



INDIGENOUS GENDERED  
**EXPERIENCES OF WORK**  
IN AN OIL-DEPENDENT, RURAL  
**ALBERTA COMMUNITY**



Angele Alook, Ian Hussey, Nicole Hill



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Angele Alook, Ian Hussey, and Nicole Hill  
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## About the Authors

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## Executive Summary

Alberta's oil sands industry is often touted as driving the economy of both the province and Canada as a whole. However, Indigenous people in the oil sands region do not necessarily reap the benefits of the industry due to limited land rights, limited access to economic development, and marginalization in the labour market.

While there is research on the educational and training barriers for Indigenous peoples in the oil sands region, and on the unequal participation of Indigenous people in the authority structures and labour markets of the oil industry, very little is known about the impacts of those unequal arrangements on gender relations of Indigenous families and communities. Significant knowledge gaps exist in the social science research in the oil sands region:

1. Possible economic or employment benefits of the oil sands industry for Indigenous workers and communities are not systemically monitored, meaning that there is an absence of information about Indigenous workers' labour market participation and experiences in the industry.
2. There is limited analysis of gender issues in the oil sands, particularly regarding Indigenous oil workers.
3. There is a regional imbalance regarding where research on the oil sands industry is conducted (i.e., most of the research occurs in Fort McMurray).

This report aims to help address these three knowledge gaps about the experiences of Indigenous oil workers by presenting a case study of Wabasca, an oil-dependent community located between Edmonton and Fort McMurray in the Athabasca oil sands deposit. Specifically, our case study focuses on the lived experiences of Indigenous working families in the oil industry and how working conditions impact families and gender relations.

This report presents an analysis of a mixed-methods study in which we used an Indigenous decolonizing research methodology complemented by the use of labour market statistics. Our study is predominantly a qualitative study of interview data, but these quantitative data enable us to comment on the gendered and racialized aspects of Alberta's overall labour force and of Alberta's oil-related jobs. We use an intersectional analysis; that is, we simultaneously examine gender, race, class, colonization, family, and work in the lives lived by Indigenous working families, and how the lives of these families are affected by broader political and economic relations.

A long history of colonialism has deeply shaped the relationship between Indigenous people and the state in Alberta and across Canada. The widespread systemic racism Indigenous peoples and communities still face in Alberta and across Canada is rooted in the colonial past and present, and these colonial relations undergird the development and current operations of the oil and gas industry in western Canada.

The five industries that Indigenous people living off-reserve in Alberta are most likely to work in are: construction; health care and social assistance; retail trade; forestry, fishing, mining, oil and gas; and accommodation and food services. The continued lag in educational attainment for Indigenous people in general means that jobs that require a postsecondary education are not accessible to all Indigenous people.

Direct jobs in the oil, gas, and mining industry accounted for 6.1% of total employment in Alberta in 2017, and only 21.5% of these workers are women. Alberta's ongoing commitment to the fossil fuel sector is obviously leaving some people behind. Women, Indigenous, and racialized people are finding their way into these jobs, but they are still the exception, and they face enormous challenges of discrimination when they get there.

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four main themes, and several sub-themes, that interviewees discussed with regard to the intersection of work and family life as they impact community health:

1. Participants' career development, and the racial and gender discrimination they've experienced.
2. Workers' families, including how paid and unpaid work happens, and the positive and negative impacts their work in the oil industry has on their families and on them as individuals.
3. The precarious reality of working and living in a boom-and-bust economy.
4. Community, specifically as it relates to uniquely Indigenous community relations in an oil-dependent region.

*Miyo-pimatisiwin* for working class Indigenous people is a balanced good life for the economy, family, and community. Indigenous people lost *miyo-pimatisiwin* in their lives when the relationship was severed with the land due to colonialism. Families and workers in Wabasca that participated in our study are seeking out and also experiencing challenges to *miyo-pimatisiwin* in their day-to-day lives. Interviews demonstrate that individuals working in the oil industry have experienced gender and racial discrimination at and related to work. At the same time, Indigenous companies have been able to carve out space in what has been an industry primarily dominated by non-Indigenous people. In doing so, these companies have created space



for Indigenous workers to create family-like work communities that they are proud of, rather than being held back or excluded based on their indigeneity.

The oil industry's boom-bust cycle and the pressures of capitalism can bring significant imbalance and disruption to communities. However, through relationality in the community, specifically paid and unpaid caring work that is largely performed by women, the community works to establish balance. The industry itself may foster and exploit women's engagement in this type of care work through its very structure and practices that create barriers and deterrents for women and ultimately reduce their participation in the higher-paying oilfield jobs.

Stress is a significant issue for community members, from paid and unpaid work pressures, to work precarity, to social issues in the community. These stresses necessitate an array of stress-relief strategies as well as support from immediate and extended family to mitigate stress.

Some interviewees have internalized hegemonic racist stereotypes and narratives that Indigenous workers lack the drive to move up the labour ladder. At the same time, some workers are conscious of the stereotypes and resist them.

