

Environment and Women's Wellbeing

Background

Resource extraction projects in northern present-day Canada have a history of failing to consider community wellbeing and input from various community members, including women.¹ In 2012, given the changes anticipated from the multibillion-dollar hydroelectric dam being built on the Lower Churchill River, a group of diverse women-identifying people in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HV-GB), Labrador, came together to talk about women's wellbeing in the community. They described and depicted² women's wellbeing as follows:



"The wellbeing of women in the north depends on having the opportunity to enjoy and develop a healthy and sustainable relationship with the environment. Having the ability to value yourself – both where you have come from and where you are going – is also important. Wellbeing requires having a sense of safety and security, and having access to appropriate food, housing, resources, finances, and support services. Having a social support network, and being free from violent relationships, are critical factors that affect wellbeing for all women. Food security; having or being able to learn coping mechanisms; being able to make choices about what's best for you and your family; having access to information and resources; and social acceptance of diverse social identities are also critically important. Having a space to meet to share and learn with other women is also important. Overall wellbeing is made up of: (1) physical; (2) emotional; (3) mental/intellectual; (4) spiritual; and (5) cultural wellbeing."

In 2018, after several rounds of pilot testing, the group conducted a survey they created to better understand the wellbeing of women in and around HV-GB. **This report focuses on survey results about the environment and women's wellbeing.** The women identified the environment and their relationship to it as integral to all dimensions of their wellbeing.

¹ Leah Levac and Jacqueline Gillis "Northern Women's Conceptualizations of Well-Being: Engaging in the "Right" Policy Conversations," In *Creating Spaces of Engagement: Policy Justice and the Practical Craft of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Leah Levac and Sarah Wiebe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 94-116. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487519889-006>.

² The Inuksuk wellbeing framework was created by community researchers in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and digitized by graphic designer Monica Peach.

About the Survey Participants

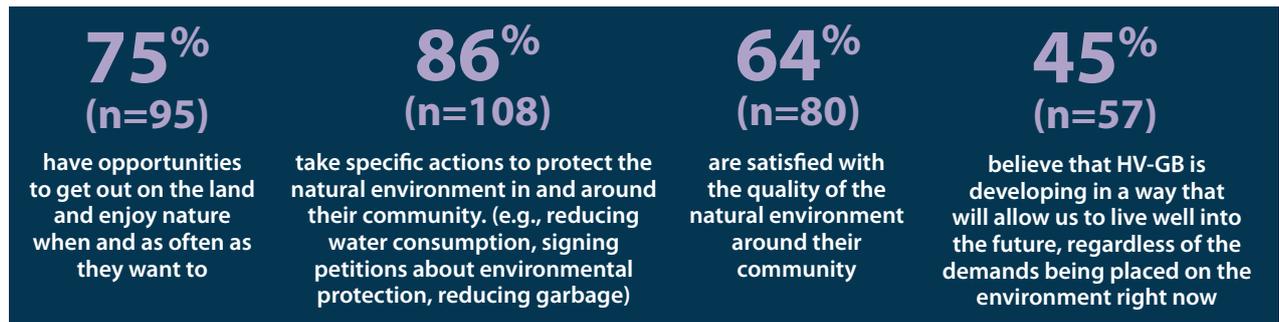
- 127 women over the age of 13 in or near Happy Valley-Goose Bay completed the survey
- 55% (n=70) identified as Inuit, Southern Inuit, and/or Métis*
- 35% (n=44) had children living with them
- 11% (n=14) identified as having a disability
- 22% (n=28) identified as 2SLGBTQIA+
- 57% (n=75) have lived in HV-GB for more than 5 years

**At the time of the survey, community collaborators suggested using the terms 'Southern Inuit and/or Métis' to capture the experiences of some Inuit living in southern and central Labrador. This terminology is more contested today. We therefore use the term 'Indigenous' throughout this report to refer to people who identified as 'Inuit' and/or 'Southern Inuit and/or Métis' in the survey. The term is not intended to suggest a universalized experience, nor to imply broad application to all Indigenous Peoples. For instance, Innu women did not respond to the survey.*

