



# INDIGENOUS INNOVATION INITIATIVE

## Advancing Indigenous Gender Equality through Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship Program Story

In May 2020, the Indigenous Innovation Initiative launched the Gender Equality Program as its inaugural program. The **ultimate impact goal** of the Gender Equality Program is to advance Indigenous gender equality across health, economic and social dimensions through transformative innovation and large-scale systemic change that is by and for First Nation, Inuit and Metis women, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse people.

**Key objective:** To support achieving this ultimate impact goal, as part of the broader innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem the Gender Equality Program seeks to use Indigenous innovation to advance health, economic and social sovereignty and well-being for First Nation, Inuit and Metis women, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse people, while re-empowering them to achieve their vision of self and community.

To support achieving this key objective, the Gender Equality Program does its best to:

- Use language, materials and approaches that are resiliency-informed, strengths-based, gender affirming and culturally rooted, and that allow innovators to have culture, community and ceremony as a basis of their strength
- Identify and address gendered barriers for First Nation, Inuit and Metis women, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse people to equally and equitably access, use and benefit from the program and the innovation projects that it funds
- Create spaces that are as safe and inclusive as possible, for diverse innovators to grow and connect across their cohort, within their communities and across the innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem more broadly

We are learning with and from First Nation, Inuit and Metis Peoples about what Indigenous gender equality means, and how we will know the Program is advancing it. To inform this understanding, we co-created the following shared vision of Indigenous gender equality with community and will evolve it as we continuously learn and grow.

Using the analogy of canoeing, a shared vision of gender equality is that our paddles are up, we are finding our place within the canoe and we are paddling together as a community. This Coast Salish artwork by **Kwantlen First Nation artist Phyllis Atkins (Q'woy'tic'a)**  represents a traditional Salish canoe riding on waves with the rising sun above. Each paddle blade is different, representing the diversity of people. The overall message is that we are all in the same boat and must paddle forward together. This reminds us that we cannot survive without the support and gifts of everyone in the community, and that we must value the contributions of everyone, no matter who they are, where they come from or how they identify themselves. This starts at birth, when we welcome each child with love, and throughout life when we honour and respect the journey that they will define for themselves with guidance from their communities.



“Two Spirit people have been part of the circle (of life) since time immemorial. **All my relations.**

The Ancestors awakening (blood) memories of our roles and responsibilities. **All my relations dreaming.**

Re-defining Indigenous governance Protocols woven in welcoming, respect and belonging –

Collectively we are re-inventing and re-defining ourselves. **All my relations resurging.**

In relationship with our communities and the Land, we are returning to our revered places. **All my relations thriving.”**

**Nathalie Pambrun** - Metis Midwife, and member of the Indigenous Innovation Council and Grand Challenges Canada Board of Directors



When our **paddles are up**, we are living our Values and Principles, are welcoming and respecting of ourselves and others and are making space for everyone to care for themselves and each other. This means that we are inclusive of the gifts and roles of women, men, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse people - including those who have come before us, those who will come after us and those who are displaced or not with us in the community.

Because many First Nation, Inuit and Metis languages are genderless and words are based on the role and function of something, our gender does not define us or the roles we take on within the community. Over time, we define these roles based on our gifts and on what will allow us to best support the needs of our self, our family and our community. When our paddles are up, we value each other equally based on the whole person, including our intersecting experiences, gifts, roles and identities - and we are not required to share our gender identities, but have a safe, inclusive and affirming space to do that if we choose to.



When our paddles are up, we are able to **find our place** within the canoe. There is a spot for everyone, so we respect and honour the role of all our relations. Each person is empowered and guided along their life journey so they can choose a role that celebrates their intersecting experiences, gifts, identities and visions of self within the broader goals of their community, regardless of their gender.

This empowerment comes when:

- We hold each other up and everyone has equal and equitable access to the ceremonies, Elders, Knowledges and experiences required to support them in learning and strengthening their gifts and choosing a role that celebrates and honours these gifts
- We honour, respect and create space for the roles that others have chosen
- We are self-determining and self-governing, understand our histories of oppression and have power over ourselves to be confident, navigate our journey in life and move forward in a good way
- We recognize that personal and community visions change over time and we embrace the fluidity of roles and places that we can each occupy within the canoe - this includes honouring our responsibilities to all our relations by learning and evolving our gifts so we can adjust our roles within the community to accommodate these changes



When everyone is empowered to find their place within the canoe, **we are paddling together** and we make space for every person and their gifts. This means that there are no power imbalances or hierarchies and no one being is elevated in status, privilege or power over another, and that everyone has equal and equitable opportunities to achieve their fullest potential. This also means that we are all working toward shared community goals and are drawing on the gifts and roles of all our relations to achieve them. This requires us to hold each other up in many ways, including that:

- We are caring for and holding space for each other to take on our unique roles, and to evolve these roles as needed
- We respect and honour the role of women, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse people by standing behind them, amplifying their voices and re-empowering them as community leaders and decision makers
- We mentor each other along our lifelong journeys by sharing learnings and experiences that can help others learn and strengthen their gifts and identify roles for themselves
- We create and evolve governance structures, Protocols and Natural and Communal Laws that support and re-empower people's gifts and roles and that meet people where they are at, so everyone can achieve their full potential
- We use strengths-based, gender affirming and resilience-informed approaches that are rooted in our histories, culture, languages and Knowledges
- We show respect by listening and learning from the heart

“A canoe is always moving forward, because gender equality isn't just something we achieve. It's something that we keep striving towards, and something that keeps us moving forward together.”

**Paige Kimiksana Kreps** - Urban Inuvialuk and member of the Gender Equality Program Reference Group

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Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada



Indigenous Services  
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Autochtones Canada

If you would like to invest in this program, please email us at [info@indigenouinnovate.org](mailto:info@indigenouinnovate.org)

## COMMUNITY AUTHORS & LEARNING

We first co-created the shared vision of Indigenous gender equality with First Nation, Inuit and Metis women, men, Two Spirit, queer, trans and gender diverse **Elders, Knowledge Keepers and community members** across Canada, including round 1 innovators from the Gender Equality Program. We then defined the objectives and strategies based on this shared vision, and all elements of this Program Story work together to guide how we learn and share stories about how the Program is progressing toward the ultimate impact goal.

Discussions around gender and gender equality are personal, and each person informed this work through sacred Sharing Circles. To protect their privacy and the experiences they shared, we have not listed them here but honour and respect their contributions. **Marissa Hill** wrote and prepared this program story, in partnership with these **community authors, Kristin Neudorf** (Grand Challenges Canada) and **Sara Wolfe** (Indigenous Innovation Initiative). This Program Story is a living being that will evolve as we learn and grow.

In the spirit of reciprocity and learning, we invite you to adapt, build upon, copy and/or share this story to support your own work, if you:

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We are grateful to live and work on Dish With One Spoon Treaty territory, the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaawbe, the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee, and which continues to be a gathering place for people from many nations.