

Gender and Arctic Security: Hybrid Gatherings, Indigenous Perspectives, and Why It Matters

Reflections on “Gender and Arctic Security: Canadian and Circumpolar Dimensions,” A Hybrid Conference hosted in Yellowknife, NWT, 15-16 October 2023; and the Sharing Circle on “Indigenous and Northern Perspective on Gendering Arctic Security,” held at the Institute for Circumpolar Health Research, Yellowknife, 21 June 2024

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An Arctic scholar presenting at the October 2023 hybrid conference reminded us that “the North has really been defined in many ways by military investments and activities but there has been no northern input in these decisions at all. The military has played a huge role in the North, [but] is unrecognized, underappreciated, and understudied.” These gatherings were intended to strengthen relationships, build capacity, and acknowledge distinct perspectives on and about Arctic defence and security.

A hybrid gathering is not only about in-person or online practices but also about storytelling and Sharing Circles grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being to share knowledge and lived experiences. Sharing Circles are intended to offer safe space and free speech. They are not intended for notetaking or to cite participants. Sharing Circles are sacred spaces that allow for the support of each other, listening attentively, and hearing the message. Storytelling is a teaching method used for knowledge transfer and transformative thinking. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit are generous with their knowledge if they feel safe and that their lived experience and Indigenous Knowledge will be respected, inform policy, and transform change: in a good way. These cultural practices are used for building trust and truth-telling. These methods allow for vulnerability and connection, building trust and relationships.

These Indigenous ways of doing were used because the study of Arctic security is multifaceted, intersectional, and exceptional. Because of these dynamics, a holistic, if not universal, approach is needed to allow for the interweaving of both soft and hard power. A more in-depth appreciation of Indigenous worldviews inclusive of gender, values, and respect for place. Arctic security and defence expand beyond the limits and interpretations of hard power. Soft power from an Indigenous and gendered lens extends beyond Southern diplomacy and political rhetoric. Arctic Security is not only wrapped around the militarization of the Arctic. It stretches and

weaves through personal, health, food, community, environmental, economic, and political security. All these factors complicate how nation-states address security and defence in alignment with Indigenous perspectives. The definitions of these seven security themes read well but have not, in many cases, been defined with the inclusion or consultation with Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic.

For example, the *Human Development Report of 1994* defined human security as both “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” (in 2003 the definition of human security was expanded to include “freedom to live in dignity”).¹ Yet, with regards to *freedom of fear*, when the war in Ukraine broke out there was very little to no engagement or conversation with Indigenous People within Canada’s borders or at the Arctic Council table, and because of this, kinship ties, and concerns about patriotism were disregarded or silenced. Concerning *freedom of want*, how does this relate to needs? The need for uncontaminated water, land-based food security, access to land-based clothing supplies, and Indigenous rights to wear fur? Sustainable and well-built homes, stewardship and ancestral responsibility of land-based medicines and plant use, ways of being, and knowledge transfer on rites of passage and ceremony? Moving on to *freedom to live in dignity*, from whose perspective and standards? Indigenous Peoples have been subjected to ‘ward of the state’ relegation since the signing of historical and numbered treaties.

Countless factors have negatively impacted the autonomy of Indigenous nations since the settler migration and land purchase. Indigenous Peoples, before treaty-making and Confederation, were sovereign nations with their own laws, values, cultures, teachings, economies, and governments. Many Indigenous nations, pre-contact, were matrilineal kinship societies valuing inclusion and respecting all members of the society. However, as acts and policies were created in Canada, First Nations women specifically found their position and responsibility in the community diminished significantly. The enactment of the *Indian Act* in 1876 governed First Nations’ status, band administration, and control of reserve land. Control and conflict with First Nations, Metis, and Inuit did not stop there. As Canada evolved, so did the erasure and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples along their distinct rights and human rights.

Indigenous academics and security experts drew further attention to the *Gender Equality in the Arctic Phase 3 Report*, specifically the section on Security. The October 2023 conference sought to support the “efforts of human and feminist security studies which call for a more equitable and inclusive approach to the field of security studies and security-oriented policy.”² Since the concept that “people need to define for themselves in relation to (or depending on) the values and ways of life they wish to protect”³ correlates with the messaging that Indigenous Peoples have been expressing regarding their concept “nothing about us without,” it is timely that Arctic experts and Knowledge Holders gather to unpack their concepts and understanding of security and defence in their homelands.

Participants at the gatherings offered personal and professional insights from their perspectives. An Indigenous scholar shared that “the ongoing discourse on Arctic security in Canada frequently excludes Indigenous peoples from the conversation. Despite facing challenges such as climate change impacts (e.g., wildfires) and cultural issues arising from a significant influx of newcomers encountering Indigenous Peoples, Canadian audiences remain largely unaware of or neglect the strong Indigenous presence in the Arctic and near North. This exclusion

is particularly evident in Canadian newspapers, which tend to prioritize coverage of Chinese investments in critical minerals over Indigenous issues.”⁴

These are the reflections and contributions that we wanted to be shared by the participants in a safe space and under the Chatham House Rule during discussions and Sharing Circles. It is no secret that Arctic and Northern communities are contending with other factors such as immigration, foreign workers, artificial intelligence, human trafficking, drug trafficking, homelessness, mental health, and Indigenous marginalization. Many of these issues stem directly from policies drafted in the South without consultation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