Key Takeaways

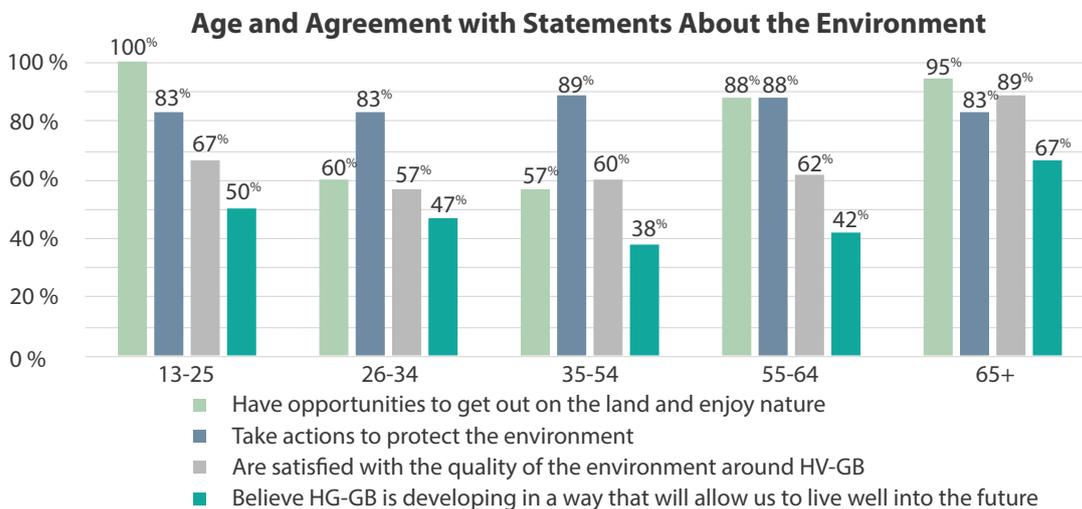
- The health of the environment is very important to women in HV-GB; many take direct steps to try and protect the environment.
- There is some concern amongst women about how HV-GB is developing and whether it will be sustainable into the future.
- Respondents under 65 years old seemed to be less satisfied with the quality of the environment than respondents 65 years old and older.

Relationship to the Environment



81% (n=17) of survey respondents who are strongly satisfied with the quality of the natural environment in HV-GB also somewhat or strongly agree that HV-GB is developing in a way that will allow us to live well into the future.

Meanwhile, 100% (n=15) of respondents who were most dissatisfied with the quality of the environment somewhat or strongly disagreed that development in HV-GB would allow people to live well into the future.





Age and the Environment

As we show in the above graph, respondents under 65 years old seemed less satisfied with the quality of the environment than those aged 65 and over. Those aged 26-54 were least likely to have opportunities to get out on the land and enjoy nature. This could be due to lack of time; women aged 35-54 are more likely to be caregivers (85%, n=38), and to be employed full-time.

Disability and the Environment

Survey respondents with a disability were more likely than those without a disability to have opportunities to get out on the land and take specific actions to protect the environment, and less likely to be satisfied with the quality of the natural environment.

	Respondents with a Disability	Respondents without a Disability
Have opportunities to get out on the land and enjoy nature when and as often as they want to	92%	75%
Take specific actions to protect the natural environment in and around their community	92%	85%
Are satisfied with the quality of the natural environment	44%	65%

Cultural Identity and the Environment

The survey results did not reveal any significant differences between people who identified as Indigenous and those who identified as non-Indigenous in terms of their environmental protection efforts, their ability to get out on the land, their satisfaction regarding the environment, or their feelings about whether HV-GB is developing in a way that will allow people to live well into the future.

Wellbeing and the Natural Environment

Physical and Mental Wellbeing and the Environment

Women's physical and mental wellbeing are linked to the environment. For instance, **walking, fishing, hunting, and berry picking** are common land-based physical activities that survey respondents reported as keeping them well. These activities are at risk of being affected by environmental changes and land developments. Other research has also highlighted these links.^{3,4}

³ Joanna Petrusek MacDonald et al., "Protective Factors for Mental Health and Well-Being in a Changing Climate: Perspectives from Inuit Youth in Nunatsiavut, Labrador," *Social Science & Medicine* 141 (2015), 133-141, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.07.017>

⁴ Jacqueline Middleton et al. "Indigenous mental health in a changing climate: a systematic scoping review of the global literature." *Environmental Research Letters*, 15, no.5 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab68a9>.

Food and water access are also critical to physical and mental wellbeing. 60% (n=71) of respondents were able to access country food if they wanted it, but some respondents voiced concerns about its decreasing quality or quantity, noting:

“

“Yes, the size and amount of fish has changed dramatically. Rock cods, and trout seem to be less in size and numbers.”

”

“People more stressed at times, not so many people eating local fish.”

“...Worrying about my traditional foods being poisoned.”

Some survey respondents also face barriers (n=35) to accessing country foods, including: hunting/fishing season restrictions, the caribou hunting moratorium, lack of proper equipment, and the lack of someone to gather these country foods for them. Past research in HV-GB has highlighted other barriers for women accessing country food, such as the destruction of berry patches around the town as these sites have been turned into housing developments.⁵ The impacts of hydroelectric dams, including methylmercury contamination,⁶ and flooding,⁷ which can disrupt access to hunting, trapping and fishing areas, also create barriers to food access.

