

Exploring Indigenous Women's Well-Being and Economic Security

A Review of the Literature

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This literature review presents an overview and scan of the available literature that summarizes the current state of Indigenous women's economic security in Canada. It is important to initially mention that the women undertaking this research present and practice from a nehiyaw, Indigenous worldview and context. The majority of the literature available however, invites us to take one of two research approaches to the issue; Indigenous and/or a Western worldview. This in itself forces us to think critically and carefully about future methods of conducting research that 'begins from inside the Indigenous worldview and experience.' (Chisan et al, 2014). Through these two differing contexts the following review attempts to examine some of the historical and contemporary factors influencing the economic experience of Indigenous women and help provide a glimpse of next steps needed by Indigenous researchers examining this complex issue. The following questions guided the researchers throughout this review:

- 1) What are the natural authentic Indigenous understandings of economy, community, and economic security for/ roles of women?
- 2) What barriers and supports exist for women in the 'on and off' reserve economies?
- 3) What barriers and supports exist for women in the 'on-settlement' and 'off-settlement' economies?
- 4) What practical actions will increase or improve the economic experience and participation of Indigenous women?

## **Natural, Authentic Indigenous Understanding of Economy, Community and Women.**

Researching Indigenous women's economic security is based on paradoxes and limited resources. The first challenge to overcome in this literature review is how to work within the confine walls of western ideologies that is rooted in the English language. Ideally, to create an authentic Indigenous understanding of the economy, community and economic security would be to share the worldview from specific Indigenous languages. For example, creation stories carry the cosmological knowledge of cultures and within those stories is the unique perception of one's relationship with the universe and Creator. This is the great difference between Western and Indigenous views (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991; Makokis, 2009). Those stories are shared through oral traditions, so there is little to no literature on Indigenous meanings of economy, specifically to women, nor is there a single Indigenous definition of economics. One of the main reasons is that Western ideologies and Indigenous ideology of economy is vastly different from one another, even within Indigenous people the meaning will differ from community to community. To better understand and contextualize the natural authentic Indigenous understandings of economy, community, and economic security for/roles of women is to look within the cultural beliefs of traditional roles and responsibilities of women.

The precolonial economic security of Indigenous women was a place of safety and power based on traditional roles and responsibilities. Though women's roles varied from nation to nation, most scholars agree that women and men's roles were complimentary and egalitarian. Yvonne Boyer writes, "First Nations women commanded

the highest respect in their communities as the givers of life and, as such, were the keepers of the traditions, practices, and customs of the nations.” (Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2009, p.70). Woman was the center of the home, she provided life, raised the children alongside family and community members, made decisions on family, education, distribution of food, land use and property rights, as well as appointing warriors, leaders, declaring war, mediating disputes and creating peace (Mann, 2000, p. 117; Gunn, 1986). Women controlled the social realm, held great influence in the political realm and controlled the economy through distribution of food and resources; they were valued economical partners (Harper in Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2006, p.175). Indigenous women held power, politically and economically, based on their roles as women of the community and Nation.

Women’s’ roles and responsibilities were not about competing with men, but working with them for the survival of the family, community and nation. Women and men are part of the whole, no higher or important than the other as Barbara Mann writes, “[T]he sexes functioned as cooperative halves. At once independent yet interdependent, they worked to create the perfect whole of society. In all the spheres - the social and the religious, the political and the economic - women did women’s half and men did men’s half, but it was only when the equal halves combined that community cohered into the functional whole of a healthy society” (2000, p. 60). In essence, men and women could not survive without the other.

The home was the basic economic institution, connected by kinship and community ties (Usher, Duham, and Serles, 2003, p. 179). It is important to note that traditional economies within family and community roles was not about profit, but about

living a good life with healthy connection with one another through maintaining personal autonomy within the community. In essence, the economy and community are interconnected, based on maintaining good relationships with one another guided by the Natural Law or what the Cree called wahkotowin (Anderson, 2006; Kuokkanen, 2011; Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2009; Mehesuah, 2003; Settee, 2011). It was vital to their kinship relations that everyone shared the work, learned the skills and values of the production, distribution and organization of consumption (Usher, Duhaim, & Serles, 2003). Families work together for the benefit of the whole community:

In subsistence-based societies, in contrast, security and well-being tend to be more associated with system maintenance than individual gain.