When considering the definition of Arctic Security, Indigenous Peoples become nervous or self-conscious as indicated earlier: security is about human needs from a land-based perspective. Indigenous Peoples prefer to have culturally relevant conversations where their stories and observations are appreciated and valued. Too often Indigenous inclusion represents one person on a panel surrounded by non-Indigenous academics, and this can be intimidating and challenging as their expertise and lived experience gets overlooked. Then, there is the perception that Indigenous women and gender-diverse people are invisible or their views disregarded. Therefore, it is important to have more conversations that are inclusive of women and gender-diverse people on issues that are important to them. They are influential members of the community, and their views must be heard and inform policy.

Why does it matter is that we are only having these conversations now? Indigenous participants at the gatherings are land-based and university educated and have been addressing security and defence issues for many years from a multitude of perspectives focused on education, housing, safe water, and issues focused on hard security important to NORAD modernization and economic development in the Arctic. Attention from First Nations, Metis, and Inuit focuses on Canada’s strategic investments and promoting multi-purpose use of infrastructure in communities. Communities are also being strategic when it comes to capacity building. Communities want to ensure that their people receive high-standard training and that their skills are used to build the infrastructure needed for resilience in defence and security long after the military has moved back South. A participant expressed that this is “not easy work and harder when you are a woman and an Indigenous Northern woman in these spaces.”⁵

Another participant shared her research observations: “A lot of the women we have engaged with throughout our work are focused on the community as a whole. They are concerned about the men in their communities and worried for the men. They have said we need to have a conversation about everyone.” This concept of “whole’ relates to the Indigenous holistic view and the belief that “All Lives Matter.” The community cannot be healthy when their people are suffering, or their needs are not being met. Intergenerational trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder have harmed relationships and community cohesion. Holistic approaches are needed to elevate traditional lifeways and advance ancestral teachings. This is of major importance to communities experiencing more social disparities than Indigenous regional communities.

Security and defence are about the inclusion of community voices and values, remembering our ancestral teachings and their voices and concerns. Indigenous prophecies and visions remind us to walk the good red road

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and to take up responsibility. When we see our people on panels and at national and international conferences it is empowering and builds up self-esteem as we know they were brave enough to share their voices and community self-determining visions. Incorporating and advancing Indigenous worldview in research and projects are complex but timely as it is worth the time and energy when we witness Indigenous Peoples thriving as a result of incorporating both the traditional and contemporary ways.

The philosophy of ‘returning to the land’ is not about going backward, it is about respecting traditional lifeways while planning for transformative change. Indigenous teachings, a participant reminded us, have to be holistic based: “We all talk a lot about human security, but it is also non-human beings. We all live on our land and waters and over the last few decades with them being destroyed by companies and colonialism, we need to protect them. Not only humans but non-humans are also endangered. Mother Earth is shaped in our culture, we call rivers and lakes grandmothers (it is shaped through gender).”⁶ It can also be argued that this philosophy is shaped by respect of Indigenous worldview and by Knowledge Holders wisdom that extends beyond gender concepts. Our teachings remind us not to adopt colonial words when referencing Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being. Indigenous philosophy comes from the land and our cosmology, it should not be distorted or warped by colonial doctrines.

The Canadian Rangers have elements of hard power using military apparatus and training tools but their main focus is on soft power and non-aggressive surveillance and diplomacy. A question was put to the Rangers: do you feel the Canadian Rangers’ contribution to security is more in a defense way or community way? An Indigenous member of the Rangers replied, “We are not training them to be in the army but to be community people and be part of the community...we are the eyes, the ears, and the voice of the military...We also are the eyes, looking constantly...there is a plane flying by is it an unusual plane, I got to report it. There have been subs up north, Rangers reported it and noticed. NWP [with increased] traffic, have to monitor. Now we have drug dealers coming to our community, we notice it and have to report it to the RCMP. The RCMP ask, how do we make this better?”⁷

This gathering was about respect for Indigenous participants and a contribution to Indigenous worldviews, indigenizing the conversation and gathering, and decolonial practices that found Indigenous Knowledge Holders and experts leading and contributing to the conversation. It is highly recommended that hybrid participation should be ongoing and not just one-off gatherings, as critical awareness and reflective practice lead to continued engagement and action-oriented responsiveness. The inclusion of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in conversation on all facets of security in the Arctic offers new opportunities for networking, capacity building, and Indigenous governance.

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Notes

¹ Human Development Report 1994. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 1994. Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security. New York.

² Arctic Council, The Pan-Arctic Report on Gender Equality in the Arctic Phase 3 (GEA3 Report), 71, https://www.dropbox.com/s/n2za1wtzoc6nh6a/Pan-Arctic_Report-GEA3-2021.pdf?dl=1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Indigenous participant shared personal perspective. Gender and Arctic Security: Canadian and Circumpolar Dimensions. Yellowknife, NWT 15-16 October 2023.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anonymous Participant. Gender and Arctic Security: Canadian and Circumpolar Dimensions. Yellowknife, NWT 15-16 October 2023.