A large minority of survey respondents (39%) were unable to access clean drinking water at least once in the year before the survey. This is an important issue to monitor because hydroelectric dams can harm surrounding water and wildlife.⁸

60%
(n=71)

were able to access
country food if they
wanted it

39%
(n=49)

were unable to
access clean drinking
water at least once in
the past year

Cultural Wellbeing and the Environment

88%
(n=56)

who engage
in cultural
traditions had a
place to go that
helps connect
them to their
culture

Women's cultural wellbeing and the environment are often inseparable. 79% (n=19) of women who reported having a place to go to connect to their culture also said that they had opportunities to get out on the land. On the other hand, 40% (n=2) of women who felt strongly that they did not have a place where they could connect to their culture also did not have opportunities to get out on the land. Given what we know about northern and Indigenous women's relationship to the land, these connections are important, and highlight the fact that land access is critical to cultural wellbeing. Other research has also highlighted this connection, including in the lives of young people.⁹

⁵Gail Baikie, Libby Dean, and Patricia Beals. "Women's Experiences of Dislocation from the Rivers and Land." Poster presented at: ArcticNet annual conference. December 2014. Ottawa, Ontario.

⁶As summarized in Susan Manning et al. "A literature synthesis report on the impacts of resource extraction for Indigenous women". Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, (2018).

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹MacDonald et al., (2015).

Wellbeing, Resource Extraction and the Environment

Resource extraction projects strain the environment, which in turn puts a strain on cultural knowledge, physical health, and mental and emotional wellness.¹⁰ Of the women who responded to the survey, 11% (n=13) identified the environment as causing them the most stress in the month before the survey. The biggest environmental issue identified by participants was the flooding caused by the dam. When we asked women if they had seen changes because of the hydroelectric project, they told us about some of their environmental concerns, including:

“

“I feel that the Transformers take away from a landscape that was initially free from much visual evidence of anthropogenic change; it makes the “wild” feeling of being outdoors seem less authentic. I have felt concern for loved ones’ safety in the event of dam failure because there is not adequate environmental monitoring and no flood management strategy in place. I also have felt uncomfortable / stared at while in the airport when I fly during a shift change and am one of the only females on the plane or having gone through security.”

”

“Greater awareness of methylmercury and its impact on the environment”

“Flooding in Mudlake”

“Infrastructure of the project seems to be interfering with nature in Labrador - e.g., the Mud Lake flood of 2017 seems to be a result”

“much more anxiety and concern about physical safety related to concerns about methylmercury in food and north spur stability”

“The land is being destroyed and people are in danger.”

¹⁰David Borish et al., ““Caribou was the reason, and everything else happened after”: Effects of caribou declines on Inuit in Labrador, Canada.” *Global Environmental Change*, 68 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102268>

Wellbeing Indicators to Monitor

Further research could help shed light on:

- specific concerns women have about the development trajectory in HV-GB.
- how being on the land helps women access their cultural traditions, and how they maintain these traditions when land access is disrupted.
- how women are coping with the fears and anxiety brought on by the Lower Churchill hydroelectric project.

Closing Thoughts

Women's wellbeing is dynamic and impacted by many factors, including their access to the environment and the many physical, mental, and cultural benefits it provides. The survey data show how age, ability, and length of time living in the community may influence women's access to the environment and their feelings surrounding the environment in their community.

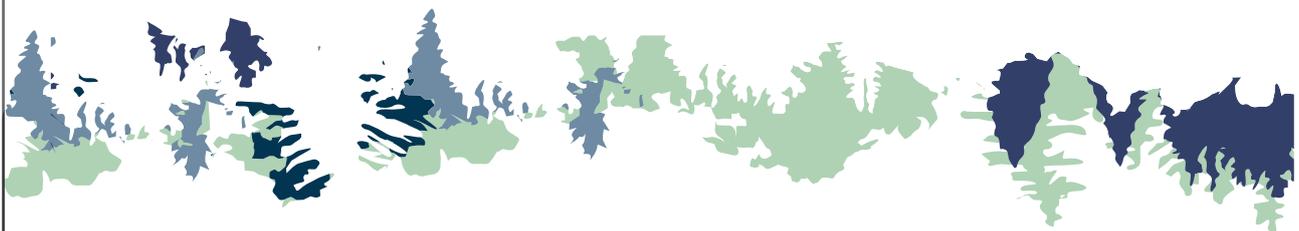
This report is available at:

<https://www.criaw-icref.ca/publications/environment-womens-wellbeing-in-hv-gb/>.

To learn more about women's wellbeing in HV-GB, follow the same link to access the rest of the reports in this series: Food, Water & Women's Wellbeing; Social Supports & Women's Wellbeing; and Spirituality, Culture & Women's Wellbeing.

Find out more about the project¹¹ at:

<https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/CVI-Overview-Dec.-2021.pdf>



¹¹This research took place in the Upper Lake Melville region of Labrador. We acknowledge these lands as the homelands of the Inuit and Innu of Labrador and recognize their ancestral and continued ties to these lands and waters. We also acknowledge that members of the research team live and work across several Indigenous territories of present-day Canada. These reports were prepared by Annalise Kennedy, Amanda Buchnea, Leah Levac, and Olivia Flegg. They were reviewed by Sylvia Moore and Darlene Jacque. Petrina Beals and Tracey Doherty also provided valuable insights. These reports would not have been possible without the expertise and contributions of Indigenous and settler women in Labrador who conceived the wellbeing framework, developed and piloted the survey, helped gather survey data, and participated in collaborative analysis sessions. This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

