



FEM
NORTH
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RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN COMMUNITIES; LOCAL WOMEN MATTER

Fact Sheet #7

NORTHERN COMMUNITY MODELS THAT VALUE LOCAL WOMEN

In this fact sheet we share examples of how women are valued in northern communities in Manitoba and in Labrador. These models of group organizing show a range of approaches, based on the unique needs and features of each community. They all value diverse women and their views.

Norway House— Healing Ourselves, Strengthening Women

Norway House is a Cree First Nation community of about 7,000 people in northern Manitoba, 450 kilometres north of Winnipeg. It was part of an important transportation route during the 19th century and the site of a Hudson's Bay Company trading post during the fur trade. In the process of colonization, this community was encouraged to adopt the Catholic religion, a shift that reduced people's connection to Cree traditions, culture, and spirituality.

Indigenous women brought together a diverse group of women in this community for sharing circles. Within this safe space, women could share emotions and life experiences. By understanding the past, the impacts of losing identity and culture, and the impacts of residential schooling, women were offered a chance for renewal. The organizers hoped to begin a process



Hudson's Bay trading post at Norway House Cree Nation – Image from Hudson Bay Company archives (c. 1880)

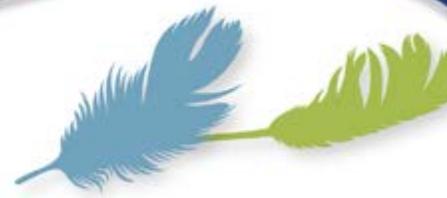
This is one in a series of ten fact sheets on women and resource development and extraction. All of the fact sheets are available at www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca and include additional resources on these topics.

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.

ISBN: 978-1-894876-68-1

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women – FemNorthNet
Accessible design by Forest Communications.



of healing and to foster leadership skills among the women. Other goals were to help re-establish

- a lost identity
- sacred ceremonies and the Cree language and
- the passing of local Indigenous knowledge to younger generations.

From a video, Nikan Iskewak, women of Norway House who were part of the circles said:

“Given what we face as women, we need a safe place to release the negativity and to seek support so we are able to move forward as strong women.”

“In building women’s strengths, I have seen leadership in women evolve from the strength that they get from these circles. I have seen women become very strong from within and very confident in decision-making and also in living their day-to-day lives.”



Daisy Monias is principal of Jack River School in Norway House Cree Nation and coordinates the local women’s sharing circles documented in FemNorthNet’s film “Nikan Iskewak” – Photo by Dorene Meyer (2016)

“It makes my heart so glad to see some of our young girls begin to come forward and ask for a circle when they want support, but mostly to know that it’s there, that it’s there for them.”

For communities across Canada that have felt the adverse effects of colonialism, women’s sharing circles are a model that shows the need for communication and the transformative results of spaces that allows for healing. It is a model that other communities can easily adopt.

Thompson, Manitoba—Influencing Economic Diversification

Thompson is a city in northern, central Manitoba, 740 km north of Winnipeg. It sits on the territory of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation whose people historically gathered food and other resources from the land. In 1956 a major ore body was found and in 1957 the province and the International Nickel Co. of Canada, Ltd. (INCO) founded the community, naming it after the chair of the company, John F. Thompson.

The city’s official population is about 13,000, but as a service centre for the northern region—often called the Hub of the North—Thompson attracts close to 65,000 people a year as a regional trade and service centre. The city has the largest (and growing) Indigenous population of any city in Canada. It is also attracts many international immigrants.

In 2009 the City of Thompson signed an accord that recognized the traditional territory of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and the many contributions of Indigenous people to the community. It was one of 13 cities across Canada that took part in a federal Urban Aboriginal Strategy to improve social and economic opportunities for Indigenous people living in urban centers.





“Can you hear their howls?” An image of the Spirit Way wolf sculptures in Thompson by ChesireCat@TO (2008, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/))

The mine employs most people in Thompson, but few are women or Indigenous people. Those that have jobs with the mine tend to work in surface operations that are at risk of closure. In 2010, Vale, a Brazilian-based iron ore mining company that bought Inco Limited, announced plans to close the Thompson smelter and refinery in 2015 (later extended to 2018). With 500 jobs about to be lost, the community knew that something had to be done to diversify the economy, create stable jobs and reduce dependence on the mining sector.

