



# Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada

## Gender Considerations



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Organisation nationale de la santé autochtone (ONSA)  
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Under Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, the term Aboriginal Peoples refers to First Nations, Inuit and Métis people living in Canada. However, common use of the term is not always inclusive of all three distinct people and much of the available research only focuses on particular segments of the Aboriginal population. NAHO makes every effort to ensure the term is used appropriately.



# Resource Extraction and Aboriginal Communities in Northern Canada: Gender Considerations

## INTRODUCTION

*Gender* refers to the identities assigned to or adopted by females and males relating to their role in society. Gender differs from sex in that gender refers to socially defined differences between women and men, and sex refers to biological differences.

In many northern communities, socially defined or gender differences include the care of children and preparation of meals being primarily (although not exclusively) done by women, while men are primarily responsible for hunting and the maintenance of guns and skidoos. Conversely, biological or sex-based differences include the ability of women to bear children and breast-feed babies.

*Gender-based analysis* is a tool that uses gender as an organizing category. It addresses the similarities and differences that exist between women and men and girls and boys due to the social context. It refers to social roles, behaviours, activities and attributes as well as the complex, interpersonal interactions and relationships between individuals and groups of individuals. In Aboriginal communities, this includes respecting the role played by female and male Elders in guiding and mentoring younger generations.

Focusing on gender enables us to consider the differences and similarities between women and men relating to social and biological factors that often lead to inequitable relations. Inequitable relations place various groups of women, men, boys, or girls in a disadvantaged position in relation to others. Adopting a gender-based lens helps us identify these inequities, enabling this imbalance to be corrected.

For example, the Special Chiefs Assembly Resolution No. 12/2006 stated that women's perspectives should be included in Assembly of First Nations (AFN) decision-making processes, and that women should not be disproportionately adversely affected by AFN policies and programs.

*Culturally relevant gender-based analysis* promotes the application of a gender-based approach along with a culturally balanced approach when conducting research and policy and program development. It adopts a lens characteristic of mainstream gender-based analysis but also acknowledges socio-cultural and historical realities caused by colonization. This analytical tool focuses on:

- *Holism*, through recognizing the importance of all interconnected aspects of the individual and the community.
- *Cultural diversity*, through respecting the distinct identity of different cultural groups, Nations and communities.
- *Equity*, through recognizing historical injustices that have occurred and ensuring that disadvantaged communities are provided with services and resources in keeping with the human rights of all individuals.

- *Ownership and voice*, through ensuring that communities control their own research agenda and identify their own priorities, and that all voices are actively engaged in decision-making processes.

## **Overview of key issues**

Resource extraction industries such as mining and oil and gas development are traditionally viewed as male-dominated. Yet these industries affect the lives of male and female community residents in unique and diverse ways. For example, as identified by the North Slave Métis Association (described in Gibson and Klinck, 2005), women and girls living in small communities near mines or a pipeline development may be drawn into prostitution.

Although gender is a significant component woven throughout the social, political, cultural, and economic issues, it is often ignored. Taking gender into consideration means that a holistic perspective is adopted, and that we think about how resource extraction affects the community overall as well as how female and male individuals are impacted.

Gibson and Klinck (2005) relate that occupational and mental health disorders experienced by mine workers in the Northwest Territories (NWT) often lead to increased drinking and other forms of substance abuse. This contributes to a higher rate of domestic violence and marital breakdown, which may incur higher social costs for the whole community in the future.

Adopting a gender lens encourages us to look more carefully, to dig deeper and to ask more thoughtful and challenging questions. This enables us to gain a more realistic, more accurate and richer understanding of how the community works and how resource extraction activities affect male and female community residents of all ages both now and in the future.

In documenting the response of Inuit women to the proposed Voisey's Bay nickel project, Archibald and Crnkovich (1999) emphasized that resource extraction activities have varying effects on residents from one community to another, and that women and men are differently affected based on their own multiple roles in the community. For example, in each community, women are mothers, daughters, grandmothers, wives, neighbours, and work colleagues; men are fathers, sons, husbands and grandfathers, neighbours, and work colleagues.

## **Overview of strategies and best practices related to key issues**

- Promoting the preservation of traditional values, language and customs, including respect for Elders.
- Supporting strong leadership for the community, traditional governance styles and self-determination.
- Recognizing and respecting that traditional means of governance and that the roles of men and women and boys and girls vary between Aboriginal Peoples and between communities.

- Adopting culturally relevant gender-based analysis rather than imperialist models of gender-based analysis.
- Recognizing and respecting that culturally relevant gender-based analysis is an emerging concept that requires dialogue between individuals and in the community.
- Understanding that culturally relevant gender-based analysis may be a challenging and sometimes painful process causing individuals to question pre-conceived and/or stereotypical views about male and female roles, behaviour and activities.
- Ensuring that gender-based analysis does not have a negative disruptive effect on culture and on community dynamics.

### **Questions to Consider:**

#### ***Social***

As discussed in Status of Women Council of the Northwest Territories (1999), the Diavik Mine development had negative gendered impacts on the community, including an increase in spousal assaults and related substance abuse. Women married to Diavik employees stated that long absences due to the work rotation schedule placed a strain on relationships. This resulted in the failure to address conflict issues within the family, causing disruptive behaviour in children. A significant rise in single-parent families during pipeline development in the NWT was also noted in Imperial Oil Resources (2006).

Do the communities that are affected by resource extraction have the infrastructure to address potential challenges caused by these industrial activities (for example, counselling services for families affected by violence)? Are the short- and long-term impacts on the community monitored, and are adverse effects addressed (preferably by both community residents and industry representatives)? Are the resource extraction companies committed to ensuring that negative effects on families and communities are minimized, and positive effects are maximized?

#### ***Political***

During the review of the Voisey's Bay Nickel Project, Archibald and Crnkovich (1999) concluded that the absence of significant numbers of women on the land claims and Impact Benefit Assessment teams and on the board of the Labrador Inuit Association directly affected the types of issues that were raised and how these issues were addressed during negotiations and other project-related meetings.

Do resource extraction companies sponsor a community liaison committee? Do both men and women participate fully and equally in decision-making processes?

#### ***Economic***

As described in Status of Women Council (1999), women in NWT communities stated that Diavik Mines geared their hiring and promotion practices towards men, and that women were only employed in low-paying housekeeping, cleaning and cook's helper positions. Many women are also

prevented from applying for full-time positions in mines or on pipeline developments due to lack of adequate childcare facilities (Status of Women Council, 1999; 2006).

Are there opportunities for both women and men to participate and benefit economically both directly (jobs) and indirectly (spin-off industries)? Are there opportunities for youth participation through employment and training?

### ***Cultural***

As documented in Kafarowski (2005), women and men possess different knowledge(s) and transmit their knowledge in various ways due to their respective roles and responsibilities. In Inuit communities in Nunavik and Nunavut, women were historically and are currently primarily responsible for food preparation and distribution, and for ensuring the short- and long-term health of the family and community. Men are mainly in charge of equipment and hunting. As such, Inuit women may play a critical role in maintaining family health, for example, through their identification of parasites and other contaminants during the preparation of fish and meat prior to drying or smoking.

How do resource extraction company managers ensure that the cultural needs of all workers, their families and the community as a whole are integral to the philosophy and vision of the company as well as how it operates on a practical basis? How are employment and training opportunities balanced with the cultural needs of the community (for example, going out on the land)?

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