



To: House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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RE: Resource Development and Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls

ISSUE

The safety of Indigenous women, girls, and other vulnerable groups in the context of resource extraction has seen increased attention in the past decade. As an Indigenous-owned research firm, Firelight has been supporting numerous Indigenous organizations and governing bodies across Canada in responding to gender-based violence (GBV) issues. In the past seven years, the demand for supporting Indigenous organizations and governing bodies on this type of work has drastically increased. Clearly there is a change in public awareness and a need for a more robust response and measures of accountability to proactively address and mitigate this issue.

BACKGROUND

Firelight Research Inc. (The Firelight Group, Firelight), is an Indigenous-owned consultancy with experience providing community-based research and technical support services to Indigenous communities and organizations across Canada and abroad. The goal of our skilled, multidisciplinary group of research professionals is to provide high-quality research, analysis, and capacity building services to support projects related to GBV and resource extraction in the following areas of work:

- Community health research;
- Social, economic, and cultural impact assessment;
- Negotiations and agreements;
- Monitoring and evaluation;
- Indigenous knowledge and use studies;
- Cartography and geographic information system (GIS) projects;
- Governance, community-based planning, and policy projects; and
- Ecological research and environmental projects.

In 2017, Firelight was contracted by Lake Babine Nation and Nak'azdli Whut'en in northern British Columbia to support them in documenting the actions, legislation and strategies to manage increased incidents of GBV resulting from nearby construction camps. In partnership with the two Nations, the research illustrated that Indigenous communities, and women and girls in particular, experienced disproportionate levels of sexual violence and harassment from non-local workers who were temporarily residing on their lands. This report documented community, corporate and government-based strategies for addressing the impacts of industrial camps (in particular) on vulnerable populations.



Since the initiation of this work and publication of the report *Indigenous Communities and Industrial Camps: Promoting healthy communities in settings of industrial change*,¹ Firelight has seen a drastic increase in requests for support on this type of work across Canada. The map included as an appendix to this memo displays the various regions that Firelight has supported GBV work related to resource extraction across Canada.

As the attached map demonstrates, Firelight has supported many other Indigenous communities, organizations, and governments in responding to GBV impacts resulting from resource extraction projects in their territories. Common issues faced in Indigenous governments and communities include conflict with industrial camps, governance pressures related to camp management, and new workforces in the region drawing on and requiring services. Individuals experience increases in STI's and unwanted pregnancies, a rise in illicit drug use and alcohol consumption, higher rates of sexual violence, harassment and domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking, among others. The 2017 report documents the full range of impacts experienced by communities when large resource extraction projects bring an influx of non-local workers to Indigenous territories (Gibson et al. 2017).

The issue of GBV and resource extraction has been prevalent for decades, but only recently has it been receiving national and international attention. In 2021, a report on the workplace culture at one of the world's largest resource extraction companies, Rio Tinto, revealed that more than 28% of women experienced sexual harassment at work, and there were 21 incidents of sexual assault.² Racism was reported to be experienced the most by those who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in Australia. Our work has found that these experiences are similar in Canada. The realities and concerns of Indigenous communities affected by resource extraction are central to the principles of reconciliation and the calls to action identified in the MMIWG report.³

ANALYSIS

Throughout our work in supporting numerous Indigenous communities, organizations, and governments on the topic of GBV and resource extraction, the following analytical themes have occurred in numerous instances:

- There are no tracking mechanisms to record the number of harassment and sexual assault and violence that occur in relation to industrial camps or resource extraction projects. Most companies manage workplace complaints internally, but do not report on them. Similarly, when complaints to get taken to the police or RCMP, they are seldom linked back to the project itself. Community members also often experience the violence, but only report incidences to their own trusted sources. Since this data is not tracked, instances of harassment and sexual assault and violence are not accurately reported on or understood.

