

**Clearing the Path for the Turtle by Lynn Gehl – Gii-Zhigaate-Mnidoo-Kwe, Ph.D.
With Turtle Art by Christopher Griffin
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Recently I stated that unless “we” stand behind the person who is most oppressed, “we” will not gain the genuine solidarity needed. This is because the more oppressed person needs to know that when the more privileged person gets what s/he needs, that s/he will continue to stand behind their needs rather than drop them. The person who is most oppressed needs to understand that their needs will not be abandoned. While I think this is true, there is another aspect of genuine solidarity that requires fleshing out.

Canada is a socially stratified country. I think we can all agree on this. In my mind I visualize this stratification as a vertical continuum where people are located at different positions based on

their ability to access services, and thus their ability to live the good life. While some people are more privileged, others are less so, and this privilege is reflected in terms of their location on the continuum.

For the most part, White able-bodied heterosexual women are situated closer to the top of this continuum of social stratification. This stands to reason, as most of the structures, institutions, laws, and policies in this country have been invented, constructed, and managed by White able-bodied heterosexual men. Black women, Hispanic women, Asian women, Queer women, Indigenous women, Transgender women, and Women with Disabilities are then situated at different locations along this vertical continuum. In my thinking process – which I am not claiming is the ultimate truth – I always place Black women, Indigenous women, and Women with Disabilities close to the bottom. Of course I know there are limitations and thus exceptions to this general thinking in understanding this placement in that there are poor White women, and for that matter, financially well-off Indigenous women in Canada. Regardless, to some degree this general understanding is a useful cognitive structure to think through issues such as how do women begin to engage in allyship across our differences and in a way that we are more effective in our need for structural change.

In illustrating what I mean by privilege, I define it as occurring when all things are equal between a poor Indigenous woman and a poor White woman yet the structures, institutions, laws, and policies one needs to navigate to survive are White. Today this is commonly referred to as “White privilege” and people such as Peggy McIntosh, whose interest is inclusive curriculum, Tim Wise, an anti-racist educator, and comedian Louis C. K., whose script addresses White privilege all talk about this issue. I too have offered a satirical diatribe on the topic after I encountered its denial. My goal here in mentioning “White privilege” is not to offend people, but rather establish a launching pad to then begin to think and talk about conceptually complex issues. In offering this discussion of privilege it is important that I point out that when a woman is both Indigenous and has a disability, for example, her experience of structural oppression also includes interactional effects where, as a result, the effects of her lived experience with structural oppressions are greater than the sum of its parts.



I rely on this understanding of social stratification, and define privilege in this way to illustrate my point about the need for women who are more privileged in terms of the continuum of social stratification to engage in concrete, on-the-ground

equity practices, equity practices that serve women who are more oppressed. Equity practices require us to first understand equity, and second to engage in remedial equity practices that will lead to a better life for people more oppressed.

Thinking through this model of social stratification as I do, and as an Indigenous woman with a disability, I am always struck by how it is that oftentimes some women, of course not all, are unable to really understand the meaning of equity versus equality. As a matter of fact, sometimes I actually encounter denial by some people who argue that women who are more oppressed require help. Some go as far as offer the excuse that Indigenous women are not getting involved enough, and that Indigenous women are not stepping up and sitting on planning committees. Yet, these same people claim to be social justice advocates interested in real change. At times I am inclined to think that this denial is a form of lateral violence.

Let's face it, in order for real change to occur, women need to form alliances across our differences. Needed is a genuine theory of solidarity. The solidarity theory I propose is simple: If equality is desired, equity measures are required; we need to follow the turtle. We need to follow the most oppressed in the movement forward.

Moving from this more genuine theory of solidarity, rather than false solidarity models and theories, in situations where the women who are more oppressed are not present in physical body, it is the responsibility of more privileged women to reach out and accommodate them in whatever way they can. More privileged women need to understand that more oppressed women may not be represented in their planning committee for very real concrete reasons such as their need to focus on finding food for their family, issues of personal safety, or in the case of a person with a disability, a lack of funds to take a taxi. Understanding this and accommodating the needs of these women represents equity in practice.



The bottom line is White women who do gain inroads in a White patriarchal society will do so at the expense of the women who are most oppressed. This is hardly an advance. Freedom must not come off the backs of those more oppressed. By relying on a genuine theory of solidarity with its inherent equity practices and placing the needs of those more oppressed – the metaphoric turtle – at the forefront of your efforts where you stand behind the women who are more oppressed, such as the One Billion Rising campaign, community Persons Day Breakfasts, International Women's Day events, and inviting women speakers of colour and of different dis/abilities into your institutions to talk about women's oppression, we engage in a process of genuine solidarity.

It is only through concrete equity practices that all people will gain emancipation. To offer the argument "we are all equal," and the excuse "to stand behind is offensive," is a sure indication that you do not understand equity in practice. Succinctly, if equality is desired, equity measures are required. Be selfish and stand behind me, my sisters, and their babies as it will assure your own emancipation. The turtle must be the leader for social justice to prevail.

Lynn Gehl—Gii-Zhigaate-Mnidoo-Kwe, Ph.D. is an Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe from the Ottawa River Valley. She has a section 15 Charter challenge regarding the continued sex discrimination in The Indian Act, is an outspoken critic of the Ontario Algonquin land claims and self-government process, and she recently published The Truth That Wampum Tells: My Debwewin on the Algonquin Land Claims Process. Lynn has over 100 academic and community based publications and she is also a blogger with more than 100 blogs. In her spare time she carves nickel-sized turtles, paints, and weaves. You can reach her at lynngehl@gmail.com and see more of her work at www.lynngehl.com

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