

Resource Development 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

Economic restructuring and the 'boom and bust' cycles associated with resource industries affect diverse women of the North in a variety of ways.

The North's resources attract large resource extraction companies, and ongoing economic restructuring, driven by the federal government, is shifting land and resource management responsibilities to territorial or Aboriginal governments. Unfortunately, the experiences and needs of Northern women are rarely considered in these developments. This fact sheet explores some impacts of resource development on diverse women's access to key sectors in the North that have been identified in other work. There are many silences in existing literature, particularly in terms of the experiences of women with disabilities.

Healthcare

Resource development significantly affects Northern women's health and access to health services.

- Resource development is rarely accompanied by an increase in health services to address the health needs of the influx of migrant workers and their families. This places additional stress on limited health services with special challenges for senior women and pregnant women who access health services more often than other women.
- The economic uncertainty of 'boom and bust' cycles can cause heightened stress levels for women. During 'bust' periods, depression increases. Smaller, remote communities often do not have mental health services available. However, mining workers with mental health challenges are likely to have workplace supports and treatment, although these are rarely culturally appropriate.
- New industry roads and migrant workers from the South can increase access to drugs and alcohol in communities where these substances were once prohibited, leading to addictions and increases in substance-related injuries and health concerns. Migrant workers can also bring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) into communities. Northern health infrastructure does not have the capacity to manage the current STI rate amongst Inuit—already eight times the Canadian average.
- Toxins and contaminants from resource extraction are linked to serious health issues, causing concern for the quality of food sources. Inuit women are often acutely aware of the risk because of their role in wild food preparation, and voice concerns about the effects on human and environmental health.
- Women in the resource sector face many health hazards, including exposure to chemicals, radiation, and dangerous situations, and have high rates of workplace-related injuries and chronic health issues.

Caregiving

Resource development places additional burdens on the care system in the North.

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- High wages offered by resource extraction companies draw eligible workers away from the low-paying or voluntary caregiving sector as individuals try to improve their incomes or just meet their basic needs.
- Childcare services are limited in many Northern communities and rarely offer the extended hours required to accommodate shift-work associated with many resource extraction jobs.
- Families face pressure to fill the caregiving gap. Women are more likely than men to sacrifice paid work to provide care, preventing them from achieving potential wage benefits from resource development.

Education, Employment & Income

Resource extraction in the North has unique impacts on women's education, income options and opportunities for employment. Northern women seeking resource industry jobs face several disadvantages.

- Educational gaps can occur when a resource town is built next to an established community. Company-funded schools often offer higher quality education than is present in the neighbouring community, allowing graduates to obtain the area's highest paying jobs. Women are also concerned over the educational quality in resource towns as experienced teachers are hard to attract to remote areas, staff turnover is high, and staffing shortages lead to overcrowded classes and limited course selection.
- Many Northern youth leave high school early, seeking unskilled, but often well-paid positions in resource extraction. Young men are more likely to drop out for work than young women, but young women sometimes drop out to move in with boyfriends working in resource industries.
- Northern colleges offer industry training for high-skilled resource jobs. Women would prefer youth train in a sector more likely to meet long-term community needs, such as healthcare, law or education.
- Women represent only 14% of the mining workforce, and often occupy support or culinary roles, not trade positions. Local education opportunities are uncommon. When they do exist, women are often unaware of them, cannot afford or access childcare to attend, or lack transportation. Further, women who are pregnant, parenting or need see a doctor regularly often find rotational shifts unappealing.
- Women are often anxious about entering male-dominated workplaces. Many feel they need to constantly prove themselves to male colleagues in order to not appear 'weak.' Employers may deny women promotion opportunities because of sexist attitudes.
- Women in jobs outside of the resource sector can also be affected by industry cycles. If a 'bust period' is anticipated, it can result in lay-offs in supporting service sectors. For example, strikes at a mine in Labrador West led to immediate lay-offs at in-town businesses where many of the city's women worked.



