



Aboriginal Women and Climate Change

An Issue Paper

Background

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change¹ has garnered national and international attention to the state of climate change globally, however, Indigenous Peoples and Elders have warned against such consequences towards Mother Earth (Turtle Island) for generations. Indigenous peoples living in Canada's Arctic regions have noticed the impacts and geographical changes to their territories and hunting grounds for much longer than science has validated.²

The current state of the earth's health has always been a concern to Aboriginal women. The extreme weather events plaguing Turtle Island will have severe consequences to people, many in areas which may have not experienced such weather patterns before.³ The risk associated with unprecedented climate change may be devastating to populations and regions where extreme weather changes occur.

Aboriginal women have always played an important role in both traditional and modern societies and are integral to the wellbeing of their families and communities in times of crisis. Aboriginal women must be encouraged and supported in the important role of educating and preparing their communities to develop general adaptation strategies in order to minimize the potential harm from impacts of climate change. Women have been identified as one of the more vulnerable sectors of Canadian society. In fact, the list of vulnerable populations, as determined by Health Canada, compounds the risk faced by Aboriginal women. The more vulnerable populations in Canada at risk of climate change impacts have been identified as:

- i. Women;
- ii. Children;
- iii. Low income groups;
- iv. Groups with pre-existing health problems (i.e.: diabetes);
- v. Groups who live off the land or have a cultural reliance on environment; and
- vi. Northern residents.⁴

The listing of vulnerable population as outlined by Health Canada places Aboriginal women and children within most or all of the categories of vulnerable segments of the Canadian population. As a national Aboriginal organization, we are tasked with an important role in preparing our women and children to prepare for extreme weather impacts and to adopt adaptation strategies necessary to reduce the risks associated with climate change. The following are some examples of potential impacts of a

1 UN Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992

2 Seguin, Jacinthe Evidence Base: Where are we now, Where are We Going Health Policy Research Bulletin, V11 at13

3 Hutton, David, Ph.D. Extreme Weather Events: Facing the challenges in Health Emergency Management. Health Policy Research Bulletin. V.11 @31

4 Health impacts and climate change: p10-11. Health Policy Research Bulletin Issue 11, November 2005

changing global climate:

Heat waves, Floods, Ice storms, Lack of water supply, Heat wave related illness, Droughts, Food/water safety, Landslides, Epidemics/need for vaccinations, and Increases in vector/airborne diseases.

The sufficiency of preparedness can only be measured by the adaptation and resiliency to actual events. Therefore, the level of preparedness and sufficiency of adaptation techniques is dependent upon the perceived vulnerability of populations. Preparations must be directed at the most vulnerable segments of society.

The Native Women's Association of Canada is currently seeking solutions and partners to support further research to assist Aboriginal women in identifying possible health and safety issues and to assist in the development of adaptation strategies.

Conclusion:

Partnerships are necessary in addressing and adapting to environmental impacts of climate change. The Native Women's Association of Canada is encouraging partnerships with governments and environmental groups to assist in addressing and minimizing the risks faced by Aboriginal women and children in Canada.

Recommendations:

1. Promote and facilitate the Native Women's Association of Canada's participation and education of Aboriginal women regarding risk associated with climate change.
2. Support research and development of risk reduction strategies for Aboriginal women and children. Promote and support the partnership with Aboriginal Women in Canada's efforts and commitments to the Convention on Biological Diversity and related environmental initiatives in Canada.
3. Support development and delivery of emergency preparedness techniques and strategies for Aboriginal women and families.