Taking action for economic diversification

In response to Vale’s announcement, the city created the Thompson Economic Diversification Working Group (TEDWG). Mining company Vale and more than 40 community organizations took part in discussions of how to diversify the local economy and create jobs.

FemNorthNet’s goal was to introduce gender into the TEDWG discussions, and to help amplify voices of local women to address their needs and interests, which had often been unheard.

In February 2012, FemNorthNet’s report *Women, Economic Development and Restructuring in Thompson* was tabled as a resource for the TEDWG discussions. It tapped into diverse views from women who use social assistance, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and youth. The report noted that women in Thompson

- were more likely to be employed than in the rest of Manitoba, but mainly in the service sector
- had low access to social programs like childcare, affordable housing, violence and crisis services, legal help and health care
- were a diverse population with diverse needs, and that many groups and individuals were working to improve women’s situation, and
- needed to participate in TEDWG, and TEDWG needed to hear women’s voices and take women’s concerns into account.

Empowering local women

Community groups and individual women began to participate in community discussions. The Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (TNRC) held focus groups with women to hear their views on economic diversification and to gather information to create a women’s leadership training program so women would have a voice in the community in the longer term. Those who participated

- identified gaps in women’s community involvement
- spoke about the commonly held view that women are less credible as a leaders, and
- recognized that women bring a different and important perspective to economic development issues.



This kind of feedback from local women led to the Thompson Women’s Empowerment Workshop Guide based on the medicine wheel. Four workshop modules helped woman explore their emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being. It invited women to understand themselves, what they want in life, the importance of self-care and practical life tools to achieve goals. The workshop allowed groups of women to share experiences, learn from each other, gain new skills, build on their strengths, and develop leadership skills and confidence to be part of community development. This leadership training continues to be offered through the Thompson Y’s Women’s Centre.

Ongoing in Thompson

In 2013 TEDWG released a series of action plans and its final report. FemNorthNet members reviewed the process, outcomes, and recommendations and then gave its feedback, including pointing out ways to better engage with and represent marginalized and diverse women. This was summarized in a report called [Critical Reflections on Economic Planning in Thompson](#). It examined how diverse women were included—or excluded—from the community process and outlined how women’s viewpoints might have given TEDWG’s conclusions a different shape.

Community leaders involved in the TEDWG process and in FemNorthNet, were able to bring an inter-sectoral, gendered way of looking at issues into the analysis, plans and community meetings held in Thompson. The city and various community organizations are now responsible for further developing and implementing the TEDWG plans. Our hope is that the concerns of diverse women will be more actively included and supported in future discussions to diversify the local economy.

Labrador West—Community Advisory Panel

Labrador West includes the nearby towns of Labrador City and Wabush City, NL. Because the Innu have been mostly displaced from this land, most of the people in Lab West are settlers, who are closely linked with the mining operations that have taken place there since the 1960s.

Like so many northern communities where resource extraction dominates the economy, the concerns and perspectives of women and many community organizations have not been part of local economic decision-making. This changed when the mining company – IOC (the Iron Ore Company of Canada) – set up a Community Advisory Panel in 2006. It supported the Panel’s work by paying for its two co-chairs. The company’s aims with the Panel were to:

- improve its understanding of environmental, economic and social issues
- work with the community to achieve shared sustainable development goals, and
- address issues that people might identify.



Labrador West Community Advisory Panel (CAP) event “New to You” introduced residents to local organizations and services – Image from CAP (2012)

The Panel held regular meetings with people from community organizations, such as local women's groups, the Innu Nation and the towns of Labrador City and Wabush. It gave people in the community a chance to ask questions of the mining company. For example, a discussion about the large number of men's camps in town led to the company developing a Code of Conduct for men staying in those camps.

On ongoing basis, the Panel has identified issues and set priorities for dealing with those issues. The lack of affordable housing was one of the main issues the Panel dealt with. Discussions at the Panel led to creation of the Labrador West Housing and Homelessness Coalition, which includes representatives from community organizations and the mining company.

The Community Advisory Panel had a focus on action. It used a consultant from outside the community at its meetings, and relied on networking and collaboration to get things done. It was a forum where groups could:

- learn about what others are doing in their community
- identify community needs
- build support, and
- identify local, regional and provincial opportunities.