¹ The Firelight Group, Lake Babine Nation, and Nak'azdli Whut'en, "Indigenous Communities and Industrial Camps: Promoting healthy communities in settings of industrial change."

² Elizabeth Broderick & Co., "Report into Workplace Culture at Rio Tinto."

³ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls."



- To Firelight's knowledge, the first reporting system in place that systematically tracks conflict and assault and violence related to construction camps is through the initiative of Lake Babine First Nation – known as Team Gooze. Lake Babine Nation's Team Gooze is one of the few Indigenous-managed operations to record data about incidents specific to resource extraction projects and construction camps. This data is shared with regional RCMP and other agencies so that incidents can be tracked, recorded, and acted upon. This six-person team works in communities across northern BC to respond to a broad range of social issues that emerge; 15% of those responses are related to construction camps in the region (See Briefing that will be submitted to this Committee from Lake Babine First Nation). As far as Firelight knows, this is the first accurate quantitative reporting of the types of concerns that emerge related to industrial camps.
- Quantitative data (i.e., the number of complaints that emerge directly related to industrial camps) are often considered to be the only acceptable or measurable form of data when discussing issues of GBV. Qualitative (i.e., oral or testimonial) data on GBV related to resource extraction has been being provided for many decades by survivors and community members. Firelight offers a comment on this: non-Indigenous society seems to prefer the quantification of stories over the reality of survivors. This is profoundly disempowering to the many survivors of violence. Furthermore, it leaves all these survivors stranded, as the government acts only in response to large numbers of incidents. As stated above, the lack of systems to reliably gather data only exacerbates this problem because the numbers of incidents on paper do not accurately reflect the real experiences of people.
- Historically, the number of complaints reported to the RCMP related to GBV issues are often much lower than the actual occurrence of instances. This is often due to historical and colonial trauma, lack of trust between community members and the RCMP, shame, and the assumption that survivors' stories won't be believed.
- There is no agreed-upon grievance mechanism for reporting issues of GBV that are linked to resource extraction projects, including within the RCMP, corporations, and the Canadian Energy Regulator (CER). Without an agreed upon and appropriate grievance mechanism, data will continue to go untracked and incidents will continue to occur unreported.
- Agreements between Indigenous communities and resource extraction companies rarely address GBV, and historical agreements are often not re-examined. The exclusion of GBV provisions with resource extraction companies results in continued ignorance about the very real impacts on communities from harassment, sexual assault and violence related to resource extraction.
- The absence of relationships between community members, non-local workers, companies, the RCMP and the CER leads to a breakdown in understanding the reality of Indigenous women and girls' lives in resource-adjacent communities. The breakdown of understanding results in an increase in GBV-related incidents.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop robust and agreed-upon reporting mechanisms between Indigenous communities and the RCMP, corporations, and the government for recording and responding to complaints about GBV and resource extraction projects. Data collected must include oral testimony;
2. Require agreements between Indigenous communities and resource extraction companies to proactively address GBV issues and identify mitigation strategies;
3. Require that cultural safety training be a component of laws, policies, and practices within companies, the RCMP, and governments at all levels of staffing (including senior executives and management, as well as contractors); and
4. Fund Indigenous communities to establish their own monitoring committees and interagency groups so that data reporting, tracking, and coding can be improved at all levels.

Please feel free to contact us for further discussion of this brief at ginger.gibson@thefirelightgroup.com

REFERENCES

Elizabeth Broderick & Co. 2021. Report into Workplace Culture at Rio Tinto. Rio Tinto.
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The Firelight Group, Lake Babine Nation, and Nak'azdli Whut'en. (2017). Indigenous Communities and Industrial Camps: Promoting healthy communities in settings of industrial change. Victoria, B.C.: The Firelight Group. https://firelight.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Firelight-work-camps-Feb-8-2017_FINAL.pdf

APPENDIX A



Figure 1: Regions in which Firelight has Conducted Gender-based Violence Research Connected to Resource Extraction