Figure 1: Nickel mine and processing facility in Thompson, Manitoba

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Housing

Resource industries generally have negative impacts on housing availability in Northern communities. Finding a place to rent or own is complicated by:

- The influx of migrant workers, whose housing costs are often covered by resource extraction companies, raises housing prices to unaffordable levels for many women, including senior and low-income women.
- The economic uncertainty associated with mining operations, which causes banks to refuse loans even to well paid mining workers due to the risk of job loss. Economic instability also means many migrant families avoid buying homes altogether. They stay in public or company housing, which does little to encourage community development and takes up desperately needed public housing space.

There have been efforts to improve the housing outlook in the North:

- Resource companies have introduced programs to buy homes and sell these to workers with a guarantee that the company will buy back the home if operations stop. This encourages migrant families to invest in the North and plan for a long-term stay.
- Some former resource communities are being revitalized, including Elliot Lake, Ontario. After mining operations shut down retirees and young people searching for affordable housing and non-traditional types of employment moved in.
- Economic diversification can help to alleviate the 'boom and bust' cycles experienced by resource industry dependent towns. Facing scaled back mining operations, Thompson, Manitoba has an economic diversification plan that should allow current residents to stay and also attract new ones.

Justice

Resource extraction activities present a number of challenges to women's safety in the North, which is a concern considering many women already lack trust in Northern justice systems.

- Increases in violence against women in communities with resource operations have been associated with rumours of infidelity, the stress of seasonal employment, and the overall normalization of violence against women in the North. This places additional strain on the few shelters available in the North.
- Women working in the resource sector report ongoing harassment of themselves or other female employees at work sites, even when anti-harassment policies are in place.
- Prostitution and sex-trafficking disproportionately affect women and girls, notably Indigenous women and girls. Investigations found sex-trafficking in remote Albertan towns is sustained by male oil workers. High wages, long periods spent away from spouses on rotational schedules, and marital friction arising from work-related stress all lead to increased exploitation of women and girls. Women with addictions are easy marks for migrant worker men who provide drugs or alcohol for sex.

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- Despite these challenges, women in these communities do not stand idly by. In Baker Lake, Nunavut, mothers have created a phone call protection network to keep tabs on their young daughters. Local organizations in Thompson, Manitoba, plan to establish a local court to address violence as well as a Northern healing lodge that would offer programming for women in trouble with the law.

Food Security

There are several effects on food security for women living in Northern resource communities.

- Increased income from resource-related jobs can decrease food bank use, increase the variety of foods in local stores, allow families to afford imported fruits and vegetables, and increase access to harvesting tools, meaning more fresh meat and land-based foods for families.
- However, wage increases lead to higher living costs and sometimes increased food bank use, especially among youth, single parents, and seniors with limited income. The rotational shift nature of resource industries can limit abilities to engage in harvesting practices. Further, the new infrastructure can drive animals out of the area or stop harvesters from accessing food sources.
- Consumption of introduced processed foods can increase risk for diabetes – already a major health issue for Indigenous. Increased reliance on these foods can lead to the deterioration of traditional food redistribution systems, which are particularly important to lone mothers and senior women.

Transportation & Telecommunications

Transportation and telecommunications infrastructure in the North is underdeveloped, yet key to improving emergency response, attracting industry and business, and sustaining Northern communities. Fortunately, the North's resource wealth attracts investment from governments and private companies.

- Climate change threatens ice roads and rising fuel prices make personal flights and cargo shipments in and out of remote communities expensive. Still, industry's growing presence in the North is leading to more permanent, sustainable, and cost-effective transportation routes. The federal government funds many of these projects in the North.
- Public-private partnerships are the key to better telecommunications infrastructure. Northern residents are largely supportive of these partnerships. In Northern Ontario, three remote First Nations communities convinced De Beers mining company to extend a fibre-optic technology line it had installed for its operations to their residents as well. Residents now have access to high-speed Internet, improved options for healthcare and education, and potential for the installation of cell phone towers.

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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