The IOC mining company left the Community Action Panel in 2015 when global demand for iron ore caused big job losses in Lab West.

Happy Valley-Goose Bay —Claiming Our Place

Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HV-GB) is a town of about 8,000 people inland from the eastern coast of Labrador. It is highly diverse, and includes Inuit and Innu people, settlers whose family roots go back to early days of the fur trade, and those who moved there more recently, including temporary foreign workers.

HV-GB is a service hub for Labrador, much like Thompson is for northern Manitoba. A resource-based economic boom is happening as more businesses and workers move to town to build the nearby hydro dam at Muskrat Falls, and as mining and exploration increase in the region.

In 2011, Environmental Impact Assessment hearings began on the massive, new hydro dam. From the start, it was clear that the voices and concerns of local women were going to be left out of the development agenda. The FemNorthNet project helped community partner, Petrina Beals from the Mokami Status of Women Centre call attention to local women's concerns in submissions to the Panel. This was covered by the media.

Shortly after this, *Claiming Our Place* was launched in HV-GB with two main goals:

- raise local women's awareness of the large economic development projects in the region that impact their lives, well-being and the wellbeing of their community, and
- develop women's ability to participate effectively in community discussions, planning meetings, and events about economic development, and create tools to amplify their voices.

Local women were invited to participate in Cha Chim hey Aqulth—Go the right way Creative Action Circles™—an arts-based method developed by educator J'Net Cavanaugh. It was rooted in Indigenous knowledge and practices. Participants shared stories, spoke their ideas, and wove their stories and themes into a performance that honoured their cultures, developed confidence and led to leadership skills. It was considered the best method to build—and rebuild—connections between local Indigenous groups and non-



Indigenous women. It also helped to uncover the relationships that women have with the natural world, and to encourage them to share their insights on the impacts of the dam.

- More than 20 women met in HV-GB for the first Creative Action Circles™ training sessions in 2011.
- The group included youth and grandmothers, northern Inuit, Innu, southern Inuit and diverse women from non-Indigenous groups.
- Women were trained to lead smaller circles with local women and to share their stories.
- They developed skills on note taking, setting an agenda for a workshop, planning a workshop, facilitating a group, collaborating with others, listening, and developing their own interests and abilities.

The four-day workshop ended with a powerful Creative Action Showcase where the women invited family and friends to see them present their creative material.



Masked Claiming Our Place participants stand in front of their Labrador tent – Photo by Elizabeth Dean (2012)

In 2012 J'Net again worked with the team from *Claiming Our Place* to write up the findings from local discussions and to prepare for a public performance. The 2012 workshop was held in a central place in the town and welcomed women with an open door and meals. This helped to attract new women to work with the core group. Women had time to share stories and prepare for a public presentation. As the performance time drew closer, it became clear that some members of the community were hostile to this group of women. It took courage and leadership skills for them to continue and to invite the community to their presentation.

In the next year, as women's confidence grew stronger, they

- organized another local public showcase in 2013
- issued statements to the media
- were part of a video about their experiences, and
- called attention to how resource extraction changes the environment and disrupts vital relationships with nature and among people.

The concerns raised by these local women in Labrador sparked two other important projects supported by FemNorthNet:

- The **Community Vitality Index** has engaged local women in discussions about the impacts of resource development on them, their families and communities. The Index tracks five elements of well-being to determine changes in the well-being of diverse women and of the communities where they live. These elements are mental, cultural, emotional, spiritual, and physical. The Index has worked well in places where social structures are strained and well-being is threatened by growth from resource development. Fact sheet 9 provides more details about the Community Vitality Index.

- The **Building Links** initiative began in June 2014 when local women from HV-GB met with diverse women from Nova Scotia in HV-GB. The Nova Scotia study tour aimed to learn more about the Muskrat Falls hydro dam's impact on local people. The dam was to generate power for Nova Scotia, as well as other parts of eastern Canada. During the study tour, members of the HV-GB town council, including the mayor and deputy-mayor met with local women and the group from Nova Scotia to hear their concerns. By linking with others outside of HV-GB, the women of the town could bear witness to the effects of resource extraction and call attention to their serious concerns.

We hope these stories about community models that value diverse women help to inspire similar actions elsewhere.

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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.

Support the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

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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