

A FemNorthNet Fact Sheet Series

Economic Restructuring and Diverse Women's Access to Services in the North



This fact sheet series is a review and summary of already published work. Sources used are included in the online version, published at www.criaw-icref.ca/femnorthnet/themes/inclusion

Women in the North are uniquely affected by economic, political and social changes. The diversity of Northern women means different women can experience these changes in different ways.

Unfortunately, most information on women's experiences of the North fails to recognize this diversity. It also fails to capture the resiliency of Northern women and often ignores the positive aspects of Northern living. This fact sheet uses feminist intersectionality to highlight how economic restructuring has been found to affect diverse Northern women's access to services and opportunities.

Healthcare

Women living in the North have limited choices as to what healthcare they can receive in their home communities and who provides it. When economic restructuring reduces or 'rationalizes' public health services, access becomes even more restricted.

- Indigenous women and girls face unique challenges because governments often provide different services and entitlements based on Aboriginal status. They also have limited access to traditional medical practices that better address Indigenous health needs.
- Pregnant women may face obstacles, as maternal services are often the first to be centralized. Midwifery services are not available everywhere, although they are being reintroduced in some places.
- Immigrant or migrant women, Indigenous women, disabled women and lesbian and transgendered women often face language barriers or insensitivity from health workers in the North. This may result in poor quality of care, or deter these women from accessing health services at all.



Figure 1: Health centre in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut

Caregiving

In communities where public care services are not available, responsibility for caring for seniors, individuals with disabilities, and children often falls to women. There is often a strong tradition of this caregiving; many women provide multiple types of care at a time.

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- Northern women see both positive and negative aspects of caregiving. It may be a core part of identity and provide happiness, or it may feel like a duty and cause stress.
- Limited housing access poses a challenge to women caregivers. For example, mothers unable to find suitable housing are at risk of having their children and caregiving rights taken away.
- Public care services and supports for seniors and people with disabilities are in short supply. Many people move to the South to access these services. Those who stay often live with limited ability to help themselves or rely on family and friends.

Housing

The high cost of living in the North paired with reduced government spending on social assistance and housing stock and services has left Northern women with significant housing challenges including a high risk of homelessness and unaffordable homes or home repairs.

- Buying a house can be difficult as communities may not have local banks for mortgages and women may lack the steady income required for loans.
- There are few supports for women wishing to move from subsidized housing to home ownership or for those fleeing dangerous homes. This can force women and those they care for to stay in unsafe situations, or into overcrowded homes, or homelessness.
- Women who are homeless in the North are often separated from their families, experience poor physical and mental health, and are forced into unsafe survival strategies, including sex work.
- Long waiting lists exist for accessible housing for women with disabilities and for subsidized housing for immigrant, low-income, lone mother, and young women.
- Landlords are known to discriminate against First Nations women looking for off-reserve housing. Meanwhile, women living on-reserve may be denied rights to own property and often only have access to a run-down housing stock.
- As Inuit women have been moved from traditional housing into homes designed in the South, their power in the household and ability to repair and maintain their homes has been eroded.

Education, Employment & Income

Women in the North experience significant barriers to attaining education and secure, well-paying jobs. Without access to strong public services, they must often find creative solutions to meet childcare or transportation needs in order to work. There is growing interest in women's entrepreneurship in the North, as self-employment can be well-paid and flexible. Northern women work to overcome these realities:

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- More women than men in the North have achieved a level of education beyond high school. However, educational outcomes are much lower for women in the North than in the South.
- Many Northern women are unemployed or underemployed and overall face lower employment rates than men. It is difficult to find work in remote communities with small populations, and (unless in the resource industry) jobs tend to be part-time and offer lower wages than comparable jobs in the South.
- Women are primarily employed in caregiving, administration, and maintenance jobs. Gender stereotypes make it difficult for women to break into higher-paying jobs, like those in the resource sector.
- Entrepreneurship has been identified as a strategy to support women's employment in the North, but women continue to face barriers as a result of low levels of education and gender discrimination when it comes to accessing loans for training or starting up a business. As well, Northern communities can only support a limited number of new businesses.



Figure 2: University College of the North has a campus in Thompson, Manitoba

Food Security

Food security, including food quality and access, is an issue for many women in the North. The groups of women who have identified this issue include Indigenous women, single women, senior women, women with low incomes, and young women.

- Access to nutritious and affordable food is a concern, especially for women with families.
- Traditional harvesting activities including hunting and berry collection are threatened by climate changes and development projects. This has the effect of changing not only diets in the North, but also how food is shared in communities.

Justice

Northern women have expressed a lack of confidence in the justice system, stemming in part from negative and discriminatory experiences. Women in the North are at high risk of violence. Many have little knowledge of their rights and limited access to law enforcement.

- Victim services are severely underfunded. In addition, women may also struggle to understand court language and processes or have poor legal representation.

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- Very few women-only correctional facilities or psychiatric wards exist in the North. This often results in women being housed in men's facilities or being sent to prisons in the South.
- In many parts of the North, services for survivors of violence, such as shelters and safe housing, are inadequate or unavailable.
- Indigenous women and girls are especially at risk in the current justice system; they experience heightened levels of abusive treatment, racism, and lack of cultural sensitivity from officers, and face disproportionate levels of domestic violence, and a greater risk of being trafficked than other women.

Transportation

Few transportation options exist for women in the North. Many women rely on family, friends, or organizations such as Friendship Centres to help them meet their transportation needs.

- Bus services to rural and remote places are consistently being cut back. There are few accessible services for women with disabilities.
- Women from communities lacking all-season road access are faced with unaffordable airfares or travel along seasonal ice roads, which are increasingly dangerous and unreliable due to climate change.
- Lack of transportation has a more significant impact on women's social inclusion in the North than on men's; one study found women were almost twice as likely as men to have missed appointments, family or community events, or social gatherings.

Telecommunications

Telecommunications access in the North is limited by cost and infrastructure. Digital literacy among Northern residents is low. Women indicate that they need increased access to technology, including faster Internet and improved cell phone services.

- Efforts to increase competition and to reduce regulation in telecommunications in Canada may result in reduced access and poor quality service for those in the North. In turn, this can affect crisis response, access to telehealth and on-line access to other public services, such as filing crime reports.

There are many silences in existing literature around diverse women's experiences in the North, but the absence of the experiences of women with disabilities was particularly apparent in our review.

The other fact sheets in this "Impacts of Economic Restructuring on Diverse Women in Canada's North" series are available for download on the FemNorthNet website: <http://www.criaw-icref.ca/femnorthnet/themes/inclusion>

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² "UCNThompson" by Rfn2xx is licensed by [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

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