

Living in the South, Caring in the North: Exploring Inuit Women's Care Responsibilities

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Article abstract

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Living in the South, Caring in the North: Exploring Inuit Women's Care Responsibilities

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Abstract

The increased Inuit population in Canadian Metropolitan Areas (CMA) has recently gained attention among the scientific community as well as within Inuit organizations. However, existing literature has overlooked the distinct experience of Inuit women and, more significantly, the importance of care responsibilities in understanding women's mobility. This study examines the relocation experiences of 46 Inuit women across five CMAs, and the role care sites play in initiating women's relocation to cities. Results show the key role caregiving responsibilities play in Inuit women's decisions to move to southern urban areas, as dysfunctional care spaces in the North push them away from their communities, and the potential for safer care sites in the South act as a pulling factor.

Keywords

Inuit women, care, colonialism, migration, gender roles

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Living in the South, Caring in the North: Exploring Inuit Women's Care Responsibilities

The increasing Inuit population in southern Canadian urban centres has recently gained attention as an important focus for policy debate, as well as a research interest in the scientific community and within Inuit organizations (Kishigami, 2006; Patrick & Budach, 2014; Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2017c; Tomiak & Patrick, 2010; Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2016). The number of urban Inuit continues to grow with an important increase between 2001 and 2016 (109.6%) that far outpaced national Inuit population growth (44.3%; Statistics Canada, 2007, 2016). The urbanization of Inuit has generated a growing body of research investigating Inuit urban life and the specific factors that influence the decision to move to southern urban areas as well as the issues encountered by Inuit in urban centres. These studies have delved into health issues (McShane et al., 2006), language practices (Patrick et al., 2013; Patrick & Budach, 2014), identity (Budach et al., 2015; Patrick et al., 2011; Tomiak & Patrick, 2010), homelessness (Kishigami, 1999, 2008), pregnancy, parenting, and family challenges (McShane et al., 2009; Simonet et al., 2010). While Inuit are not the only ones affected by these challenges, studies point to the importance of history, geography, culture, and identity in understanding both individual and collective experiences.

It is important to note that the gendered dimension of the Inuit urban experience remains understudied and poorly understood (for an exception see Kishigami, 2002; Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2017c), despite the fact that Inuit women outnumber men in most Canadian Metropolitan Areas (CMAs; Statistics Canada, 2016). In exploring some gendered aspects of migration among Inuit women, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada (2017c) found similar mobility patterns and gender-differentiated “push and pull” factors as First Nations women (Gerber, 1984; Newhouse & Peters, 2003). Within the literature on the intersections between Indigenous migration patterns and gender, research has suggested that women's experience in cities is shaped both by gender identity and the colonial legacies that tend to marginalize and impoverish Indigenous women (Peters, 2000a, 2000b, 2006; Williams, 1997). However, this scholarship has focused largely on individual pathways, omitting the more complex web of social relations that come into play in the process of relocation and, more importantly, the distinct caring responsibilities assumed by women.

To explore Inuit women's role as carers, this article brings into conversation two bodies of research: geographies of care and Inuit ethics of care. Care as a geographical concept requires that we pay attention to the uneven social relations across space and, conversely, to the power of spaces as they produce relationships (Daly & Lewis, 2000; Massey, 2004). Spaces of care exist at various scales, from the individual, home, and local, to national and global (Lawson, 2007). Feminist geographers have produced a large body of research addressing the space-care-gender nexus. For instance, the global care chain literature addresses issues of female migrants from developing countries relocating to work for high-income families in developed countries to provide care for children, elders, and the whole family (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Huang et al., 2012; Lutz, 2008; Romero, 2018). At the local scale, scholars have examined the shifting geographies of care, from the home (McDowell et al., 2005; Pratt, 2009) to various private or state-run facilities such as day cares and senior homes (Milligan, 2003; Staeheli & Brown, 2003). These complex and multi-scale geographies of caring work (Popke, 2006) suggest that care is necessarily relational, in that it involves ongoing responsibility and commitment to an object (or subject) of care (Tronto, 1989).

