

Left out: The Important Role of Indigenous Women in Agriculture



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Misogynistic framing of economic and agricultural exchange denies existence of the historical indigenous female labour in Quebec.

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Looking back on Canadian agricultural history, there are numerous sources which speak of the importance of Indigenous female labour in agriculture. However, recent research shows that this role within agriculture continued on for years following the Roman Catholic

Missionaries arrival to Canada with minimal archived evidence of these actions. Which begs the question: why were Indigenous women written out of agricultural history in Quebec? And consequentially, what impact has this framing posed on Indigenous women today?

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This archived image of a man standing beside a cart of produce in Montreal demonstrates how archival evidence was used to promote a patriarchal society which valued the celebration of male labour within agricultural systems and ignored the role which women played at this time.

There is an importance of Indigenous women in agriculture from a historical perspective and the numerous ways in which their rights have been stripped due to colonization which has made them marginalized, silenced and oppressed.

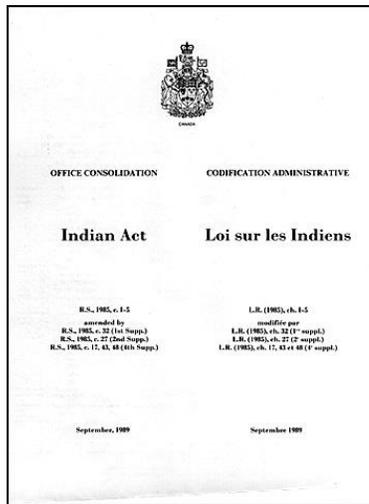
When it came to harvesting, Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous people of the lower Great Lakes and St Lawrence regions planted two types of maize, squash and beans, and practiced seed selection. As for Indigenous women and their contribution to harvesting and lands, historians and other experts emphasize that women across many first nations were responsible for land holdings and allocation of resources. They controlled access to certain areas as well as distribution of its products.

As well as harvesting, Indigenous women in North America took part in all aspects of the farm enterprise skills such as milking, butter-making, bread-making and knitting. Indigenous women responded positively to the activities. However, there has been very little research that includes the farmer as a part of the system and even less research describing the experiences of female farmers. Successful female farmers have developed and sustained their practices of agriculture over a decade or more by learning from the land and other farmers in horizontal networks.

During the period of the western fur trade, European men became dependent on the traditional hunting, gathering, and manufacturing skills of Indigenous women, for their personal survival, and on their abilities as interpreters, cultural mediators, and guides to further the trade. Winona Stevenson explains in her essay *Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada* that Indigenous women all over Canada have had strong impact on agriculture but with the arrival of Roman Catholic Missionaries, a gap in information on this role appears in history. This is believed to be caused by patriarchal values which the Roman Catholic Missionaries promoted, oppressing and ignoring the role which Indigenous women played in agriculture throughout Canada and in particular, the province of Quebec.

The oppression of Indigenous women in agriculture caused by the Roman Catholic Missionaries values continues beyond the time of Roman Catholic proselytization within Indigenous societies in the 17th century. For Example, an unusual feature of studies completed on Indigenous people and labour is that most focus solely on men, therefore obscuring Indigenous women's work. The tendency to exclude an analysis of gender in Indigenous history is an important oversight, not only because the term and the idea of "Indian" is usually only a representation of Indian men, but also because when gender is not clear, we risk reproducing a history in which women are absent. An example of this is when the Iroquois women changed their status based on European values. In this situation, there was an increase in the production by the male and the decrease in the contribution of the female Iroquois. This loss of the Iroquois women's status was rushed by non-Iroquois

religion, politics and legislation where the male status role was defined according to European values.



This oppression of Indigenous women is only furthered through the introduction of The Indian Act. First introduced in 1876 as a consolidation of previous colonial ordinances, it aimed to eliminate first nations culture in favor of assimilation into Euro-Canadian society. The Indian Act had a large impact which negated indigenous women many rights and privileges. For example; The Indian Act denied women the right to possess land and marital property. Only widows could possess land under the reserve system. However, a widow could not inherit her husband's personal property upon his death. Everything, including the family house, legally went to his children. Government agents modified the Act slightly in 1884, with an amendment that allowed men to will their estate to their wives, but a wife could only receive it if the Indian agent determined she was of "good moral character." Furthermore, government created legislation to determine who qualified as "Indian". The government decided that to be an Indian, one had to be

an Indian male, be the child of an Indian male, or be married to an Indian male. Under this system, a woman depended on her relationship with a man to determine whether or not she was an Indian. This completely contradicted the matrilineal system of many First Nations and disrupted a hereditary system that had been in place for hundreds of generations. Non-Aboriginal control over lands, through environmental conservation efforts or through expropriating traditional lands, has resulted in the loss of women's traditional power. The right to live on one's own reserve suddenly denied many women who had strong ties and Aboriginal rights to their territory. This changed the social, political and economic custom of preserving land for future generations. What consequences have this oppression had on Indigenous women today?

Like the role in which they played in agriculture, much of the indigenous women's history has been silenced. Indigenous women today are being marginalized and remain in the dichotomy of uncivilized and irrational. Just like throughout history, the Canadian government and media, continue to participate in this absence of knowledge protecting indigenous women's rights. The numerous Indigenous women who are missing and murdered within our nation today is evidence of this. Groups including Amnesty International and the Legal Strategy Coalition on Violence against Indigenous Women critiqued the RCMP report for having critical gaps in the data. According to Amnesty International, this means that missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Ontario and Québec, for example, were not included in the update.

The silencing of Indigenous women's role in agriculture throughout the 17th Century has led to a governmental mentality which continually effects Indigenous women in Canada every day. Through gaps in history and information, we further oppress the women whose land we stand on. The Canadian government needs to set initiatives in place to ensure the proper recognition and recordings of the labour and events surrounding Indigenous women and their role in both contemporary society and history. -