There is also a concern with the class divisions created by the industry. Many Indigenous workers may end up streamed into unskilled labourer positions, and the few Indigenous workers that become skilled journeymen or journeywomen sometimes end up being business owners by starting their own contracting companies. With this emergence of small-scale Indigenous capitalists is the concern that capitalist relations will get implanted in Indigenous communities, hooking them into the trans-local practices of ruling that are integral to corporate power and dividing the community against itself.

From the perspective of *miyo-pimatisiwin*, a critical question is how Indigenous understandings of being relations and caring for the collective good can be maintained when capitalist structures divide the community by class and individualist approaches impact community relations.

**“ Indigenous people in the oil sands region do not necessarily reap the benefits of the industry. ”**

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## 1. Introduction

Alberta’s oil sands industry is often touted as driving the economy of both the province and Canada as a whole. However, Indigenous people in the oil sands region do not necessarily reap the benefits of the industry due to limited land rights, limited access to economic development, and marginalization in the labour market. While there is research on the educational and training barriers for Indigenous peoples in the oil sands region (Taylor, Friedel, and Edge 2009), and on the unequal participation of Indigenous people in the authority structures and labour markets of the oil industry (Taylor and Friedel 2011), very little is known about the impacts of those unequal arrangements on gender relations of Indigenous families and communities.

Recent research in Fort McMurray investigates how gender and race shape experiences of work in the region, but these studies do not focus on Indigenous workers’ experiences (Dorow 2015; Foster and Barnetson 2015; O’Shaughnessy and Dogu 2016). A key finding of Tara Joly and Clinton Westman’s (2017, v) recent review of the social science research in the oil sands region is that “there has been virtually no monitoring of economic or employment benefits (claimed as the principal benefit) or similar trade-offs involving Indigenous communities. This includes a lack of information about labour market participation and experiences.” Joly and Westman also point out that there is limited analysis of gender issues in the oil sands, particularly regarding Indigenous oil workers, and that there is a regional imbalance regarding where research on the oil sands industry is conducted (i.e., most of the research occurs in Fort McMurray).

This report aims to help address these three knowledge gaps about the experiences of Indigenous oil workers by presenting a case study of Wabasca, an oil-dependent community located between Edmonton and Fort McMurray in the Athabasca oil sands deposit. Specifically, our case study focuses on the lived experiences of Indigenous working families in the oil industry, and how working conditions impact families and gender relations.

The Wabasca area is headquarters to the Bigstone Cree Nation (BCN) reserve lands, composed of five small plots of land, as well as to the Municipal District of Opportunity #17 (MD) that surrounds the reserve lands. The MD, which describes itself as the “land of opportunity” (see MD of Opportunity n.d.) to emphasize its abundant natural resources and large land base, is the third-largest municipality in Alberta and stretches across 3.14 million hectares, while the BCN “checkerboard” reserve land only covers 20,000 hectares. The permanent resident population of Wabasca is about 3,500 (this includes MD and BCN on-reserve residents). There were also 1,775 beds in work camps across the region in mid-2016, which house a temporary oil industry workforce known as a “shadow population.”

Our report builds on Alook's PhD dissertation research in Wabasca and Edmonton (Alook 2016), which found that for Indigenous people, extended family networks and building healthy family relations act as a form of resistance and resilience to colonial and gendered structures in school and work. Alook's research also showed that capitalist structures of resource extraction encouraged a gendered workforce and gendered life scripts. Indigenous men seemed to be streamed into traditionally masculine careers directly in the oil industry (e.g., trades, general labourers, and heavy equipment operating). The Indigenous male interviewees in Alook's PhD research discussed a life script in which they left school early to work in the oilfield, and how they felt streamed into this life course by the school system and the oil industry. The Indigenous women in Alook's PhD research seemed to be streamed into female-dominated professions (e.g., administrative assistants, teachers, and social workers). Women discussed a gendered life script in which they needed to get an education to avoid a fate of early childbearing and poverty.

Our current research project focuses on Indigenous people who work directly in the oil industry in Wabasca. Building on Alook's PhD research, our study provides a more in-depth understanding of the range of Indigenous work and family experiences by investigating if and how those experiences are changed or impacted by oil development in the region. Although Alook's PhD research found that extended family networks were valued, it also showed varying gender relations within families, from those resembling Indigenous egalitarian gender relations to more western patriarchal gender relations. Several key questions arising from Alook's PhD research findings provided the impetus for our current project: What impact does oil development have on Indigenous families directly working in the oil industry? How does oil development impact Indigenous family and community health? How does the streaming of Indigenous men and women into gendered occupations affect family and community relationships and well-being?

The report unfolds as follows. In Section 2, we explain our research methodology, analytic approach, and some characteristics of our sample of interviewees. In Section 3, we provide some background information on Alberta's labour market, gender pay gap, and recent research on how gender and race shape experiences of work in the oil industry. In Section 4, we analyze our interview data in four main themes and several sub-themes. Section 5 contains our conclusions based on our research results.