By considering the connections between relocation and caring responsibilities, this article explores Inuit women's mobility and critically examines the push and pull factors that bring Inuit women into Canadian cities. Specifically, we introduce data on the relocation experiences of 46 Inuit women across five CMAs and argue that these data raise two issues that feminist and Indigenous literatures have overlooked: namely, that women's caregiving responsibilities play a key role in relocation and that Canadian colonial geographies shape social and spatial inequalities directly affecting Inuit women's agency and autonomy. In addressing these issues, we highlight the distinct resources and policies that are required to meet the specific needs of Inuit women in urban centres.

Inuit Families and Caring Approach

The Inuit Nunangat is the Inuit homeland in Canada, and it encompasses four distinct land claim regions where 72% of Inuit live today (Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, and Inuvialuit). Across these territories, Inuit share a common culture tied to the land, sea, and the resources they provide. A brief 60 years ago, the vast majority of Inuit were living a lifestyle centered upon nomadic harvesting, hunting, fishing, and trapping (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). The production and distribution of local resources were socially structured and guided by kinship principles to ensure that everyone had access to food (Niutaq Cultural Institute [NCI] & Qikiqtani Inuit Association [QIA], 2011; Wachowich et al., 1999). As Inuit lived in *ilagiit*-based camps consisting of extended family members, the family was the main social organizational unit. These socially guided systems involved great ingenuity, intimate knowledge of the environment, and *piliriqatigiingniq*, which is the ability to work together in harmony for common purpose and in cooperation.

Today, the persistence of traditional sharing practices and associated social values and norms demonstrate and remain key components of the distinct Inuit way of life (QIA, 2019; Searles, 2008). These traditional practices represent and reinforce Inuit identity as a distinct group of people whose culture emphasizes togetherness and demonstrates the bonding between relations, households, and community members. Similarly, Inuit societal values emphasize the importance of generosity, social responsibility, and networks of care. Key examples are *Inuuqatigiitsiarniq* (caring for others), and *Pijitsirniq* (serving and providing for one's community; Government of Nunavut, 1999; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2018). These values underline the sharing practices that are undertaken by Inuit to foster care and collaborative living and minimize deprivation, especially among vulnerable *ilagiit* members.

While caring is understood as a shared responsibility between individual, family, and community, the labour associated with caring is generally divided along the lines of gender. As "keepers of the camp," women traditionally held authority within the home and camp, understood as the primary care space, and enjoyed considerable autonomy (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). Their responsibilities included managing camp life and ensuring collective well-being (Reimer, 1996). Today, Inuit women continue to play a central role in organizing settlement life: They identify local issues and undertake social actions to address community needs. Women's caring roles include childrearing, Elder care, and tending to the ill. Furthermore, their duties often extend to collective well-being through volunteer work and community service (Billson & Mancini, 2007; Guemple, 1986; Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006). In Inuit culture, distinctions such as workplace, home, and productive and reproductive work are less pronounced, and community and domestic roles carry a different significance that is not necessarily

less powerful (Leigh, 2009). For instance, Inuk scholar Karla Jessen Williamson (2011) argued that the correlation between physical work and the ontological and spiritual aspects of labour is highly important to fully appreciate women's agency and contribution. Furthermore, Williamson (2011) noted that while activities and tasks performed by men and women might be different in nature, their roles in and contributions to society are of equal importance.

To adequately examine Inuit women's social roles and responsibilities, one needs to consider the broader context of colonialism. In the Canadian Arctic, the modernization agenda of the Canadian State has largely focused on transforming northern economic and social landscapes to southern standards. A series of public policy testifies to this aim. The first policy is the relocation and (re)settlement of families into permanent communities where Inuit were expected to live according to *qallunaat* (non-Inuit) standards. The family relocation policy aimed to reorganize Inuit life according to dominant patriarchal ideas about the family, work, community, and social relations (Healey, 2016; Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). For instance, Inuit girls and women were to be trained in domestic sciences and household economics to become housewives, and Inuit men were expected to engage in the labour market to fulfill their breadwinner role (Awa, 1999). Colonial policies introduced a patriarchal cultural bias in the conception of the gendered division of labour which resulted in undermining Inuit women's agency and social position within families and, more broadly, society.