Security and well-being are achieved through cooperative production, wide distribution, and mutual aid, each organized by kinship. This is celebrated, consolidated, reinforced, and reproduced by sharing, feasting, ritual observance, and associated ethical norms. There is much incentive to maintain the system, little to disrupt it. Hence subsistence-based societies tend toward conservatism, valuing and promoting system stability over individual accumulation. (Usher, Duhaim, & Serles, 2003, p. 179)

Through much of the research, economic and social systems are inseparable. Ceremonies were an important aspect of establishing social networks, and not only for individual need, but for the wellbeing of the community (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001). Ceremonies helped individuals to maintain connections to all life forms as well as to communicate with the universe and Creator. Women and men each had their

important duties in conducting prosperous ceremony, including the creation of gifts.

Another form of subsistence economy of Indigenous women was the artistic creation of clothing and functional household items (Anderson, 2011, p.108).

Transforming hides into homes, household items and clothing were important learned skills and were developed through hard work. Skilled workers transformed clothing to connecting with spirits to help the wearer of clothes, who in turn helps the community. Sherry Farrell Racette writes about the spiritual responsibility of women's work, "Finely tanned and embellished hides were a means of communicating respect of the all-seeing spirits, and sending a hunter into bush dressed in fine clothing please the animals.... Women were in charged with the responsibility of visually communicating that respect and soliciting the approval of the animals." (Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2009, p.297). The spiritual work of women relied heavy on traditional knowledge that was learned through kinship ties, and hard work.

Kim Anderson's extensive research provides great insight on women's roles and responsibilities, she shares that a highly valued attribute of Indigenous women was hard work (2011, p.104). A community and family's survival depended on, therefore encouraged, marriages to a hard working woman. It was important for women to be skilled and knowledgeable in food gathering, preparation and preservation (Gunn, 1986; Anderson, 2011). A woman who worked hard was an economical investment in the community. When men were scarce, women did the hunting, fishing and trapping to contribute to the family's well-being (Anderson, 2011, p. 104-105). Each generation and gender had their important roles within the community, including grandparents who transmitted cultural knowledge to the younger generation about everything from oral

histories to food preparation and food security (Anderson, 2011, p. 106). Indigenous economies were about community development, and wealth was about access to healthy abundant water, land, and children. Through colonization, the conscious destruction to kinship ties and displacement of women's place in the community severely affected the autonomy of the nation.

Historical colonial leaders knew that in order to succeed in colonizing Indigenous peoples they needed to displace women's place within the community, and they succeeded at that through 1876 Indian Act, followed by imposing patriarchal laws and policies, and further indoctrinated patriarchal roles on children through forced education in Indian Residential schools (Settee, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond, 2009). The Indian Act disrupted traditional governance systems, misplacing women's roles outside the community well-being while privileging male over female that has contributed greatly to the inequality of Indigenous women (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, Hampton, 2004). The loss of women's' roles also created loss in social and kinship structures (Poonwassie and Charter, 2001; Mehsuah, 2003; Anderson, 2011).

There is limited information and discourses of Indigenous women in traditional economies, most research focuses on capitalism and profit driven development based on logging, mining, hydro, and oil and gas development in indigenous communities (Kuokkanen, 2011; Wrightson, 2006). Many historical accounts were written from male euro-centric views which are biased as they did not understand kinship systems, gender roles and spiritual and social principles (Mihsuah, 2003, p. 44). Colonization, sexism and racism limit our dialogues/discourses, translate indigenous knowledge as primitive and homogenizes Aboriginal experiences (Wrightson, 2006). Social scientists predicted

traditional economies would decline but evolved into integrating with industrial economies, “dual economy” (Usher, Duham, & Serles, 2003). Because traditions were still being passed down from generation to generation, some families, communities and villages integrate subsistence activity of hunting and fishing with labour market (Usher, Duham, & Serles, 2003). There is limited research on how traditional economies survived, but is found within the stories of women’s persistence in keeping families together, and the communities striving. Indigenous writers like Anderson (2011), and the many contributing writers in Valsakakis, Stout and Guimonds anthology (2009), make the distinction that woman’s roles were the economic security of communities.

