Climate change, colonialism, and women's well-being in Canada: what is to be done?

Lewis Williams^{1,2}

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Abstract

The impacts of accelerating climate change across Canada are unequally distributed between populations and regions. Emerging evidence shows climate change and resultant policies to be worsening gendered social and economic inequities between women and men, with women's participation largely absent in climate change research and decision-making. These dynamics are resulting in negative impacts for women's well-being, with Indigenous and historically marginalized women at increased risk of experiencing health inequities as a result of climate change. To date, public health discourse has largely failed to incorporate gender as a key determinant of health in discussions of climate change impacts on populations. Paralleling this lack of development, the entangled relationship between climate and colonialism tends to be subsumed under the term "Aboriginality" within health determinants discourse. This commentary on gender and climate change in Canada is framed within a radical intersectional approach as an alternative course of public health analysis and action aimed at addressing resulting health and power inequities. Following an overview of evidence regarding the gendered impacts of climate change on women's work, roles, agency, and well-being, several possible public health action areas on climate change and gender are highlighted as necessary components for resilient communities capable of meeting contemporary challenges.

Résumé

Les incidences de l'accélération des changements climatiques sont inégalement réparties entre les populations et les régions du Canada. Selon les preuves émergentes, les changements climatiques et les politiques qui en résultent creuseraient les inégalités sociales et économiques entre les femmes et les hommes, la participation des femmes à la recherche et à la prise de décisions sur les changements climatiques étant largement absente. Une telle dynamique a des effets nuisibles sur le bien-être des femmes, et les femmes autochtones et historiquement marginalisées courent un risque accru d'être victimes d'inégalités de santé en raison des changements climatiques. Jusqu'à maintenant, le discours de la Santé publique a généralement omis d'inclure le sexe parmi les grands déterminants de la santé lorsqu'il est question des incidences des changements climatiques sur les populations. En parallèle à ce développement insuffisant, le discours sur les déterminants de la santé a tendance à fondre la relation enchevêtrée entre le climat et le colonialisme dans la notion d'« autochtonité ». Notre commentaire sur le sexe et les changements climatiques au Canada s'inscrit dans une approche intersectionnelle radicale qui se veut une option de rechange à l'analyse et à l'intervention de la Santé publique devant les inégalités de santé et de pouvoir qui résultent des changements climatiques. Nous résumons la preuve des incidences des changements climatiques sur le travail, les rôles, le pouvoir et le bien-être des femmes, puis nous faisons valoir que la Santé publique a plusieurs champs d'action possibles à l'égard des changements climatiques et du sexe, et que ce sont des éléments nécessaires à la résilience des communautés et à leur capacité de relever les défis contemporains.

Keywords Women · Climate change · Indigenous · Gender

Mots-clés Femmes · Changement climatique · Autochtones · Sexe

✉ Lewis Williams
lewis.williams@usask.ca

¹ School of Public Health, University of Saskatchewan, 104 Clinic Place, Saskatoon, SK S7K 2Z4, Canada

² School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

Introduction

Persistent social and economic inequities between women and men resulting from women's marginalization within social, institutional, and legal contexts remain the norm throughout most developed countries, including Canada. Accordingly,

women and men are differently positioned within climatically changing conditions, impacts, and associated decision-making forums. This reality is of increasing significance in Canada where rapidly changing environments are impacting the conditions, livelihoods, and health experiences of communities in multiple ways (Warren and Lemmen 2014; Health Canada 2008). Research on the gendered impacts of climate change in Canada demonstrates the ways in which climate change is exacerbating inequities between women and men (Griffin-Cohen 2014). For example, a national report “Women and Climate Change Impacts and Action in Canada: Feminist, Indigenous and Intersectional Perspectives” (Williams et al. 2018) recently released by the W3 Working in a Warming World Project, which points to ways forward in addressing climate change through the application of Western and Indigenous Feminist theoretical frameworks, outlines these dynamics in its executive summary. Both women’s lower incomes relative to men, as well as their gendered roles and intersections with other social statuses (for example, Aboriginality, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and age), and the ways in which these interact with climate change and related policies and programs, affect women’s work, roles, agency, and ultimately, their well-being (Williams et al. 2018). Despite these inequities, women’s voices and gender considerations are remarkably absent in climate strategies; a situation made worse by the government’s disinvestment in women’s equality over the past decade (Perkins 2014).