Second, the restructuring of living arrangements in the new centralized communities favoured the mainstream Canadian nuclear family model. Indeed, housing policies and house designs reflected Euro-Canadian sociocultural norms and not Inuit social organization (Stern, 2005). For instance, houses were assigned to Inuit males to enforce a view of families as independent, nuclear, and headed by a male breadwinner (Christensen, 2017; Damas, 1976; Stern, 2005; Tester, 2009). Many educational materials were developed to promote "a hegemonic view of the sovereign nuclear family" (Stern, 2005, p. 71), such as the booklet *Living in the New Houses* where typical Euro-Canadian gendered family roles are displayed: male breadwinner and female homemaker. Previously, the traditional economic arrangements placed women in the key economic role of preparing furs for household use or sale. That this work was done at home while undertaking care-taking duties was not recognized under modernization (Williamson, 2004).

Third, the residential school system implemented by the federal government involved removing Inuit children from their families to attend residential schools in other communities or regions (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2007; QIA, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Up to three generations of children were required "to leave their families during their formative years and to miss out on Inuit skills and knowledge that were so important to survival and cultural fulfillment" (QIA, 2014, p. 117). Studies have identified changes in family structure and disruption in the passing down of knowledge as key factors in current social problems in northern communities, such as domestic violence and dysfunctional relationships (Healey, 2014; Kral et al., 2011).

Racialized and gendered colonial legacies have shaped gender power relations within northern communities and contributed to Inuit women's marginalization from previously shared responsibilities (Bodenhorn, 1990; Williamson, 2011). While colonialism continues to affect their lives (Monture & McGuire, 2009), the academic literature has not sufficiently addressed what this means in terms of Inuit women's mobility and their caring role. Furthermore, the relationship between home as a primary care

site and gendered caring responsibilities suggests differentiated mobility constraints for Inuit women and men. In other words, the specific ways in which migration and urban relocation play out differ significantly between men and women. This gendered framework is compounded by the role that colonialism has played and continues to play in shaping social and spatial inequalities among Inuit women in Canada and elsewhere. In the following sections, we examine the context of Inuit women's mobility in Canada and discuss the role care sites play in initiating women's relocation to cities.

Methods

This research examines Inuit women's experience in five major Canadian cities: Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal. These cities were selected because of the significant increase in Inuit population in these areas. The design and objectives of the study were developed and conducted by the lead author and researchers at Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. Prior to conducting this project, Pauktuutit's team had consulted local organizations across these cities to assess specific needs and to initiate collaboration on the emerging priority of addressing the increased Inuit presence in urban centres. Following these consultations, the research framework was developed in a meaningful collaboration between Pauktuutit and the lead author. Similarly, the questionnaire and consent form design, data analysis, and report to the funding agency were developed, discussed, and negotiated between them following principles of collaborative research (ITK, 2018). The research design was reviewed and approved by Pauktuutit Board of Directors as well as the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa where the lead author was a post-doctoral fellow.

The research project uses an intersectional approach to identify the multiple and overlapping systems of oppression effecting Inuit women's experience in urban spaces. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argued, among Black women in the USA, the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism. In other words, it means that Inuit identity, female gender, racism, sexism, and poverty are not experienced sequentially: They are lived and experienced simultaneously (Culhane, 2009). In conducting this research, we looked at the intersectional effects and consequences of colonial policies of relocations, racism against Inuit in urban centres, as well as gender marginalization in urban spaces and its roots in northern communities. Furthermore, data were analysed using an Inuit gender-based analysis to assess the differential impact of migration and urban life on Inuit women. An Inuit gender-based analysis is an Inuit-specific approach that considers the effects of culture and history on the experiences of men and women (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2017a). By considering historical data about Inuit and the different roles and responsibilities required of men and women in order to maintain the family, social, and community structure, this article creates a more meaningful and relevant analysis that better reflects historical and contemporary contexts and lived realities (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007, 2010).

