Ontario Native Women's Association Submission to the Call for Inputs: "Women, Girls, and the Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment"

14 October 2022

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# ONWA's Mandate

Established in 1971, the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) is the oldest and largest Indigenous women's organization in Canada with over 50 years of experience working alongside Indigenous women and their families. The organization’s expertise in supporting Indigenous women and their families is extensive, coordinated, and effective despite having to operate as an underfunded non-profit organization. ONWA is mandated to empower and support all Indigenous women and their families in Ontario through research, advocacy, policy development, and programs that focus on local, regional, and provincial activities. ONWA’s vision guides this work:

"We celebrate and honour the safety and healing of Indigenous women and girls as they take up their leadership roles in the family, community, and internationally for generations to come."

ONWA's work focuses on nine key issues identified by Indigenous women in the community: child welfare, health, housing and homelessness, justice, family violence, sexual violence, human trafficking, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. These issues are intersectional and directly impact the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of Indigenous women and their families. ONWA's membership consists of 12 Chapters (incorporated organizations providing frontline services) and 21 Councils (grassroots groups supporting community development models), representative of ONWA's four regional directions – East, South, West, North – throughout Ontario. ONWA's reach continues to expand as more Indigenous women's organizations join our collective. In 2020-2021, ONWA's overall community impact reached 128,000 community members and provided over 55,000 individual services to Indigenous women and their families.

# Questionnaire

### 1) How are the climate, pollution, and biodiversity crises adversely impacting women and girls?

The climate crisis is impacting the health, safety, security, and ways of life of Indigenous communities, while also deepening existing conditions of inequality for Indigenous women, their families, and communities. With 90% of disasters now classified as climate or weather related, Indigenous communities and their territories face heightened risks related to the safety and sustainability of their lands and water systems.[[1]](#footnote-1) The danger posed to Indigenous peoples globally is widespread, with resource extraction playing a significant role in global climate change, particularly in the risks it poses to Indigenous communities. For example, oil and gas infrastructure leads to environmental degradation related to the construction of new pipeline projects, including spills and leaks related to existing pipelines. There is an overwhelming body of evidence directly correlating oil and gas infrastructure with harm to Indigenous communities, particularly in the ways in which extractive resources impact access to clean drinking water and harm traditional subsistence practices.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indigenous women are disproportionately affected by the negative impacts of climate change. Environmental issues are inherently connected to the systemic marginalization of Indigenous women and girls, which is why these issues must be addressed.

ONWA recognizes the traditional and inherent roles of Indigenous women as caretakers of their traditional lands and waterways. The voices of Indigenous women must inform and lead the conversations around climate change and environmental justice. As stewards of their lands and waterways, Indigenous women are at the forefront of action defending their territories from irreversible harm. The traditional knowledge and cultural values Indigenous women hold are key to the protection and sustainability of the natural environment for all future generations in all communities.

ONWA has identified significant concerns with the relationship between violence against Indigenous women and resource extraction. Many of the communities in ONWA’s northern regions are directly impacted by government-supported resource extraction activities such as mining and forestry. Frequently, these activities involve the establishment of temporary man camps near Indigenous communities. “Man camps” are defined as “temporary housing facilities constructed for predominantly male workers on resource development projects.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Research that has been undertaken in this area demonstrates a correlation between the violent victimization of Indigenous women and the socio-economic changes created by the presence of extractive industries in proximity to Indigenous communities.[[4]](#footnote-4) Reports by First Peoples Worldwide and the U.S. Department of State show that in areas where extractive industries operate, Indigenous women and girls experience higher rates of gender-based violence, including sex trafficking and intimate partner violence.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* found that Indigenous women and girls across Canada have been targets of violence due to their communities being near natural resource industries.[[6]](#footnote-6) The culture of gender-based violence that has been fostered within the man camps has been described as one that exacerbates “isolation, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and racism among the men living there”, which all contribute to Indigenous women and girls being at a high risk for experiencing violence.[[7]](#footnote-7)

### 2) What are the specific obligations of States and responsibilities of businesses in terms of adopting a gender-responsive approach to protecting and respecting women’s and girls’ rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment?

ONWA’s membership has identified that in addition to their concerns around violence related to extractive industries near their communities, there is a lack of information about the connection resource extraction has with human trafficking. They have expressed concerns about young Indigenous women being lured or forced into human trafficking by those in man camps. Further research by States into violence mitigation strategies as they relate to extractive resource industries and man camps is pressing for all communities in proximity to natural resource extraction sites.

