

Different Lives, Common Threads

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In the spring of 1998, a small group of women in Whitehorse met for lunch and agreed to undertake to organize a conference of women of the Circumpolar North. The result was "Different Lives, Common Threads," held in Whitehorse in November 1999. The impetus came from two sources in particular. The first was the realization that the traditional conference, with its gathering of expert speakers and paper-presenters and its discussions of academic and specialized topics, often deters those outside the field and the culture from attending and contributing. The second was the proceedings of the Arctic Council's May 1998 "Sustainable Development in the Arctic: Lessons Learned and the Way Ahead" conference. In it, discussants, asked to develop recommendations for moving towards sustainable development in the North, repeatedly urged improvement to intra-regional communication. Better communication, they said, is a vital part of any success. We must talk to each other; we must share our knowledge. The women's conference Steering Committee planned its event with a view to creating a space where women living in the Circumpolar North could meet face-to-face and share their knowledge and experience.

With the financial or in-kind assistance of the Yukon Territorial Government, departments of the federal government, agencies, local businesses, individuals and foreign governments,¹ organizers welcomed over 450 parti-

participants to Whitehorse for the three-day meeting in November 1999. They came from every nation of the Circumpolar world, as well as Great Britain, Denmark, The Netherlands and Australia.

The conference was arranged in a fairly conventional way. Large plenary sessions presented participants with general ideas and themes than could be further discussed or considered. The small theme sessions were intended to give the opportunity for more intimate presentations and discussions and to offer the best possible chance for meeting like-minded people and to forge the personal connections that are the foundation of sustained (and sustainable) contacts, strong partnerships and effective networks. In addition, people who wanted to give papers were encouraged to do so, academic ones and others that often presented personal experiences. The results of the session discussions and plenaries are contained in a separate proceedings document (write to the *Review* for a copy). Most of the papers collected here are from the sessions and offer a fascinating view of some of the issues and matters that women of the Circumpolar North think are important.

In her opening address, Ambassador Mary Simon's traces her own "personal journey" from Kangiqsualujjuaq to Copenhagen. Kathryn Bennett's paper was written after the conference and gives a southern hemisphere perspective on what was accomplished at the conference. The balance of the papers come from some of the many Russian women who were able to make the trip. Their work reflects a broad ranges of issues, subjects, cultures and geographical areas. This would not be possible, however, without help. The organizers wish to acknowledge the enormous contribution of Shauna McLarnon of Whitehorse, Yukon, who not only undertook all the Russian

¹ A complete list of contributors and supporters may be found at www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/womensconf/1999/sponsors.htm

correspondence for the conference and interpreted for us as well, but also translated all but one of the papers for this issue of the *Review*. Professor John Young, of University of Northern British Columbia, generously translated the last paper in this collection.

The papers collected here touch on a variety of issues, some broad, others more focussed or restricted. Marie-Françoise Guédon's paper examines the traditions and practices of "sacred smokes" in the boreal regions of the circumpolar North. She includes a detailed list of botanicals used in these practices. Ekaterina Ruth explores the relationships between environments and disturbances to them with a view to understanding the capacity of environments to be sustainable. Nyurguyana P. Alexandrova discusses the potential for the Northern Forum Academy to support women scientists and to foster their contributions as international actors in the contemporary circumpolar North. Natalia Okhlopko considers the role of northern women in contemporary globalization. Two other papers also take a broad view of their subjects. Lydia Fyodorova presents a comparison of the role of "ethnopedagogical values" in early education as experienced in Alaska and in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Finally, Maria P. Pogodayeva describes the course of events and the needs that led to the creation of the World Union of Reindeer Breeding Peoples.

The next papers concentrate on more regional matters and experiences. Victoria Churikova describes her experiences of learning to live in the Kamchatka wilderness and the benefits it produced for her and her family in the difficult times since the formation of the Russian Federation. Ludmila Ignatenko and Victoria Churikova present the efforts and problems facing the development of sustainable and self-determining national communities in the southern parts of the Kamchatka Peninsula where natural resources have fallen, to a large extent, under the control of foreign and outside interests. The

next papers describe three recently formed grass-roots organizations devoted to different causes. Isabella P. Matveyeva describes the aims and objectives of *Alaas Khotun*, the Association of Rural Women of the Sakha Republic, Antonina N. Petrova discusses the League of Women Scientists, which was formed in 1995, to foster the development of scientific creativity and of social support for women scientists in Yakutia. Ludmila Levina explores the importance of women's access to the media, to share their accomplishments and to unite their efforts. Levina describes the establishment of a women's newspaper, *Ona Plus*, which began circulation in 1999, against the backdrop of changing regional conditions.

Some authors chose to present, briefly, the results of research they had conducted. Nadezhda M. Melnikova presents her analysis of gender differences in the values of a sample of male and female students of the Yakutsk State University. She shows that students are interested in health, wealth, friendship, family and love, that there is some evidence of influence of the socio-economic changes in the Republic and that there are differences between the values prized by men and women. A. N. Myreeva considers Yakut literature and its representations of women and speculates on the contribution literature can make to the moral "health" of a people. P. G. Petrova and R. D. Philippova outline some of the health problems Yakut women (principally in maternity and childbearing) are burdened with and discuss some of the programs that are attempting to improve the situation for all women.

Five papers examine aspects of the Aboriginal experience. Olga Beldiy discusses the role of totems and amulets in Nanaian spiritual culture. Marina Kh. Belyanskaya looks at some traditions and customs of the Even of Yakutia and at their significance today. Sardana A. Alexeyeva focusses on traditional birth rituals among the Even during the 19th and 20th centuries. S. A. Alexeyeva and Anatoliy A. Alexeyev give a brief outline of the shamanic cosmology

as it is conceived among the Tungus Even and Evenk. Oktyabrina V. Naumova describes the functions of an Evenk shaman's assistant in shamanic "performances," which occur for giving thanks, healing, or providing help to hunters and herders. The last paper of the collection stresses the link between humans and the land, and suggests that great good might come from encouraging urban people and families to take working holidays in the countryside and to help with vital agricultural work.

One of the strengths of the conference was the emphasis placed on talking, conversing and discussing. The papers here suggest some of the range of the conversations: environment, traditional knowledge, governance, education, health, communication—these are the broad themes in these threads of circumpolar women's lives. The individual experiences may be different but the papers here make it clear that there truly are common threads in the lives of Circumpolar Women.

Amanda Graham, the managing editor of the *Review*, is proud to have been a member of the Steering Committee of the conference.