A minimum of eight interviews were conducted in each city and informants were recruited using Inuit urban networks, social media, and through local organizations that offer resources and support to Inuit and other Indigenous people. People were contacted through email, phone, or in person. We employed a purposeful sampling approach that consists of including every person interested in sharing their experience (Crang & Cook, 2007). Individual interviews were conducted with participants using a conversational interview approach, which focused on individual stories. Similarly, interviews with frontline service providers used a conversational approach and open-ended questions. Overall, 68

interviews were conducted: 46 with Inuit women and 22 with service providers (only 5 of which were Inuit). Interviews with service providers were conducted to get a better understanding of the Inuit presence in urban centres; as many of them were Indigenous-focused organizations, we were interested to know for how long the organization had provided services to Inuit and how the needs and profile were different from or similar to other Indigenous groups. Among the 46 Inuit women, the vast majority (91%) had relocated to the South during their adulthood, two women (4%) did so as children following their parents, and two others (4%) were born in urban centres. As a whole, the average time spent living in an urban centre was six years. In addition, focus groups were facilitated to accommodate participants and local organizations, with one or two people taking notes to document collective experiences and exchanges between participants. They were structured as informal group discussions and included three main sections for discussions: migration paths, challenges, and family and gender-distinct responsibilities. The consultation process resulted in three engaging sessions with 19 participants (Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal).

Interviews, individual stories, and focus group notes and recordings were transcribed and coded using key themes and concepts from our research objectives (Cope, 2005). The first round of coding was done by the first author and then discussed with Pauktuutit research team. While coding helped reduce the volume of data into a more manageable format, it also provided a visual organization of the data, wherein repeating ideas and patterns emerged even more clearly. Overall, 62 codes were used. We conducted a second round of coding to see how codes appeared in the data, their frequency, and their relations with each other. Finally, we grouped codes into larger themes that were meaningful. Triangulating all the data allowed us to assess the credibility of the results and ensure that every specific objective was supported by more than one information source.

Results: A Geography of Care

Understanding participants' motivation for migrating to southern cities provides a framework within which to consider Inuit women's gender roles and caring responsibilities. Across all five cities, women participants repeatedly highlighted a series of factors that *pushed* them away from their communities as well as factors *pulling* them into urban centres. The women interviewed never identified only one reason for their choice to relocate. Rather, women's stories suggest that multiple and overlapping circumstances prompted their journeys south. Through a thematic analysis of women's narratives, three main factors emerged: opportunities for learning and working, need for services, and dysfunctional homes and relations. In the following section, we present the results from the interviews and focus groups conducted in the five cities.

Opportunities for Learning and Working

Women in all five cities described urban centres as places of opportunity. Many of them emphasized a clear distinction between northern communities—where opportunities are limited—and southern urban places, where “opportunities are infinite” (woman, mid-thirties). Participants usually considered “opportunity” to mean employment or vocational training and education possibilities. One woman (late forties) described her migration story:

I've been in the (city) area for nine years now. My husband and I, we both moved here for jobs, but mostly my husband because he had an offer. But he is no longer with that job and now it's me who has a good job. It's much easier to get jobs, especially interesting ones; in the South, there are more opportunities for employment.

While nearly all women had work experience in their hometowns, many felt that the South offered better opportunities. For instance, many young women talked about the lack of job diversity in the northern employment landscape: "You can either be a clerk or cashier, it seems" (woman, mid-thirties). A service provider in an Inuit employment centre expressed a similar view: "There is a strong desire for new opportunities in terms of career, especially for Inuit women, when they arrive at our offices."

Even if urban centres present more employment opportunities than northern communities, women cannot necessarily access these jobs easily. In fact, many women mentioned that although they perceived more opportunities in the South than at home, various structural barriers kept them from obtaining them. Among the most common barriers were applicants' education level and lack of relevant previous experience. Very few participants received education beyond Grade 12, which only provided them access to low-wage jobs that conferred very little social advantage. A few women also discussed discrimination and racism towards Indigenous people as a constraint for employment, especially outside of Inuit or other Indigenous organizations. Nevertheless, employment opportunities, real or perceived, constituted an important factor for women's migration to the South.