For States and businesses, acknowledgement of the harms perpetrated against Indigenous women and girls by climate change and resource extraction initiatives is a necessary first step in working toward positive change. The first of these harms is the racist and discriminatory legacy of colonization which disrupted, undermined, and ignored Indigenous women’s place in society, as well as their roles and responsibilities as Indigenous people. Colonization left Indigenous women and girls untethered from their identities, families, and communities, with patriarchal values informed by colonial standards that replaced Indigenous values. From colonization, there is a long history of racialized gender-based violence that has been perpetrated on Indigenous women with the most notable being the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2-Spirit peoples.

### 3) If your State is one of the 156 UN Member States that recognizes the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in law, has this right been recognized and/or interpreted in a way that clarifies the state’s obligations or businesses’ responsibilities with respect to the realization of rights with no discrimination based on sex and gender and other grounds?

The Government of Canada amended the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act (1999)* in February 2022 to recognize the right of Canadians to a healthy environment and the duty of the federal government to protect that right under legislation of the act.[[8]](#footnote-8) Further, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (2021)* received Royal Assent which provides guidance on how UNDRIP will be implemented, however the implementation is still in the consultation stage between the federal government and Indigenous communities.[[9]](#footnote-9) With the 2019 adoption of the UNDRIP by the Ontario legislature, the provincial government agreed to develop and implement a provincial plan to ensure the objectives outlined in the UNDRIP are met.[[10]](#footnote-10) The right to self-determination as outlined in the UNDRIP and Bill 76 is all encompassing and includes the right for Indigenous peoples to exercise their own cultural and legal traditions, as well as provides a foundation for the development of systems that support and protect the cultural practices of Indigenous people. Environmental rights are recognized by UNDRIP under Article 29.1, which provides further protection of Indigenous women’s rights to conserve and protect the environment and productive capacity of their lands.[[11]](#footnote-11)

### 4) What steps has your organization taken to employ a gender-responsive, rights-based approach to addressing the impacts of the climate, biodiversity, and pollution crises and to accelerate gender equality related to environmental decision-making processes, benefit-sharing processes, and outcomes?

The Ontario Native Women’s Association (ONWA) values the protection of Indigenous women’s rights, and the rights of the collective community to own their stories, wisdom, and knowledge. ONWA ensures that there is a balanced approach of recognizing and reclaiming Indigenous women’s voices, knowledge, stories, and leadership that are protected by Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As a foundation to the work done across the agency, ONWA uses UNDRIP to support Indigenous women’s individual and collective rights to have their own agencies, to be directly and meaningfully engaged on issues that impact them, and the support to reclaim leadership roles in their families and communities.

ONWA uses three frameworks developed by the organization in collaboration with trusted Knowledge Keepers to inform all analyses. These frameworks are based on Indigenous women’s lived experiences, worldviews, and knowledge and underpin all of the work done by the organization. The first framework is ONWA’s Theory of Change which recognizes that Indigenous women are experts in their lives and know the solutions to issues they experience. The second framework is ONWA’s Indigenous Gender-Based Analysis (IGBA) which recognizes that constructs of Indigenous women in Canada, a country built on colonization, reduces Indigenous women to victims and never builds them as leaders in their lives, their families, communities, or Nations. Applying an intersectional framework, we realize that Indigenous women occupy multiple social identities; some that negatively impact Indigenous women’s lives directly influencing the level of violence they experience. The third framework is She is Wise which positions Indigenous women’s knowledge and practices in an understanding of Indigenous women’s leadership. It provides guidance to define policy and deliver programs that support Indigenous women’s experiences and moves Indigenous women into their leadership roles.

### 5) Please identify specific ways in which the rights of particularly marginalized or vulnerable women are (or should be) recognized and protected to enable the realization of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment without discrimination based on sex or gender. How can these populations be empowered to increase their impact as agents of positive environmental transformation?