### **Contemporary Metis and First Nations Women’s Economies.**

A review of the literature on economic security and the connection and relevance to Metis women in Canada leaves much to be desired. Several themes emerged that help provide us with a substantial, yet general, indication of Indigenous women and their relationship to *economy*. The availability of specific data of Metis Women in this regard however, is alarmingly sparse and suggests the need for further research. The following is a summary of findings that although are not all Metis specific, will help illuminate the current context surrounding the topic of Indigenous women’s economic security.

There were two prevailing worldviews of economics that emerged throughout the literature; fiscal or capitalist views of economy versus Indigenous philosophies of economy (the capitalist view far outweighed the latter overall). The significance of traditional Indigenous economics goes beyond the financial realm. “These economies, including the practices of sharing, manifest indigenous worldviews characterized by interdependence and reciprocity that extend to all living beings and to the land. In short,



besides an economic occupation, subsistence activities are an expression of one's identity, culture, and values." (Kuokkanen, 2011, p.217) In contrast, a capitalist view of economics takes on a global interpretation such as profit driven projects that often included resource extraction within Indigenous communities such as logging, mining, hydro, and oil and gas developments. (Kuokkanen, 2011, p.217) Most of the contemporary literature available regarding Metis women eludes holistic approaches to economics and are narrowly focused approaches that address economic issues on an individual basis – usually within area at a time. A sub-sector within this theme appeared emphasizing the dichotomy of methodologies used by various researchers to approach the topic in question: pathological versus strength based perspectives. Research regarding economics of Indigenous women was highly problem focused. According to Dion Stout, "With surprisingly few exceptions work dealing with Aboriginal women has tended to be highly problem-focused and it has pathologized these women's agency and realities. This in turn has allowed little room for an understanding of the real complexities at work, and has provided little insight into the strategies that work." (1998, p.7) In addition, the majority of the research reiterated several consistent barriers to economic security for Indigenous women. Lack of childcare, transportation, educational attainment, awareness of resources was commonly cited across research surrounding all Indigenous groups (First Nation, Metis and Inuit) in Canada.

There was no one singular or common definition of *economic security* across First Nation or Metis groups, or even within those groups. For First Nations groups a common theme of economy was often characterized by professional business ventures on an individual or collective basis. Regardless of the economic endeavor the overall

goal throughout the literature was twofold; improving self-governance in First Nation communities and to improving socio-economic conditions on-reserve. More often than not, the research also suggested that First Nation communities are endeavoring to approach economic development opportunities in ways that are consistent with their community values, cultural institutions, and practices. Similarly, the available reports on Metis definitions of economic development included success in the labour market (employment) and entrepreneurship.

The available literature that examines the contemporary supports that exist for First Nations women takes on two varying perspectives when analyzed with a gender based perspective. It showed that Aboriginal Men and women have different beliefs about what economic security is. Women, in community circles, whether on or off reserve, uphold community efficacy, family wellness, good relations, and home based assets as defining factors for economic security. Men, in leadership positions, on or off reserve, look to mainstream education and training, employment programs and changes to the political infrastructure of governing bodies, to provide economic security within their community. Women have natural leadership skills that they feel are not being recognized in the community, whether it is on or off-reserve. This lack of recognition and validation of women's natural talents and abilities creates an imbalance in the home, the community and the economy, leading to un-wellness. Women need the flexibility of time and space to be able to work from home and take care of children. However, women's work in the home; cooking; sewing; making crafts; cleaning; taking care of children; and or working on small contracts, is not seen as an equal contribution to the welfare of the economy. Men, whose work takes them away from home and their

families, are instead, adequately compensated. This gender inequality of economic security appears to be a struggle between Indigenous women's desire to hold on to Indigenous values of community wellbeing and men's buy-in to a system that gives them the power to support their families. This disparity is described through a political context in an article titled *Project Muse* written by Koukkanen (2012). She relates the increasing violence against women in poverty through this critical lens where she states, "Colonialism and patriarchy have also enabled cooperation between male Aboriginal leadership and Canadian governments to resist the inclusion of Aboriginal women in Aboriginal governance. These denials and exclusions perpetuate the exposure of Aboriginal women and children to violence and consign many to extreme poverty." This exclusion from government is a systemic barrier faced by many women, who live on or off reserve. Currently, on-reserve leadership is blatantly evident of the underrepresentation of First Nations women in community leadership roles.

