

# “Everyone Should Have a Voice, Everyone’s Equal”

## Gender, Decision-Making and Environmental Policy in the Canadian Arctic

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*Dans la lointaine Arctique, les chasseurs et trappeurs Inuits locaux sont tout d’abord responsables de la gestion des ressources naturelles de la communauté. Toutefois, ils ont une double fonction en ce que les membres qui siègent en co-direction sur les comités territoriaux participent à en établir les politiques tout en assurant que les politiques nationales et territoriales soient implantées dans la communauté. L’auteure de cet article montre dans son étude sur le terrain, que ces organismes sont dominés par des hommes et que leurs mécanismes limitent sérieusement l’accès aux processus décisionnels et aux politiques pour les femmes Inuits.*

Historically, Arctic Inuit communities have been structured around a subsistence economy based on hunting and gathering. A deep respect for the environment underpinned the complex relationship that existed between the Inuit, the land, the water, and all living creatures. Based on generations of observing and learning from the land and elders, traditional knowledge<sup>1</sup> guided the Inuit in their decisions about how many whales to harvest, when the Arctic char would be running and where to find the caribou herd. As such, traditional knowledge was possessed by women and men equally. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the federal and territorial governments in Canada imposed a formalized system of natural resource management (a term rejected by many Indigenous peoples). In the 1980s and ’90s, hunters and trappers organizations were created in the North as a means of engaging and involving the community in wildlife decisions. In Nunavut, these organizations are referred to as Hunters and Trappers Organizations (HTOs) and are based in all communities. In the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories,<sup>2</sup> these organizations are referred to as Hunters and Trappers Committees (HTCs) and are located in the six communities of the Inuvialuit Settlement Region.

Working in co-operation with government representatives, members of Hunters and Trappers Organizations/

Committees are influenced by traditional knowledge and Western science. Despite the fact that Inuit women are actively engaged in fishing and hunting both directly and indirectly, they are largely absent from the boards of these hunters and trappers groups. As pointed out by Louise Grenier, although most literature readily acknowledges that Indigenous women’s and men’s roles and responsibilities in the community vary, the fact that these roles engender different knowledge(s) and that women’s and men’s traditional knowledge is distinct and complementary, is not. Women’s and men’s unique experience and understanding of their world is, instead, conflated into one traditional knowledge system- a knowledge system that too often privileges the male perspective (see Zweifel). This results in critical natural resource decisions and policies that are made without the substantive input of women (see Reed and Mitchell).

As termed by Janice Jiggins, women’s “distinctive knowledge” is pertinent to the sustainable development of resources. According to Consuelo Quiroz:

Women’s relation with and perception of their environment tends to be comprehensive and multidimensional whereas men’s knowledge ... tends to be one-dimensional, focusing on narrow areas” (3)

Women’s ability to identify and examine all aspects of an issue rather than focusing on one element in particular is critical when facing the complex ramifications of ongoing environmental change in the circumpolar North.

### The Role of Hunters and Trappers’ Organizations

In both Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, wildlife management groups were established as the result of land claims agreements. Following the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, 27 Hunters and Trap-



Mother and child fishing in Pangnirtung, Nunavut. Photo: Joanna Kafarowski

pers Organizations and three Regional Wildlife Organizations (RWOs)<sup>3</sup> were formed in Nunavut. Each community established its own Hunters and Trappers Organization to which members are elected. HTOs are primarily responsible for regulating harvesting practices and allocating and enforcing quotas at the community level while RWOs carry out similar tasks at the regional level. Both bodies are also responsible for implementing and enforcing relevant policies developed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans; Environment Canada; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and other federal government departments. The board of RWOs is comprised of representatives from community HTOs. Each of the Regional Wildlife Organizations appoints one member to the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board which is the co-management board made up of appointees from the territorial and federal governments and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.<sup>4</sup> The Nunavut Wildlife Management Board has extensive discretionary powers related to the management and protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat and the direction of wildlife research.

