

How does the theory explain the Economic Inequality of Indigenous women: A study of Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Economic Barriers in Canada.

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### **Posing the Theoretical Problem and Gap**

The persistent economic inequality experienced by Indigenous women in Canada reveals a critical theoretical gap in addressing the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and economic barriers.

The social and economic justice structures in existence currently do not adequately address the needs of Indigenous women who exist in societies dominated by colonial, patriarchal, and racist constructs. It is noted that although attempts are made to tackle some forms of marginalization, the more oppressive forms tend to become silent. This gap indicates a larger need for the inclusion of the intersectional concept in order to provide a deeper understanding of the systematic oppression that exists.

In her feminist essay *Intersectionality: Why Is It Important and Its Value in the Feminist Movement*, Isabella Thurston makes basic assertions about the usefulness of intersectionality in explaining the complexity of the oppression faced by particular groups. The work of Thurston emphasizes the dangers of mono-causal approaches, especially in feminist movements that have dominantly silenced Indigenous women. The perspectives of Indigenous women demonstrate the direction in which the concept of intersectionality has to be enlarged and fused- by placing focus on Indigenous discourses, including cultural, historical, and social elements that are relevant to their experiences.

Moreover, the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2006) states that such difficulties are not successfully met and are extremely rare as there exist very few programs and policies in place that specifically target Indigenous women's economic status regardless of their circumstances. Their report underlines the absence of policies and programs directed towards such groups of Indigenous women, which makes them even more economically stricken.

This research will engage with the concept of intersectionality by expanding its application to analyze the particular economic predicaments that the Indigenous women in Canada have. It will

enhance intersectionality with Indigenous views on social justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and reconciliation to expose possible linkages between colonialism, systemic racism, and gender discrimination. To this end, this study seeks to broaden the understanding of economic inequality and the strategies to combat it through enhancing the intersectional realities of Indigenous women. This approach seeks to fill the theoretical gaps and achieve real change in terms of tackling the economic oppression the participants encounter.

### **Introduction**

Economic Inequality among Indigenous Women in Canada Many authors write from very different perspectives. O'Brien, in 1995, described an economic and social structure of oppression. McIntosh, in 1988, identified that there are structures of oppression that are interlocking, such as race and sex. Thurston, in *Contemporary American Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots*, said that the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in his work, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." For the Indigenous communities in Canada's case, how does power and dominance manifest economically? The intersection point of gender and race situates Indigenous women in a unique economic position, for the most part, located at the bottom of the hierarchy, and hence, their access to resources is very limited. According to the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous women have been culturally and operationally taken to the margins as a result of colonizing histories and the inclusion of patriarchal policies; this exclusion of some groups has, however, led to structural inequalities which are still deep-rooted. Structural economic differences are further heightened with historical displacements, cultural genocide, and devaluation of Indigenous epistemologies, which directly impact Indigenous women. As postulated by Coulthard,

the colonial politics of recognition, as described by Tuck and Yang, always fail to tackle the structural origins of the problem, hence leaving Indigenous women at a great disadvantage.

As indicated by statistical evidence, the economic inequalities suffered by Indigenous women are indeed significant. According to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2012), women who do not belong to the Indigenous community have substantially higher wages than women in the Indigenous community, and their rate of poverty is much larger than the poverty rate of the average citizen. This disparity in wages is a definite manifestation of a whole range of other issues: lack of education, employment discrimination, and low representation in decision-making positions (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021). On the other hand, these inequities are also exacerbated through historical trauma and today's ongoing systemic racism. As Allan and Smilie (2015) explain, racism causes devastating consequences on the health and well-being of the Indigenous population, including equity in the economy.

Furthermore, their responsibilities as nurturers and leaders create further economic difficulties for Indigenous women. According to Hunt (2016), it is clear that the health and the social well-being of an Indigenous woman are built into her culture, which are both neglected by the mainstream economy. Their alienation is further provoked by the absence of culturally sensitive policies and programs, leading to poverty and exclusion from the economy.