## 2. Research Methodology

This report presents an analysis of a mixed-methods study in which we used an Indigenous decolonizing research methodology complemented by the use of labour market statistics. A decolonizing methodology enables Indigenous scholars to produce knowledge based on localized Indigenous worldviews (by interviewing community members, for example), avoiding western colonial practices of using research to exploit Indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). In short, this means it was not our intent to produce knowledge on the community and on local workers so that our study could be used by multinational oil companies to further exploit the land and the workers. Our research was thus done with, as opposed to on, the BCN community (Menzies 2001). In practice, this means Alook, as the lead investigator and a BCN member, sought to establish and maintain respectful relationships with the community, its elected leaders, and interviewees. Alook gained permission to undertake the study from the BCN Chief and Council through a band council resolution that outlines our project team's relationship with the community. Alook also promised to and did return the knowledge we produced to several elected community leaders before it was published as a public-facing report. After all, we were trying to produce knowledge that might be useful to the community leaders and members in their efforts to think through various issues and relationships in the community. Ultimately, this study belongs to the community, and it is up to them to decide what to do with it and how it might be useful in possible efforts to improve the health and well-being of the community.

Alook conducted all of the interviews that are analyzed in this report using the method of *acimowin* (Cree storytelling). The interviews were designed with her knowledge of the Cree language and cultural protocol. Voluntary informed consent was granted by all participants and the interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. We have taken steps to maintain the anonymity of the participants as much as is possible in the particular circumstances of the study.

The idea was to interview variously positioned community members to learn from their different perspectives and produce an analysis of how Indigenous workers' and families' health and well-being are affected by the oil industry. For our ongoing study, in the spring of 2018 Alook interviewed eight Indigenous people working in the Wabasca area, and for the purposes of producing this report we have also analyzed eight interviews conducted by Alook between 2011 and 2012 (Alook 2016). Fifteen of the interviewees are First Nations people and one interviewee is Métis.

The new set of interviews includes six male and two female participants, with an average age of 35. Half of the interviewees are married and have two to three children each. The other half of the participants are single and without children. Three of the male interviewees work as managers or assistant managers of oilfield service companies, and the other three are skilled tradesmen. One of the female interviewees works as an administrator of an oilfield service company and the other is a public sector worker in the community. The seven participants that work in the oil industry are employees of Indigenous-owned companies (owned either by BCN or by an Indigenous person or family).

The eight interviews from Alook's dissertation include three women and five men, all of whom were married with one to three children each at the time of their interviews. The average age of these interviewees in 2011–12 was 32. Two of the women are public sector workers and one is a skilled tradeswoman. Two of the men are managers in oilfield service companies, two are oilfield operators, and one is a truck driver.

We use an intersectional analysis; that is, we simultaneously examine gender, race, class, colonization, family, and work in the lives lived by Indigenous working families, and how the lives of these families are affected by broader political and economic relations. We combine interview data with statistics on the Alberta Indigenous and non-Indigenous labour forces. Our study is predominantly a qualitative study of interview data, but these quantitative data enable us to comment on the gendered and racialized aspects of Alberta's overall labour force and of Alberta's oil-related jobs.

In the conclusion section, we use the Cree notion of *miyo-pimatisiwin* (the good life). *Miyo-pimatisiwin* is a relevant analytic lens for this study because it is part of the local Cree worldview. We found the concept useful in drawing our high-level conclusions based on our more detailed research results because it helps ground our conclusions in the worldview of what is traditionally valued in Cree communities. The concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* includes a concern for balanced gender relations and the active role extended family networks often play in the life of someone living a good life (Hart 2002). To live a good life is to understand health in a holistic way, in which individual well-being is connected to overall family health, which in turn is integral to community health. Within this communal understanding of health, all aspects of self and community are taken into consideration, such as spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental well-being.



### 3. Background Context

*“ Many Indigenous peoples and communities are connected to the resource extraction industry in numerous and complex ways. ”*

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A long history of colonialism has deeply shaped the relationship between Indigenous people and the state in Alberta and across Canada. The widespread systemic racism Indigenous peoples and communities still face in Alberta and across Canada is rooted in the colonial past and present, and these colonial relations undergird the development and current operations of the oil and gas industry in Western Canada. Treaties in Western Canada, including in the oil sands region, were initially completed for the sake of creating stability for industry to move in (Slowey and Stefanick 2015). The process of colonization created incredible inequities for Indigenous peoples, seen manifesting today in intergenerational trauma related to the breakdown of Indigenous families as Indigenous children are taken into the care of inadequate welfare systems; under-employment of Indigenous people; reduced access to basic human and citizenship rights, including education, health care, safe water, and housing; and an epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Six percent of Alberta’s total population is Indigenous, and approximately 23,000 Indigenous people from 18 First Nations and six Métis settlements live in Alberta’s oil sands region (Alook, Hill, and Hussey 2017). Many Indigenous peoples and communities are connected to the resource extraction industry in numerous and complex ways, including as workers and oilfield service company owners.

The five industries that Indigenous people living off-reserve in Alberta are most likely to work in are: construction (14.6%), health care and social assistance (11.9%), retail trade (10.3%), forestry, fishing, mining, oil and gas (8.5%), and accommodation and food services (7.8%) (Government of Alberta 2018a, 10). The continued lag in educational attainment for Indigenous people in general means that jobs requiring a post-secondary education are not accessible to all Indigenous people (Alook, Hill, and Hussey 2017).

