

## **INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE FOREST SECTOR FINAL REPORT**

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the National Steering Committee for Gender Equity in Canada's Forest Sector

March, 2021

### **Introduction**

Indigenous women are often seen as victims, the lowest of the low, the poorest of the poor, facing extreme violence and discrimination. But Indigenous women are also leaders, taking care of their children and their communities, seeking out education to improve themselves and their families' situations. Their education on forest land stewardship comes from a combination of traditional knowledge, universities, colleges and on-the-job experience. These leaders are an inspiration to Indigenous youth. By profiling the accomplishments of Indigenous women in the forest sector, this project aims to shed a different light on their contributions in the forest sector thereby increasing appreciation of Indigenous women's roles in the sector.

Funded by the Canadian Institute of Forestry/Institut forestier du Canada, this study was conducted to explore Indigenous women's leadership in the forest sector through interviews, with the results to inform the National Action Plan on Gender Equity in Canada's Forest Sector.

### **Methods**

A pool of potential interviewees was compiled beginning with the database of the National Aboriginal Forestry Association (NAFA), an Indigenous-controlled not-for-profit, and the personal network of the researcher, Dr. Peggy Smith, who has worked in the forest sector with a focus on Indigenous engagement for the past 30 years, including as Senior Advisor at NAFA. With the help of research assistant Erin Knight, further contacts were sought through the Steering Committee on Gender Equity in Canada's Forest Sector. From this pool, the research assistant contacted potential interviewees to explain the project and seek willing interviewees. Fifteen semi-structured interviews following an Interview Guide (Appendix I) were conducted via phone or videoconferencing between September and December 2020. Some interview questions were similar to those asked by Dr. Tracey Adams in her interviews with women in the forest sector, completed as part of the Gender Equity in Canada's Forest Sector National Action Plan project.

Interviews were transcribed by the research assistant and checked by interviewees. The results were analyzed using coding to develop common themes across the interviews.

## **Results**

The Indigenous women interviewed ranged between the ages of 22-58 with two (2) not providing this information. Two (2) were below 30, so could be described as youth. Their education and work experience are broadly described below under Sector Experience and Work. Their current work varies with five (5) working as managers of lands and resources departments in First Nation communities, two as directors and one as a youth intern for non-governmental organizations, one in education as an Indigenous student recruiter, one as an urban forester, one as a researcher with a focus on Indigenous forestry, one as a policy advisor in the federal government, one as a project forester, one as a forest technician focussed on timber development, and one as an Indigenous Relations advisor in the energy sector.

Given that the National Aboriginal Forestry Association's education goal was to encourage more Indigenous people to become Registered Professional Foresters—a campaign conducted between approximately 1995-2010—the study's reliance on mainly NAFA's contact list focussed on women who had pursued post-secondary education in the forest sector. As a result, Indigenous women working in the skilled trades did not participate in this study, an area of research that needs to be pursued.

Responses to the study questions have been divided into seven themes:

- 1) Sector experience and work
- 2) Inspirations
- 3) Opportunities/contributions
- 4) Incorporation of Traditional knowledge
- 5) Family and relationships
- 6) Challenges
- 7) Advice and recommendations

### ***Sector Experience and Work***

All the women were highly educated. All but two (2) participants had either forestry-based field training or schooling experience. All but two (2) participants acknowledged completing post-secondary education in the sector, one (1) of whom is currently enrolled in a program. Five (5) had post-graduate degrees, either a Masters or PhD. Five (5) participants provided responses that confirmed them holding the Registered Professional Forester (RPF) designation (2 non-practicing), while others said they had performed professional and/or technical forester duties (silviculture, engineering or harvest planning) at some point in their career. All but one (1) of the

participants acknowledged that their current work, whether in the sector or estranged from it, is now office centered and includes little to no active/regular field work.

### *Inspirations*

All participants said that an affinity for nature was the impetus for their desire to work in the forestry sector. Several participants noted that this connection to the Land was informed by relationships with family, community members or others close to them who shared the same sentiment. All but one (1) participant responded that the opportunity to work outdoors was a key factor in choosing a career in forestry or a related field. Several participants talked about feeling a need to serve as a protector or advocate for the Land. One (1) participant acknowledged that despite being raised in and around forestry, she had no interest in working in the sector until compelled by post-secondary coursework. Two (2) participants admitted that forestry was not a “first choice” for their career, but a summer forestry-related work experience changed their mind.