Questions around the current measuring tools that we use to measure economic success amongst Indigenous groups was also discussed and was more prevalent amid researchers whose approaches were strengths based or those that used Indigenous methodological approaches to defining *economic security*. A contemporary and more recent theme was the identified need to critically examine how we measure success in terms of economic security. The Institute for Research on Public Policy, IRPP (2007, p.5) suggests the need for Canadian researchers to supplement quantitative measures with qualitative measures which are consistent with values and culture. A new standard of evidence equals new ways of reading the evidence. (IRPP, 2007, p.5) Because Indigenous women's ways of knowing and doing have helped to sustain communities

for generations, a need to reframe the issues has been identified to ensure that this knowledge is captured and mobilized.

There is a significant gap in the literature on specific research around Metis and Non-status women and economics overall. There is an even larger gap on Metis women with disabilities. Overall, Inuit and First Nation women have attracted the most significant research attention. In general, all of the research available on First Nations and Metis women economic security suggests we are well below the economic indicators of success when compared to the rest of the population in Canada. First Nations women living on-reserve report the lowest economic success statistics (based on available quantitative statistics). There is a strong correlation between high school completion rates and the success of Indigenous women within the formal capitalist economy. There was virtually no research available on Metis women living on Metis Settlements which represents less than 10% of all Metis people in Canada. This is alarming and needs to be of concern to Metis leaders in Alberta and Canada.

Although there is limited *Métis women specific* supports available in the literature at this time, there was however some data in terms of Métis entrepreneurship in general. Métis entrepreneurship is growing and Metis entrepreneurs are the fastest growing segment of all Indigenous entrepreneurial research. Several positive strategies were noted and have been developed to support First Nation and Metis participation in the economy such as the development of First Nation financial institutions and Indigenous Business Development services to both First Nation and Metis communities. Growth in the development of Indigenous professional associations in Canada for

example, the Aboriginal Nurse's Association of Canada was also a positive trend throughout the literature.

There were areas/gaps that emerged which require further research for all Indigenous women's' groups: 1) how can the modern economics be reconciled with Indigenous cultures? 2) What models of economic security are appropriate for the vast growing numbers of Indigenous women moving to - and living in - urban centers? 3) A strong need for further research to understand the health and economic status of Metis women, and *specifically Métis women with disabilities*.

### **Practical Actions that will Improve the Economic Experience and Participation of Indigenous Women.**

A review of the literature related to what practical actions will increase or improve the economic experience and participation of Indigenous women is quite limited. Much exists in the literature related to the struggles and barriers to women's economic security yet little is published that speaks of recovery or reclamation in terms of economics for Indigenous women. In speaking of practical solutions the dominant lens focuses on capitalism and material acquisition. The Indigenous lens shines a light on recovery and reclamation of what is or was known as remediation to the present state experienced by many women.

The sources that speak to an Indigenous approach articulate two themes. First, is the value in 'stories versus numbers' as the approach that serves today's women in their economic successes. (Findlay and Wuttunee, 2007). Next, there are tools and resources that are documented as progressive in economic security (Government of Alberta, 2009). Various communities in Canada who are engaged in the process of

economic recovery are using government's offer of these tools. Several sub-sectors of themes emerged which are: the need to renew policy and program designs to determine and address the root causes of Indigenous women's economic risk, the establishment of improved working relationships amongst all sectors involved in addressing this issue, and the development of strategic plans for implementation.

Examples of success related to the first theme were derived from stories which were sought from women. Many questioned whether it is possible to pursue business objectives while living the values of their culture and assuming their rightful place in the community (Findlay and Wuttunee). As discussed earlier, the research emphasized that most studies have focused on the over-use of quantitative measures in business such as inputs and outputs, and in most studies few researchers explored the qualitative feature of business success. Conventional measurement frameworks undermine Indigenous people and communities. "Aboriginal measures rightly value relationships and local and experiential knowledge, and work to reconnect what has been disconnected or fragmented by colonial thinking" (Findlay and Wuttunee, p. 19). The validity of *women's stories* give pathways of teaching, support and success related to business ventures. Of the successful Indigenous women who were the leads of successful business ventures found; there emerged a strong sense of ability to identify and address a range of barriers they faced in their economic development journeys. The majority of women spoke of business cooperatives as the approach that showed the greatest result. "Early cooperatives were built on the traditional ways of life of arts and crafts production, fur harvesting and commercial fisheries" (Findlay and Wuttunee, p.13). With the addition of technical support, their operations expanded and prospered.