Direct jobs in the oil, gas, and mining industry accounted for 6.1% of total employment in Alberta in 2017 (Government of Alberta 2018b, 2). Only 21.5% of workers in this sector are women. In contrast, women make up 45.5% of Alberta’s overall labour force. Additionally, about four in five mining and extraction workers are between 25 and 54 years of age, compared to 68% of Alberta’s total labour force (ibid, 5). These statistics portray the Alberta mining and extraction employee as either a young or middle-aged man, but that is only part of the story.

The social science research on Alberta’s oil industry tends to focus on the operations of the industry in Fort McMurray, and the literature shows that gender, race, and country of origin are all built into the division of labour

**“ Women and racialized workers are highly overrepresented in feminized and invisible service, retail, and care work in the oil sands region. ”**

in the industry. In short, Albertans are living in a corporate-dominated province overly focused on the oil and gas sector, in a settler-colonial country that is built on an intersectional hierarchy of value that sees white, male workers benefit because of the super-exploitation of gendered and racialized people (as well as other intersections of marginalization not focused on here). That is, in a corporate-capitalist economy like present-day Alberta, even high-wage workers are in some respects exploited, but gendered and racialized people tend to be confined to precarious, marginal positions in which their low wages contribute to especially high profits (Alook, Hill, and Hussey 2017).

Sociologist Sara Dorow (2015) describes the frenzied work environment of Fort McMurray as a “pressure cooker.” Her research shows how much of that pressure is felt by women and racialized people; through their paid and unpaid work, these marginalized populations support and maximize men’s highly masculinized work in the oil industry, to the profit of those men, oil executives (who are mostly men), and shareholders of oil corporations (who, again, are mostly men).

While some women stay home with children to free up their partner’s time to work in the Alberta oil industry (90% of tradespeople and transport and equipment operators are male (Alook, Hill, and Hussey 2017)), other women and racialized workers are highly overrepresented in feminized and invisible service, retail, and care work in the oil sands region (Foster and Barnetson 2015; O’Shaughnessy and Dogu 2016). When we simultaneously consider the gendered inequality of access to high-paying jobs in the oil industry, the significant pay gap between men and women both in the oil industry and in Alberta in general (Lahey 2016), and the normalization of racial and gender discrimination in the industry (O’Shaughnessy and Dogu 2016; Amnesty International Canada 2016; Knott 2018), it is clear why men’s incomes in the Fort McMurray region are more than double those of women.

Law professor Kathleen Lahey (2016) highlights the sizeable and persistent income gap between men and women in the province. Although a gender pay gap exists in all Canadian provinces and territories, and Canada has the third-largest gap among OECD countries, it is largest in Alberta: women working full-time, all year make on average \$31,000 less than their male counterparts (ibid, 3). The gender pay gap is even more problematic when we consider that Alberta women are performing a “double day,” doing approximately 35 hours of unpaid house work per week, compared to men’s average of 17 hours (ibid, 9).

In a recent report, Amnesty International Canada (2016) finds patterns of inequality and discrimination against Indigenous workers in the fossil fuel extractive industry in northeastern British Columbia (BC). Treatment

**“Women are overrepresented in low-paying sales and service jobs, with visible minority and Indigenous women the most overrepresented in these industries.”**

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of First Nations and Métis workers in BC “varied enormously among companies and at different worksites,” writes Amnesty (2016, 40). Some workers told researchers they felt “unwelcome and unsafe,” and that they are the “last hired [and] first fired” for any job. “There’s an old boys club that controls hiring,” Chief Marvin Yahey explained. “After everything is in play, they invite the First Nations in for the shovel jobs, the grunt jobs.”

The Amnesty report highlights “the conflict between jobs that require long, multi-day and multi-week shifts often far from home, and cultural traditions of being out on the land with extended family” (ibid). Indigenous peoples bear the brunt of the socioeconomic and environmental burdens in regions where resource extraction happens on a large scale, yet they benefit the least from the massive profits generated by these industries.

One of the main findings of Amnesty’s study is that violence toward Indigenous women is a routine part of life for those involved in BC’s extractive sector (see also Knott 2018). Participants described daily harassment on some worksites. “It’s a boys’ club, so if something happens you don’t say anything,” confessed one Indigenous woman (2016, 42). Others described sexual advances or expectations by some of their male co-workers, and even cases of sexual assault. One woman who works in the resource sector summarized the masculine working environment, telling Amnesty that women “work twice as hard to get half the recognition.” The study describes the work camps as “a highly stressful environment. [The] physical isolation, and the drug and alcohol abuse at some camps all create an environment that can be unsafe for women” (ibid).

Likewise in Alberta, workers in the extractive industries are afforded a different worth based on their race and gender. White men are significantly advantaged in employment in the province, with the highest incomes in nearly every field (see Table 4, Lahey 2016, 21). Women are overrepresented in low-paying sales and service jobs, with visible minority and Indigenous women the most overrepresented in these industries. Indigenous men and women tend to earn higher pay in certain public sector jobs: health care, the arts, culture, and recreation and sport. Male and female workers of various races all seem to earn higher wages in trades and transport jobs, showing the value of skilled trades work. However, white men still earn higher wages than most in this occupational category.