*I didn't grow up in a family that is forestry-based so I didn't really know what the industry was actually when I started, but I did want to make a difference. So I was someone that joined the forest industry to make a difference on the land with my First Nation and other First Nations.*

Each participant had a different story about the people who provided inspiration for them to enter or continue in the forestry sector. Among those influences were family, colleagues, teachers or partners. Participants described some of this inspiration as time shared on the Land, mentorship received at either school or work, and encounters with employers or other members of the sector.

### *Opportunities/Contributions*

Respondents discussed their lack of knowledge about the range of opportunities in the forestry sector and how attending events, taking advantage of programs, and networking all broadened their opportunities. When it came to contributions, all participants put their contributions to community at the top of their list.

Several participants responded that the ability to move both laterally and tangentially within the forestry sector provided opportunities to explore career paths that were not previously known to them as related to forestry. Examples included opportunities to travel for work or to return to their home community having gained experience or training elsewhere. Work in forestry-focused research was highlighted by five (5) participants, three (3) of whom mentioned working with the National Aboriginal Forestry Association as an important opportunity.



Several participants talked about opportunities arising as an element of luck or being in “the right place at the right time”. As mentioned, most participants were not aware of some facets of forestry work and they said certain opportunities arose from attending events, like conferences, networking, or taking advantage of programs offered through their employer or community. Four (4) participants commented that forestry as a sector does not advertise the array of opportunities within the sector adequately to youth, specifically women, and especially young Indigenous women. The youngest of this group commented that she would not have known of forestry sector

*I think that experience, getting field experience, really helped me get into forestry even though I didn't have a real forestry background, so it really gave me that street cred which is always helpful.*

opportunities were it not for the introduction to a youth skills training program. The participants who worked for or with the private sector industry noted the opportunities for advancement were limited to management. Two (2) participants said that travel for work in camps provided field experience that could not be acquired otherwise. Participants no longer working for industry, or those who had chosen not

to, conveyed a greater sense of job satisfaction, especially if their work was community-focused or community-based. Participants working in the research area also conveyed the sentiment of preferring forest-related teaching and educational work over industrial forestry work.

All participants described their core contributions to the sector as being best reflected in work that supported their community, be it their traditional territory or otherwise. This included time spent advocating for and/or designing programming for participation in forestry activities or building local capacity through training or youth mentorship. Participants who worked in the research or policy arenas said they felt their work made a contribution at the community level, even if their work was not used directly by their home community. Urban forestry is represented in this study by one (1) participant who confirmed that forest work for a municipality provides a sense of contribution at both the community and regional levels.

*That's the real motivation behind this as we know that so many of our youth in our community don't have a direction or an identity to adhere to and to strive for. And so I think by creating our programs, surely, we've affected the lives of individuals and hopefully have changed them, kind of redirected them from a destructive path... And who knows, maybe in that pool we created our next national chief, who knows... what the potential of individuals could be. Those are the some of the proudest moments of our work knowing that we may be transforming individual lives for good.*

More than half of participants acknowledged feeling that past or current work as an Indigenous woman in the sector in and of itself was a contribution and that recognition through an award or

work opportunity provided a sense of accomplishment. The two (2) youngest participants in this study both credit the receipt of awards or recognition as providing an opportunity for introductions to prospective employers.

Interestingly, five (5) participants with field experience in professional forestry noted that the chance to fly in a helicopter was a favorite memorable opportunity.

