



FEM
NORTH
NET

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN COMMUNITIES; LOCAL WOMEN MATTER

Fact Sheet #3

COLONIALISM AND ITS IMPACTS

Introduction

Colonialism in Canada may be best understood as Indigenous peoples' forced disconnection from land, culture and community by another group. It has its roots in Canada's history but it is alive and well today, too. In Canada's north, governments offer support to industries that take over northern land for resource extraction and remove Indigenous peoples from it.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission called attention to the importance of understanding Canada's history with Indigenous peoples in order to reconcile and rebuild our relationships.

By understanding this history, and seeing how it is a shared history, northern communities, and the diverse northern women living in those communities can work together to influence local resource development.

What is Colonialism?

Colonialism is defined as a policy or set of policies and practices where a political power from one territory exerts control in a different territory. It involves unequal power relations.

Colonialism and its bigger brother, imperialism, flourished between the late 1400s and the 1800s as European countries took over the Americas, Africa and most of Asia, mostly to gain access to resources such as gold, silver, furs and fish.

Canada experienced settler colonialism as Europeans aggressively took lands from Indigenous peoples and over time displaced and then greatly outnumbered them. Settlement by Europeans began first on the east coast of Canada. There were known encounters with the Vikings more than 1,000 years ago. Evidence also exists of Basque sailors along the coast of Labrador in the 1500s. The Hudson's Bay Company set up a fur trading post in North West River, just north of what is now Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador in the 1830s. Over time, European settlement moved west and south across Canada, reaching the west coast in the 1800s. The largest wave of colonization occurred mostly along Canada's southern border with the United States.

This is one in a series of ten fact sheets on women and resource development and extraction. All of the fact sheets are available at www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca and include additional resources on these topics.

CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

This publication was created by CRIAW's Feminist Northern Network. For the full list of contributors refer to our website.

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In the 1940s and 1950s, Indigenous peoples in Canada's near north started to be displaced by European settlements for military reasons and for resource extraction. This was the case in Thompson Manitoba, Labrador City, Wabush Mines, Churchill Falls (Lab West) and Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador—communities that participated in the FemNorthNetwork (2010–2015).

The Seizure of “Empty Land”

As colonizers took a firm hold on Turtle Island (North America), the seizure of Indigenous land

for resource extraction began. In this struggle for land, Indigenous peoples were displaced from their traditional territories and in some parts of Canada, pushed onto reserves with the signing of treaties.

Early European explorers and settlers used the term “terra nullius” (“empty land” in Latin) to argue that the land was free to be taken and used by anyone who wished to exploit it.

History of Colonization in Canada

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples grouped the history of colonization in Canada into four stages:

- **Stage 1: Separate Worlds (up to 1500 AD)**
Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies developed on their own in lands far from each other, with different cultures and forms of social organization. This changed when Europeans arrived and began to settle in North America.
- **Stage 2: Contact and Co-operation (1500 to 1870)**
A growing non-Indigenous population sought ways to foster co-existence, mostly in the form of trading and military alliances. Despite a steep decline in Indigenous populations due to diseases carried by settlers, this time was marked by mutual tolerance and respect, with each society left to govern its own internal affairs.
- **Stage 3: Displacement and Assimilation (1871 to 1969)**
In this period, most of non-Indigenous society—now larger and more dominant—stopped respecting their Indigenous neighbors. Interventions in the lives and lands of Indigenous peoples grew as the dominant culture set up policies that forcefully absorbed Indigenous land and people into the Canadian mainstream.
- **Stage 4: Negotiation and Renewal (1970 to present)**
Supreme Court victories for Indigenous peoples, along with the recognition that assimilation was a failure compelled non-Indigenous society to begin seeking change to the relationship through dialogue, consultation and negotiation. Meanwhile, Indigenous leaders regained greater control over their own affairs and re-established their own societies by healing the wounds caused by decades of domination.

In 1493, in response to a request by the King and Queen of Spain, Pope Alexander VI issued a “papal bull” or solemn declaration from the Vatican. Known as the Doctrine of Discovery, it was used with the concept of terra nullius to justify colonial nations’ right to claim land “discovered” by their explorers. It granted Spain the right to conquer any lands its explorers discovered, and it stopped non-Christians from owning land.

These European ideas and documents

- ignored that the lands of Turtle Island had been used by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years for hunting, trapping, fishing, travelling, and more
- failed to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island were living in thousands of distinct societies that formed hundreds of nations with languages, cultures, systems of governance and trade relations unique to them.



“Women and child from Webequie visiting Lansdowne House for annual treaty payment” by John Macfie (1956)

Nation-to-Nation Agreements: the Royal Proclamation of 1763

One of the most important treaties in Canada between Europeans and Indigenous peoples is the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* by King George VI of England. It confirmed in constitutional law that Indigenous nations have title to their lands as well as sovereignty and self-government. In it, both sides agreed that treaties (agreements) were the only legal way for Indigenous peoples to release control of their lands.

What is a Treaty? What are Treaty rights?

