**Resolution 53/6 – Human Rights and Climate Change**

Input to the Report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,

in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 53/6 of 7 July 2023

The Alaska Native Women’s Resource Center (AKNWRC) offers the following contributions to the research and report that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is preparing in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 53/6 of 7 July 2023. In particular, we offer an Alaska insight on “*evaluat[ing] the impacts of loss and damage, including from extreme weather and slow-onset events, on the full enjoyment of human rights*” with a particular focus on “*the disproportionate effects on women and girls…[and]…Indigenous Peoples…living in poverty and others in vulnerable situations.”*

My name is Tami Truett Jerue, and I am an enrolled citizen of the Anvik Tribe from interior Alaska, and serve as the Executive Director of the AKNWRC. I am the mother to 4 children, the grandmother of 6 grandchildren, and the Auntie to many.

Since 2015, the AKNWRC has been dedicated to strengthening local and tribal government’s responses through community organizing efforts advocating for the safety of women and children in their communities and homes, especially against domestic and sexual abuse and violence. Through the voices, languages, and teachings of Tribes, survivors, and advocates, and in partnership with our allies and other stakeholders, the AKNWRC provides a voice at the local, statewide, national, and international levels for life-saving changes needed in laws, policies, and social norms.

Alaska, the largest state in the United States, is renowned for its stunning natural landscapes. It is home to 229 Alaska Native Tribes and villages, comprising 40% of our nation’s tribes, each with their own distinct culture, speaking 16 different languages. Violence against Alaska Natives is a persistent issue in our communities and is rooted in the impact of colonization by Russian and the U.S. government, as reflected in laws, policies, and practices challenging the resiliency and strength of the Alaska Native people.

The UN Human Rights Council recognizes that “environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable development constitute . . . pressing and serious threats to the ability of present and future generations to enjoy human rights, including the right to life,” and the human rights implications “are felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations, including indigenous peoples and women and girls.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Today, I come before you with a plea for urgent action on behalf of Alaska Native peoples, who are facing an existential threat unlike any we have encountered previously. Climate change, driven by human activity and indifference, is wreaking havoc on the lands, waters, and cultures of indigenous communities across Alaska. The consequences are dire, the stakes are high, and the time for meaningful intervention is now.

*Guardians of the Land: Alaska Native Peoples as Stewards of the Earth*

Since time immemorial, Alaska Native peoples have inhabited and thrived in some of the most remote and pristine landscapes on Earth. We have served as the guardians of the land and as stewards of our Earth. Our cultures, traditions, and ways of life are deeply intertwined with our natural world, embodying a profound respect for the land, the water, and the creatures that inhabit them. Yet, as climate change accelerates, the very foundations of our existence are under siege.

We are experiencing record-melting ice and disappearing shorelines in Alaska. Rising temperatures are causing glaciers to recede, sea ice to shrink, and permafrost to thaw at an unprecedented rate. For Alaska Native communities along the coast, this means losing not only their homes and ancestral lands but also their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Warming temperatures are altering the delicate balance of Arctic ecosystems, disrupting migration patterns, and threatening the survival of iconic species such as polar bears, walruses, and caribou. For Alaska Native peoples, who depend on hunting, fishing, and gathering for our subsistence and cultural practices, these changes represent a direct threat to our food security and way of life.

Climate change has created an increase in environmental hazards. Climate change is fueling more frequent and severe weather events, including storms, floods, and wildfires, which pose significant risks to our Alaska Native communities' infrastructure, health, and safety. Inadequate infrastructure, limited access to emergency services, and geographic isolation exacerbate the vulnerability of our communities to environmental hazards, leaving them disproportionately exposed to harm.

In September 2022, the west coast of Alaska was struck by Extratropical Typhoon Merbok, generating a significant storm surge that caused severe flooding, erosion damage, and loss of subsistence infrastructure to over 35 communities along more than 1300 miles of Alaska’s western coast.

The Emmonak Women's Shelter, located in the Village of Emmonak with roughly 800 residents which sits along the Yukon River, serves as the only domestic violence shelter for dozens of communities within the region and along the Yukon River. The effects of climate change and Typhoon Merbok have eroded the river banks and severely impacted the ground under which the shelter sits, creating dangerous and unsafe conditions, especially during spring break-up. This has left the shelter with no choice but to either move their existing building, if it's even deemed possible to move, or build a new shelter. Both options face hurdles of securing adequate land and construction costs which are very high in rural Alaska.