An important divide between Inuit men and women in urban centres appears in education and training programs. In all five cities, we visited university Indigenous student centres or services and reached out to the Inuit student community. Of the small number of Inuit students, the overwhelming majority are female. This statistic, while not new, raises questions over the long term about what Inuit women do after graduating, and, more importantly, where they do it. Accordingly, during the research process we asked all young female students about their plans after graduating. The vast majority described their stay in southern urban areas as temporary. One woman (an 18-year-old) emphasized that Inuit women are strongly committed to their community and that this forms part of their traditional role:

I have always been involved in my community—with children at the school, at the community centre, and at the daycare too. I feel this is my place, maybe because we, as women, have always been responsible for teaching the next generation. Elders say that women were "guides" for our people. I can relate to that. I know other girls like me who went south for education, like colleges or universities, and then went back north to work either in the school or for the government; like good jobs where you can make a difference. Anyway, this is why I am doing it; I think I can change things and make sure that we have access to a better education, one that is truly Inuk.

One student advisor in a university Indigenous centre noted that during the six years she had worked there, 12 Inuit female students had been referred to the centre, while no male students had. She also noted that Indigenous women (not only Inuit) usually undertake studies that are directly relevant and applicable to their home community, such as early childhood education, teacher preparation programs, nursing, or management. These courses of study present them with more options after graduating: The route back home lies open, as does the opportunity to stay in the urban centre.

Furthermore, this case study suggests that women are choosing opportunities that align with their caring role. Indeed, in women's narratives, learning and working opportunities strongly correlate with an increased ability to support their children and families:

I came south because of my mom who was sent for a long period for medical issue, but I still had to send some money back home, so I took a job at the health centre. It's like win-win!

Similarly, several interviews revealed that the search for better opportunities for their children motivated women's journeys. In particular, access to higher quality education compelled their moves:

Every summer we go back home to the Northwest Territories. And my son sees his cousins and they talk about school. Even for him it's so obvious—the lack of good education; his cousins have no homework, teachers are there half of the time, and there is a lack of motivation. My husband and I moved because of our jobs, but in the end we are not going back because of our son's education; it's so much better here. (woman, mid-forties, Edmonton)

Taking part in a learning program or joining the labour force clearly correlated to a positive experience in the urban centres and served as an anchoring factor. While the value of wage work was consistently tied to short-term financial need, and education to future possibilities, women emphasized the social context within which these activities were performed. Beyond immediate and future possibilities, work and learning environments offered a “place to go” and “people to be with.” This was especially true for women who worked with other Inuit. Consequently, women with positive employment or learning experiences were more likely to state a desire to remain in urban centres.

Accessing Services

Access to services was a common reason for women to move to the urban centres we visited. Some of them had no choice (i.e., they were forced to), but others moved in order to overcome personal issues or to support family members. Here, again, these reasons often overlapped in women's testimonies. Indeed, in women's narratives, children's needs often spurred moves. For instance, three women in our sample had moved to southern cities to access services for their children whose health conditions were not treated properly in their hometown. In one case, the child and her mother had moved three times in Ottawa to access services for a period of six to nine months. Each time, the mother dealt with finding a place to stay close to the treatment centre, navigating the city to find help and resources, while her other two children were left home:

He needs physio three or four times a week and some counselling, and none of that is available in our community. So, doctors suggested that we move here and try it to see if he improves. It seems to help a lot, so I'll stay at least for a few months, but I miss so much my other children so I don't think I can stay here for too long.

Two other women moved to follow children sent into foster homes. Throughout interviews, participants repeatedly described the child welfare system as a mechanism that pushed women into cities and sometimes kept them there, since they wanted to be close to their children. Indeed, according to a report published by Statistics Canada in 2016, 51% of Inuit foster children were living with non-Inuit and non-

Indigenous foster parents (Turner, 2016). One service provider explained how this situation disproportionately affects Inuit women:

Children are sent into foster care in the South because the welfare system has very strict rules on who can become a foster home. For instance, you need to be able to provide a room for each child. They can't share the same room if they are not the same sex.¹ This makes it very difficult for Inuit families in the North; there is a housing crisis! So, what happens? Children are being sent south and the mother follows. In the South, she has no roots, no contacts, even for us trying to reach them is hard. Their journey in the city is often painful: losing their children, having no place to go and no one to reach out to; on top of that they need mental health support and they need to treat their addiction—because that's the reason they've lost their child in the first place.

