

# Food, Water 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.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, given the changes anticipated related to 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 depicted<sup>2</sup> 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 testing, the group conducted a survey they created to better understand the wellbeing of women in and around HV-GB. **This report focuses on the survey results about food and water access and quality.** Women identified food and water access and quality as important for their physical, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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

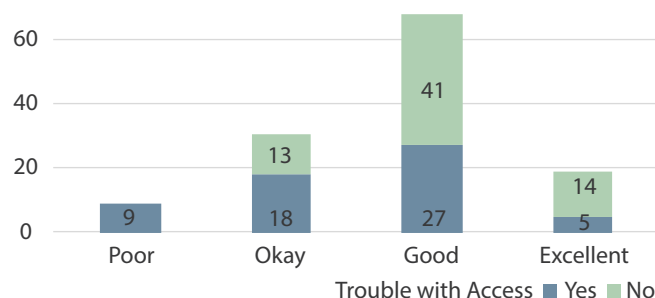
- Women over 65 years old seem to have greater food security and better access to clean water and country food than younger women.
- It was especially difficult for women with poor physical health or a disability to access nutritious food.
- Almost two-thirds (60%; n=71) of women said they could access country food if they wanted it.
- Women with children at home more frequently reported not being able to afford to buy more food when they ran out than those without children.

## Access to Good Food and Clean Water

### Overall Access to Good, Nutritious Food

Good, nutritious food, including country food, should be available for all residents of HV-GB. Yet, almost half (47%) of respondents struggled to access food at least once in the past year. Women over 65 reported the least difficulty accessing food among the age groups. Those with children at home (18%; n=8), those with disabilities (50%; n=7), and those who have lived in HV-GB for less than five years (75%; n=15) more frequently reported having trouble accessing food. Additionally, women who rated their physical health as "poor" or "okay" more frequently said that they had trouble accessing good, nutritious food. This could be because less access to good food is causing poorer health, because people with poorer health have more trouble accessing good food, or both.

**Physical Health vs Trouble Accessing Nutritious Food**



### Access to Country Food



*"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."*

60% (n=71) of respondents could access country food. Those who identified as Indigenous reported more access to country foods than non-Indigenous participants. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents raised concerns about the quality and quantity of country food, and about how these limitations impacted their cultural traditions.

For some women, their weekly physical activities included accessing country food through hunting (9%; n=10), fishing (17%; n=19), and berry picking (17%; n=19). Country food and land-based activities are necessary for physical and cultural wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> In fact, country food is important for many reasons. Berry picking also contributes greatly to women's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing and is a major source of food and medicine.<sup>4</sup> Another important food source in this area is caribou, which is closely connected to identity and culture.<sup>5</sup> The decrease in the caribou population has put stress on food sources, income, and culture.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, industrial pollutants can contaminate country food sources, making them unsafe to kill or eat.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Participants who were 65 and over reported having better access to country foods than those who were younger:

<b>60%(n=12)</b>	<b>58%(n=15)</b>	<b>56%(n=25)</b>	<b>50%(n=15)</b>
of those 65+ have access to country food	of those 55-64 have access to country food	of those 35-54 have access to country food	of those 26-34 have access to country food

Of those who identified as Indigenous, 70% (n=49) said that they had access to country foods, compared to 39% (n=22) of non-Indigenous participants.

Those who had lived in HV-GB for less than five years reported less access to country foods (30%; n=6) or were unsure about whether they had access. This is compared to the 61% (n=64) of respondents who had lived in HV-GB for more than 5 years who said that they had access to country foods.

Those who faced barriers (n=41) to accessing country foods identified the following issues: hunting/fishing season restrictions, the caribou hunting moratorium, lack of proper equipment, and the lack of someone to gather country foods for them. Some respondents also told us that barriers to accessing country food created barriers to practicing their cultural traditions.

## Access to Country Foods and Spiritual/Cultural Wellbeing

Access to country food is important in the lives of many northern people and is linked to the culture and spirituality of many Indigenous populations. For the Innu, food and medicine traditionally came from the land.<sup>10</sup> The Inuit also rely on hunting and gathering activities – such as berry picking – for cultural, spiritual, and nutritional health and wellbeing, as well as arts and other traditions.<sup>11</sup> Being out on the land and connecting with other women in the community is important, and so are the spiritual beliefs surrounding being close to and cared for by Creator.<sup>12</sup> Activities related to gathering country food are a way to pass on knowledge, values, history, and heritage within these communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Derek Rasmussen and Jessica Guillo. "Developing an Inuit-Specific Framework for Culturally Relevant Health Indicators Incorporating Gender-Based Analysis." *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 8, no. 2 (2012): 24–35.