Similarly, in the Northwest Territories, community Hunters and Trappers Committees and the regional Inuvialuit Game Council were created following the 1982 Inuvialuit Land Claims Agreement. As in Nunavut, communities elect Hunters and Trappers Committee members who focus on advising the Game Council on local matters including the requirements of subsistence

users, camp registrations, land use applications and information dissemination. Each of the six local committees elects a Director and an alternate to the Board of the Inuvialuit Game Council. This Council represents the collective Inuvialuit interests in wildlife and board members sit on other joint management boards with various levels of government. In this way, the Inuvialuit Game Council and the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board hold similar powers.

#### **Gender Representation in Hunters and Trappers Organizations**

*The HTO have a lot of power in the communities and very limited females. Most of the boards don't have any females. I think there should be more females on HTOs. I also feel that NWMB should get more females involved. There should be more encouragement of that. Not because there should be, but because females constitute a certain amount of the population and they have stuff to add to this and it should be added to the table. (Nunavut representative, Department of Sustainable Development)*

The boards of Hunters and Trappers Organizations in Nunavut and Hunters and Trappers Committees in the NWT are dominated by men (see Kafarowski). Only 6.8 per cent of board members in the Baffin region of Nunavut



Cutting up Arctic char in Iqaluit, Nunavut.  
Photo: Joanna Kafarowski

were women in 2003-2004 and this increased only incrementally in 2004-2005 to 9.1 per cent (see Kafarowski). The Baffin region is considered the most traditional of the three regions in Nunavut. Additionally, only one woman sits on the board of the three Regional Wildlife Organizations combined (see Kafarowski).

A particularly low percentage of women is represented at the board level of the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board. The maximum number of female members of the board of the NWMB in any one given term from the Board's inception in 1994 until 2004 has been two.

Women are also poorly represented at the board level of Hunters and Trappers Committees located in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Over a six-year period, less than 20 per cent of board members of the Hunters and Trappers Committees in Inuvik, Sachs Harbour, and Tuktoyaktuk were women. Paulatuk has never had a woman board member during this period and is recognized as the most patriarchal of these communities. Holman and Aklavik have the highest number of female board members and both communities are recognized for their strong women leaders (see Kafarowski).

Between 1998-2003, there have been no female Direc-

tors of the Inuvialuit Game Council. Three alternate members during this period were women.

Although few women are HTO and HTC board members, they frequently hold the position of Secretary/Managers for these organizations. This is an advisory position but a Secretary/Manager can provide some guidance to board members. Despite the fact that women hold many of these positions, their decision-making powers are limited. Due to low pay, these positions have a high turnover rate with some HTO's/HTCS employing several Secretary/Managers in one year.

### Reasons for Gender Imbalance in Hunters and Trappers Organizations

Hunters and Trappers Organizations and Committees are perceived primarily as groups for experienced hunters and this is not a woman's traditional role in Inuit society. Staff in some fisheries-related organizations in Nunavut and Northwest Territories recognize that hunters and trappers groups are often conservative, patriarchal organizations.

*Most of the meetings we have, it's been a male-dominated situation. That has been the case in Nunavut. When we go in and meet with Hunters and Trappers Organizations and meet with the fishers, traditionally most of the people we meet with are male. I think it's something we need to work on and try to change. I think there are extremely knowledgeable individuals that I have met and chatted with on fisheries. But I think there's room for further expansion or further development of that, through having more women involved in fish management, fish development, and overall organizational management. (Iqaluit organizational representative)*

It is likely that more men sit on these boards because their skills as hunters and trappers are recognized and validated by the community (see Brody). In most communities in Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, many men hunt and trap and the majority of women fish. Despite the fact that Hunters and Trappers Organizations and Committees are mandated to manage *all* wildlife (including fish), higher status is accorded to males who hunt rather than women who fish. This higher status, in part, contributes to the greater number of male members at the board level of these organizations. Males, more than females, retain their position on the board for many years and there is no restriction on the number of years any one board member may serve. This may result in a board membership that is reluctant to relinquish its power by admitting new members (including women) with innovative ideas.

