



## HOW COLONIALISM AFFECTS WOMEN

Colonial power and the capitalist economic system that came with it have had a huge impact on Indigenous women's lives. In pre-colonial times, Indigenous men and women often had different, but valuable roles in their societies. In European culture, men were seen as superior to women. This was not the case in the Indigenous world.

Colonial policies and practices tried to end Indigenous beliefs, customs, language and culture. These attempts had dramatic and mostly negative effects on Indigenous women's role in society.



Theresa Billette, age 15, and her sister, Delia, aged five, stitching beads on moosehide moccasins. [They are from the Buffalo River Dene First Nation at Dillon, Saskatchewan.] by Rosemary Gilliat Eaton (1955)

### Women's central role

Women in pre-colonial Canada were honored for their unique role in giving and nurturing life. Grandmothers often played a vital role in teaching culture and traditions by caring for the very young. They became the first teachers of hunting, trapping, and fishing. Drawing on their experience and wisdom, they taught children to be thankful, respectful, and gentle with animals.

Because of strong kinship systems, Indigenous women did not have economic dependence on one male. Women were considered the heads of households because they were the ones most responsible for managing the home and raising children.

In Inuit culture, women were at the centre of families. They acted as silent advisors, never the spokespeople, but were always central to the family's survival. Women kept everyone warm with the parkas and boots they made, and they kept the people around them fed and happy. In Labrador, Inuit women shared and distributed food, and things they made, to others in their communities.

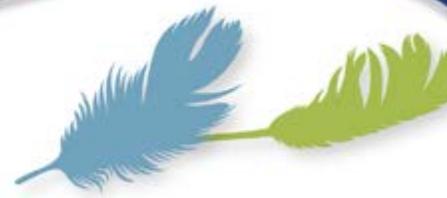
This is one in a series of ten fact sheets on women and resource development and extraction. All of the fact sheets are available at [www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca](http://www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca) and include additional resources on these topics.

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

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## Indigenous women leaders

Many First Nations were matrilineal, meaning that wealth, power, and inheritance were passed to new generations through the mother. Mothers were honoured and respected for the role they played in creating a thriving culture. They were respected as leaders because they took responsibility for caring for others.

In many Indigenous societies, older women—sometimes called clan mothers—were part of women’s councils or were head women of their extended families. In these roles, they made decisions that set the direction for all of their people. In cases where there were male chiefs, women often chose the chief and were able to take his power away.

**In many pre-contact cultures, Indigenous women could decide on war, distribute wealth in the community, and decide who was allowed to be a member of the nation.**

In the teachings of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, before colonial contact, women were respected as sacred beings. Women were an important part of decision-making because they nurtured families, understood family dynamics and therefore knew what was best for the whole village. Based on this respected role, women were chosen to speak on behalf of the community with colonial settlers. But the settlers looked down on women and insisted on dealing only with men.



“Cree people going to Nelson House (Nisichawayasihk) in Manitoba for treaty negotiations” from the Archives of Manitoba (1910)

## Women—disrespected and displaced from the land

*The Indian Act*, introduced in 1876, applied to and defined rights for all “status Indians” in Canada. It imposed rules for and requirements about the way “Indians” should live that were based on European thinking and British law. The *Act* dramatically transformed the roles, rights and privileges of Indigenous people in Canada. It had a more severe impact on Indigenous women than men by introducing patriarchy—the belief that men are better than women and should have more power. An example was that men should be in charge of the household. Patriarchy lessened the traditional, honored and respected roles women had as leaders. It treated them as less equal than men and gave them fewer rights.



“Inuit woman and child, Arctic Red River, N.W.T., June 1921” from Library & Archives Canada (1921)

**The Indian Act's most severe impact on women was in refusing to recognize their role in community decision-making.**

The government excluded women from the band council structures that were part of the government Indigenous communities called “reserves.” In fact, Indigenous women were not allowed to hold band council positions until 1951.