<sup>4</sup> Brenda Parlee, Fikret Berkes and Teetl'it Gwich'in Renewable Resources Council. "Health of the Land, Health of the People: A Case Study on Gwich'in Berry Harvesting in Northern Canada." *EcoHealth*, 2, no.2 (2005): 127–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10393-005-3870-z>

<sup>5</sup> David 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>

<sup>6</sup> Mark Andrachuk and Barry Smit. "Community-based vulnerability assessment of Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, Canada to environmental and socio-economic changes." *Regional Environmental Change*, 12, no.4 (2012): 867–885. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-012-0299-0>

<sup>7</sup> Josh Snodgrass. "Health of Indigenous Circumpolar Populations." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, no. 1 (2013): 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155517>

<sup>8</sup> 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)

<sup>9</sup> Heather Peters et al., "Interweaving Caring and Economics in the Context of Place: Experiences of Northern and Rural Women Caregivers," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4, no. 2 (2010): 172–187, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2010.484261>

<sup>10</sup> Leonor Mercedes Ward et al., "The Land Nurtures Our Spirit": Understanding the Role of the Land in Labrador Innu Wellbeing." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, no.10 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18105102>

<sup>11</sup> Rasmussen and Guillo, (2012)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Borish et al., (2021)

## Access to Clean Water

**39% (n=49) of respondents were unable to access clean drinking water at least once in the past year**

Hydroelectric dams can harm water and the wildlife both in and around them.<sup>14</sup> In turn, unclean drinking water can contribute to the spread of infectious diseases and have an impact on the physical health of people.<sup>15</sup> In reference to changes they had experienced, one respondent noted “drinking water issues”, which they thought were related to the dam construction. The respondent stated:

“The water quality has been horrible, and it has caused several intestinal/digestion problems.”

About two-thirds (61%) of respondents had not experienced difficulties accessing clean drinking water in the past year. Of those who did have difficulty accessing clean drinking water, some groups had more difficulty than others:

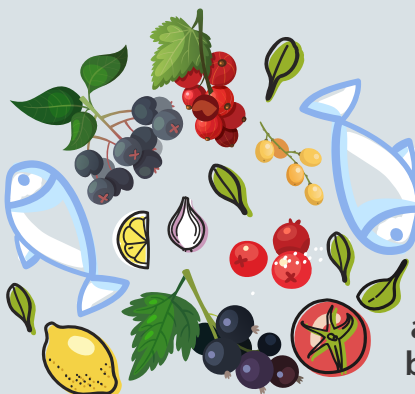
- 37% (n=26) of those who identified as Indigenous said they had had trouble accessing clean drinking water in the past year, compared to 42% (n=23) of non-Indigenous respondents.
- People who had lived in the HV-GB area for more than 5 years more frequently reported having difficulty accessing clean water (40%, n=41) than those who had lived in the area for less than five years (35%, n=7).
- Respondents under 65 years old had more difficulty accessing clean drinking water than those 65 years old and older:

Age	13-25	26-34	35-54	55-64	65 or over
Difficulty accessing clean drinking water	50% (n=3)	40% (n=12)	44% (n=20)	42% (n=11)	17% (n=3)

## Food Affordability

**38% (n=46)** of respondents could identify food security services in their community.

**15% (n=21)** of respondents ran out of food and could not afford to buy more at least once in the past year.



**13% (n=16)** of respondents indicated that accessing basic needs like food was causing them stress.

**35% (n=44)** of respondents worried about meeting their families' basic needs - including food - more than once in the past year.

Lack of affordability was a major theme in participants' responses about food. Many participants indicated that food prices had increased and that the cost of living in HV-GB was going up. This is a documented impact of resource extraction projects.<sup>16</sup>

Research about the impacts of loss of land and lack of food security on Indigenous Peoples shows that social support systems and mental wellbeing can become strained as people are forced to move away from their homes in search of more affordable and traditional food supplies.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Manning et al., (2018)

<sup>15</sup> Snodgrass, (2013)

<sup>16</sup> Andrachuk and Smit, (2012): 873.

<sup>17</sup> 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>.



**1/4**  
**of 26-34**  
**year-olds**

AND

**1/3**  
**of 35-54**  
**year-olds**

**reported being**  
**unable to afford**  
**more food after**  
**running out, at**  
**least once in**  
**the past year.**

The survey showed that 23% (n=16) of respondents who identified as Indigenous ran out of food and were unable to afford more in the past year, compared to 9% (n=5) of non-Indigenous respondents.

Nearly one-quarter (23%; n=7) of 26-34-year-olds and one-third (29%; n=13) of 35-54-year-olds reported times in the past year when they were unable to afford to buy more food when they ran out. **It is encouraging to note that participants 55 and over reported always being able to afford to buy more food after running out.**

49% (n=22) of those with children at home reported running out of food at least once in the past year and being unable to afford more. 50% (n=11) of those women said that this happened to them often. 45% (n=37) of those without children said that at least once, they ran out of food in the past year and could not afford to buy more. Of those women, only 30% (n=11) said that this happened often. There was no large difference between those who identified as having a disability and those who did not in relation to food security.

## Wellbeing Indicators to Monitor

Further research could help shed light on:

- why older women seem to have more food security than younger women in HV-GB.
- the relationship between food security and access for different types of families (i.e., with and without children, headed by lone parents).
- the ways that poorer physical health and food access are connected.
- how to ensure people who are newer to the community have access to good, nutritious food, clean drinking water, and country foods if they need them.
- food security and access for people with disabilities.
- barriers to accessing clean drinking water.

## Closing Thoughts

Women's wellbeing is dynamic and impacted by many factors, including access to affordable and good quality food and water. The survey data show how age, ability, having children at home, and length of time living in the community may all influence women's access to the food and water they need to support positive, holistic wellbeing.

This report is available at: <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/publications/food-water-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: Social Supports & Women's Wellbeing; Environment & Women's Wellbeing; and Spirituality, Culture & Women's Wellbeing.

Find out more about the project<sup>18</sup> at:

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

<sup>18</sup> This 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. Tracey Doherty and Petrina Beals also provided helpful 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.

