MANITOBA MOON VOICES INC.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GENDER DIVERSE INDIVIDUALS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCY

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RESEARCH PAPER BASED IN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT:

Indigenous[1] climate resiliency refers to the collective ability of Indigenous Peoples to manage and adapt to climate change. This paper will explore

1) historical and political barriers to climate change adaptation for Indigenous Peoples, specifically; Indigenous women and *gender-diverse* individuals;

2) how resource-extraction based industries have adversely impacted Indigenous communities;

3) explore how Indigenous culture and tradition is the pathway to achieving climate change resiliency and adaptation strategies, and

4) briefly examine factors that contribute to resiliency of Indigenous women and *gender-diverse* individuals in the face of persistent and aggressive climate change.

INTRODUCTION TO INDIGENOUS CLIMATE CHANGE RESILIENCY:

"Indigenous Peoples, in particular, have witnessed, endured, and adapted to environmental changes over thousands of years[2]."

Indigenous climate change resiliency is rooted in Indigenous Peoples' Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous languages, customary laws, and ways of knowing. It can be described as the unique and innate ability of Indigenous populations to adapt to environmental stressors associated with climate change based on Indigenous Nationhood; meaning the shared identity, social networks, connections, Knowledge, and understanding–all of which is connected to the land they come from.

1 The term Indigenous will be used as a universal term for Metis, Inuit, First Nations People (both status and non-status, also described as "Aboriginal people" for the sake of consistency).

2 Fayazi, M., Bisson, I., & Nicholas. (2020). P. 2.

Many Indigenous teachings, traditions, customary protocols, and natural laws are held in the language. The term for Indigenous woman is "iskwew" in Nehethowewin, and "ikwe" in Anishinabemowin. It is derived from the word "iskotew," meaning "fire." In Indigenous languages, all words are descriptive and there is no direct translation. Iskwew and Ikwe translate to meaning "the home fire that blazes in the hearts of the woman." This term speaks directly to the traditional role and responsibility of Indigenous women to maintain strong social networks within the community to preserve common identity, which includes kinship ties, bonding, sharing of resources, food security. These roles and responsibilities also include teachings related to medicines, birth traditions, and rites of passage. All these things keep identity burning strong in the hearts of all Indigenous people.

Historically, Indigenous Peoples have always had to adapt and adjust to climate change and environmental degradation in their respective territories. This is well documented through the treaties, industrial development, oral histories, stories, and Knowledge transferred from Elders, as well as linguistic terms that reflect responses to such change, especially since European contact. In recent times, many Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have noticed the heightened environmental change and increased challenges to their resilience due to industrial advancements and development throughout their respective territories, while their communities remain in a stagnant or slow pace of local development and expansion.

Indigenous communities experience both resilience and vulnerability to climate change and environmental stressors. Vulnerability may be created when there is a process or action that undermines the Indigenous Knowledge systems. Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals, who are central to the social connection within Indigenous communities, become exposed to greater vulnerability when communities experience landscape disruptions and land dispossession that threaten Nationhood and Indigenous sovereignty.

Manitoba's Nehetho and Anishinaabe people greatly rely on a Traditional medicine, called Weekis. or Weekay.[3] [4] This medicine has always been significant

3 Also known as "bitter root" or "rat root."

4 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9PQk5kgyZ0 Aboriginal Students Health Sciences (ASHS) Elder in Residence Bertha Skye talks about various Indigenous medicines and cultural practices. This episode looks at the Rat Root.

to numerous Indigenous populations, but even more so due to the current global pandemic. Indigenous people traditionally consume muskrat, an animal that lives in wetland regions and areas characterized by muskeg, such as central and northern Manitoba. Because muskrats consume large amounts of weekis/weekay, Indigenous people would consume this medicine regularly through ingesting these animals. Due to climate change and the resultant decimation of wetlands, the muskrat population is a species at risk, as is the "rat root," or weekay/weekis, medicine.

Indigenous people must travel farther distances and explore new harvesting areas in effort to conserve the existing ones. Thus, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals, as traditional harvesters of medicines, become vulnerable to the decimation of a widely used Traditional medicine, as well as diminishing of their Traditional roles. These are critical observations and perspectives that must be included in all discussions on climate change but are often omitted from the realm of mainstream research and academia.[5]

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BARRIERS TO CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION:

It is important to examine historical and political barriers that have impeded Indigenous climate change adaptations to contextualize main discussions on Indigenous climate change resiliency. Historically, Indigenous populations have been dispossessed, relocated, and flooded to advance economic progress and ensure wealth, health, and environmental protection for non-Indigenous societies.