A significant portion of board members are male elders who have been active for many years as hunters and

trappers. While the experience represented by elders is undoubtedly beneficial, it may also intimidate younger people and deter them from applying to the board. Organizational representatives in NWT report that although some women are outspoken and have no difficulty participating openly in public meetings, many women would be inhibited by groups in which the majority of those present are male elders.

Although remuneration is provided for board members, there is no reimbursement specifically for child or elder care costs that may be incurred as a result of board

Establishing and managing harvesting quotas, dealing with conflicts over resource use, and addressing the bureaucratic details of wildlife management would all be skills learned as a board member.

*We should encourage young people because we can't live forever, our end could come at any time. There should be someone who could carry it on if we pass it on to them.*  
(Holman resident)

However, most HTOs do not allow youth members to

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## **A clear path exists for Inuit who wish to become involved in decision and policy-making processes in wildlife management in Canada's Arctic. It is equally clear that this path is not yet open for women.**

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meetings. This is another barrier to women who often are not able to make the significant time commitment required of full-time board members. States an Inuvik-based organizational representative:

*Most younger women in the communities have 9-5 jobs in the community and so don't have the time. There are definitely more women than men in full-time government jobs there. It's hard when you work full-time and have a family too.*

One challenge in many smaller communities is that there is often a restricted pool of individuals who join committees. This is particularly the case with dynamic women who do manage to combine working full-time outside the home with family and community commitments. Women are also mindful of the informal controls that exists in most remote northern communities regarding sitting on too many boards. Only a certain number of board/committee positions offering an honoraria exist in any one community and women are sensitive to the perception that "you are taking a job away from someone else if you sit on too many boards." Also, women appear likelier to sit on boards pertaining to health and education and other fields stereotypically associated with women, than those related to natural resources and wildlife management.

### **The Impact of Gender Imbalance on HTOs and on the Community**

Community residents in both Nunavut and the NWT indicate that board experience is valuable for all individuals and would provide an excellent opportunity for young women and men to learn about wildlife management.

join the board although youth are able to attend meetings. Most Hunters and Trappers Organizations impose an age limit of 18 years for board members that relates directly to the age required to obtain a license to hunt. However, some communities in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region are considering lowering this age limit to 16.

Organizational representatives report that increasing the diversity of the board membership has a positive impact on board effectiveness. Particularly in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, the boards of Hunters and Trappers Committees that are comprised of a combination of elders, experienced hunters/trappers/fishers and business people (including women) are often the most effective. This diversity ensures that a wide spectrum of opinions and experience is represented and that all aspects of an issue are argued.

Both community and organizational representatives emphasize that the presence of women on the board only improves the efficiency of the Hunters and Trappers Committees. States a Holman resident: "It is beneficial for women to be on the HTC. Women have different points of view and different ways of doing things than men that are more efficient."

Maureen Reed's work on the gendered dimensions of a contentious land-use planning process in British Columbia reveals that critical aspects of environmental planning were neglected when women were not adequately consulted. A further study on the effect of the Vancouver Island Land Use Plan on women indicated that

women linked the contradictory elements of environmental, social and economic policies in their daily lives... [and that]the specific and narrow interpretation of environmental and land use planning was not shared by women of the North Island. (201)

Similarly, participants in this study stated that female board members of hunters and trappers groups in the north bring different issues to the table than did male members. While recognizing and engaging in discussions regarding economic and environmental aspects of managing wildlife, women also raised questions about fostering traditional skills in youth; food (in)security and initiating related socio-cultural activities that focused on the family. Female board members embraced a more holistic concept of hunting and fishing than was evident amongst many male members (see Kafarowski).