### ***The Role of Traditional Knowledge***

Except for two (2) participants, the incorporation of traditional knowledge in their work was described as being present but not central to their work. The two (2) participants for whom

*You can verify the validity of traditional knowledge through a scientific lens and then we can use it to build trust, to build that comfort in the broader community to use traditional ecological knowledge in things like management of resources. There's a lot of opportunities to incorporate it into my practice and forestry.*

traditional knowledge was not present identified a lack of personal exposure to their Indigenous heritage as the cause. Of the participants that acknowledged bringing traditional teachings into their work, several noted that it was done through personal ceremony or to inform others of cultural practices and protocols. Two (2) participants confirmed that they relied on Elders to inform aspects of their work. Of the participants who acknowledged bringing traditional teachings into their work, three (3) admitted to a feeling of tokenism when called upon to share

teachings/knowledge in spaces where Indigenous representation was the minority. Five (5) participants noted that traditional ecological knowledge was more of a lived experience than a suite of demonstrative actions. Two (2) of those participants shared that a wider understanding of respect for the nuances of Indigenous culture would be better suited for the workplace than the inclusion of specific practices or teachings. All participants concurred that the sharing of traditional knowledge among young foresters was valuable and should be encouraged. Two (2) participants specified the need for better access to traditional knowledge keepers for those lacking that exposure, whether through a network of resources or mentoring. Further, all agreed that recognition for, and inclusion of, Indigenous ways of knowing is not common enough in the practice of forestry.

Interviewees provided broad direction on the role of traditional knowledge in the sector, another area that requires further exploration. To summarize, these recommendations included:

- Bringing Elders, community members, and family to act as key informants, e.g. to speak at conferences/discussions relating to activities on the Land;
- A critical focus on youth to ensure traditional knowledge is passed on;



- Observing ceremony (e.g., smudging before a harvest/meeting, offering tobacco on the Land);
- Addressing Indigenous worldviews in work and planning documents and sharing these worldviews with colleagues through workshops and other events; and
- Acknowledging engagement protocols with Indigenous peoples and communities in work and planning documents.

### ***Family and Relationships***

Apart from participants sharing stories about family or community, it was difficult to ascertain if there was a consensus about how raising children or maintaining intimate partnerships affected their work. Perhaps this was a shortcoming of the interviewer; feeling uncomfortable enough to ask pointed questions relating to partnerships and motherhood, or that the experiences are too personal to categorize given the number of participants.

Three (3) participants were not currently in a domestic partnership. Of those participants one (1) does not have children. Seven (7) participants had children, two (2) of whom had children six (6) years old or younger. Child-rearing support varied amongst these participants, ranging from support from a spouse, family or daycare programming. One (1) participant decided to stay home as the primary caregiver for her children until they were school aged.

Four (4) participants shared that they find the sector a conducive environment for motherhood; one specifically stating she felt the sector provided adequate space to balance work and raising children. Four (4) participants acknowledged that contract positions and work requiring travel were often a barrier to marriage or motherhood; one of whom noted that contract work had once made it difficult to support herself and children financially. Another said finding adequate childcare would have been impossible without a family support system. One (1) participant conceded that she had avoided making requests for accommodation related to childrearing for fear of not being able to advance at the same pace as her male counterparts. Conversely, one (1) participant said she had been able to bring her children into the field and experienced no barrier to maintaining both career and motherhood. One (1) participant declined to respond to this section of the interview.

*In order to function at the level that I wanted to in the company that I was working with at the time—10- or 15-day shifts at a time—it really doesn't work well when you have young kids. I feel like there would have been accommodations made had I made the request, but I wouldn't have gotten the same experience.*



## Challenges

Each participant discussed specific challenges based on their experience and work in the forestry sector. Generally, all responded that some of the challenges they felt were perhaps more universal to the experience of all women; specifically instances of misogyny in the workplace and the feeling of “needing to prove” oneself to male co-workers or employers. There were also several comments along the lines of industrial forestry being “an old boys club”. These comments were more common in participants who had worked in the private sector. Reports of micro-aggressions included: hearing derogatory comments, living in segregated camp accommodations, and being asked to perform administrative duties outside the scope of their work, e.g., being asked to take notes at a meeting or prepare/provide refreshments. Two (2) participants cited an experience of a micro-aggression in the workplace within the last 2-3 years. One (1) participant responded that her current work with an all-female staff in a welcoming non-Indigenous community might be sheltering her from the experiences of other Indigenous women in the sector.