Alberta’s ongoing commitment to the fossil fuel sector is obviously leaving some people behind. Women, Indigenous, and racialized people are finding their way into these jobs, but they are still the exception, and they face enormous challenges of discrimination when they get there.

## 4. Data Analysis

Analysis of the transcripts revealed four main themes, and several sub-themes, that interviewees discussed with regard to the intersection of work and family life as they impact community health. The first theme is about participants' career development, and the racial and gender discrimination they've experienced. The second theme is about workers' families, including how paid and unpaid work happens, and the positive and negative impacts their work in the oil industry has on them and their families. The third theme is the precarious reality of working and living in a boom-and-bust economy. The fourth theme is about community, specifically as it relates to uniquely Indigenous community relations in an oil-dependent region.

### Theme 1: Making Careers

#### *From the bottom up*

Many workers emphasize that labourer jobs are the entry point into the industry. One participant explained, "a lot of people here in this town, they'll start basically coming in as a labourer if they have no experience running equipment previously." At the same time, there is also a desire to get out of labourer jobs and recognition that it is difficult to advance from them. One worker reflected that he "should have went the education way and got some kind of degree or diploma" because he "was in the mud for a long time." Another explained that "it's hard to move up as a labourer ... you're in maintenance, like, there's nothing higher."

#### *Agency, discrimination, and perpetuating stereotypes*

The idea of unique individuals who possess the agency and "drive" needed to climb the labour ladder came up frequently. One manager explained that "you can pick up on the people that are able to move up." It's suggested that for those who do not advance the opportunities to do so are adequate, but "some people like to stay back." Describing Indigenous workers, a senior worker said, "there's only some that takes work seriously enough that they're willing to move up ... find the drive and determination." Talking about young Indigenous workers, he went on to say, "you see that in a lot of kids here. They're so happy that they got 'a' job; they don't want that job that's one step up." At the same time that he was talking about the importance of personal drive, he seemed to be perpetuating stereotypes of Indigenous workers as unmotivated.

Some interviewees raised the idea of "handouts," often in a disparaging way or in a manner that distances themselves from them. One worker explained, "nothing I got has been handed to me." These types of comments maintain negative stereotypes about Indigenous people relying on state handouts, suggesting if one does not have the personal agency to "work hard" and

“Interviewees described a stereotype that Indigenous workers are only good enough for unskilled work.”

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“move up,” then one lacks motivation. This formulation ignores the educational barriers and barriers caused by racism and colonial trauma that cause some Indigenous people to be unable to fully participate in the waged economy.

### *Held back by racial discrimination*

Interviewees described a stereotype that Indigenous workers are only good enough for unskilled work. An Indigenous manager explained, “the conception that natives will only be a labourer is something that we’ve had for years and years and that we have to try and break that norm. ... We don’t just operate shovels.” This normalization of racist stereotypes that Indigenous workers are best suited to labourer jobs stalls them in unskilled, lower-paying work. Interviewees explained that Indigenous workers in the oilfield are not treated the same as other workers, and sometimes miss out on wage raises while experiencing more wage cuts and job cuts.

One Indigenous worker that now works for an Indigenous company explained that “it was harder to move up for other [non-Indigenous] companies. ... Even if I was better than someone else, they would move up quicker than I would ... usually just white guys.” Another Indigenous worker said, “because I was First Nations, not because I had less experience ... it’s taken me longer to get up the ladder.” Both of these skilled Indigenous workers were able to climb to the top of the ladder when they worked for Indigenous companies.

One senior Indigenous oilfield official asserted his belief that a major oil company operating in a nearby area would only hire white workers from nearby communities: “They’re all in cahoots so all that work going on over there and it’s quite a bit—nobody [here] is working there ... That impacts a lot of people ‘cause there’s a lot of work there, but we’re not allowed to work there. It’s only *moniyaw* (white people) that are allowed there.”

In addition to stereotypes that Indigenous workers are unmotivated and only fit for labourer jobs, there is a gendered stereotype that Indigenous men are criminals. One oilfield worker described an incident while working in another town where he and fellow Indigenous workers were being harassed by locals (white men), and even assaulted at one point, yet police ultimately came to question and warn them the police were “keeping an eye” on them. After this incident, he said, “It was so bad I never did go back there again to work.” Another Indigenous skilled worker said that people off-reserve talk badly about those on-reserve, “as if we’re all criminals and such, alcoholics or drug abusers.”



Due to the racist stereotypes about Indigenous workers in the oilfield, several mentioned the need to work harder than white workers: “It’s almost like you’re trying to prove yourself a little bit as well that you know what, we’re just as good as anybody else.”

It’s also a disadvantage to be an Indigenous company competing with non-Indigenous companies in what is a non-Indigenous-dominated industry. One interviewee described the need to overcome discrimination: “We really have to sell our people and say, ‘No, we’re not the typical native.’ There’s a typical native that people assume is out there: lazy, late, and never there the next day.”

As well, there is the stereotype that Indigenous workers that work for oilfield companies owned by the First Nations feel “entitled to work” and get “work handed to them” because of their political affiliation. This myth goes against the idea that First Nations need to build up self-governance by owning and operating companies and thus creating jobs, and that Indigenous workers are undeserving and have not earned their jobs.