*The Indian Act* also had a more severe impact on women than men over the definition of who the government considers “Indian” and therefore who had rights to official status under the *Act*. *The Indian Act* gave the Indian agent (a European official) power to:

- put people in jail
- decide who was eligible for Indian status, and
- register births and marriages.

This gave Indian agents tremendous power over women. For example, a married woman who went to live with another man (after agreeing to separate from her husband) could be charged with bigamy and sent off the reserve, far from her family and community. Status women who married non-Indian men lost their Indian status and band membership. They were banished from their communities, even if they later divorced.

By taking away women’s official status as Indians, the government advanced its goal of reducing the number of Indigenous people who had Indian status. It helped fulfill a bigger goal of *The Indian Act*—cultural genocide—the desire to wipe out Indian identity in Canada.

Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which made gender discrimination illegal, gave Indigenous women an opening to win legal changes to *The Indian Act*. It took decades in the courts for some women who were denied status, and their children, to regain it. Even so, many did not.

The denial of identity and status, along with losing access to community and familiar land has forced some Indigenous women into cities. They often find themselves more socially and culturally alone. They may live in poverty, be vulnerable to violent relationships, or enter the sex trade to survive and provide for their children.

Displacement of Indigenous women from their land has led to the growing numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women. For years, the Native Women’s Association of Canada has called on the federal government to investigate and take action to stop this national tragedy through its Sisters in Spirit campaign.

**Ongoing impacts**

Colonialism and the competitive economic system that came with it have had ongoing impacts on Indigenous women in Canada.

- They experience the highest rates of poverty, violence, and poor health in Canada today
- Sexism, racism, and colonialism continue to erode Indigenous women’s understanding of “who we are, and where we belong.”

**Colonialism introduced patriarchy into Indigenous societies – the belief that men are better than women and deserve more power.**



“Warning sign on the British Columbia Highway 16 section known as “Highway of Tears”, located 31.4 km north of Smithers. More than 40 indigenous women have gone missing or been murdered along this stretch of highway in the last few decades.” Photo by Nick Smyth (2009, [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/))

***“We’ve gone from sacred, to scared, to scarred.”***

*“Before contact, women were respected as sacred beings. Contact with settlers introduced a new way of life where people were scared by the changes imposed on them and that they had to adapt to. Today we are scarred by the legacy of colonialism, the residential schools, the Sixties Scoop. Those scars will always be there but they don’t define us. It’s a scar, it’s not an open wound. We’re in transition. Now we want to learn and relearn, accept the traditions and ceremonies, feel the beauty of the culture again. And be ready to welcome people back, be ready to help them connect back with being sacred again.”*

—Nina Cordell, Thompson, Manitoba

The effects of colonialism make it hard for some women to develop a healthy sense of identity. That’s why practices like women’s sharing circles in Norway House, MB described in the video, *Nikan Iskewak* (Women First), are so important. You can see the video on the FemNorthNet web site at: <http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/en/page/womens-leadership-development>.

Among diverse women in Canada, colonialism and capitalism have set all women back. They ignore the important contributions settler and Indigenous women make because they:

- fail to recognize the value of all the unpaid, domestic work women do
- undervalue women’s paid work
- create levels of power based on differences to justify unequal rights, and
- emphasize racial and other differences among women, which create false divisions among us.

When it comes to extraction and development of natural resources, it’s important to understand and respect the deep, historic relationships that northern women and their communities have with the land. Indigenous and non-Indigenous local women have important knowledge and insights that can support a move to environmental sustainability. We need policies and laws to reduce the impacts of colonialism and to involve diverse northern women, including Indigenous women, in resource development decisions that affect their communities.

## RESOURCES

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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 (CRIA-W) 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](http://www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca).



### Support the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

Since 1976, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) has been documenting the economic and social situation of women in Canada through ground-breaking feminist research. All CRIAW 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, CRIAW's activities depend on the support of its members and donors from across Canada. All CRIAW members receive the CRIAW eNewsletter directly in their inbox, along with notices of new reports, policy papers, and fact sheets – like this one.

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