Most “Climate Justice” research and policy positions developed countries as the primary drivers of climate change with developing nations disproportionately bearing the impacts through lack of adaptive capacity and, in particular, the vulnerability of women in these countries (Arora-Jonsson 2011). Research on Indigenous well-being and climate change in Canada disrupts this framing through demonstrating how changing environments are worsening colonial-rooted inequities and living conditions, often equated with those of developing nations. Within Canada’s Northern Indigenous communities where climate change is most acutely experienced, a recent study shows the ways in which the mutually impacting dynamics of poverty, gambling and substance addictions, and declines in traditional food result in food insecurity and socioeconomic stress for Inuit women (Beaumier and Ford 2010), while other research demonstrates the negative impacts of disruption from land-based activities on mental well-being due to climate change and increased reliance on a cash economy cast adrift from land-based productivity (Bunce et al. 2016).

Globally, climate change causes and solutions are largely driven by the interlocking dynamics of colonialism, patriarchy, and neo-liberalist forms of development based on human and interspecies hierarchies (Williams et al. 2018). Indigenous feminist scholarship in particular explicates the close relationship between colonialism and hetero-patriarchy (social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are considered normal and natural) whereby settler nation states through complex

governance and kinship structures have managed Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s gender roles and sexuality towards the production of a citizenry that will bolster the nation-state (Arvin et al. 2013), including modes of economic productivity.

Relatedly, climate change science and strategy is largely a Western, masculinized endeavour, stemming from the natural sciences and oriented towards technological strategies often aligned with corporate interests (Gaard 2015; Nagel 2015). Pertinent examples of this in Canada are the renewable energy sector (RES) and aligned “Climate Prosperity” initiatives which form the backbone of the Nation’s climate mitigation strategy, primarily driven by male, business interests. In the RES in particular, participation is patterned according to male norms, limiting women’s participation and perpetuating income inequalities through women encountering significant barriers to both workforce entry and subsequent access to positions of authority associated with higher pay. Such barriers include women being deemed less competent than men regardless of qualifications, fear of sexual harassment, and discomfort on women’s part regarding assumptions made about their sexuality in “non-traditional” occupations (Baruah 2017).

Most climate change solutions do not significantly challenge status quo approaches to development (Cameron 2012). (This is unsurprising in an age of climate change skepticism, and economic concerns regarding the likelihood of necessarily significant changes to the ways we live and work). However, research evidence demonstrates these same dynamics as suppressing women’s realities and capacities within climate change strategy and action, from local to global levels (Morgan 2008). Yet these perspectives are critical to implementing the deeper cultural shifts necessary for community resilience and a healthy and sustainable planet.

Climate change and gender as a determinant of health

Gender has been officially recognized as a health determinant within Canadian Public Health discourse for nearly two decades. Yet, it remains conspicuously absent as a distinct category of analysis within Public Health commentaries of climate change impacts and action. The Chief Public Health Officer’s 2014 Annual Report (Public Health Agency of Canada 2014), for example, makes no mention of gender, while naming income levels and social status, employment and working conditions, age, housing, and Aboriginal status, as key health determinants which shape climate change impacts on populations.

Emerging Canadian sectoral (Williams et al. 2018) and regional studies (Fletcher and Knuttila 2016), however, demonstrate the impacts of inter-locking economic, political, ecological, and cultural systems in shaping gendered experiences of, and responses to climate change with both climate mitigation and adaptation strategies imposing unfair economic and social burdens on women. This has been found to be the case throughout

the public (e.g., the greening of healthcare in BC), private (e.g., carbon taxes and greening of hospitality industries), and domestic sectors (e.g., recycling policies) (Williams et al. 2018).

