Gender and Disability in Canada’s North

We know little about the lives of women who live with disabilities in Canada’s North. This fact sheet shares some stories we heard from women with disabilities in FemNorthNet’s partner communities. There is no common understanding of disability in Northern communities, often because of Indigenous ways of knowing or inclusive practices in communities. Historically, federal and provincial/territorial governments removed people with disabilities from Northern communities, and sent them to Southern centres or institutions, instead of providing adequate government funding and support for local and community---based services and supports in the North.

Some Northern Women’s Voices

"My granddaughter doesn’t know she has disabilities and we’re not going to tell her."  "I think a lot of people with mental health issues...I don’t think that they necessarily see that as being a disability.”  “If you look at intergenerational trauma [as disability] then that almost includes [all our members].”  “I have disability like walking, hearing, and thinking.”  “I hardly look at my disabilities...I don’t dwell on my disability.”

Women pointed out some positive aspects of living with disabilities in the North:

- Many Northern communities are small. This creates a strong sense of community that helps women with disabilities feel included.
- When women are not eligible for government supports for specialized equipment, communities often fundraise to meet their needs.
- Community organizations, including churches, often fill in gaps when government services are not available locally for women with disabilities.

Nunatsiavut’s Model of Inclusion

Nunatsiavut (Canada’s first Inuit self-government, located in Labrador) supports inclusion in its programs and services for people with multiple and complex needs, including disabilities, even though some services like schools are operated by the NL provincial government. Their model recognizes the effects of colonization, residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and forced displacement. It could be a model for other governments.

“"We do our best to find accommodations for individuals no matter what that is. For instance, in schools where we have a number of children with FASD, we don’t single them out necessarily but we have adapted the school environment to be more friendly for children with FASD. Because of all the sensory issues we have more spaces like a tent at the back of the room where children can get away and have a space. We’ve looked at the colours in the school, the amount of things that are on the walls – those kinds of things... We try to make those accommodations that are probably more helpful for all individuals.”

Figure 1: The flag of Nunatsiavut.
Experiences of Women with Disabilities in Canada’s North

Common Barriers to Inclusion and Access for Women with Disabilities in the North

Diverse women with disabilities may have different experiences depending on their individual situations and differences in age, income, Indigenous identity, citizenship status, and related social categories.

**Gaps in Services and Social Supports:** Services and social supports for people with disabilities do not exist in many Northern communities. Women may need to leave their home communities and travel to a regional hub community or a Southern city to receive services. Some must permanently relocate to receive needed supports, leading to isolation and separation from vital family, community and cultural support networks. When supports are not available/accessible, some women with disabilities find the environment unsupportive. There are risks. Some women with mental health disabilities could be placed at greater risk for ending up in the criminal justice system.

**Legacies of Colonization:** Colonization is disabling for many Indigenous women, their families and their communities in the North and has intergenerational psychological and social impacts. Colonization can erode community and cultural support systems, and can mean that families and communities can face difficulties in providing the required supports for women with disabilities.

**Northern Climate:** The Northern climate is challenging for many women with disabilities, particularly women with mobility limitations. Women reported having difficulty finding someone to plow their driveways and shovel their steps. Paying for this work can be expensive, especially for women living on low incomes.

**Infrastructure:** Women who use wheelchairs, walkers or scooters face barriers when communities do not have sidewalks or buildings do not have ramps. Inaccessible or unavailable public transit also prevents those who are unable to drive or cannot afford to own a car from participating fully in their communities. Women experiencing pain or fatigue may find benches for resting helpful in public places.

**Employment:** Many women with disabilities in the North face difficulty in accessing employment opportunities and finding the supports they need to work. This is partly due to discrimination or the lack of understanding that surrounds disability. There can also be a lack of workplace supports or employer commitment to providing supports.

**Life Transitions:** The provinces and territories typically provide disability supports, such as assistive technologies for education or income supplements, for children with disabilities until 18 or the end of high school. Eligibility after that point depends on many factors, including type of disability, income and

---

**A View from Labrador**

“There are positive differences from being in the North because you’re isolated... isolation brings sometimes good things... like if [my daughter] had grown up in an urban centre, the whole town would never know her... would never have seen her do gymnastics or swim or skate. She’s changing the way people view persons with intellectual disabilities.”

Figure 2: Unplowed driveways are barriers for women with mobility limitations.
Experiences of Women with Disabilities in Canada’s North

Indigenous identity. Families often provide supports into adulthood if programs do not exist in their communities or women are not eligible. As parents age, this is a source of concern for many families.