The advocates attempted to locate these issues in a wider context, namely in other struggles, including feminists and human rights movements, arguing for a better understanding of intersectionality. Thurston (n.d.) brings intersectionality to the feminist table and underscores the need to combat intersecting forms of injustice to attain true equality. This study seeks to address the lacunae in gender and race studies in this regard by elucidating the systemic position of economics in the formulation of social hierarchies, while also envisioning ways in which this may

be altered for the better. It is important to bridge these gaps not only in the quest for the progress of Indigenous women but also in the quest for an even more fair and just Canadian society.

### **Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Its Application.**

This Theory paper uses intersectionality as the major concept to analyze the structural economic disadvantage that Indigenous women face in Canada. It is Kimberlé Crenshaw who first introduced the term in 1991, where she defined it as the interactions of overlapping social identities, including race, gender, and class, that shape an individual's experience of oppression in a specific way. For women belonging to Indigenous communities, it is these multiple characteristics of their lives that place them at the intersection of systemic racism, sexism, and economic deprivation.

Intersectionality is particularly relevant in understanding the economic challenges faced by Indigenous women as it goes beyond mono-causal explanations. As Thurston (n.d.) shows, mono-causal explanations oversimplify the most complex social circumstances, which is the weakness of the intersectional understanding of inequalities. Feminist and anti-racist frameworks offer meaningful perspectives but do not reference the specific issues Indigenous women have to deal with as these are colonial and contextual issues. Thus, intersectionality needs to be combined with Indigenous ways of knowing that emerged in relation to the colonial and systemic dispossession and oppression of cultures (Hunt, 2016).

Nonetheless, intersectionality has its downsides. Some critics of its implementation contended its excessive scope renders it less strategic. Additionally, its emphasis on individuals might go awry as it ignores structural factors that maintain social hierarchies (Carastathis, 2014). In order to fill these lacunae, this paper draws on ideas from feminist standpoint theory which stresses the importance of learning from the voices of the oppressed. It is this framework, rooted in the voices of Indigenous women which addresses the systematic barriers that pervade policy and practice (Harding 2004).

The unification of intersectional analysis with feminist standpoint theory provides context to the analysis by locating lived experiences within the context of structural constraints. These frameworks, working together, explain how Indigenous women are rendered invisible by a combination of historical dispossession, wage and employment discrimination. This integration underscores not only the institutional nature of their economic marginalization but also goes towards the development of culturally sensitive policies for structural transformation so as to redress the injustice that exists.

### **Poverty Among Indigenous Women**

Feminist Standpoint Theory: Sustaining Interconnections Between Indigenous Women's Poverty and Intersectional Framework.

Poverty among Indigenous women in Canada has also been studied through the lens of intersectionality, which is especially relevant in this type of investigation. As part of a larger framework, intersectionality situates overlapping social identities such as gender, race, and class as factors that contribute to the processes of subordination (Thurston, nd). In the case of Indigenous women, the interrelation of these social categories places them at a greater risk of poverty and results in further inequity of wealth and structural exclusion.

The consequences of poverty in the life of Indigenous women should not be treated as an individual misfortune but rather understood as the outcome of feminism and racism as systemic tools. Racism is a barrier to good health status and access to education, health care services, and employment, which breeds poverty, according to Allan and Smylie (2015). Wage inequality, occupational segregation, and lack of upward career mobility opportunities also have negative effects on the

economic outcomes of Canadian Indigenous women, according to the Canadian Women's Foundation (2021).

The historical lens of colonization and the ongoing legacy of racism and sexism explain why Indigenous women are among the most impoverished populations. According to the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2006), poverty is caused by structural margins that neglect the specific characteristics and contexts of Indigenous women. Hunt (2016) also believes that these dimensions must be recognized so that culturally relevant and equity-driven approaches can be developed. Policymakers and advocates who approach poverty through intersectionality can address the structural causes of earning disparities more effectively and thus contribute to real transformation.