Climate challenges contribute directly to increased gender-based violence. Climate change is increasing risks to food security, housing security, and traditional values and lifestyles. Threats to these elements of our lifeways are well-established risk factors for gender-based violence and raise significant safety concerns for women and girls.

*Climate Injustice: Disproportionate Impacts on Alaska Native Peoples*

The impacts of climate change are not felt equally across all of society; they are disproportionately borne by those who have contributed the least to the problem – Alaska Natives. In Alaska, where our indigenous communities comprise a significant portion of the population, the injustices of climate change are stark and undeniable.

Alaska Natives have endured centuries of colonization, exploitation, and displacement by external forces. Now, we are being forced to deal with the consequences of a crisis we did not create, bearing the brunt of environmental degradation and climate-induced disasters with resilience and dignity. Alaska Native communities face unique challenges in adapting to the impacts of climate change, including limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural barriers to accessing mainstream adaptation measures. Despite our profound knowledge of the land and innovative adaptation strategies, we are often overlooked and underserved by government agencies and policymakers.

For Alaska Native peoples, the land is more than just a source of subsistence; it is the foundation of our cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and social cohesion. As climate change erodes the landscapes and ecosystems that sustain our way of life, indigenous communities grapple with profound loss and a sense of dislocation, threatening the continuity of our cultural heritage for future generations.

Alaska's rapidly changing climate manifests in retreating ice caps, thawing permafrost, and eroding coastlines, directly threatening the traditional lands and ways of life of our Alaska Native indigenous communities. As ancestral lands become uninhabitable due to environmental degradation, Alaska Native women find themselves disproportionately affected.

For example, climate-induced disasters, such as coastal erosion and flooding, are forcing our Alaska Native communities to relocate, disrupting social structures and exacerbating economic hardships.[[2]](#footnote-1) Women bear the brunt of these displacements, often shouldering the responsibility of caring for families and rebuilding communities in unfamiliar environments. Traditional subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, form the backbone of our Alaska Native cultures and economies. However, as warming temperatures alter ecosystems and deplete wildlife populations, women face increased challenges in securing food and resources for their families, heightening vulnerability to food insecurity and poverty.

The intersection of climate change with existing socioeconomic disparities amplifies the marginalization experienced by Alaska Native women. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities further constrains their ability to adapt to environmental changes and mitigate the impacts of violence within their communities.

*Environmental Stressors and Gender-Based Violence*

Climate change not only disrupts ecosystems but also exacerbates pre-existing social tensions and vulnerabilities, creating fertile grounds for gender-based violence within our Alaska Native communities.

Competition for dwindling natural resources intensifies within indigenous communities, leading to heightened tensions and interpersonal conflicts. As women play pivotal roles in resource management and household provisioning, they become targets of violence and coercion in the struggle for survival. Climate-induced displacement fragments social support networks and erodes traditional mechanisms of community cohesion and conflict resolution. Women, already marginalized within patriarchal structures, face increased isolation and are less likely to seek help or report instances of violence, perpetuating cycles of abuse and impunity.

The erosion of cultural traditions and spiritual connections to the land exacerbates feelings of dislocation and alienation among our Alaska Native women. As ancestral knowledge systems and healing practices fade into obscurity, women grapple with a loss of identity and belonging, rendering them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse.

*Interconnected Solutions*

Addressing violence against Alaska Native women in the context of climate change requires a multi-faceted and intersectional approach that acknowledges the complex interplay of environmental, social, and economic factors.

Central to any effective response is the empowerment of Alaska Native women as agents of change within their communities. By amplifying their voices, strengthening their leadership capacities, and providing access to resources and opportunities, we can foster resilience and catalyze transformative action at the grassroots level. Building resilience to climate change and violence requires holistic approaches that integrate indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and gender-sensitive strategies. Investing in community-led initiatives that promote sustainable resource management, enhance social cohesion, and provide trauma-informed support services can create protective buffers against environmental and social shocks.

Governments and institutions must prioritize the needs and rights of Alaska Native women in climate adaptation and disaster response efforts. This includes enacting and enforcing laws that address gender-based violence, investing in infrastructure and services that enhance community resilience, and facilitating meaningful participation and decision-making by indigenous women in policy processes.

