

## Commentary

# Overlooking a Regional Crux of Vulnerability: Missing Women in the Arctic

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Changes to the Arctic's physical environment—driven by climate change, technological innovation, demographic shifts, and the increased presence of extractive industries—are significantly impacting the region's social environment. In conjunction, as extractive industries and their associated challenges permeate remote and rural communities in the circumpolar North, the role of women in community adaptation and in shaping change is weakened. Across the Arctic, pressure points arise at a faster rate than regional policies are drafted, and women living in this region often fall between the cracks of a stretched and weakened social safety net. It is this crux of vulnerability in which women get caught.

The Arctic Council recognized the importance of women in developing Arctic communities in its Inari Declaration (2002, p. 2) by encouraging “the integration of gender equality and women...perspectives in all efforts to enhance human living conditions in the Arctic.” A conference that same year, titled “Taking Wing: Gender Equality and Women in the Arctic” (2002), included a

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focus on economic policy, health, women's rights, violence against women and the trafficking of women. Twelve years later, in her statement at the conference "Gender Equality in the Arctic: Current Realities, Future Challenges," (2014, p. 80) former Finnish president Tarja Halonen further highlighted that climate change can hinder the productivity and use of land, which can adversely impact women's land ownership, inheritance, control and management over natural resources. Conversations relating to "climate change, gender equality, ownership and control rights, and environmental protection" she argued, "must be closely interlinked" (Gender Equality in the Arctic, 2014, p. 80).

Yet integrating a gender dimension into domestic and foreign policy on climate change can be contentious. When Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna drew attention to the gendered dimension of climate change at a 2016 G7 meeting of environment ministers, she witnessed a backlash (Vanderklippe, 2016). The Minister's comments flagged women's social and economic vulnerability in both natural resource discussions and climate disasters, and yielded a "swift, and angry" response (Vanderklippe, 2016). In turn, McKenna's comments noted that the support of women's rights by the Canadian government must be part and parcel of its federal policies, highlighting that the (gendered) dimension is often lost in climate talks (Vanderklippe, 2016).

Pulling out of the Canadian context, a 2013 Arctic Centre report commissioned by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs sought to understand how international processes and standards, such as Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), interact with self-determination and the rights of indigenous women in the context of climate change. In line with Halonen and McKenna's statement, the report found that indigenous women globally, including the Arctic, continue to face systemic violations at the intersection of gender, indigeneity, and climate change (Prior et al., 2013).

As an example of how these dimensions intersect, and the delayed government response, we need not look further than the recent *Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act* (2013) in Canada. Until 2013, matrimonial real property (MRP) for Canadian Aboriginal women living on-reserve fell into what *Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada* heralded as a "long-standing and unacceptable legislative gap" (2015), as neither the *Indian Act*, nor provincial or territorial law, provided redress.<sup>1</sup> This new legislation is an example of how law can be used by Canadian Aboriginal women to uphold their property rights, which ripples into their ability to participate in natural resource development and climate change discussions.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, when looking at the intersection of gender, climate change and extractive industries, we should not only approach the geography of the Arctic as fixed. And few subjects so strikingly pull into light this transcendence of borders as does the flux of women moving across Arctic borders for the purpose of sex, particularly to remote resource extraction sites. It may not always grab the attention of the *United Nations Office on Drug and Crime* or other leading agencies and authorities, but it should. Research by Victoria Sweet (2014, p. 1) highlights how an increasing interest in resource extraction, as a result of climate change, and its associated demographic shifts might heighten the risk of

trafficking in the region.<sup>3</sup> To mitigate such risks, she argues that, communities must “remember the historical stories, officials need to understand the risk factors that come with extractive developments in rural areas, and preparations must be made for the next wave of outsiders entering the region” to protect indigenous and non-indigenous women (Sweet, 2014, p. 10).