### **Wage Gaps and Income Disparities**

The matter of wage gaps and income disparity goes without neglect, as Aboriginal women in Canada are amongst the most economically excluded. This perspective has a basis rooted in history and mass discrimination, as well as gendered economic relations that limit their chances of being treated in such a manner. Statistical data confirms that Aboriginal women earn much less than their non-Aboriginal colleagues. Studies by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2012) show that the average income of Aboriginal women was 30 percent lower than that of non-Aboriginal men and 15 percent lower than non-Aboriginal women's average. These imbalances depict the barbaric injustices that Aboriginal women encounter owing to being two times marginalized on the basis of race and gender.

Such income differentials are also reinforced through education, which is an important factor in the above-mentioned income inequalities. Education is usually portrayed as a form of overcoming one's economically insecure situation; however, for Aboriginal women, education is often not

possible due to circumstances beyond their control. A number of them have been found grappling with the effects of the trauma over their ancestors, under-resourced Indigenous education systems, or culturally irrelevant education content (Hunt, 2016). So, Indigenous women have no chance of accessing jobs with good remuneration which exacerbates the problem of economic disparity.

This segregation of occupational categories is in turn viewed as contributing to the wage differences as well.

Segregation into occupational categories is also seen to aggravate these wage disparities.

Aboriginal women were among those more likely to work in poor-paying, unstable occupations in the service and care economy, also being unpaid and meeting the expectations of many women (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021). This hierarchical division of labor serves to reinforce the negative impact of widespread discrimination against Indigenous women through the devaluation of Indigenous women's work (Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2006).

The impact of racism in this context as a contributing factor in these outcomes also has to be acknowledged. Allan and Smylie (2015) draw attention to how consistently embedded in racism, Indigenous women are rendered more economically inactive and less employed than others in the population. These discrepancies in wages and incomes are not simply a consequence of the actions of people but more of the strategies that are embedded in structural injustices that have to be dealt with as such (Coulthard, 2014). Dealing with these hurdles is crucial for economic justice and social equality for Aboriginal women in Canada.

### **Discrimination in Hiring and Promotion**

In the Canadian insider culture, Indigenous women are exposed to systemic discrimination in hiring and promotion that causes their economic status to be low. These barriers arise from entrenched inequities and a culture of the workplace that is exclusionary and discriminatory in



nature. Notwithstanding, policy pronouncements of equity and diversity are couched in fine words; Indigenous women often complain of heavy stereotyping, micro-aggressions, and even social ostracization in employment situations that restrict their chances for upward mobility.

‘Prejudice stereotypes’ are also evident in recruitment practices where Indigenous women are seen as poor performers in cases that involve cultures that are considered foreign or that require reliability focus. Allan and Smylie (2015) observe that forming stereotypes about Indigenous people perpetuates systemic along with underrepresentation in skilled work and leadership positions. Recruitment has, however, faced not only these biased assumptions and perceptions but also a mixture of these stereotypes with gendered ones that see Indigenous women at the bottom of the ladder than their employment with non-indigenous men or women.

Letting children be the target of micro-aggressions in the form of discriminatory comments, words, and actions slowly but surely pushes Indigenous women away from the workplace. These behaviors damage the affected person’s self-esteem, and such plans to sabotage one's confidence accumulate to create a hostile workplace. The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2006) stresses that exclusionary workplace cultures are major obstacles to Indigenous women’s employment and career advancement.

Children at an early age bore other children, even marrying when they were still thirteen and fourteen. This practice was both legal as well as permissible socially. Thus, parents did allow their daughters to bear the responsibility of a family, including the strength of maintaining their husband’s position. It is these same children who would go on to dominate the schoolyard, coming from fathers with strong genes and charismatic extremes, so this practice did not shock anyone (Graham, 2001). The abuse was also witnessed in how boys were raised, using aggression and violence in themselves rather than reason and intellect to allow them to justify their acts. A boy

knows when and where to fight and have troubles, and that belief remains instilled for a lifetime once understood effectively in their youth. Most of them were even born to the over-pound who had ample seats at school; those who did not go on to become rulers were ideal abuse winners.

