlach et al., 2017). Paula's response to this is, "As matriarchs, we need to fulfill our roles that, over the years, have been distorted by patriarchy and colonialism," (Gearon, 2021; P. Pitawanakwat, personal communication, February 11, 2024). At Binindigen Families, we constantly examine our structure, ensuring we are not replicating the systems that have harmed us.

Maracle notes that colonization and patriarchy profoundly impacted Indigenous communities, leaving our ancestors feeling apologetic for who they were (2003). This internalized oppression made it difficult for us to appreciate the value of our cultures or to see them as vibrant and essential forms of community development. As a result, our communities often

lacked cohesiveness. “We needed a vision.” Reclaiming our identities and responsibilities is crucial for healing and empowerment. Maracle believed that “Indigenous women were the first ones to wake up to this process and the first to take up their responsibilities” (p. 74, 2003). This shared vision unites us and brings our community together.

As we began to recognize our responsibilities as Indigenous women, our traditions taught us that we are not the same as men, nor should we try to be. We should not have to lower ourselves to achieve equality. My teachings and life experiences remind me of our strength as women and the significant responsibilities we carry for our people. We are responsible for creating and nurturing, making it natural for women to lead our reclamation as a community.

This understanding shaped my role with Biindigen Families, where our responsibilities in community development, cultural revitalization, and program development often require us to work long hours without real compensation. We are driven by our vision and our duty to Shkagamik Kwe (Mother Earth). We work for the children, their families, and generations to come, as it is our role as Anishnaabe Kwe. With this vision, role, and responsibility in mind, we challenge the boundaries of patriarchy that have confined us. Within Biindigen Families, we’ve created a sense of community where we can freely express our creativity and vision. Ultimately, we have overcome colonial and patriarchal influences by embracing the idea that “We have shared our dream as opposed to power” (Maracle, 2003: 74).

Challenging norms based in colonialism and patriarchy, Biindigen Families offers programming that supports women and the family as a whole. There is a historic hesitancy to join early-childhood programming, due to the painful legacy of government sanctioned policies (Gerlach et al., 2017). Programming designed and run by Indigenous people for Indigenous people breaks down the barrier to accessing community programming, restoring sovereignty and the reclamation of our cultural practices. Research has demonstrated that for the success of Indigenous early childhood programs, primary caregivers must be engaged (Gerlach et al., 2017). Biindigen Families ensure accessibility and family support to ease the engagement of primary caregivers in programming. Some of the features of Biindigen Families programming, that uphold values of accessibility, are the inclusion of childcare in programming, free transportation options and gift cards to local grocery stores, so that families may share a meal together.

Challenging the patriarchal and colonial influence in Indigenous programming meant looking at the way Biindigen Families presents itself. The term ‘biindigen’ means welcome. Using minimalist features in the logo’s design honours the diversity of Indigenous people and aims to be welcoming for all Anishinaabe to envision themselves as a part of the Biindigen family. Whether a person is coming by themselves, with their family or their friends, there is a place for them in our programming. By providing programming that is accessible, inclusive, and conscious, Biindigen Families is a safe space where families can grow their bundles.

## **Being**

Indigenous ways of being include healing, adapting, and creating a sense of well-being. Further, story work allows for thinking deeply and critically while learning relational ways of being (Charles, 2022). According to Charles (2022), storytelling reinforces

Indigenous worldview, culture, language, values, knowledge, and sustainable ways of knowing and being. Hence, “being” means a worldview that is guided through the stories and learnings from cultural practices. Dreaming for the future simultaneously connects us to our relations, both past and future (McGregor, 2015; Day, 2023). Caring for the generations to come assures the representation of traditional structures in institutional settings, collaboration as route towards strengthening the community as a whole and being able to dream towards the future. Building on the examination of existing structures, the founders of Biindigen Families have the opportunity to redefine what working with institutions. Aspects of this redefinment include examining power dynamics within Biidingen Familes, working non-competitively with other organizations and staying true to the foundation of Biidingen Families.

Often, community programming must operate in conjunction with institutional settings. This provides an opportunity to examine institutional structures and the potential to effect change (Gerlach et al., 2017). Acknowledging the power dynamics between a placement student from an institutional setting and the leaders of Biindigen Families, it was decided that the student would be paid for her time. In addition, it was written in the student’s duty set that she is to take billed time for personal care, rejecting the institutional norm. When coming together as a team, the Ikwewag that support Biindigen Families have authentic check-ins and will smudge together, to remind themselves that they come before the institution and workplace.

With humility and deep respect for other community and grassroots organizations, Biindigen Families is able to work with other organizations to broaden their programming. For example, hosting events in coordination with other organizations or planning events to not interfere with other organizations’ programming. By working with other organizations, we strengthen the community, as a whole.

Even in the worst of times, our people have maintained the unshakable ability to dream towards a future, that leaves a meaningful legacy through the stewardship of our relations and the land (Knott, 2023). Healing is generational, for those in the physical and spirit worlds. Biindigen is for our children, so they may feel embraced and guided by our culture, it is also for our ancestors, so they can begin to heal, seeing that their kin are recovering knowledge and strengthening community. Nicole and Paula’s realized dream can be carried by the next generation, allowing the one after them to be engulfed in the culture, free from colonial influence.

## Final thoughts

Like their grandmothers, Nicole and Paula continue their families’ legacies by providing matriarchal leadership and kin-like relationships with all community members, contributing to the health and wellbeing of the individual, family unit and community. The lessons from community programming through a traditional matriarchal lens can empower social workers to incorporate the values embodied by traditional matriarchy as told through the conception, growing and being stages of Biindigen Families. I may not know the land, water and sky like my ancestors did but, 1 day my children will. Miigwetch kina Anishinaabe Kweg.

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