Starting in 1701 the British Crown entered into formal treaties (agreements) with Indigenous peoples in areas that later became Canada. The Peace and Friendship treaties with the Mi’kmaq and Maliseet peoples in the Maritimes aimed to end fighting and encourage better relations between the British and these Indigenous nations. Later treaties were signed in Upper Canada and on Vancouver Island. The “numbered” treaties (Treaties 1 to 11) in Ontario and across the Prairies involved First Nations ceding or surrendering their rights to land in exchange for benefits. Those benefits included reserve lands elsewhere, farming equipment and animals, annual payments, ammunition, clothing and some rights to hunt and fish. Treaties often included the right to preserve and foster language, culture and economic development, as well as Indigenous legal systems and ways of governance. Recent treaties are sometimes more comprehensive than early ones. They may provide for self-government, and include administrative and funding clauses, as well as land claims for large areas.



Colonial settlers and governments were eager to set up their own communities to extract resources to send back to Europe. They did not share the Indigenous view that land was sacred and should be used with care. Instead, they viewed land as a something to be bought and sold and to be exploited for profit, with little thought for long-term consequences.

As more Europeans took over and used land for farming and mining, relations with Indigenous people became more strained.

By the 1800s, when Canada became a Confederation, the Crown saw Indigenous people as barriers to settling the land. Treaties were seen as a way to gain access to land and natural resources. The first treaties to cede land to the British followed the War of 1812, when conditions faced by Indigenous people forced some to sign because times were bad. They had died in large numbers due to illnesses like smallpox, introduced by the Europeans. Many had lost access to traditional land with wild food and meat.

Hunger and poverty led many Indigenous nations to sign treaties that gave up territory and the resources it contained.

The Indian Act, 1876

The Canadian government passed *The Indian Act* in 1876. This highly invasive law controlled many aspects of daily life for Indigenous people.

It had an immediate impact on women when it restricted political decision-making to men. In many nations, this was contrary to Indigenous traditions

where women had important decision-making roles and rights.

The Indian Act also controlled and constrained Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land. For example, changes to the *Indian Act* allowed nearby towns and cities to remove First Nations people from reserve lands when the city wanted the land for projects like roads and railways. The *Act* did not require any consultation with people living on the reserve.

Although parts of *The Indian Act* have changed over the years to reduce or remove some of its more offensive provisions, many people argue that very little has changed. They say the *Act* still erodes and destroys the cultural, social, economic, and political distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples. The goal that was there from the start seems to still apply: Indigenous peoples needed to be absorbed into mainstream Canadian life and adopt those same values.

In the Far North, the Inuit were not recognized by Canada as distinct people and therefore were not covered by *The Indian Act*. As well, Newfoundland and Labrador avoided *The Indian Act* by not being part of Canada until 1949.



"Qu'Appelle Industrial School in 1885. Parents camped outside the gate in order to visit their children. Destroyed by fire in 1904." Library & Archives Canada (1885)

Residential Schools

By 1920, Indigenous families were required by law to send children as young as seven to distant residential schools run by churches. The role of these schools was to “civilize and Christianize” Indigenous children.

Children’s pain of being away from family was often worsened by disease, hunger, and physical and sexual abuse. This attempt to strip Indigenous children of their culture and language lasted for generations, with the last residential school closing in 1996. Many former students are alive today, and are living with the effects of the trauma they endured at the schools.

Residential school had impacts on the physical and social health of children who attended them, and on the generations that followed. These impacts have included:

- medical conditions
- mental health issues
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- changes to spiritual practices
- loss of languages and traditional knowledge
- violence
- suicide, and
- effects on gender roles, childrearing, and family relationships.

The federal government did not have the same relationship with residential schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, as it did in the rest of Canada. As a result, it has taken no responsibility for residential school survivors in Newfoundland. They were not included in the federal government’s apology or compensated as residential school survivors.

Ongoing Trauma

Many traumas inflicted by residential schools are still felt today, not only among survivors and their children, but for all of Canadian society.

The “secret” trauma of residential schools caused many survivors to suffer powerlessness and low self-esteem.

- Many forms of violence were normalized in residential schools, from teachers to the students and among students themselves.
- For survivors, abusive and violent behaviors, often combined with alcohol and drug abuse, are legacies of their time at the schools.
- Many survivors came to accept violence as a norm due to their personal trauma, and passed this down to new generations.
- Survivors of residential schools and their families still struggle to find peace.

For the government, family dysfunction was used to create another wave of interference: the so-called ‘Sixties Scoop,’ an era when, from the 1960s onward, large numbers of Indigenous children were put in foster care by state authorities. By the 1970s, about one-third of all foster children in Canada were Indigenous. Most ended up in non-Indigenous homes or in institutions. It was as if history was repeating itself under a different name.

Created Poverty

As times have changed, so has colonialism. In the past, colonialism was more overt. For years, the government policy on-reserve was to provide only enough food to keep Indigenous people alive. Likewise, the Hudson’s Bay Company in Labrador gave local Indigenous people only enough ammunition to hunt for a short time. The thinking was: If they had a food surplus, they would not want to set traps for the Company.