The right of Indigenous women and girls to be consulted and engaged in the matters that impact their traditional lands and waterways must be acknowledged and ensured. Indigenous women’s voices, perspectives, and leadership must be uplifted and protected, with the UNDRIP as a framework in which to entrench the rights of Indigenous women and girls. The right to safety for Indigenous women and girls must be ensured at all levels of government, whether local, territorial, national, or international. There is a long history of racialized gender-based violence that has been perpetrated on Indigenous women, with the most notable being the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and two-spirit peoples. Almost six in ten (56%) Indigenous women have experienced physical assault while almost half (46%) have experienced sexual assault, whereas only about a third of non-Indigenous women have experienced physical assault (34%) or sexual assault (33%) in their lifetime.[[12]](#footnote-12) The impacts of discrimination and gender-based violence on the mental and physical health, quality of life, self-esteem, and identities of targeted groups is well documented.[[13]](#footnote-13) One way in which Indigenous women and girls can be empowered to resist and be free from gender-based violence is through taking up leadership roles in their families and communities. Indigenous women must have their own representation at all decision-making tables that impact their lives as well as be consulted properly in good faith.

### 6) What kinds of socioeconomic, cultural, legal, and/or institutional transformations would be required within your States’ national context to achieve gender parity that most directly impact environmental decision-making processes, benefit-sharing processes, and outcomes?

As an organization, ONWA provides six key recommendations to support positive and sustainable transformation to achieve gender parity at all levels of society:

1. **Core Sustainable Funding for Indigenous Women’s Organizations**

Indigenous women’s organizations need core sustainable funding to support capacity building, engagements at multiple levels (in community, with our chapters and councils, at government tables, with other partner organizations, etc.), performance measurement, and the achievement of long-term performance goals. Investing in policy, research, and evaluation to support community development and community services in meeting the safety and healing needs of Indigenous women and girls must be made a priority by governments of all levels. This should be understood as central to reconciliation with Indigenous women as Indigenous women must be empowered and supported to take up their leadership roles in their communities and Nations.

1. **An Indigenous Gender Based Analysis must be applied to the issues facing Indigenous women, specifically as it pertains to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada as well as globally**

Systemic change across all systems must take place to ensure safety is central to all work surrounding Indigenous women and girls. MMIWG is an intersectional human rights issue in Canada and thus must be viewed from this lens. Employing tools such as ONWA’s Indigenous Gender-Based Analysis is central to this work. All levels of government must work with Indigenous women’s organizations to ensure that an Indigenous Gender-Based Analysis is used to account for the multifaceted needs of Indigenous women and girls. All work relating to climate change, environmental protection, or resource development must ensure that a human rights framework and intersectional lens is applied to all aspects and must build on the recommendations of previous reports, which in the context of Indigenous women and girls in Canada includes, but is not limited to: the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007), Report of the Ipperwash Inquiry (2007), Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015), and Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Calls to Justice (2019).

1. **Investing in the safety and healing for Indigenous women and girls**

Immediate investments are needed to address Indigenous women’s safety and violence prevention as it relates to climate change, environmental disasters, and resource extraction. This means investing in Indigenous women’s organizations for the long term as they provide safe spaces and apply an Indigenous gender-based lens to programs, services, and advocacy. Indigenous women and girls have a right to identify the programs and services they wish to access to meet their needs – this includes the right to Indigenous women’s specific programming and supports. The safety of Indigenous women and girls must be considered in any policy or legislation that impacts their lives, with any relevant policies and programs being culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and strengths-based. All programs for Indigenous women and girls must be supportive of the wholistic well-being of the entire community.

1. **Indigenous Women’s voices must be central to the implementation of any strategies, plans, or legislation that impacts them**

Indigenous women are the experts in their own lives. ONWA maintains that Indigenous women’s perspectives and issues must be at the forefront of discussions and policy changes that impact them. It is critical that an Indigenous Gender-Based Analysis is applied to the issues and proposed solutions.

1. **A commitment to ongoing and meaningful engagement with Indigenous women through a Nation-to-Nation-PLUS approach that is inclusive of Indigenous women who are not represented by distinctions-based organizations**

Systemic change is needed across all systems to advance work on the provincial or national implementation of legislation or policy that directly affects them or their communities. Indigenous women and our organizations must be included at the forefront of this work.

1. **Standardized and formalized reporting process for violence in proximity to climate related disasters and resource extraction initiatives must be created**

Standardized and formalized reporting processes allow for data and trend analysis, accountability, and record keeping which can be used to support policy changes, safety initiatives, and changes in legislation to support the safety of Indigenous women and girls across jurisdictions, States, and territories.

### 7) To what extent do the environmental ministries, nationally determined contributions, and national biodiversity strategies and action plans of your State include gender action plans, gender-responsive budgets or budgets specifically devoted to gender equality? At the global level, what changes to climate and biodiversity finance mechanisms are needed to ensure that these are gender-responsive and equitably inclusive of female beneficiaries?