**After breaking through the racism and winning contracts in the oil industry, Indigenous-owned companies and their workers feel a sense of pride for breaking the barriers.**

After breaking through the racism and winning contracts in the oil industry, Indigenous-owned companies and their workers feel a sense of pride for breaking the barriers. One manager stated, “we kind of pride ourselves here ... there’s not too many oilfield companies that are 100% native owned and operated.”

Workers shared how it was a relief to be working for an Indigenous company. One worker said working for an Indigenous company “is probably the most I ever felt comfortable at the workplace ... before I felt like, don’t matter how hard I work here, I was still, like, the brown boy.” He mentioned how his current company is more like a family, and a friendly work environment.

### **Gender discrimination**

Data in this sub-theme confirms research findings summarized in the background context section, which shows the oil industry as male-dominated, and that Indigenous women are mostly segmented into retail, accommodation, and administrative positions, although some Indigenous women work higher-paying public sector health care, social work, and education jobs.

When asked if the industry is male dominated, an Indigenous male oilfield manager stated, “it’s pretty rare to see women doing labour-type work in the oilfield. I have come across one or two female workers but they generally don’t seem to last as long maybe as a male worker.”

**// Conversations  
with both male  
and female  
workers revealed  
an unequal  
sharing of social  
reproductive  
labour. //**

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When asked if women have equal opportunity for advancement, male workers could only speculate. One answered, “Yeah, I guess—I’ve never really seen the issue before.” Suggesting perhaps women get special treatment as minorities in the field, one male worker said, “I think girls actually get treated better when they do get [trade] jobs ... like everyone’s just nice to them all the time.” But, the lack of female workers made some aware of the disparity. One male worker said, “they say they do [give women equal opportunities], but I haven’t really seen any females in higher positions like that.”

When working in the oil industry, one female journeywoman pipefitter noted, it can be “a bit tough at times” and “guys with all their testosterone” think they are better than you. She notes women in the industry need to minimize their appearance to not be sexualized in the workplace, saying, “You definitely have to be comfortable with yourself ... be not so high maintenance” and try not to be “attractive to the opposite sex.” She mentioned that, as women, “you just deal with it and do something about it if you feel, you know.”

Some male participants noted the industry is male dominated, but they also felt that women are treated equally in the industry and that it’s due to “family commitments” and the role women still play in social reproductive work that makes the industry less conducive to female workers. One senior male worker stated, “Women have a tougher time with having to commit to the work schedule; basically they’re not able to have the daycare or the care for their children at home, especially single mothers or mothers in general.”

One Indigenous employer explained that the employer is there to protect female workers against harassment, however, he acknowledged the limits of the complaint-based system and “old fashioned” thinking about women:

We’re trying to promote equality out in the field ... You know, they get harassed by other workers, and they’re out there working just like anybody else. We’re here to protect them if they come up and ask us for assistance ... Like I said, it’s a different industry; a lot of old-fashioned Aboriginal men are probably the most old-fashioned people out there. As an Aboriginal company, that’s the tough part.

Part of the old-fashioned way of thinking is that a woman’s place is in the home. Unfortunately, the industry is still based on masculinist thinking that it is a “tough” industry built for men.

Multiple interviewees referenced a small number of Indigenous women that were journeywomen and worked in the trades, and that these two or three women in the community highlighted that with enough agency and drive women can succeed. When referring to the successful journeywoman “down the road,” one journeyman said, “for a woman to try and break through, it’s not easy ... we’re not a rig company, but you hear of that ‘rig pig’ mentality ... and it’s gotten better over the years, but it definitely wouldn’t be an easy place for a woman to work.”

## **Theme 2: Working Families and Working Selves**

### *Unequal sharing of social reproductive work*

Conversations with both male and female workers revealed an unequal sharing of social reproductive labour. Women, including those who worked outside the home, were generally responsible for all or most of the social reproductive labour, including child care, cooking, and cleaning. One woman explained that her “husband was raised by old-school parents that think that the wife should be the cook and the cleaner, so that’s my role.” One mother who works and is also in school explained that “it’s tough, and then having a family, it’s overwhelming. ... Just managing the kids and coming to work and then going home and cooking supper and then take care of your kids, make sure they get fed and [to] bed and that’s when you [have] time for school.” One man in a senior position in the oil industry acknowledges the unpaid labour of his wife: “If I didn’t have a wife that stayed home and she was a full-time mom I think we’d have difficulty doing my job and trying to do that at the same time.” Some interviewees pointed to the important role of extended family providing child care and emotional support, particularly when women were in school and/or worked outside the home.

Women’s hours of work are chosen or arranged based on the assumption that women are primarily responsible for social reproductive labour and men work long hours in the oilfield. Women we interviewed more often worked “normal” hours (9 AM–5 PM), whereas male workers more often worked long shifts or normal hours plus additional hours as needed (which is frequent). One male worker stated, “There’s days where I feel like I lose time with my kids because I work,” and explained he tries to be with them when he’s not at work. Some men were happy to point out that they do help with laundry, cooking, extracurricular activities with children, and yard work, trying to maintain an equitable division of labour when their work schedules permit.

