

# The impact of climate change on Indigenous women: Insight into female leadership in earthly stewardship.

By Ilne Barnard

*“Indigenous women carry the knowledge of their ancestors while also leading their communities into a resilient future. When indigenous women engage, climate policies and actions at every level benefit from their holistic, nature-focused knowledge and leadership.”*

– UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa<sup>24</sup>

## Impact of Climate Change

Climate change across the world poses many challenges to human health and wellbeing. Concerns surrounding climate change include seasonal shifts, inconsistency in weather, deterioration in water quantity and quality, and changes in plant and animal species diversity. In Canada, Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.<sup>35</sup> This is partially due to a number of communities in more volatile coastal areas and low-altitude regions, but is also the result of increased dependence that Indigenous Peoples have on the natural world.<sup>35</sup> Existing food, water, and energy insecurities are examples of inequalities that have become intensified by climate change.<sup>16, 17, 25, 29, 36</sup>

The extent of direct physical demand of the natural world is accompanied by tremendous respect and sacred connection to nature held by Indigenous Peoples. The livelihood and self-identity of Indigenous Peoples is directly connected to the land.<sup>31</sup> The deep connection they have with nature manifests in various capacities. Water is known as “a giver of life” and makes up the first environment in a woman’s body, resulting in the uniquely special bond that Indigenous women have with water.<sup>3,27</sup> In Canada, Indigenous women, as child bearers, share a sacred connection to the spirit of water. Water is essential to their identities, cultural traditions, and practices, and is integral to the wellness of their communities.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous women inherit sacred water knowledge and resource management from their ancestors and hold

significant leadership roles within their communities to protect their resources and contribute in the community’s decision making process.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

*“We must never forget that it is at this most critical window of development in the mother’s womb, the child’s first environment and first relationship, where the embodied wealth of indigenous nations is determined.”<sup>33</sup>*

Despite holding leadership roles within their communities on earthly stewardship, Indigenous women are disproportionately impacted by climate change.<sup>12,19,14,32</sup> In Canada’s Inuit population, it has been reported that females are more vulnerable to the effects of decreased food supplies.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous women have reported deterioration in their health while providing for the people in their care due to decreased food availability and drinkable water.<sup>4,15,16,17,28</sup> In healthcare, Indigenous women and children are often flown out of northern communities, as adequate access to proper child and female medical care is scarce.<sup>30</sup> Harsh weather that can be exacerbated by the effects of climate change may disrupt flights and bus routes to airports, further distancing Indigenous women from access to quality healthcare services.<sup>30</sup> Changes in the environment also increase the risk of exposure to environmental hazards and airborne sicknesses, which can be especially dangerous during pregnancy.<sup>22</sup>

Changes in the natural environment also have a direct impact on Indigenous traditional practices, and by extension, mental health.<sup>8,9,21,23</sup> Indigenous females’ inability to engage in traditional land-centered practices impacts their complex intersectionality where self-identity, livelihood, and gendered social and economic roles are connected to the land.<sup>7,8,9</sup> The ability of Indigenous women to enact their roles in caring for the environment and their communities is threatened by climate change.<sup>31</sup> In their communities, for example,

environmental degradation impacts women's roles as traditional healers, using natural resources and medicinal plants to help maintain the wellbeing of their communities.<sup>2,3,10,35</sup> Through observing the climate conditions and relying on the raw resources of the land, women develop detailed knowledge of the climate and environmental patterns in their area.<sup>36</sup> Within larger society, increased marginalization due to climate change further impacts their ability to share this traditional knowledge on environmental change.<sup>36</sup>

“Aboriginal women have diverse connections to ATK [Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge], and their influence on protecting the environment and natural resources cannot be neglected. Acknowledging the views of Aboriginal women encourages the consideration of relevant traditional knowledge, contributes to greater environmental sustainability and care, as well as enhances gender equality.”<sup>30</sup>

Indigenous female leadership in earthly stewarding needs to be supported during climate change. This will help promote the overall wellbeing of Indigenous women and their communities while supporting environmental justice and sustainable practices. Their rich knowledge should also be sought out by governing bodies and brought into policy making decisions.

### Roles in Policy Making

“(W)omen are not just helpless victims of climate change – they are powerful agents of change and their leadership is critical... should ensure that climate change and disaster risk reduction measures are gender responsive, sensitive to indigenous knowledge systems and respect human rights. Women's right to participate at all levels of decision-making must be guaranteed in climate change policies and programmes.”<sup>6</sup>

Within Canada, women are generally under-represented in government positions provincially, territorially, and federally. In the past, reports such as the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change Second Annual Synthesis Report on the Status of Implementation (or the ‘WEF nexus’) have lacked both gender equality and recognition of Indigenous ecological and natural knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Despite disproportionate representation, Indigenous women, particularly Inuit women, have been at the forefront of many environmental movements.<sup>11</sup> For example, at the Conference of the Parties (COP-15) of

the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Inuit women held significant representation for the Inuit and Canadian Arctic representation. In the Paris Agreement and discourse within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2014, there was increased recognition of the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in responding to climate change.<sup>15</sup>

In more recent climate change-related policy meetings, Canada has worked towards incorporating a knowledge sharing framework approach with Indigenous Peoples.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change was the first climate change plan developed in consultation with Indigenous Peoples. Canada also then recognized the need for gender-sensitive strategies in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) with the gender-specific aspects of climate change.<sup>25,36</sup> Another key moment came in 2018 with the creation of the Nature Legacy Initiative, which aimed to help protect land and ocean biodiversity and to advance reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, continued partnership agreements were signed with Indigenous People to continue to help protect important habitats.<sup>14</sup> Increased efforts have been made in 2021 to include Indigenous women in major climate change and policy meetings. For example, as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's 26th Conference of Parties (UNFCCC COP26) in Glasgow, a few Indigenous women spoke and provided perspective on future climate solutions and helped finalize elements of the Paris Agreement.

Although there are improvements in Indigenous knowledge transfer related to climate change efforts, there is still a need for continual emphasis and advocacy for Indigenous female representation in these policy making decisions.<sup>13,18</sup> In Canada, there are a few key organizations related to gender, women's rights, and climate change activities.<sup>20</sup> These include:

- Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women
- Sponsors the Feminist Northern network focusing on gendered impact of environmental change in the North
- Idle No More
- A women-led initiative to promote gender-just and sustainable forms of development, supporting the sovereignty of Indigenous communities

- Women for Nature
- A philanthropic initiative of professional women across Canada that are passionate about the environment and educate about their values
- Climate Change Action Network Canada
- A network that has entities focused on gender and climate change issues
- Oxfam Canada
- Conducts research and advocacy for issues related to gender and the environment.

## Conclusion

As our understanding of climate change increases, there is a need to increase the transparency of statistical reporting of affected individuals, namely Indigenous women in marginalized communities.<sup>5</sup> Improved statistical reporting can help increase awareness and work to ensure proper resources and care is available to the populations in need of support. Promoting Indigenous women's voices in the politics of global environmental decision-making and incorporating traditional knowledge is important for adaptation and for creating new ways to handle climate change.<sup>26</sup>

## Author Note

This article is written from a non-Indigenous, settler perspective. Discussion is based on an in-depth literature search and additional resources.

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