Community Changes as a Result of Resource Extraction

Resource extraction creates many changes in communities near mega-project sites. Many women with disabilities in the North feel that these projects are not benefitting them, and are instead creating more barriers to inclusion, while bringing prosperity and employment for some community members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happy Valleys-Goose Bay, NL</th>
<th>Labrador West, NL</th>
<th>Thompson, MB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HV-GB) is a hub community for Labrador, and has a population of 7500 people, including many members of the Innu Nation, Nunatsiavut, and NunatuKavut. The Muskrat Falls hydro dam is under construction nearby. Residents are concerned about the project’s effects on their community and ways of life.</td>
<td>The towns of Labrador City and Wabush, together Labrador West (LW), have a population of 9200 people. Residents of LW are familiar with the boom and bust cycle of resource extraction, and its negative effects, as the towns are surrounded by multiple mining developments. In 2015, Labrador West began experiencing a bust period.</td>
<td>Thompson is the “Hub of the North” in Manitoba, and is home to 13,100 people. Thompson is Cree territory, and provides centralized services for many people who live on First Nations reserves. Vale-Inco has a nickel mine near Thompson – one of the largest employers in the region. Vale has announced the closure of its smelter and refinery in 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transportation: Public transportation systems are often strained with the development of mega-projects, as an influx of people into the community creates a higher demand for transportation. Many women with disabilities depend on taxis to get around. In HV-GB, women say it can be impossible to get a taxi as many drivers have left the company to work at the better-paying Muskrat Falls jobs.

Safety & Loss of Sense of Community: With an influx of workers comes a loss of sense of community where “everyone knows everyone” for many women with disabilities in the North. A loss of sense of safety can also occur. Some women in Labrador reported that they had invested in home security systems, and others noticed an increase in street harassment.

Employment: While most resource projects have employment equity policies, many women with disabilities cannot easily access jobs. They may not have the needed training, or access to educational supports to pursue training. People with disabilities are increasingly encouraged to create their own jobs with government entrepreneurship supports, rather than employment supports to fill existing positions.

Service Provision: Providing supports to women with disabilities in the North is often unpaid or low wage work. Personal care workers and medical professionals may leave service provision to pursue higher paying jobs on resource projects. Women report that the quality of services they receive often decreases after mega-projects begin. As well, there is increased demand for medical care, causing longer wait times.

Figure 2: The Vale mine is one of the top employers in Thompson.
Experiences of Women with Disabilities in Canada’s North

**Food Supply & Costs:** With resource development projects, more people also strain local food systems, resulting in basic items like bread not always being available in retail stores. Cost of food also rises when a resource project begins, placing increased demand on food banks. In HV-GB, Indigenous women are concerned about rising mercury levels in fish as a result of construction, and what the dam means for their access to other country foods.

**Housing:** The cost of housing usually rises dramatically when workers arrive for resource projects. Women with disabilities living on low incomes can then face challenges in finding affordable and accessible housing in their communities and meeting their other needs. They can become vulnerable to homelessness or may live in overcrowded or unsafe housing.

**Sex Work:** An increase in sex work has been linked to resource development in many communities in the North. Many attribute this to the influx of temporary workers, typically men with large amounts of disposable income. Women battling addictions, struggling with mental health concerns, and those who may be homeless can be vulnerable to exploitation through sex work.

**Issues and Recommendations**

- **Disability Related Supports:** Disability related support programs need to be present in the North and recognize the costs and challenges of providing disability related supports. Some rules, like ones that prevent family members from providing supports, are incompatible with small Northern communities.
- **Women with Disabilities are Part of the Community!:** Women with disabilities may need to move multiple times between and within communities to get the services they need as their support needs change or when services are inaccessible or unavailable. When women require high levels of support, their only option may be to enter long-term care facilities. Creating local, home and community-based supports would help to decrease isolation. Community members can also ensure that people with disabilities are included in community events and have access to safe, barrier-free transportation.
- **Developing Local Capacities:** More research is needed on the issues, perspectives, and experiences of people with disabilities in the North. In the North, medicalized or service organizations are more prominent than disabled people’s organizations (DPOs). Southern DPOs can work with local people with disabilities to establish local DPOs, based on Northern understandings and approaches to disability.

### Resources

- Diversity Through Inclusive Practice Toolkit ([link](#)) & Checklist ([link](#))
- Nunavummi Disabilities Makinnasuaqtiit Society ([link](#))
- Coalition of Persons with Disabilities NL ([link](#)) & Manitoba League of Persons with Disabilities ([link](#))
- Living in Manitoba: A Resource Guide For Women with Disabilities ([link](#))
- Interview with Carmela Hutchison ([link](#))

References and image credits can be found in the online accessible version, available at [http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/en/publications](http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/en/publications)
Experiences of Women with Disabilities in Canada’s North

References
Interviews conducted in 2015 with seven women with disabilities in Labrador and two sets of government representatives.


Image Credits
Figure 1: Flag of Nunatsiavut by Jorge Candeias is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.
Figure 2: Snowy driveway is in the public domain.
Figure 3: Vale Nickel Mine by Timkal is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.