Being forced to access treatment or services was the story of eight women we encountered. One young woman (22-year-old), whom we met at a Friendship Centre, had just completed an addiction treatment program:

I am not sure what I'll do next. They [social workers] forced me to get into this program so I can get my child back—now he is with my mom. I am not sure what my options are now; if I go back home it's gonna be all the same again. I have no place for myself up there. So, I am thinking I'll stay here in the city, get an apartment, and then get my child here.

As she described, addiction treatment and mental health support were common reasons for “being sent south.” Routes back to the North often proved to be more convoluted, as it often meant going back to the social context that produced the difficult circumstances. She noted being torn between going home where she belongs, but where all her personal issues started, and staying in a city where she had no roots or family. Another young mother came to a similar conclusion—there is no safe and easy path back after completing treatment:

Okay, so they [health workers] tell you now you are recovered, so you can go back home, but don't take anything [drugs]. But really . . . how do you think this is really possible! There is so much drama in the North. And this drama is never “fixed;” no one is fixing it. It's like their [health workers] job is to “fix” you but not fix the real problem: trauma.

Several women expressed similar concerns about the “drama” in their hometown. In all cases, the term “drama” was used to talk about traumatic experiences (past and present) that haunted families and communities and that impinged on both individual and collective well-being. Whether women referred directly to intergenerational trauma or used elusive terms to speak about issues related to violence and abuse, all women acknowledge the lack of specialized counselling and support services to address unresolved trauma, which is a persistent infrastructural issue in Inuit communities (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2016).

¹ Foster care and adoption standards do not allow a child of a different sex to share a room.

Dysfunctional Homes and Relationships

Of the 46 interviews with Inuit women, 28 identified issues related to housing as critical to their decision to migrate. These ranged from not being able to access an apartment to homelessness. For several decades, most northern communities have been experiencing a housing crisis that affects individual and collective well-being (Christensen, 2017). Attempts to solve the housing crisis have remained unsuccessful due to persistent barriers that include limited local economic opportunities, a virtually non-existent private housing market, insufficient public resources, high building and maintenance costs due to cold climate, costly shipping and transportation of materials, and geographic remoteness (Christensen et al., 2017; Northern Housing Forum, 2018). The lack of adequate and affordable housing in the North also accounts for Inuit women's journeys to urban centres. For one woman (mid-twenties), home had always been her parents' house, but her sister who also lived there got into a relationship and now had two kids:

I had no place anymore in my parents' house, with all my sister's kids. Not even an official room for myself. I have been waiting for years to get a place, but when you have no children you are not a priority.

When we started talking about her house, she frequently mentioned she had no home but was just living in her parents' house. By the end of the interview, she explained she had no home anymore in the North, and also could not call the city home, even though she had been living there for three years now.

Statistics derived by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) further indicate that Inuit face the most crowded living conditions in all of Canada, which has a direct negative impact on a number of health concerns, such as social relationships, family violence, and children's ability to learn (Knotsch & Kinnon, 2011). Additionally, considering the age demographics in Inuit communities—specifically that 50% of Inuit are under the age of 25—access to safe and adequate housing is an even greater priority. This situation has led to a housing crisis in Inuit communities, including the constant threat of becoming homeless in the harsh climate of the Arctic as well as in urban areas across Canada. In women's stories, the built environment (house) and the caring space it provides (home) were under considerable stress in many Inuit families, leading to dysfunctional homes and relations.²

While almost two-thirds (61%) of the interviewees mentioned moving because of the lack of adequate and affordable housing in the North, the turning point for most participants was when their ability to care for themselves, and eventually for others, was affected. Home is the primary care site for all participants and is the first space women referred to when they describe their responsibilities towards others. In many women's stories, what they considered home had shifted over the years prior to their decision to move. No participants mentioned moving *because* there was no place to live, but rather

