**Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada**

**Written Submission**

**for the**

**United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples**

**The Situation of Mobile Indigenous Peoples Report**

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada

Pauktuutit is the national representative organization for all Inuit women in Canada. Our mandate is to promote awareness of the experiences and reality of Inuit women, and to amplify their voices at regional, national, and international levels. This year, Pauktuutit is celebrating our 40th anniversary, and though we have come a long way in forty years, the challenges that Inuit women face remain largely unchanged. As the national advocate for Inuit women, we are working to ensure that the next forty years are a time of transformation and reclamation for Inuit.

Forced Sedentarism across Inuit Nunangat

For 5,000 years Inuit have lived on the land, sea, and ice of Inuit Nunangat, where Inuit live in Canada (ITK 2004). Inuit and their culture have occupied “the vast territory stretching from the shores of the Chukchi Peninsula of Russia, east across Alaska and Canda, to the southeastern coast of Greenland” (ITK 20024: 2). It is in this region that Inuit developed an innovative and sustainable culture that allowed them to live in harmony with their physical environment (ITK 2004).

Prior to contact with Europeans, Inuit were entirely self-sufficient. They lived in small, autonomous, nomadic groups, dependent upon hunting, fishing and gathering for survival and for all their physical needs. Customary law was followed, characterized by its informal nature, flexibility, and its reliance upon social pressures to ensure that people acted appropriately. Inuit had developed a rich material culture, based primarily upon hunting and fishing technology. Spirituality centered upon beliefs in animal and human-like spirits, including the spirits of deceased relatives. A variety of taboos affected many aspects of life and a rich mythology explained both the natural and the supernatural world (Pauktuutit 2006: 4)

The arrival of explorers, missionaries, hunters, and traders to Inuit Nunangat transformed Inuit societies, upsetting the delicate balance of Inuit culture and subsistence existence. Because the land of Inuit Nunangat was not seen as a place for settlement, “government, military, and economic interests claimed territory over the lives of Inuit often from a distance” (Payne 2022: 355). Instead of moving large numbers of settlers to Inuit Nunangat, the colonial administration sought to bring Inuit into settlements, where they could be governed from afar (Payne 2022).

Colonial contact brought surveillance and racialized representations of Inuit that were used to facilitate resource development, such as geological surveys that communicated the potential wealth of Inuit Nunangat at the same time that they dehumanized Inuit, cataloguing Inuit beliefs and bodies as features of an exploitable landscape (Predko 2022). Inuit were represented as being fixed “in time and space” and these representations were based in and supported racist constructions of “‘static’ Indigenous peoples” being helped by the “‘advancing’ West” (Crowson 2021: 50).

Inuit were described by colonists both as “filthy, dishonest savages” and “resourceful ‘children of nature’” who exist “outside of the modern” world (Crowson 2021: 50). In the past, these narratives justified colonization, today they support continued colonial administration and present Inuit as a people out of place, struggling with their transitions to modern life (Crowson 2021: 34).

From the point of first contact in Inuit Nunangat, “Inuit bodies, ontologies, and cosmologies have been subject to physical and epistemic violence - subjugated by the vessel of colonial knowledge production about the Canadian North” (Crowson 2021: 59). This violence has been enacted through and supported by the Government of Canada’s policies of forced sedentarism, which saw Inuit across Inuit Nunangat coerced into government settlements. The relocation of Inuit and the surveillance of and control of Inuit lives and homes have become central mechanisms of colonialism in the north.

Before colonization, Inuit were “nomadic, self-reliant and self-governing” (Crawford 2014: 345). Inuit were coerced into sedentarism in government settlements to facilitate colonial administration and to further assimilate Inuit (Crawford 2014). In the mid-1960s, the government of Canada “demolished traditional Inuit homes” claiming that they posed a health risk and government officials justified these actions by stating that it was “more desirable to have a live and slightly disturbed” Inuit “than a dead one” (Schwan & Lightman 2015: 15).

Though Inuit had lived on their lands for thousands of years, they were viewed as dependent, child-like, and incapable of adapting to change (Wakeham 2014). However, the wellbeing and cultural survival of Inuit was not policymakers’ primary concern. Instead, colonial governments sought to balance “an anxious need to govern Inuit in the face of heightened international Arctic presence, and trepidation of the fiscal expense of providing welfare programs to Inuit” (Wakeham 2014: 93).

