

Female Assembly of First Nations may be forming

By Lynda Powless
Editor

SAULT STE. MARIE, Ont.- Anishnabek women may be leading the way to the future formation of female version of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

Over 200 women attending the Mnaa-gaazwat Kweok Celebration of Women elected their own representatives to the Board of Directors of the Ontario Union of Indians and agreed, if they are not accepted by the Chiefs, they will form their own Anishnabek Women's Coalition.

"I think its time for aboriginal women to look at joining together to form our organizations based on nationhood and look to forming our own Confederacy of Nations," said Susan Hare, a lawyer who was elected as one of the eight women directors.

Keynote speaker for the weekend conference, she said it was

time for women to gather together. Hare, from West Bay First Nation, disagreed with Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaines call for a

women's advisory body.

She said advisory councils "are meaningless when those who will

(Continued on page 18)

Aboriginal women seek political equality

(Continued from front page)

act on these recommendations have not made Anishnabek women's needs a priority in the past."

AFN leader Phil Fontaine urged native women Sunday to fight for equality.

Fontaine told the women "Freedom is never given to you. No one ever will come to you and give you freedom on a silver platter. You take it."

The AFN and aboriginal women's groups have been at odds for several years. Fontaine told the group, the AFN was willing to be more "accommodating" to women and is considering establishing a gender equality secretariat.

Fontaine told the women from the 43 communities that make up the Anishnabek Nation "we have to be more accommodating than we have been in the past to your interests."

But Fontaine had difficulty maintaining the attention of the group. "He told us he had suffered from residential schools, that he had abused women but we didn't want to hear that. I guess he thought since it was a woman's group he should talk about feelings. We want to talk about jobs, economic development, training," said Hare. "Women were milling about, talking to each other. They didn't want to hear that, they want to hear about real issues."

Hare said the AFN has lost sight of aboriginal women's issues. "I'm not sure they ever understood it but now, it's clear they don't have a clue about the changing role of aboriginal women in today's society."

While the number of women chiefs in Canada has grown to 77 from 40 since 1990, women have had to fight for that, Fontaine said in the closing address to the three-day conference.

Fontaine said the assembly is considering the creation of a gender equality secretariat "so everything we do fully reflects the interests of women."

But by the end of the conference Sunday, eight women had been elected from four Union of Ontario Indian (U.O.I.) regions to sit as a Board of Directors. The women represent both on and off reserve interests.

The women said they want their representatives to sit beside the Chiefs on the U.O.I. Board of Directors and threatened to form their own Anishnabek Women's Coalition if the U.O.I. does not accept their representatives.

Vernon Roote, head of the Union of Ontario Indians, told the women he would take the request back to the Chiefs-In-Assembly at their spring meeting.

Hare and Barbara Burton, from Dokis First Nation were elected to represent women in the Robinson-Huron Treaty Region of the Union of Ontario Indians.

Hare says history was made Sunday. "The women of an Indigenous Nation decided to organize on their own. It is a very strong disapprobation of the male leadership who hold 37 out of 43 chiefs positions in the U.O.I."

In the past, women's groups have been a collective of many aborigi-

nal nations and Metis women, but Hare, said the historic importance now lies in the "nationhood" status of this women's organization.

Hare said the UOI has undergone restructuring in the past few years and trying to define the role of women and elders. She said the Elders have a voice at the table now.

She said the Anishnawbek Women also said wanted their voice heard at the table.

Hare, also former president of the Ontario Native Women's Association, said spiritually the Medawin Lodge always had a male and female head.

She said the eight women make up an interim representative women's council and expect to sit on on the board of directors.

Hare isn't optimistic. "I don't think they (the chiefs) are going to go for it. The advisory council idea was part of an overall AFN plan. We were told by Vernon (Roote) if the council was set up here that Fontaine would promote it to other organizations across the country. I don't think they expected women to reject it and I don't know if they have a Plan B."

Hare said the Anishnabek Women's representatives would like to meet with other women from other Nations.

"We would like to help them form their own organizations based on nationhood and then get together with them to let them know what we're doing. We would like to see a Confederacy of Anishnabek women, Iroquois women, Cree Women, like the AFN, only with women.

She said the weekend conference was "very exciting. The nationhood aspect is what sets it apart and the women were very aware of that."