² Also, women and children who need to leave because of family violence often experience further harm as a direct result of the lack of alternate housing in the North. In Inuit Nunangat specifically, there are only 15 shelters in 51 communities, which means that more than 70% of Inuit communities do not have a safe shelter for women and children experiencing family violence. Homes and friends and families are often also overcrowded, and it can be difficult to ascertain if these homes are free violence.

identified dysfunctional space as the real reason to leave. A young woman described her home as “an overwhelming space” where people screamed at each other; once, her brother-in-law got into a fight and punched her friend in the face: “There was too much violence in the house. Not towards me or the kids, but between people that would come to my place. The kids could see it, they witnessed it, and I couldn’t stand it anymore,” she said. She first moved to her parents’ place, but again decided it was time to move away from a place where her children were exposed to violence. After moving to Iqaluit for a couple months to a friend’s house, she went further south to a larger city. Although the first year was difficult, she described her choice as “the best thing that could have happened to my children.” Her story is not unique; many participants undertook similar journeys to provide safer homes for their children.

Furthermore, participants reported unstable relationships and dysfunctional family environments as an important reason for leaving their home. While the women used multiple definitions and perceptions of “instability” and “dysfunctional” environments, a majority of them reported a feeling of exclusion rooted in a lack of communication with their social networks. Participants frequently mentioned isolation, gossip, and being looked down on as factors contributing to their feelings of exclusion from their community. Indeed, relationship breakdowns and the stigma facing women who left relationships were often turning points in women’s decisions to leave.

Another woman (mid-thirties) had experienced social pressure to take the blame for breaking up with a boyfriend on two separate occasions. Twice she decided to leave her community for a while:

He was blaming me and I was blaming him. But he started telling stories about me, personal stuff, so I would be ashamed. This went on for weeks and he wouldn’t stop. At the end I was staying home, ‘cause I didn’t want to see anyone, the way they looked at me.

Ultimately, she moved away seeking a place to feel safe and care for herself.

While the participants described many dysfunctional social dynamics that led them to leave their homes, the cycle of violence was most significant. We found women in each city who had fled violence and sought refuge. Behavioural patterns emerged: Women tend to escape alone, hoping to find a safe place in a large city that offer anonymity and eventually bring their kids with them. Other women reported fleeing with their children, sometimes passing through multiple destinations before ultimately reaching urban centres in the South. In all circumstances, women experienced heavy trauma, remorse, and feelings of inadequacy as a parent.

Finally, beyond the domestic sphere, women talked about mental health issues as well as emotional and social problems that contribute to the disintegration of the social fabric in some northern communities, burning bridges between families and generations. Participants brought up the difficulty of maintaining healthy relationships with people who suffered from addiction or mental health issues, particularly when those people were marginalized by the community (for a broader discussion see Healey, 2014; Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2017b). At the same time, the lack of services to deal with these issues in the community constituted a reason for leaving their hometown. In this regard, women talked about the need for trauma-related healing programs *within* northern communities to better address mental health needs and prevent migration associated with access to services.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine the gender–migration–care nexus from the perspective of Inuit women living in CMAs. Existing literature on urban Indigenous populations has overlooked the distinct experience of Inuit women, and more significantly, the importance of care responsibilities in understanding women’s mobility. This study addresses these gaps by examining Inuit women’s distinct migration experiences, and the role care sites play in initiating women’s relocation to cities.

Evidence from this study suggests three key findings. First, Inuit women’s experience in Canadian urban centres speaks to the significance of caregiving among Inuit families, communities, and society. During our interviews, the caregiving role emerges as an important vector for Inuit women’s relocation, and family responsibilities deeply influenced their experiences in urban centres. While family plays a central role in Inuit society, and women are vital to this institution, women face significant challenges within the family unit. Because Indigenous women are disproportionately targeted by the current practices of the child welfare system, Inuit women can be forced to make difficult decisions regarding their children’s health. In a study conducted in the Northwest Territories, Christensen (2012) found that the child welfare system draws Indigenous women into northern regional centres, where they remain to stay closer to their children in foster care. Many women we met during the research were mothers and grandmothers; their stories often revealed similar challenges and pathways where the children’s well-being had initiated their relocation.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2016, 17% of Inuit women aged 15 and above were heading families on their own, compared with 8% of non-Indigenous women, with women heading about 8 in 10 Inuit single-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2018). Similarly, in 2011, the National Household Survey identified that Inuit children in CMAs were twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to live with a single parent (36% compared with 18%). These numbers suggest the highly gendered reality of parenting: Inuit women, who are more likely to be the primary caregivers, are overrepresented in single-parent families, and are more likely than men to migrate. From a policy perspective, an Inuit-specific approach to child welfare and family support is essential both in the North and in the South in order to reflect distinct Inuit culture and history. In particular, this system ought to ensure the transfer of Inuit children into other Inuit families.