### **Policy Responses and Recommendations:**

It is important to emphasize that to tackle systemic economic inequity experienced by Indigenous women in Canada; policy frameworks need to address the interlocking nature of race, gender as well as economic disadvantage. This paradigm shifts the focus because there are structural forms of discrimination that are entrenched and, therefore, must be confronted in a multitude of ways. Some of the recent assessments of Canadian employment and pay equity legislation have focused on specific measures such as mentorship programs, targeted recruitment, and broader social support infrastructures, which would help improve Indigenous women's outcomes (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012).

The economic participation of the Indigenous women can also be improved by making sure that basic needs like child care services, health care provision, and affordable transport services are available. The Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2006 reports that lack of access to these services entrenches poverty and geographic mobility. For example, Hunt (2016) points out that Indigenous women's well-being and economic stability can be enhanced because the provision of culturally competent healthcare services addresses their specific needs.

Moreover, wage transparency and pay equity policies need to be instituted to reduce the income gap between the two groups since Indigenous women earn much less than their non-indigenous peers (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021). Where pay equity regulations are in place, there must also be effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance in all sectors. Coulthard

(2014) submits that commencing with the appreciation and acknowledgment of colonially induced injustices and imbalances is central to their remedy.

As this suggests, the recommendations fit well with an interactional approach to poverty that, in a similar way, understands the nature of structural barriers and the ways they interact with people's lives. As such, Thurston (n.d.) notes that dealing with interlocking oppressions needs inclusivity and change and policy interventions. If Canada employs these strategy sets, it will be moving toward addressing the ingrained structural inequalities that underlie economic disparity within the Indigenous woman population and work toward building a greater equity in society.

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing social and economic disparities that Indigenous women in Canada face presents a theoretical shortcoming in comprehending gender, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination. Today's existing frameworks of social and economic justice are not able to grasp the realities that Indigenous women face in a colonial, patriarchal, and racist world. As Thurston (n.d.) notes, mono-causal explanations often marginalize such groups, which require intersectionality as a more effective response to systemic suppression and violence. The present study advocates the need for an incorporation of Indigenous cultural, historical, and social narratives within the frameworks of intersectionality to fill these gaps.

Some of the causes that sustain wage and income gaps, social and institutional disaggregation dependence on tribal relations, and nepotism in employment, as well as the promotion of Indigenous women, are inherent within the system. A study by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2012) indicated that Indigenous women are relatively poorer than non-Indigenous women, which dishonors some of the economic opportunities that are a legacy of colonialism, racism, systemic notions of ethnicity, and sexism. In addition, Hunt (2016) also

stresses that to address the socioeconomic status of Indigenous women, healing from historical trauma and structural inequities must be desired through culturally relevant and equity-sensitive strategies.

Policy options include enhancement of fair pay legislation, introduction of wage reporting, and effective loss provisions with respect to income differentials. Investments in culturally appropriate early childhood education and care, health care, and transport services can mitigate structural barriers further (Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2006). Moreover, overcoming workplace discrimination via mentorship and building an inclusive context is key to improving representation and upward mobility for Indigenous women (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

Future research should explore how intersectionality can be enhanced with Indigenous perspectives on sovereignty, social justice, and reconciliation. incorporation of Indigenous experience and values. Furthermore, systemic racism, as well as coloniality's political economy, might even help shape such practices. Combining theory and practice can be conducive in fighting against economic inequalities and promoting fairness which in turn contributes to a greater ambivalence for Canada, which is that of reconciliation and equity. Such endeavors hold out the possibility of transformative change on the part of Indigenous women and society as a whole.

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