As few as 50 years ago, the Minister of Indian Affairs had the ability to remove land from a First Nation through a process called "Expropriation" under the Indian Act. This power also allowed the land to be assigned to a company, or corporation, for purposes of development or public interest. This land dispossession drastically impacted the mobility patterns of Indigenous communities for hunting, trapping, and fishing. In many instances, expropriation was exercised to build mines and pipelines. further decimating the surrounding territories of Indigenous populations. It wasn't until 1982 that expropriation could no longer occur without

5 Fayazi, M., Bisson, I., & Nicholas. (2020).

the consent of the First Nation. This is when Canada's Constitution Act was amended to include Section 35, recognizing and affirming Aboriginal and Treaty Rights by upholding a legal "duty to consult." At which time, federal and provincial governments must take Aboriginal rights, title, historic, or modern Treaty Rights into account, before making decisions regarding the use of lands and resources.

Despite this legal duty, the Crown and the Province continue to act in ways that detrimentally affect Indigenous People, including their lands, waterways, and Aboriginal and Treaty Rights. In the past decade, politically motivated decisions have resulted in entire Indigenous communities, such as South Indian Lake[6] and Lake St. Martin, being drastically flooded and entire populations having to relocate.[7]

The Nehetho[8] community of South Indian Lake was destroyed when Manitoba Hydro, a provincial Crown corporation, diverted the Churchill River into the Nelson River to generate Hydroelectric power. This flooding was called the Churchill River Diversion (CRD) project, and it resulted in the destruction of land, water, and local economy of commercial fishing.[9] Moreover, Manitoba Hydro transformed South Indian Lake, the once autonomous and self-sufficient community into a community with high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence, and characterized by rampant mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety.[10]

The Anishinaabe[11] community of Lake St. Martin was drastically flooded in 2011, forcing all their community members to flee their homes when the Manitoba government diverted water from the Assiniboine River into Lake Manitoba.[12] This flooding was an intentional act meant to reduce the risk of flooding and risk to residents in the City of Winnipeg, and surrounding farm owners.[13] The flooding caused extensive damage to the community, destroying all homes and infrastructure on the reserve.[14] In 2022, the community remains in the process

6 Also known as "O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation" or, "the winter camp."
7 See www.creelegaleagle.com; https://intercontinentalcry.org/flooding-hope-displacement-politics-by-the-province-towards-lake-st-martin-first-nation/.
8 Ithiniw (human beings), or Nehetho (people of the four winds), also known as "Cree."
9 www.creelegaleagle.com.
10 Id.; https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/lake-st-martin-residents-looking-for-answers-after-flood-evacuation-benefits-end-1.4795558.
11 Ojibway.
12 See https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/lake-st-martin-flood-court-evacuees-1.5424688.
13 Id.
14 Id.

of rebuilding and healing from a decade of trauma inflicted upon their people, that upon losing all that they own, were exiled into urban hotel rooms and forgotten about for nearly ten years. High stress and anxiety, mental health struggles, post-traumatic stress disorder, and conflicts with suicide including deaths, ideations, and attempts were reported to be experienced by all displaced community members.[15] As community members continue to return to their home communities, they struggle in healing from the trauma of being displaced for so many years.

In both scenarios, Indigenous lands were deemed disposable and Indigenous people were considered irrelevant by government decision-makers. However, steps were taken to ensure prosperity and safety for other Manitobans, namely non-Indigenous Manitobans. These communities experienced the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and ability to be self-sufficient for over a decade.

Although there exists very little research in this domain, the socio-economic impacts[16] of such politically motivated destruction have been intergenerationally destructive and exponential in effect.[17] It will take generations for children, and grandchildren, of the community who experienced this environmental dispossession to heal from it.

Importantly, the needs of Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals were not taken into consideration, nor was their survival or well-being. Indigenous women had to cope with miscarriages, anxiety, depression, and financial burdens, while supporting their partners who, in many instances, were unable to work or secure employment due to their temporary living arrangements and barriers of racism and discrimination. Furthermore, women had to compensate for all their children being out of school for half the year, while shuffling from one hotel to another. The children also reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and perpetual sadness, while away from their home community.

Traditionally, women serve as the caregivers of the family. They are life givers and carry the most sacred waters–birth waters, which bring new life. Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have a sacred responsibility for the

15 Thompson, S., Ballard, M., & Martin, D. (2014).
16 See https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/CAN/INT_CEDAW_NGO_CAN_25380_E.pdf, p.3.
17 BlueSky, K., & Levasseur., A. (2021).

water, Nibi (Anishinaabemowin), or Nipi (Nehethowewin). Intuitively, they are programmed to be nurturing and sacrifice for the health and well-being of their children and loved ones, just as Mother Earth nurtures and sacrifices for all human beings to survive and thrive. As a result, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have, and will continue to, suffer[18] disproportionately due to the adverse effects of climate change, water contamination, resource extraction, and environmental degradation.

THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF RESOURCE-EXTRACTION BASED INDUSTRIES ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

For over 500 years, Indigenous communities have been adversely affected by resource extraction-based industries, beginning with commercial fishing and fur trade.[19] The early post-contact era saw a relatively swift depletion of fish from lakes and oceans, as well as a rapid decimation of fur-bearing animals, such as beaver, fox, lynx, and marten.[20]

A decimation of fish due to industry-based flooding; as well as moose and deer due to severe disruption in travel corridors and irregularities in weather patterns,[21] threatened local ecosystems has had severe ramifications for Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals. Western science fails to recognize the direct relationship between the disruption to the natural flow of waters and the impact on weather patterns and climate change. The most serious impacts are compromised food security and challenges posed to human health, due to health of the water and changing weather conditions.

Indigenous communities have also been adversely, and disproportionately, affected by resource extraction-based industries, such as hydroelectric dams and pulp and paper mills.[22] Economic incentives and political ignorance have caused Indigenous Peoples to be marginalized, while those employed by such industries

18 Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals experience poverty, mental illness, incarceration, domestic violence, murder, sexual abuse, sexual assault, and other social ills at rates exponentially higher than non-Indigenous women and non-Indigenous gender-diverse individuals.

19 Boothroyd, p. 10, (2000); Thibault & Hoffman, (2011).

20 Kay, J. (1985).

21 See generally https://gov.mb.ca/fish-wildlife/pubs/fish_wildlife/hard-to-be-a-moose.pdf.

22 https://www.facinghistory.org/stolen-lives-indigenous-peoples-canada-and-indian-residential-schools/historical-background/dispossession-destruction-and-reserves.

thrive. Moreover, this tendency to marginalize rights of Indigenous people deeply intensifies sensitivities to climate change and constitutes severe challenges to their livelihood.[23]

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals are disproportionately affected by climate change due to racism, sexism, homophobia, inadequate access to health care, poverty, sexualized violence,[24] domestic violence, and numerous other factors.

Indigenous people have survived numerous epidemics such as smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis. They have also survived the Indian Residential School system, the Sixties Scoop, and present child welfare systems. All of these were deliberately calculated to advance the mass dispossession and subsequent decimation of Indigenous people to take control of their lands for purposes of settlement and resource-based extraction. Despite numerous historical harms, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have remained at the forefront for the recognition and advancement of water protection, political resistance of pipelines and resource extraction, as well as advocacy for interdependence. Interdependence is the advancement of balance and harmony in collaboration to make sustainable decisions with the health and well-being of future generations of children as the driving force.

INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE; CULTURE AND TRADITION AS THE PATHWAY:

In terms of Mino Bimaadiziwin,[25] or Mitho Pimatisiwin, or "the good life," Indigenous people have a holistic view of health focusing on living in balance with their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. All four aspects are interconnected with their relationships with the land and environment. This

23 Boothroyd, p. 10, (2000); Thibault & Hoffman, (2011).

24 Man camps are temporary housing facilities constructed for predominantly male workers on resource development projects in the oil, pipeline, mining, hydroelectric, and forestry industries. Reports show a direct correlation between these encampments and violence against women. See https://www.secwepemculecw.org/no-mans-camps for elaboration

25 Simpson, L. (2008).

sacred relationship directly links health and well-being of Indigenous women, and gender-diverse individuals, with the health and well-being of lands and waters from which they come.

Despite the ongoing attempted destruction and control of Indigenous lands, and the adverse effects of climate change, Indigenous peoples continue to return to the land to reconnect with their roots. The summer of 2021 saw the resurgence of the Sundance Ceremony in northern Manitoba. Sundance Chief David Blacksmith traveled to remote Manitoba First Nations communities, such as Norway House Cree Nation and York Landing Cree Nation,[26] to revive this ancient and most sacred ceremony. In fact, a ceremony held in York Landing in August 2021, was the first of its kind in the community in over 150 years. Northern Manitoba has witnessed a major resurgence of the Sundance Ceremony, with more and more people making the pledge to dance. The pledge involves a four-year commitment. Indigenous people have always viewed the land as a healer and thus, acknowledge and recognize that if they take care of the land, the land will heal them.[27]

Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have important, sacred, roles and responsibilities in relation to climate change. Traditionally, Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals have upheld their sacred duty to be guardians, protectors, and keepers of the water. Water is sacred, and water is life. Without water, human beings cannot survive. Despite this truth, industry continues to pollute and destroy water to the point where our collective survival as a species is in danger.

Indigenous people feel interconnected with the land, water, and wildlife, through a means that is intergenerational, gender, and role specific. Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must resume their ancestors' role as guardians and protectors of the land and water. They remain resilient in the face of extreme and detrimental changes to the environment, and honour their responsibilities. Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals must be supported to take their rightful place in preventing, and resisting, the destruction of the land and water for economic gain.

"Everything we do to Mother Earth, we are doing to ourselves, and we are destroying ourselves."

26 https://www.northwest.ca/community/community-engagement/602/york-landing-celebrates-first-sundance-ceremony-in-150-years.

27 BlueSky, K., & Levasseur., A. (2021).

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