Climate justice is inseparable from social justice, and addressing violence against Alaska Native women requires collective action and solidarity across communities, sectors, and movements. By standing in solidarity with indigenous peoples, amplifying our struggles, and advocating for systemic change, we can build a more just and sustainable future for all.

The nexus between climate change and violence against Alaska Native women demands urgent attention and action. As we confront the existential threat of climate change, we must not overlook the intersecting crises facing marginalized communities, nor the resilience and wisdom they possess in navigating adversity. By recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental degradation, social inequities, and gender-based violence, we can work towards a more equitable and harmonious world where the rights and dignity of all are upheld and protected.

*A Call to Action: Upholding Indigenous Rights and Environmental Justice*

The challenges posed by climate change demand a comprehensive and equitable response that prioritizes the rights, needs, and aspirations of Alaska Native peoples. As custodians of the land and frontline witnesses to its degradation, indigenous communities must be empowered to lead the charge for climate justice:

Indigenous knowledge systems offer invaluable insights into sustainable resource management, adaptation strategies, and community resilience. By recognizing and respecting indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and land rights, we can foster more inclusive and effective approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Supporting community-led initiatives that promote climate resilience, sustainable development, and cultural revitalization is essential to building a more just and sustainable future for Alaska Native peoples. This includes funding for renewable energy projects, ecosystem restoration efforts, and capacity-building programs that empower indigenous communities to thrive in the face of environmental challenges.

In conclusion, climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is a profound social, economic, and moral challenge that demands immediate and urgent action. As we confront the existential threat of climate change, we must not overlook the disproportionate impacts on Alaska Native peoples, nor the wisdom, resilience, and cultural richness that we bring to the table. By upholding indigenous rights, investing in community-led solutions, and fostering solidarity and allyship, we can build a future where all peoples, including Alaska Native communities, can thrive in harmony with the natural world. The time to act is now, and the stakes could not be higher.

**Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing and in the context of climate change, we urge that the OHCHR include in their report recommendations that:

1. The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be directed to pay particular attention to the rights and special needs of Indigenous women and children in the context of climate change, including monitoring states’ measures to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2014 Outcome Document to the UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples to ensure indigenous women and children enjoy protection against all forms of violence and discrimination;
2. The relevant special procedures be urged to address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination experienced by indigenous women in the context of climate change by periodically requesting special, and perhaps joint, reports on the topic; and
3. Request that the Secretary-General:
   1. Issue a report on violence against indigenous women in the context of climate change with recommendations for future actions, and
   2. Convene a high-level panel on intensifying efforts, in collaboration with indigenous peoples and indigenous women, to prevent and eliminate violence and discrimination against indigenous women in the context of climate change, and with consideration of the interconnections between securing safety for indigenous women, securing indigenous land rights, and securing global climate justice.

*About the Alaska Native Women’s Resource Center*

Since our humble beginnings as a grassroots, Alaska Native non-profit organization, the Alaska Native Women’s Resource Center (AKNWRC) has grown to become a leading voice for Alaska Native survivors of gender-based violence on the Tribal, federal, state, and international stages. Officially established in 2015, a group of long-time Alaska Native Advocates and allies with over 150 years of combined experience delivering life-saving advocacy in remote Villages and urban settings had the resiliency to envision an Alaska Native Women’s Resource Center designed to provide technical assistance and training to Tribes and Tribally based advocacy programs supporting establishment or growing of gender-based violence programs specific to the needs of that community or Tribe.

The AKNWRC remains at the forefront of the battle against gender-based violence impacting Alaska Native women and Alaska's 229 federally recognized Tribes. Our vision, which guides our work each day, is violence against Alaska Native women is rooted in the colonization of Indigenous Nations, and reversing these devastating effects lies in the exercise of Tribal sovereignty and traditional ways. AKNWRC exists to work in partnership with Tribes to address gender-based violence by providing uniquely Alaska Native-designed and delivered technical assistance and training that is rooted in each Tribe’s distinct voices, languages, and teachings.

For questions or additional information about the AKNWRC, please contact Tami Truett Jerue, Executive Director, at tami.jerue@aknwrc.org.

1. A/HRC/RES/48/13 (2021), pg. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *Climate change has finally caught up to Newtok, Alaska,* National Geographic Magazine, October 22, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/climate-change-finally-caught-up-to-this-alaska-village>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)