



THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POWER OF ARTISAN PRODUCTS:

NWAC'S VIRTUAL CLASSES OFFER A PATHWAY OUT OF VIOLENCE INTO INCOME SECURITY

An online space created to relieve isolation of Indigenous women during COVID-19 has become a pathway for healing and economic opportunity.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) recognized a need to connect First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, says Lynne Groulx, NWAC's Chief Executive Officer. The organization began to offer online workshops, where skilled artisans would teach their skills.

"We thought the crafting would be a good way to gather (online) and to do healing at the same time," says Ms. Groulx. Economic potential was also immediately apparent.

"In our communities, there are a lot of women who have micro businesses," says Ms. Groulx. "And we know that a lot of them are selling their artisan products online, through their social media accounts such as Facebook, on Etsy, or at powwows."

Teaching Indigenous women to create to bring in an income while helping them to connect with others in a healing environment seemed like a win-win situation, she says.

Workshops started in a robust manner with the help of COVID-19 funding from the federal government. NWAC began running three workshops a week, then quickly increased that number to five because the demand was so high.

Workshop participants are taught by a wide range of expert artisans in many different types of arts. Beading, moccasin-making, drawing, painting, doll-making, and sewing have proved to be some of the most popular offerings.

By May 2022, more than 12,000 people had taken part in an NWAC workshop.

"We are taken aback," says Ms. Groulx. "When we announced the workshops, some of them were filled in a matter of minutes."

NWAC provided participants with free kits containing all the needed materials to take part. Some kits, like those for making moccasins, cost nearly \$100 apiece. Others, like those for beaded earrings, cost about \$20.

NWAC limits participants to between 10 and 35 participants as the workshops are also meant to be circles for connecting and learning from Elders. If there are too many people, some will not get a chance to actively participate.

Many of the women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people attending workshops are doing it for the opportunity to gather with other Indigenous people. Learning a craft can become an income generator, which also increases security for Indigenous women—many of whom remain targets of a genocide, according to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