Women and girls are not mentioned within the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act (1999)* however Indigenous women are recognized throughout the Government of Canada’s *2023 Emissions Reduction Plan* as important participants at the forefront of conservation and stewardship work for their lands and waterways.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the *2023 Emissions Reduction Plan* the federal government acknowledges and affirms the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which recognized the discriminatory impacts of climate change on marginalized groups including women and girls.[[15]](#footnote-15) However at this time there is no specific gender-based funding for climate change related projects or initiatives. At the global level, finance mechanisms must ensure there is low barrier, Indigenous specific funding available for Indigenous women, girls, and organizations that wish to do work to protect their communities from the impacts of climate change or environmental disasters. The lack of accessible funding is a barrier to Indigenous women and girls who want to scale up environmental protection or safety projects but cannot do so due to lack of funding.

### 8) How can businesses best contribute to the realization of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, based on sex and gender? What policies or practices are already in place to ensure that business activities identify, assess, prevent, cease, mitigate, and effectively remedy adverse impacts to women’s and girls’ rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment?

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides a framework to achieving transformations in relationships with Indigenous peoples, with Articles 3 through 5 indicating that Indigenous peoples have the right to self determination relating to their political, economic, social, and cultural needs, and have the right to autonomy and self-governance in matters relating to their own affairs.[[16]](#footnote-16) Substantive and meaningful solutions cannot be put forward until the systemic issues that impact Indigenous women, girls, and their communities are understood, addressed, and remedied.

### 9) Please share any good practices for: i) protecting women’s and girl’s rights to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; ii) empowering women and girls to act as positive agents of environmental justice; and iii) encouraging men and boys to act as allies in these endeavors.

The primary means of ensuring Indigenous women and girls have their rights protected is to ensure that their rights are acknowledged, understood, and entrenched by State and local governments. The knowledge and expertise of Indigenous women and girls is vast, and they are uniquely positioned to speak on the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on their communities, and on strategies for resistance and remediation. Indigenous women who take up the role of land, water, or environmental defenders are well versed in establishing and practicing ongoing tactics and strategies to protect their children, families, and communities from the impacts of global climate change. The facilitation of knowledge-sharing to strengthen global and local solidarity between Indigenous women and girls must be protected. Indigenous women and girls who are a part of grassroots initiatives to protect their land, water, and territories from environmental degradation and climate change must be supported and protected from violence, whether perpetrated by State or non-State actors.

Indigenous women as well as the organizations that represent and support their voices are the leading experts in all areas that impact them, their families, and communities. All future work to protect the planet from climate related disasters and environmental degradation must centre around their voices, expertise, and recommendations. Indigenous women and girls must be consulted first and have a seat at all tables that impact their lives.

To address the impacts climate change and environmental degradation have in their communities, Indigenous women and girls must have the right to free, prior, and informed consent to anything that may impact them as well as the mechanisms to confront situations when their rights are impacted. Entrenched rights to health, healing, and wellness for Indigenous women and girls must be considered foundational to any work done in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation.

For Indigenous girls and youth in particular, having the education and tools to address situations of injustice would empower girls and youth to navigate difficult situations related to climate justice. Indigenous girls and youth must have the right to participate in opportunities related to cultural education and traditional ways, such as returning to the lodge, meeting with elders, and participating in land-based activities. Guidance and positive reinforcement for all Indigenous girls and youth will empower them, so they can collectively resist against harm in their communities and give voice to their perspectives without fear and shame.

### 10) What are the potential benefits of respecting, protecting, and fulfilling women’s and girl’s rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment?

When Indigenous women and girls are empowered to become leaders, entire communities’ benefit. Through positive self-development and increased capacity for leadership opportunities, the holistic healing and growth of Indigenous women’s families and communities will ensure the health and wellness of the natural environment. When Indigenous women and girls have the knowledge to question the ways in which current systems uphold policies and practices that harm their communities, their community’s health and wellbeing can be supported and uplifted.

Cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities as a part of climate justice work will benefit all, through building mutual understanding and responsibility with each other. The concept of mutual responsibility related to protecting the natural environment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will heal not only the natural environment, but the social environment as well. Accountability for and acknowledgement of the historical processes that lead to social stratification between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will support both communities in working together to enact positive change. Acknowledgement is not synonymous with blame, instead it is the understanding of how systemic discrimination and harm was established through colonial processes. For Indigenous women, knowledge and learning is rooted in community, by coming together and learning about each others’ perspectives both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can form positive relationships with each other and walk forward in a good way.

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