**“ Families of oil industry workers are deeply impacted by the industry. ”**

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### *Men, work, and masculinity*

There is an assumption that men working in resource extraction will be the primary breadwinners in the family. One interviewee describes his emotional struggles after the 2014 oil price decline, which led to him losing his job during the downturn and his female partner becoming the breadwinner in their home. He stated that this change “definitely affected [my] self-esteem, as in not being able to provide.” He went on to explain that he didn’t feel that a man necessarily was supposed to be the provider, but said, “you talk to peers, right, and there’s jokes that are made.” He discusses embracing the caregiver role in the household and his own efforts to overcome problematic ideas about masculinity, including “men don’t cry” and “men don’t talk about feelings.”

Stress related to the pace of work or the long hours can manifest in alcohol or drug abuse. To better deal with stress some men talked about surrounding themselves with “positive people,” taking part in recreation activities, and their agency to make healthier choices. Several workers described spending time outdoors, taking part in activities such as hunting, fishing, quading, camping, sledding, skidooing, as well as spending time with friends and family. These recreational activities had a class-based aspect to them, where those with high wages could take part in activities requiring expensive equipment and/or travel.

### *Working families*

Families of oil industry workers are deeply impacted by the industry. Some interviewees point to the high income of the oil industry as something that positively impacts families by providing them with a good quality of life, enabling them to enrol their kids in organized sports (hockey was mentioned by several interviewees), and allowing their children to think about post-secondary education since their parents can afford to pay for it.

Families can also be negatively impacted from work in the oil industry. One worker explained that he can bring his work stress home, but also that family provides support to stressed workers. Workers of all types described the double-edged sword of working in the industry: the job pays very well, enabling your family to be comfortable, but the job also requires long hours and can be stressful. One worker explained he has “long hours, away from home, always on the phone [for work purposes], [and] too tired to do anything in the evenings,” and that “you’re always in a conflict one way or another with somebody when it comes to the family.”

### Theme 3: Boom and Bust

The boom-and-bust oil commodity cycle has a substantial impact on all Indigenous oil workers and their oil-dependent community. However, the commodity cycle has different impacts on men and women, skilled and unskilled workers, and various families. One interviewee emphasized the precarity of employment in a boom-bust economy, saying, “with the industry, you got to work when there’s work—or, because you never know when, you know what I mean, it could get slow again and not be any work.”

During a bust period, unskilled and less-experienced workers are often the ones let go first. One Indigenous company in our study went from 200 employees in the last boom period to 70–100 employees during the recent bust period. In a community of 3,500 people, those 100–130 high-paying jobs matter a great deal.

Skilled workers that continue to be employed during the bust period face the stress of watching as their co-workers are laid-off, assuming increasing workloads as their crews shrink, and a constant fear the axe may swing in their direction. One worker said that he feels “fortunate to just be working” in a bust period. Another explained that “we kind of just take on everything for that role [that is now empty].”

One worker said, “Everybody’s replaceable, right?” This bust-induced precariousness heavily impacts male workers, and there is speculation that women are even less likely to be working in resource extraction during a bust period. One interviewee suggested that in a bust it is “maybe a little harder for the women to get work.”

Although it is apparent that female workers in the public sector, such as teachers and social workers, and private sector administrative workers may continue working during these bust periods, family life is impacted because there is “less money coming in to families.” The result, according to one interviewee, is that the “town is less busy.” He said in the last boom period people were “buying stuff,” and then came the inevitable bust and “you see them on ‘Buy and Sell’ selling stuff.”



## Theme 4: Community

### *The Indigenous community: We are all relations*

As a primarily Indigenous community, there is a strong sense of the collective among the study participants. One interviewee described community as “everybody knows who your mom is, who your dad is, who your grandparents are and which family you belong to.” This prioritization of relations and belonging exemplifies the distinct Indigenous understanding of life and community. Community was also described as “knowing where your roots are” as it relates to personal identity as situated within familial relations and the First Nation.

**“ The practice of helping each other was frequently reiterated. ”**

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Others pointed to the unity in communities that come together “when needed at a time of crisis or celebration.” Multiple interviewees described the importance of supporting community members, such as through fundraisers after a family tragedy. One interviewee said, “the community is so willing to give, it’s amazing to see that. ... This is more of an Aboriginal thing [as opposed to any small community in Alberta]. People taking care of their own.”

The practice of helping each other was frequently reiterated, with one participant describing her extended kin network by saying, “We help each other ... we’re not alone, we have each other all the time.” Other respondents emphasized their efforts to support those in need, including people with addictions and youth. One respondent said, “There was people when I was young that took the time out to stop and talk to me. I feel that I owe the younger generation the same.”

### *Industry and community*

The oil industry has significant positive and negative impacts on the community. One interviewee described this tension, saying that “the industry brought in jobs, and it has brought in a ton of money, but when you bring in jobs and you bring in money, you also bring in drugs and you bring in alcohol. Now you can afford those things.” On the other hand, oil companies were described as providing important community support, such as donations to local sports teams.