Forced relocation and resettlement of Inuit was determined to be the best way to address both concerns by decreasing the cost of colonial administration while maintaining claims over sovereignty over the Arctic (Wakeham 2014). By grouping Inuit together and fixing them in place, Inuit could be easily controlled, while at the same time the creation of government settlements in strategic locations allowed Canada strengthen its claim to the Arctic (Wakeham 2014: 94).

Forced sedentarism and coerced relocations caused irreparable harm to Inuit communities. Small kinship groups were relocated to larger communities upsetting community dynamics, food sources were scarce and larger groups were forced to manage smaller hunting grounds, housing was poorly planned, ill-suited to the environment, and inadequate, and often the land families were relocated to differed greatly from their traditional homelands (QTA 2013).

Despite all these challenges, once relocated communities were unable to return home as they had been promised, and in some cases found that their belonging had been burned and traditional homes destroyed (QTA 2013). Deepening this crisis, the RCMP slaughtered the Inuit sled dogs on Baffin Island in the 1950s and 1960s (TQA 2013). Without sled dogs, Inuit in this region were unable to hunt, travel between communities, move across the land or return home (QTA 2013).

By the 1970s, almost all Inuit across Inuit Nunangat had been coercively relocated to government settlements (QTA 2013). As noted by the Qikiqtani Truth Commission, settlement “imposed a new form of poverty, and hindered access to the land and the country food that nourished” Inuit (QTA 2013: 17). Once forced into sedentarism, Inuit were separated from their subsistence livelihoods, increasing their dependence on the colonial government, and this dependence was used to strategically advance assimilation policies.

Without access to the food and clothing nomadic life assured them, Inuit who were unable to support themselves through hunting and many became dependent on government allowances. These allowances were used to force Inuit to send their children to residential schools, which took various forms across Inuit Nunangat, including missions, hostels, and boarding schools, where children were far away from their homes and unable to see their families for years at a time (Gadoua 2010: 169; QTA 2013). Parents who refused to send their children were threatened with termination of their allowances or prison sentences (QTA 2013).

Children and families were also separated by medical policies. Inuit were forcibly screened for tuberculosis and sent south for treatment in isolation, away from their language and culture (QTA 2013). Inuit who were sent away were often unable to see their families before being separated and some never returned (QTA 2013). In many cases, children lived alone in hospitals and sanatoria, and many Inuit died alone, and their families were never informed of the loss (QTA 2013).

Today, Inuit continue to be removed from their land, homes, families, communities, and culture through numerous colonial policies and systems, including resource deprivation and service denial. This includes Inuit who are forced to leave home to access basic health care, Inuit children who are removed by child welfare authorities and placed in facilities in the south, and the institutionalization of Inuit through the mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Zinger 2023).

Forced sedentarism in Inuit Nunangat and the continued forced relocation of Inuit outside of Inuit Nunangat are part of a broader policy of ongoing assimilation. Forced settlement and assimilation facilitate other forms of colonial violence, such as racialized police violence and misconduct, the criminalization of Inuit, and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis which has been recognized by the Canadian government as genocide.

The Impact of Forced Sedentarism on Inuit Women

* “In the territories, 25.0% of Inuit are in low income compared to 5.6% of non-Indigenous people.”[[1]](#footnote-1)
* An estimated 25% of Inuit children live in poverty[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Because poverty statistics are not recorded in the territories “[p]overty rates for Indigenous people, especially status First Nations and Inuit, are reported to be much lower than a full count would indicate is truly the case”[[3]](#footnote-3)
* “For Inuit in Inuit Nunangat in 2015, the median income for those aged 15 years and over was $23,485 compared with $92,011 for non-Indigenous people in this region.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
* In 2016, only 45% of Inuit in Canada reported having a high school diploma in comparison to 86% of the non-Indigenous population.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* “Within Inuit Nunangat, the lack of access to appropriate and affordable housing is well documented.”[[6]](#footnote-6)
* “Among Inuit in Inuit Nunangat, 52% live in crowded homes”[[7]](#footnote-7)
* “The rate of violent crime against women in Nunavut was nearly 13 times higher than the rate for Canada” [[8]](#footnote-8)
* “Across the 51 communities of Inuit Nunangat, more than 70% do not have a safe shelter for women and children experiencing family violence”[[9]](#footnote-9)
* “45% of Inuit aged 15 years and older reported experiencing sexual or physical violence by an adult before the age of 15”[[10]](#footnote-10)
* “the actual rates of violent crime against Indigenous women and girls, and the disparity in comparison to non-Indigenous women and girls, are likely under-estimated”[[11]](#footnote-11)
* “19% of Inuit reported that they had been under the responsibility of the government before the age of 15, compared with 1.3% of non-Indigenous people”[[12]](#footnote-12)
* Indigenous women are incarcerated at a rate “15.4 times higher than non-Indigenous women”[[13]](#footnote-13)
* The rate of incarceration for Inuit women is unknown because this data is not available.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These statistics demonstrate some of the impacts of forced sedentarism, however they do not clearly articulate the deep cultural harm Inuit experience day to day. Forced sedentarism disrupted traditional Inuit life, severing Inuit from their respective roles and responsibilities. In government settlements, Inuit men were unable to participate in their role as providers for society and collective responsibilities were suppressed and individualized.