*Most of the gentlemen were in their 50s or 60s and they thought it was funny to have a woman in the field. That was within the community. I couldn't wear makeup because I remember once I went in the bush and had makeup on and they said: “Are you looking for a husband?”, comments like that.*

Two (2) participants commented that they feel industrial forestry specifically is not doing enough

*I would say that it's more about being an Indigenous person working in the forest sector where your view is not mainstream. So you're always having to explain things. It always feels like your values are under attack because you know you're not just all about wood to the mill. You look at it differently. It's a plant and you have your family that's talking about medicines and things like that. You're aware of that extra context to the forest, that it's not just wood to the mill for people.*

to address gender disparities such as wage gaps and the lack of encouragement for women to work in the skilled trades. One (1) of these participants further commented that an overarching pressure for women in the workplace to “be nice and be polite” may account for a reluctance to ask for a pay increase or pay equity with male counterparts. One (1) other participant noted that funding constraints at the community level have resulted in times where remuneration does not reflect academic or professional achievement; essentially, that labourers, technicians and RPFs are paid the same.

Of the participants who acknowledged attendance in a post-secondary program, four (4) commented that the most troubling experiences of racism, misogyny or microaggression took



place in their school’s faculty and not in the workplace. Of those participants, two (2) shared an experience of micro-aggression from their academic supervisors.

Several participants conveyed having experienced racism in their workplace. Two (2) participants noted the most recent incident occurred in the last 18 months. Four (4) participants relayed a belief that their self-identification as an Indigenous woman, or their being “ethnically ambiguous,” resulted in being held to a different standard than non-Indigenous or non-female colleagues. Specific examples included a lack of opportunities for advancement in the industrial arenas of forestry and feelings of

*One of my colleagues described me as “ethnically ambiguous”, a way of saying “we know that you're not just white”. It’s like saying not English, Irish, Scottish but you're something, and we don't really know what it is.*

being “a poster girl” for women or Indigenous women in both the industrial and other areas of the sector. Several participants also noted that the nature of contract work, work dependent on the ability to travel, and the feeling of having to “work your way up” were barriers that persisted throughout their careers. Two (2) participants also noted feeling pressured to “be assertive” and “stand your ground” in order to gain or hold respect in the workplace. However, all participants maintained that their current work in forestry or a forestry-related field is stable and fulfilling. Four (4) participants commented that a return to industrial or professional forestry is no longer of interest to them. One (1) participant acknowledged her current and future work will result in distancing from the sector altogether.

### ***Advice and Recommendations***

The consensus of the participants was that young Indigenous women should be encouraged to look at for work in the sector other than that associated with the private sector industry. Several participants felt that the sector does not provide enough mentorship for young Indigenous women, resulting in limited access to the opportunities that are not industry focused. Labour and field positions to support industry were noted by some participants as avenues they would neither encourage nor discourage Indigenous women from entering. However, all participants concurred that field work is valuable; with some level necessary for gaining an appreciation for the sector and one’s place in it.

Several participants highlighted post-secondary education as being important for gaining interpersonal skills and developing personal confidence. Some participants encouraged professional forestry training to achieve the RPF designation, while others suggested broader natural resources education would provide more opportunities. Two (2) participants suggested skills training initiatives that expose youth to a variety of jobs in the sector would also be beneficial.





Several participants noted that young Indigenous women would benefit from support that encourages them to use their voice. One (1) participant commented that the lack of permanent full-time employment in home communities can limit Indigenous female participation in the sector for fear of having to leave home to find work. Other participants noticed a shift in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women's presence in the sector, yet they did not feel there was a cohesive network to draw from or connect with. Two (2) participants commented on the need for nation-level programming to support and foster Indigenous youth for entry into the forestry sector.

Two (2) participants commented that work designed to advance the presence of women in the forest sector must remain reflective: that spaces women seek to occupy in the sector are

*It's interesting, this gender question. If you call First Nation Band's administration and you call their natural resource department, there's probably a 90% chance you'll talk to a woman. Likely the vast majority of her staff will be women. It's the funniest thing because when you see a leader, say in a national organization, or you see somebody gets a phone call to go represent the community at the Assembly of First Nations or at the United Nations, it's a man. But all of us know that the people who are actually doing the work, who actually know, it's mostly women in the Indigenous context.*

inherently competitive and have the potential to lead to power imbalances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Another participant commented that efforts to address gender-based issues in the sector should seek to identify and address systematic issues rather than tasking young foresters with the work of trailblazing. Contrarily, one (1) participant stated that gender issues appear to be recognized and better acknowledged by younger foresters. Additionally, participants highlighted

a need for greater reporting and dissemination of data on the successes of Indigenous women in the sector including areas of progress, how that progress is accomplished, and information on the metrics used to collect and assess data.