The women we met in the five CMAs are acutely aware of their responsibilities toward family and community; they see their role, in the past and in the present, as tied to the social well-being of their family network and community as a whole. The way they contribute may have changed as a result of their settlement transition, but as Reimer (1996) found in Pangnirtung, Nunavut, women remain the “primary instigators of social action concerning health care, child-care, sexual abuse, suicide, and general family breakdown” (p. 84). As our interviews demonstrate, this is also true across wide swaths of space, with women extending their care responsibilities to people living thousands of kilometers away. This caring geography suggests an embodied consciousness of female roles and responsibilities and a highly gendered ethic of care.

The second key finding that emerges from this research is the interconnectedness of northern and southern spaces. Indeed, from a geography perspective, the North and the South are highly interconnected in Inuit women’s experience. Some of the difficulties women face in northern

communities (for example the lack of infrastructure and services to address trauma, domestic violence, abuse, and addiction) lead them to urban centres in the South. As a result, many participants and service providers have identified the need for better services in the North. As one woman in Ottawa mentioned:

We need to heal the North too. Our northern communities need healing, otherwise this pattern [fleeing violence] will never stop.

Other structural barriers, such as the child welfare system, systemic racism, and exclusion, are pervasive in Inuit women's experiences in the South and wend their way into the North. In other words, what happens in one location extends far beyond geographical boundaries—social and material geographies in the North or South are inextricably linked. For instance, social and economic inequalities in northern communities and uneven spatial development were repeatedly mentioned as a policy priority for services providers. Addressing the root problems would avoid undesired or “forced” migration. For example, mental health counselling in Inuktitut that is available in a timely manner is needed for women, men, and children all across the North.

Lastly, the third finding points to the legacies of governmental colonial policies as well as the ongoing effects of continued colonial practices on Inuit women and communities. Research has shown that the long history of colonization, forced relocation, residential schools, racism, and discrimination have had devastating impacts on Inuit families (Healey, 2014; Rae, 2011; Trocmé et al., 2004). Specifically, the State's paternalistic policies have led to radical changes in family organization (i.e., from extended family to nuclear family) and the roles of women and men (models of male as breadwinner and female as housewife). These profound transformations imposed on Inuit families and communities are all linked to family breakdown, domestic violence, and dysfunctional social relationships, and they play a key role in explaining women's mobility (Guerrero, 2003; Haskell & Randall, 2009; O'Neil, 1986). Our research points to the need to support more initiatives that focus on the non-material needs of Inuit women and their overall well-being. These include healing from past trauma and experiences, identity building, and empowerment.

In exploring Inuit women's migration into Canadian cities, we found that dysfunctional care spaces in the North played an important role in pushing women away from their homes, and conversely, the possibility of establishing safer care sites in urban centres pulled women south. This geography of care challenges the organization of services for Inuit women and their families because resources do not follow when they move from one location to the other. These dynamics also suggest that housing and care policies in the North play a key role in shaping women's mobility. In this matter, our findings further suggest that the relationship between housing policies, care spaces, and women's ability to perform their caring responsibilities merits further investigation. The results of this study add to a growing body of qualitative research that seeks to understand the context in which mobility occurs among Indigenous Peoples, including Inuit, and, more broadly, speaks to ongoing research on the role that colonial policies and practices continue to play in shaping gender inequalities and vulnerabilities among Indigenous Peoples both nationally and internationally.

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