Explorers, missionaries, traders, and colonial administrators and enforcers such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, brought patriarchal values to Inuit Nunangat that began to “supplant egalitarian values with an overlay of male domination and control” (Billson 2006: 73). With the compounded impacts of forced settlement, ongoing colonial policies of marginalization and assimilation, and intergenerational trauma, Inuit experience incredible community stress, and one of the consequences is a family violence crisis that impacts communities across Inuit Nunangat (Billson 2006).

This community stress is again compounded by the extreme and persistent housing crisis Inuit communities have experienced since being forced into settlements. Though Inuit were promised housing, they came to settlements to find that housing had not been providing or was insufficient for a family’s size and needs, and was not suited to the environment of Inuit Nunangat (QTA 2013). Overcrowding in unsafe and unhealthy housing exacerbates community stress and forces large extended families into confined, shared spaces, further upsetting traditional relations.

Family violence across Inuit Nunangat, including intimate partner violence, indicates that power relations between community members are imbalanced (Billson 2006). Though gender-based violence statistics clearly demonstrate that Inuit women bear the burden of violence in Inuit Nunangat, it is important to recognize that violence within a community harms everyone. Intimate partner violence harms women, children, men, and elders, and is not a women’s issues “but a political and community issue” (Billson 2006: 78).

Across Canada more broadly, violence against Indigenous women is normalized as part of settler colonial society (Sikka 2010), and the imposition of an adversarial justice system that suppresses and dislocates Inuit justice systems and processes contributes to this violence (Comack 2020). In Canada, Indigenous women and girls are disproportionately targeted for exploitation and trafficking, are disappeared, and are being murdered because “they are Indigenous and female” and impunity persists because of “the deep racism and sexism that exists in Canada and its laws, policies, and institutions” (Palmater 2016: 270).

Yet, the belief that Indigenous women and girls are deserving of violence and are disposable is routinely communicated through casual and ubiquitous racism and sexism, and in the failure to “properly investigate the murder of Indigenous women [and] missing Indigenous girls” (Palmater 2016: 283). These same injustices impact Inuit women, particularly in urban centres and across Inuit Nunangat. In our research, we have found that police in Inuit Nunangat fail to respond to calls for assistance, refuse to respond to third party reports, and prioritize calls from non-Inuit while dismissing domestic violence calls (Comack 2020).

In Pauktuutit’s study of policing practices in Inuit Nunangat, we also found a clear pattern of systemic misconduct as well as numerous instances of excessive use of force against Inuit, overt victim-blaming discourse against Inuit women, and a broad reluctance to enforce protection orders designed to keep Inuit women safe. In this same study, service providers across Inuit Nunangat corroborated these findings and the report author noted that many Inuit women are reluctant to seek police assistance, and some have found police responses “jeopardized their safety” (Comack 2020: 78).

Decades of Government Neglect

In 2019, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls concluded its work and report its findings. In the final report, *Reclaiming Power and Place*, over one thousand pages of research and expert and community testimonies describe an ongoing genocide propelled by systemic violence and state complicity.

Among the reports produced by the Inquiry is a list of 231 Calls for Justice, outlining two hundred and thirty-one steps the Government of Canada must take to end this crisis. Yet, to date, the Government of Canada has only implemented 2 of the 231 Calls for Justice. What is even more troubling is that rates of homicide against Indigenous women have increased since the Inquiry (Barrera 2019).