Colonialism is alive and well today, too.

For example, in the 1950s, a fixed address was needed to get social welfare payments in the north. This new rule stopped people from travelling to hunting and fishing grounds with the seasons. It enforced settlement and almost guaranteed poverty. Economic policies and economic marginalization have also created poverty, as does the extremely high cost of store-bought food in northern Canada.

A 2007 Senate study recognized that alienation from the land and from the things the land provides has led to economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples in this country. The results of this marginalization are higher levels of poverty, along with lower levels of education, high unemployment, poor housing, homelessness and lack of food security.

Basic Infrastructure Needed

Indigenous communities in northern Canada need basic infrastructure that most Canadians take for granted: things like housing and access to education, water and sanitation systems.

- Federal funding for housing is less than half of what is needed. The on-reserve population is growing at a rate of 4,500 new households each year (from 2003–2013). Yet First Nations communities get only enough federal funds to build 2,600 new houses a year, a gap of 42 per cent.
- Federal funding for many First Nations schools is less than federal contributions to provincial schools that have similar costs and needs. The gap is even wider for kids with complex needs.
- Thousands of people living on-reserve do not have indoor plumbing. Water systems for

25 per cent of on-reserve people may be a risk to health, safety and the environment. First Nations communities had 133 drinking water advisories in effect in July 2015, not including those in British Columbia.

- The federal government provides 22-34% less funding for child welfare services on-reserve, compared to provincial funding levels. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal confirmed this racially discriminatory practice in 2016, in response to a case launched in 2007 by the First Nations Family Caring Society (FNFCS) and the Assembly of First Nations. Results of this case may have a bearing on other federal services on-reserve, like education, health and housing.

Colonialism Today—Disconnecting Indigenous People from their Land

Over time, Canada’s laws have made it easy to take and then own Indigenous land. Sometimes, land was simply stolen.

- In the 1800s, the military and the North-west Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) had tremendous power to help governments by clearing Indigenous people off their land so it could be opened up for things like railways and resource extraction.



“Idle no more protesters marching along Government Street on December 21, 2012.” by R. A. Paterson (2012, [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

- Today, more indirect means do the same thing, using language such as “progress” and “development” for the “national interest.” Resource extraction is often approved in northern areas because the land is seen as empty or unpopulated. A few hundred local people cannot be allowed to stand in the way of economic development (that will largely benefit others).

The land inhabited for generations creates an identity. What happens when that land is taken away, or, equally, when people are taken away from it?

Loss of identity can erode a sense of self, create social tensions in Indigenous communities and lead to a collective dependence on government, as subsistence ways of life are lost.

- Hunting and fishing are not just cultural or recreational activities in the north.
- For many people, they are vital parts of a healthy life and diet.
- They often support a family.
- Because food from stores costs so much more in the north than in the south, many low-income and non-waged people in the north get important nutrients from hunting and fishing. Local berries, too, contain high levels of vitamins.

Taking children out on the land to gather berries, hunt and fish, is not only about connecting to the past or learning traditional ways. It is also about survival in the future. Northern children need to learn skills to sustain themselves and a family for times when there is not enough paid work.

Land remains the central point of conflict between Indigenous people and others.

Canada’s history of resource extraction has changed the relationship between Indigenous people and their land in order to support so-called economic development. This happened first with European contact when furs, fish and lumber were taken. It continues today, with companies taking lumber and minerals, and using water for hydro projects.

Contrast the amount of wealth in the south of Canada to the poverty in the north. Minerals that generate huge profits, for example, are extracted in the north. But little of that wealth is invested locally. Those who benefit most are corporate owners and shareholders elsewhere.

In recent years, Indigenous governments in Canada have negotiated land claim agreements in exchange for resource extraction that will provide local benefits and revenue sharing. In some cases, the benefits of this are substantial. But the negotiations have occurred in a limited and tight context. In most cases, few other local options for economic development exist. The company may be a multi-national that seeks as much control and profit as possible. Deep, unequal power relations that began with colonialism persist today.

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ABOUT FEMNORTHNET

Economic development centered around resource extraction is changing northern communities in Canada socially, economically, and culturally. FemNorthNet (or the Feminist Northern Network) documented and shared the experiences of diverse, northern women affected by these changes while supporting them in their work to strengthen and build resiliency within their communities. FemNorthNet was initiated by the Canadian

Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) and supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This network engaged over 30 researchers and community activists across Canadian universities, colleges, and northern community organizations, with community partners in Thompson (Manitoba), Happy Valley – Goose Bay (Labrador), and Labrador West (Labrador). Learn more at www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca.

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Since 1976, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) has been documenting the economic and social situation of women in Canada through ground-breaking feminist research. All CRIAOW activities flow from an overarching goal to provide tools to help organizations taking action to advance social justice and equality for all women.

As a non-profit organization and charity, CRIAOW's activities depend on the support of its members and donors from across Canada. All CRIAOW members receive the CRIAOW eNewsletter directly in their inbox, along with notices of new reports, policy papers, and fact sheets – like this one.

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