When asked what they might recommend to support Indigenous women in the forest sector, interviewees pointed to the need to facilitate a mentorship network and to improve resources for community-based work. Two (2) participants specified the need for greater efforts to engage young foresters at the secondary and post-secondary levels through the forestry schools and other related education channels. Finally, participants with industry experience highlighted a need for addressing the systemic barriers for

*I think what they need is a lot of mentoring. It's great to have that connection with other Indigenous women that are in the sector who have gone through it and found their way. They know how to deal with that. That's probably one of the biggest things I probably could have used was more mentoring.*

all women, specifically in logging, and greater promotion of the areas of work existing outside of industrial forestry.

## **Conclusion**

Drawn to the forest sector by an affinity for nature and a connection with the Land, Indigenous women seem to have found the most satisfaction in the sector in their contributions to community. Community and Land come first, but often there are few resources at the community level to hire forestry staff or pay them a wage that reflected their achievements.

There is an undertone in these interviews of dissatisfaction with the private sector with many participants not wanting to recommend work in the private sector, particular in logging. It seems that this dissatisfaction stems from a perception that the private sector is not doing enough to address wage gaps, provide opportunities in skilled trades, confront racism and misogyny in the workplace, or open more opportunities for advancement. But not only the private sector was mentioned at failing to provide a safe and nurturing environment, even faculty in forestry schools and men in their own communities were identified as exhibiting misogynist behaviour. Access to mentorship from other Indigenous women in the sector and the ability to connect with other resources or supports through an established network were presented as avenues to address these shortfalls.

In spite of the challenges and barriers, these Indigenous women are eager to expand on and explore new opportunities that maintain their connection with the Land and community. Creating space for and mentoring new foresters has brought these Indigenous women a sense of higher purpose to their work. Field work is considered essential to understand the sector; noted as one of the inspirations to work in forestry. Indigenous women also want to bring a greater understanding of the nuances of Indigenous culture and knowledge to the workplace, especially to young foresters. However, they want to avoid the tokenism many of them feel in being called on to share knowledge and practices that are deeply rooted in Indigenous world views and natural laws.

This report raises issues that need further attention. A creative problem-solving workshop, with regular follow ups, that brings together Indigenous women in the forest sector with other women and men in the sector, academics, Gender Equity Steering Committee members, and others could focus on some of the critical outstanding questions about diversity and inclusion. How do we nurture Indigenous women's leadership in the sector? How can traditional knowledge be respectfully and successfully applied to promote Indigenous communities and improve forestry practices? What actions are needed to remove systemic barriers? What recommendations can be directed at the different actors in sector, from academics in forestry programs to decision makers in government, industry and non-governmental organizations? What are the best practices for



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mentorship and role models? How can we carry forward and expand on what we have learned in this first phase of developing a National Action Plan for Gender Equity in Canada's Forest Sector?

## Appendix I

### Interview Guide

1. Describe your work in the forest sector.
2. What inspired you to work in the forest sector?
3. Were there people who inspired/encouraged you to work in the forest sector?
4. What are the opportunities you've had in the forest sector?
5. What are the challenges you've faced being an Indigenous woman in the forest sector?
6. What do you think have been your greatest contributions to your community as an Indigenous woman in the forest sector?
7. What do you think have been your greatest contributions to the forest sector?
8. Have you incorporated traditional knowledge/teachings/science into your work? If yes, explain how you have done this.
9. How has your family situation affected your work?
10. What advice would you give to young Indigenous women thinking about a career in the forest sector?
11. What issues do you think need to be addressed in a National Action Plan for Gender Equity in the Forest Sector?
12. Is there anything you would like to add?