



**The Honourable Edna Elias
Commissioner of Nunavut**

*Speaking notes for the
Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council's Presentation of Wise Women Award
Sunday, 29 March 2011
Singiituuq Complex, Rankin Inlet Nunavut*

Good afternoon.....

I am delighted to be here with you today for this event of great significance. To witness the presentation of this year's Qullit Wise Women Award in the same month as the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day marks a milestone for women all over the world.

International Women's Day is celebrated each year on March 8th. On this day people across Canada and around the world celebrate the economic, political, and social achievements of women past, present and future.

The first National Women's Day was observed in the United States on February 28th 1909. In 1910 the leader of the Women's Office for the Social Democratic Party in Germany, Clara Zetkin, proposed that every year in every country there should be a celebration on the same day – a Women's Day – that would help women campaign for their rights.

Women from 17 countries representing unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs and the first three women elected to the parliament in Finland approved the proposal and International Women's Day was created. The first International Women's Day was honored in 1911 in Austria, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland.

In Canada, women won the right to vote at the federal level in 1919. Then in October 1929, the legal recognition of women as persons was obtained. Up until then, the legal term for person did not apply to women according to the Canadian Constitution. It meant in practice that women were prevented from equal participation with men in public life. They did not exist as active agents in the legal process. It was a big victory when women acquired the right to exercise official functions, to attend university, and to work in any field they chose.

As for Inuit, men and women, *The Dominion Franchise Act* of 1934 explicitly disqualified them from voting in federal elections. Later in the 1950s and among other strategies to protect its sovereignty in the Arctic, the Canadian government relocated individuals, families and communities into the High Arctic. At the same time, the government extended the right to vote and all rights of citizenship to the Inuit. Until the early 1960s, however, they were rarely enumerated for federal elections. Most were geographically isolated, so in the absence of special efforts to enable them to vote, they had no means to exercise their right. In fact, it was only in the 1962 federal election that ballot boxes were finally placed in Inuit communities, permitting full exercise of the right to vote.

It took a long time before Inuit women began seeking election, since homemaking and childrearing took first and foremost priority in their lives. It took even longer for women to seek election to boards and political office seats outside the community level. Since then, Inuit women have made great strides in the election scene; think of all the great Inuit women who hold executive offices today. I don't think I need to mention them by name. This is one of the reasons to recognize and celebrate International Women's Day.

There have been significant improvements in the quality of life for women over the last 100 years but we need to continue to work on behalf of women to gain equality in the workplace, in business and in politics. In this day and age, there are still some cultures around the world that do not give equality where it should be a given, within the home.

We must continue to work on many levels; first and foremost at the community and Nunavut levels as well as on a global scale to improve education opportunities for women, provide quality health care to women and work to reduce violence against women. Once violence can be reduced or eliminated and that peace and harmony replace fear and turmoil, can you imagine how healthy our communities would become?

Women have always played an important role in Inuit society and today in Nunavut our government is working with other organizations to help find solutions to the barriers women face when they move forward to develop their skills, abilities and leadership potential. Qullit is one of those agents of change and betterment.

Women who are confident in their skills, talents and knowledge can be an inspiration our younger generation. They can be mentors to the young women of today, encouraging them to play active roles in society. The contributions women make to society will help us all build strong and healthy communities rooted in equality and balance.

Today, as the Wise Women Award recipient is being celebrated, she in fact symbolizes a whole century of achievements among women.

I encourage everyone to take the time to acknowledge the roles women play in society today, to inspire the women we know and to celebrate their accomplishments.

Quanna