This begs the question probed in many other spheres: could these issues be resolved if women were more involved in Arctic policy-shaping and decision-making? Studies focusing on Canada show that women only comprise 16 per cent of northern management boards in its three northern territories (Natcher, 2013, p. 219). With such a small percentage, women are often subjected to marginalization, and rendered invisible in decision-making processes (Natcher, 2013, p. 218; Westerman et al., 2005). In Alaska, some view the impact of low oil prices on its economy as an opportunity to tackle the gender wage gap, which is significantly higher relative to the rest of the US (Alaska Economic Trends, 2016, p. 3). Employment is declining in traditionally male-dominated fields, like the extractive industries, while labour market data shows a growth in female-dominated industries, including healthcare and tourism (Alaska Economic Trends, 2016, p. 3). As recommended by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, a focus on expanding training opportunities and increasing wages for these industries will make the state a better place for women to work and live, all while injecting more money into the local economy.<sup>4</sup>

But is it possible to tie all of this together? Nina Larsson and her work is a great example of the interplay between local narratives, domestic law-making and international standards, and how although domestic efforts have started to scratch the surface of such issues and intersections, much is left to be done on a regional scale to foster transnational responses. In November 2014, she spearheaded the first ever Indigenous Circumpolar Women’s gathering in Yellowknife, where over 80 Indigenous women shared their knowledge and approaches to programs and/or ongoing projects in different corners of the Arctic. In a report on the subject titled “Mind the Gender Gap”, Larsson (2015) further examined how Arctic states approach the inclusion of indigenous women in decision-making roles. Larsson (2015, p. 35) concluded that “Scandinavia’s approach to gender equality translate[s] into the appreciation of different management styles and a gender diverse workforce,” something the Northwest Territories could learn from.

Even though some Arctic states are often heralded as utopia for gender equality, *all Arctic states*, and policy arenas like the Arctic Council, must ensure that gender is included across Arctic policy and law (Conway, 2016). But where to begin with already marginalized issues in a remote area? How can we connect the Nina Larsson’s, who strive to connect local narratives with transnational research and policy to ignite domestic change?

Join us in helping connect these narratives, won’t you, so we can ensure that the next 20 years of Arctic cooperation and policy-making take into better account half of the Arctic’s population?

## Notes

1. Cornet and Lendor provide more historical contextualization of this issue. See Cornet, W. and Lendor, A. (2002). *Matrimonial Real Property on Reserve* (Discussion Paper). Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
2. See the *Centre for Excellence for Matrimonial Real Property* which seeks to provide information on the protections and rights available to individuals and families living on reserves, on provisional federal rules, once in force, and an understanding of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Access at: <http://www.coemrp.ca/resources/>. See also the toolkit drafted by the Native Women's Association of Canada: <http://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2014-Matrimonial-Real-Property-Toolkit-Version-1.3.pdf>.
3. The trafficking of women across Arctic borders has surfaced in academic research and policy reports alike. Yttergren examines how Sweden's gender equality objectives are confronted with the trafficking of women, including Russian women, to Sweden. See: Yttergren, Åsa. (2012). *Swedish Gender Equality for Trafficked Women? : Radical Official Remedies and Ethnic Otherness*. Umeå universitet, Juridiskt forum. Victoria Sweet points to the potential risks associated with the trafficking of indigenous women in the circumpolar United States and Canada. See: Sweet, V. (2015). *Rising Waters, Rising Threats: The Human Trafficking of Indigenous Women in the Circumpolar Region of the United States and Canada*. *Yearbook of Polar Law*, 6, 162-188. *Pauktuutit: Inuit Women of Canada*, an organization representing Inuit women across Canada, has made the trafficking of Inuit women in the Canadian North, and in urban centers like Ottawa (through which over 40 Inuit women were trafficked in 2012 alone) a priority. See: <http://pauktuutit.ca/abuse-prevention/inuit-and-human-trafficking/>.
4. As of May 2016, the wage gap in Alaska was 67 cents on the dollar for women compared to men, representing a \$1 billion missed opportunity for the state. See *Gender and Nontraditional Work*. (May 2016). *Alaska Economic Trends*, 35, 5. Juneau: Department of Labour and Workforce Development, 3.
5. Together, Rachel Kohut and Tahnee Prior jumpstarted **Plan A** ([www.genderisnotplanb.com](http://www.genderisnotplanb.com)), a conversation turned digital platform that seeks to weave together stories to better inform gender-oriented policy-making across the Arctic. Today, Tahnee leads the project. Both are members of the Tromsø-Umeå-Arkhangelsk-Rovaniemi-Kingston (TUARK) Network on Gender in the Arctic.

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