Many Holman residents comment on the fact that many board meetings are long and drawn-out and that if women were running the meetings, the meetings would be concluded much earlier with all the work done. Certainly, Hunters and Trappers Committees are charged with much work to oversee and administer in the community but many women assert that:

*Women get right down to the point and are very efficient while men talk forever. Women are more conscious of time and they need to manage time the wisest. They need to find the most efficient way of doing this. They will try newer ways of doing things to be efficient while men used tried and true ways.*

#### **Linking Decision and Policy-Making Processes**

*It would be better to have Inuit people running the show, running fisheries development. Because it's closer to them, they're running their own territory and they're not relying on qalunaaq like myself from the south. So that's where we have to go. I think that's very important and those are the steps we need to take. (Iqaluit organizational representative)*

In Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Inuit women's participation in decision-making processes in wildlife management takes place initially within the community as a board member of the local hunters and trappers organization or committee. At this level, board members must implement national and territorial policies that are not always acceptable to the local residents or relevant within a remote Arctic community. Board members may then be elected to a Regional Wildlife Organization and thus gain experience working at a more advanced level. Working within a co-management board such as the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board or the Inuvialuit Game Council offers the greatest scope for women to become involved in decision-making processes and to acquire valuable skills. At this level, these boards are also responsible for developing wildlife management policies. These are powerful organizations and board members are well-respected. Significantly, members of these boards may use their experience as a springboard into politics either at the territorial or national level.

A clear path exists for Inuit who wish to become involved in decision and policy-making processes in wildlife management in Canada's Arctic. It is equally clear that this path is not yet open for women. As has been demonstrated, women are not well represented on boards at the community level and this lack of representation is apparent at both the regional and territorial levels. Women's lack of representation on hunters and trapper boards *directly* impacts on their lack of representation on co-management boards including the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board and the Inuvialuit Game Council. This results in a marginalization of women's knowledge and perspectives and a subsequent narrowing of the wildlife management agenda. Additionally, the need to redress gender imbalance in these organizations has not been identified by the communities themselves. Until this happens, Inuit women in these territories will continue to be largely excluded from direct involvement in decision and policy-making processes in wildlife management.

Across the circumpolar North, global change stimulates uncertainty regarding the natural and human environments. Shifting ice conditions, seasonal fluctuations, warming oceans and the arrival of insect and other species from the south disrupt the pattern of traditional activities of the Inuit that have existed for generations. In order for environmental change in the Arctic to be addressed, innovative and robust policies must be developed that are holistic, flexible, culturally relevant and sensitive to gender.

#### **Conclusion**

Gender imbalance on hunters and trappers boards at the community, regional, and territorial levels in the Canadian Arctic may result in poor wildlife management decisions that are not reflective of the diverse perspectives represented in the community. As has been outlined in this paper, individuals work within a local organization then progress to the regional and territorial levels (if they so desire), gaining greater experience in wildlife decision-making at each stage. Board members at the territorial level are then highly knowledgeable and capable of engaging actively in making decisions *and* making policies. The invisibility of Inuit women in environmental decision and policy-making processes at the territorial level as it pertains to wildlife management, can be traced back to the gender imbalance that exists on community hunters and trappers boards. A new project being conducted by Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association and the Arctic Council will be investigating this link further. Ongoing environmental and political change in the Canadian Arctic requires that all individuals- women and men, elders and youth participate actively and equally in these processes and that their perspectives and contributions are valued.

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<sup>1</sup>Also referred to as Inuit *Qaujimaqatugangit*, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) or local knowledge. See Thorpe, Hakongak, Eyegetok and the Kitikmeot Elders; Berkes; McDonald, Arragutainaq and Novalinga.

<sup>2</sup>That portion of the Western Arctic in the Northwest Territories, the Yukon Territory and adjacent offshore areas that is indicated in the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (1982). In the Northwest Territories, it includes the communities of Aklavik, Holman, Inuvik, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour and Tuktoyaktuk.

<sup>3</sup>In Nunavut, these organizations are the Qikiqtaani Inuit Association, Kivalliq Inuit Association, and Kitikmeot Inuit Association.

<sup>4</sup>Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Pauktuutit Inuit Women's Association, and Inuit Circumpolar Conference (Canada) are the three major national Inuit organizations in Canada.

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## FARIDEH DE BOSSET

### Insomnia

is a bird  
 whose wings  
 have been clipped,  
 It tries hard  
 to fly  
 only to fall on its impotent  
 body,  
 frustrated  
 and helpless  
 waiting to be rescued by dawn.

*Farideh de Bosset is a poet who sees the storm in each soul and the seed of beauty in each cell and wants to share it with the world*