With multiple companies competing for a finite number of contracts in the local oil industry, tensions develop. One interviewee explained that with fewer companies working in the region recently, “it makes it a little harder to get work ‘cause we bid on jobs and we’re getting out-bid again by other companies ... and we’re all working against each other for whatever work they can find.” Another participant confirmed that sometimes their Indigenous-owned, private business was competing for contracts with BCN-

owned companies, saying, “Our biggest people we have to compete with are our own nation.” Other interviewees described jealousy or tension that is felt within the community between those working for the different Indigenous-owned companies, or even between those who are in positions to hire workers and those workers in the community who need jobs but have been let go or are not being hired.

### *Community at work*

Work itself is a site for community, particularly in the Indigenous workplaces. One interviewee explained, “We talk a lot in Cree and joke around, yeah, so—it’s fun and the majority of us are all First Nations.” Those working in Indigenous companies described a sense of loyalty to the company, and solidarity and loyalty among Indigenous workers.

For one worker, his work community was where he found his reconnection to the land, which then enabled him to reconnect his family to the land. He explained that his superiors at his company used to “go out hunting and [he] started hanging out with them out in the bush and it became something [he] liked doing ... and then eventually started doing it on [his] own.”

“ Families and workers in Wabasca are seeking out and also experiencing challenges to *miyo-pimatisiwin* in their day-to-day lives. ”

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## 5. Conclusion

*Miyo-pimatisiwin* for working class Indigenous people is a balanced good life for the economy, family, and community. Indigenous people lost *miyo-pimatisiwin* in their lives when the relationship was severed with the land due to colonialism, and a loss of traditional ways of subsistence in which living off the land involved balanced gender relations and was a spiritual, emotional, physical, mental, and economic balance with the Earth. Families and workers in Wabasca are seeking out and also experiencing challenges to *miyo-pimatisiwin* in their day-to-day lives. Interviews demonstrated that individuals working in the oil industry have experienced gender and racial discrimination at and related to work. At the same time, Indigenous companies have been able to carve out space in what has been an industry primarily dominated by non-Indigenous people. In doing so, these companies have created space for Indigenous workers to create family-like work communities that they are proud of, rather than being held back or excluded based on their indigeneity.

The oil industry's boom-bust cycle and the pressures of capitalism can bring significant imbalance and disruption to communities, as described here. However, through relationality in the community, specifically paid and unpaid caring work that is largely performed by women, the community works to establish balance. The industry itself may foster and exploit women's engagement in this type of care work through its very structure and practices that create barriers and deterrents for women and ultimately reduce their participation in the higher-paying oilfield jobs.

Stress is a significant issue for community members, from paid and unpaid work pressures, to work precarity, to social issues in the community. These stresses necessitate an array of stress-relief strategies as well as support from immediate and extended family to mitigate stress. Our research project heard a great deal from men in the community with regard to how they deal with stress, such as traditional outdoor activities like hunting and fishing, but also all-terrain vehicle driving and rallies. Future research would do well to investigate how women address their stress and maintain (or not) their own *miyo-pimatisiwin*.

Some interviewees have internalized hegemonic racist stereotypes and narratives that Indigenous workers lack the drive to move up the labour ladder. At the same time, some workers are conscious of the stereotypes and resist them. These workers, especially Indigenous tradespeople, described the need to work harder than white workers to move up the ladder.

There is a concern with the class divisions created by the industry. Many Indigenous workers may end up streamed into unskilled labourer positions. The few Indigenous workers that become skilled journeymen or

journeywomen sometimes end up being business owners by starting their own contracting companies. Indigenous business owners are a different class than their employees because they are wealthy enough to own some means of production. Some Indigenous business managers recognized the unfairness in how large multinational corporations own the rights to exploit the oil and First Nations are not even shareholders in these large corporations. Indeed, during the recent downturn, local Indigenous oilfield service companies struggled to keep afloat, yet the largest oil sands producers remained incredibly profitable (see Hussey et al. 2018).

The emergence of small-scale Indigenous capitalists is a concern. They view themselves, and perhaps are seen by others, as simply being members of the community who provide jobs. Structurally that is typical of smaller capitalists elsewhere, whose businesses employ the local workforce. Also typical is small-capitalist resentment against large corporations who, after all, hold most of the cards. Glen Coulthard (2014) registers this concern about capitalist enterprises being established on reserves, along with concerns about “partnerships” between Indigenous communities and large extractivist corporations. Capital is a form of social and economic power that is not necessarily recognized as such. The long-term concern is that capitalist relations will get implanted in Indigenous communities, hooking them into the trans-local practices of ruling that are integral to corporate power (building stronger support for continued extractivism, as business revenue streams come to require it), and dividing the community against itself. From the perspective of *miyo-pimatisiwin*, how can Indigenous understandings of being relations (“all my relations”), and caring for the collective good be maintained when capitalist structures divide the community by class and individualist approaches impact community relations?

It is important to note that this study interviewed individuals who continue to be employed. It is evident that there are also community members who have not been able to keep their jobs and who have adapted differently (or not) to the demands and fluctuations of the oil industry. Future research is needed on the experiences of those individuals who have not been able to retain employment, and have experienced the industry and its turbulence in a different way.

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