Furthermore, intersectional analyses demonstrate the compounding influence of women's gendered identities with other marginal social statuses in shaping women's limited mitigation and adaptive capacities. For example, research (Perkins 2017) on climate change and related adaptation policy in the city of Toronto finds that from an equity perspective, women are more likely to be negatively impacted due to their substantially lower incomes than men, and therefore more likely to occupy cheaper basement apartments which are more easily flooded, and less likely to be home owners and therefore eligible for government infrastructure subsidies. Also, evident in intersectional studies are the impacts of mutually impacting social statuses of gender, Aboriginality, and low income leading to higher rates of food insecurity for Aboriginal women than men in Canada's North (Canadian Council of Academies 2014), and analyses of employment rates and income levels for GLBTQ2S (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and Two-Spirit) communities as rendering them more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. While US-based, this latter study, which is undoubtedly comparable to the situation in Canada, also demonstrates the extraordinarily high unemployment rates for Native American transgender people and associated stigma levels, as likely to perpetuate increased vulnerability to climate change disasters (Connell and Whittaker 2015). In particular, it also makes apparent the colonial, binary constructions of gender (absent in pre-colonial Canada) often imposed within climate change impact assessment and decision-making.

These findings are not to suggest that gendered impacts of climate change for men are non-existent. Indeed, these are very real, and of course, male identities intersect with marginalized social statuses. However, for reasons previously stated in this article, the primary focus here is women's well-being and agency and the ways in which vulnerability (and adaptive capacity) is "affected by social, economic, cultural and political conditions, and processes operating at multiple scales over time and space" (Bunce et al. 2016) (p. 1421). For women and historically marginalized populations, climate change impacts could potentially magnify health inequities over time. Given the accelerated nature and unpredictability of climate change, this poses a formidable barrier to achieving health equity between populations, a significant cornerstone of Public Health.

What is to be done?

Clearly, women and Indigenous women must be part of climate change action and decision-making at all levels if we are to (a) address the gendered patterns of climate change impacts and emerging risks for women's well-being and (b) incorporate

women's specific knowledges and experiences (including those that arise from the intersections with other marginalized social statuses) into climate change strategies in meaningful ways. Furthermore, public health action aimed at climate justice and health equity across the multiple levels and scales previously described, requires approaches to community resilience based on the "existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise" (Magis 2010) (p. 401). Resources for resilient communities include the development of individual and community capacities such as critical thinking, social networking, and inclusion strategies, as well as policy development aimed at structural changes in terms of how climate change mitigation and adaptation policies are conceived, articulated, and implemented.

In this vein, public health-related climate change, programming, and policy development could adopt a "radical intersectional" approach to addressing climate change-related health inequities. This approach not only includes a focus on women's perspectives from a range of social identity statuses, but also adopts a ground-up approach to articulating the ways in which marginal identities, as well as more fluid identity categories and associated subjectivities might in turn re-shape patriarchal and colonial constructions of climate change impacts and action for various groups.

Within this broad framing of radical intersectionality and a health determinants approach are three suggested action areas (framed more broadly as theoretical positions in the aforementioned Women, Climate Change Impacts and Action in Canada report (Williams et al. 2018)) which appear to be promising in terms of addressing gender equity within climate change impact analysis and strategy:

- 1) That all sectors, and particularly the RES, incorporate gender equity practices in work-force training, hiring, and management;
- 2) Expansion of our concepts of work and the green economy, such as child and elder care and inter-generational knowledge transmission. This also includes gender-specific responsibilities related to care of the environment undertaken by Indigenous women; and,
- 3) Inclusion of Indigenous women's perspectives in climate change action strategies through grounding these in worldviews that arise from belonging to the land and associated conceptualizations of citizenship based on inter-species relationships and responsibilities (Whyte 2014).

While the first action area does not challenge the dominant development paradigm, it is important for its inclusion of women and women's perspectives within all sectors, with particular emphasis on Canada's most significant climate change strategy to date—expansion of the RES. While inclusion of women in RES does not guarantee their immunity from

perpetuating beliefs and practices associated with dominant modes of climate change action, nevertheless, their presence within Canada's most prominent and powerful climate change action sector is important as a site of women's expression and agency. The second and third action areas call for a re-conceptualization within public policy of what constitutes economic exchange and appropriate modes of citizenship more conducive to a low-carbon economy. They not only value women's unique perspectives and leadership, but also point to fundamental changes to Western, neo-colonial conceptualizations of economic growth, and associated anthropocentric worldviews that have perpetuated climate change in the first place, thus holding promise for human and planetary well-being more generally.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest None to declare.

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