These Calls for Justice exist alongside hundreds more recommendations from Indigenous peoples across Canada, who have voiced their demands for change through studies and commissions, including the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Residential Schools, and the Qikiqtani Truth Commission. Pauktuutit, along with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has also created an Inuit specific National Action Plan for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Yet, Inuit women continue to wait for change.

Despite an increasing awareness of climate change impacts Inuit Nunangat and growing interest in and revenue being extracted from Inuit Nunangat’s natural resources, Canadians are largely ignorant of the realities Inuit experience, with little knowledge about their historical and contemporary colonial experience, the exclusion of Inuit voices from policy, or how Canadians can support decolonization and reconciliation.

What is often misunderstood is that Inuit are not simply experiencing intergenerational trauma from past colonial policies, such as forced settlement. Ongoing colonial policies are compound past violence, creating layered impacts that can be mistaken as intergenerational trauma acting (Morris 2016) and often public discourses frame colonialism as a legacy. Contrary to these ideas, Canada is an active settler colony.

The common narrative that Inuit experience greater violence because of intergenerational trauma is itself part of colonial discourses that conceal and normalize colonial policies and help advance the misconception of colonialism as a historical event (Wolfe 2006). Rather than focusing on intergenerational trauma alone, it is important to remember that Inuit are still surviving and resisting settler colonialism today (Crawford 2015: 357).

Inuit were thriving, healthy, and happy before colonial contact and despite the contemporary violence they experience, they are increasingly taking control of their lives. Because Inuit were defined as separate according to colonial interests, their access to land was treated as being significantly different from First Nations under Canadian law. Instead of having access to special land rights, Inuit were required to advance comprehensive land claims.

Since 1984, Inuit have settled four land claims, and these land claim processes reflect the ongoing efforts of Inuit to protect their homelands.

* Inuvialuit Final Agreement, western Arctic (1984)
* Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, Inuit of the eastern Arctic (1993)
* Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, Labrador and Newfoundland (2005)
* Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement, Québec (2008)

The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement was the largest land claim settlement in this history of Canada and though there was a great deal of optimism about the settlement in 1993, there was very little discussion or attention given to the social realities that Inuit were living (Crawford 2015). Early on in the land claim process, Inuit sought to include protections for their language and culture, and to address social well-being (Crawford 2015).

Inuit leaders were concerned about nonrenewable resource development and associated incursions into the land in the name of development, and threats posed to Inuit culture by forced sedentarism and economic integration, including loss of language and the cultural disintegration that was likely to occur as a result of impeded access to traditional lands and land uses. (Crawford 2015: 347)

Federal land claims policy, however, does not allow for these considerations and focused instead on “land, access, animal preservation, and economic development” (Crawford 2015: 347). Some researchers and advocates argue that the marginalization of Inuit concerns at the outset of the land claims process has continued beyond the creation of Nunavut in 1999 (Johnston & Tester 2015).

In particular, Inuit continue to be marginalized in “decision making, governance, and the development of policy” in Nunavut (Johnston & Tester 2015: 247).

Though land claim agreements provide Inuit with “important tools and resources” to exercise a greater degree of control over their lives (Pauktuutit 2006: 5) implementation is ongoing and Inuit have yet to regain full sovereignty over their lands (Arnold 2012). In the colonial imagination, the Canadian Arctic remains a “site of international struggle” and “international industrialists, such as international mining companies and research scientists” continue to seek new opportunities for exploration and exploitation (Hanrahan 2017: 16).

The systemic and structural foundations of exclusion, resource deprivation, basic service denial, the complex intersections of family violence, and the impact of these injustices on Inuit women’s lives can all be linked to forced sedentarism and settler colonialism. The violence, insecurity, and instability that Inuit women experience across Inuit Nunangat and the urban south are rooted in coerced re/settlement and colonial occupation. When we listen to Inuit women’s voices, it is clear that significant change is needed across Inuit Nunangat and Canada.

Inuit women have expressed their visions for this change; it must be transformational and must restore the autonomy and balance of Inuit communities. This transformation lies in decolonization. In order to end colonial violence, it is essential to end settler colonial domination and ensure that Inuit are empowered to move beyond devolution of government towards meaningful decolonization and self-determination. Inuit Nunangat, the ancestral home of the Inuit, remains resilient and continues to resist, and Pauktuutit will continue to work alongside our partners to ensure that Inuit women’s voices lead this change.

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