In listening to the stories, the researchers also heard of subscription to values such as self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and solidarity in the operation of these businesses. “Honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others are the ethics that bind cooperatives.” (Findlay and Wuttunee, p.13). Their stories also emphasized the collective good being the business goal versus measurable outcomes of corporate profits. Overall, participatory decision-making emerged as the key to success. One significant example of the co-operative model is the experience of the Basque people of Spain who formed the Mondragon Corporation with sales and production facilities on five continents (<http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/> ).

In the discussion of the availability and use of tools that are seen as successful approaches to improving the economies of Indigenous women, a few resources that support Indigenous women were found. The Aboriginal Relations branch of the Government of Alberta developed a toolkit of economic resources to assist community leaders, economic development officers and community members to improve economic development in their community. The contents and the tools define what economic development is, talks about the process of building capacity, discusses the core processes involved, speaks of what abilities are necessary, and provides contacts and information as resources. The elements that are offered as tools include asset building, community resilience, social enterprise, co-operatives, enterprise facilitation and the incubation of business. The theme within this document frames building economic capacity as having effective community government, human resource development, housing, and the management of the land and natural resources. This work offers a detailed and wide base of links to self-employment strategies, industry resources,

business planning, financing, marketing, workforce development, networks and associations and service providers. A small portion of this resource highlights the 'Top 20 Sources' section in the toolkit where the "Alberta Women Entrepreneurs" (AWE), specifically focuses attention on advancing women in business. Loan program are described for start-up and expansion ventures. The AWE offers ideas for viability, loan-readiness, and guidance and support.

The gaps in the literature were prominent. There is little mention of strategies addressing the social or structural underpinnings that create women's economic insecurity related to historical injustice and colonial policies which stifled entrepreneurship and economic improvement for centuries. Next, there are a limited scope of participants and interviewees discussing this issue. Only three businesses were nationally highlighted. All of these were led by women. Further, when projects are engaged, their timelines are very ambitious and perhaps at risk due to those timelines. It appears that little time is given to the process of recovery and more attention is granted to production of success. Advocates of mainstream approaches see remediation for Indigenous economic development through the lens of Western, mainstream ideologies and practices as the panacea for the present state for Indigenous people. Although there is discussion of work with Chiefs, councils, and communities; there is no discussion of traditional approaches in accomplishing this work. Finally, there is little gender-focus research around women's economic development and security in Canada.

There was a strong argument for blending both Western and Indigenous approaches and using this as an aid in the recovery and reclamation of Indigenous women's economic security. This blending requires a shift in ideologies where



Indigenous and Western thought and ways of doing are more aligned. Nationally, a few projects are underway such as the Six Nations Women of the Grand River who have articulated a community economic security strategic plan (2013, Status of Women, Canada).

Locally, none could be found.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

As we strive to understand what economic security is to Indigenous women, literature that investigates the barriers and supports to economic wellness and sustainability will increase our knowledge base and enable us to conduct more targeted research moving forward. All of life, including that of Indigenous women's economic security along with its barriers and supports, is interconnected with numerous other facets of life and therefore cannot be examined in isolation. "Not only is there widespread evidence in the literature to suggest that research which focuses on one field to the detriment of all others is routinely planned and carried out, there also appears to be little real awareness of the possibility that interventions meant to resolve a problem in one area may serve only to exacerbate problems in another." (Stout and Kipling, 1998) *What we know* is that Indigenous women's participation in economy improves the quality of life in Canada for all. There are strong seeds of optimism and shifts in consciousness that are transforming the socioeconomic landscape in Canada for all Indigenous women. This research we are undertaking is timely and has reinforced the need for a cultivated and methodical approach to finding answers and ensuring Indigenous women's voices and experiences are incorporated into academia, policy and decision making processes from the family level to that of the international

arena. (Dion Stout, 1998, p. 10) It is with this knowing and understanding that the BQFNC research group intends to proceed and further explore this issue.

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