



A Gendered Perspective of the Lack of Justice for the Asubpeeschoseewagoon Anishinabek Women of Grassy Narrows

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ABSTRACT

From 1962 to 1970, the Reed Paper Mill dumped over 9000 kilograms of mercury into the English-Wabigoon River system in Northern Ontario. The Grassy Narrows community, an Anishinabek First Nation, depend on this water system for sustenance and their livelihoods. Their reliance specifically on fish as a primary source of food and income increases their community's vulnerability to mercury poisoning, which has resulted in lasting impacts on the physical and mental health of their community. Grassy Narrows women are disproportionately impacted by mercury poisoning due to their gendered responsibility to protect water, care work, and child-bearing. This paper examines the failure of the Government of Ontario to uphold the foundational elements of environmental justice for Grassy Narrows women, including distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and corrective action. Recommendations for the Government of Ontario include listening to the needs of Grassy Narrows First Nations and including them in decision-making processes to help ease the generational pain caused by perpetual environmental racism.

INTRODUCTION

"When the white man comes to my country, he leaves a trail of blood."¹ Arnold Pelly, a Grassy Narrows First Nations Chief, pointed to the disproportionate burden placed on his indigenous community caused by one of the largest cases of perpetual environmental racism in Ontario: the devastating mercury pollution that occurred within Grassy Narrows.²⁻⁵ From 1962 to 1970, the Reed Paper Mill dumped over 9000 kilograms of mercury into the water system (English-Wabigoon River) of Grassy Narrows located in Northern Ontario.^{1,2,3,4,6} The mercury created an

"immense sickness in the Anishinabek community and negatively impacted their health and way of life."^{4,6,7} Due to high mercury concentrations in the water, the Anishinabek community was also forced by the Government of Ontario to halt the selling of all fish. This drastically impacted their community given that their primary source of income came from commercial and touristic fishing.^{4,6,17} Simultaneously, the government insisted the fish were safe for the community to eat, despite collective signs of mercury poisoning.¹⁵ This contradiction raises the question of the government's intentions.¹⁵ While acknowledging that mercury contamination was a concern for non-Indigenous

communities, they disregarded these same concerns impacting the Indigenous community.¹⁵

For decades, the Grassy Narrows people have been pursuing environmental justice,⁷ defined as the equitable treatment and effective consultation with all people in respect to environmental decision-making.⁸⁻¹¹ In the case of Grassy Narrows, women have been disproportionately impacted by mercury contamination due to the failure of the Government of Ontario to uphold the three key pillars of environmental justice; distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and corrective action.^{7,8,12} Through this paper, the gendered impacts of mercury pollution will be explored through the foundations of justice to critique the action and inaction of the government of Ontario.⁸

2.1 Distributive Fairness

Distributive fairness refers to people equally sharing the burdens and benefits of environmental decision-making outcomes.²² Specifically, the women of Grassy Narrows are more vulnerable to mercury due to their gendered responsibility to the land, water, and their nation.⁷ Given that water is considered by the Anishinabek community as the “lifeblood” that brings health and nurtures unborn children and ecosystems, women are the primary caregivers responsible for meeting the needs of the family, children, and elders.⁷ Therefore, women are more vulnerable to the impacts of mercury pollution as monitoring the quality of food and water is an important part of a women's tasks.^{7,23}

Dietary exposure to unsafe mercury concentrations detrimentally impacts physical health and economic prosperity.^{16,23} For example, fishing guide fathers are associated with lower economic stability and higher dietary mercury.²³ Moreover, studies have linked a fishing guide father to children with poor health, high psychological distress, poor results in school, and a higher poverty rate.²³ Similarly, consumption of dietary mercury during pregnancy is associated with higher blood concentrations in children.²³ This phenomenon can be explained by the vulnerability of children to chemical exposure due to their relative body weight to absorption ratio and rapid brain development.²³

Importantly, eating fish during pregnancy is a traditional medicine for the Anishinabek peoples.^{7,23,24} Grassy Narrows Elder Judy Da Silva explained, “The grandmothers used to say, ‘Eat fish broth, and the breast milk will come out.’ That’s how important fish was to a woman’s body.”^{7,25} Higher fish consumption increases mercury exposure during pregnancy and is linked to poor emotional, behavioural, and physical health in children.²³ As a result, mothers in Grassy Narrows have reported that 27.4 % of young adults have attempted suicide at least once, with the rate of girls attempting suicide being threefold the average for First Nations in Canada.^{16,23}

These health issues amplify the burdens on mothers

and women, who are already struggling with their own health concerns.^{16,23} In Grassy Narrows, the mental health of mothers is greatly impacted by mercury exposure and is carried to future generations.^{16,23} A mother’s poor mental health is linked to struggling children, with more than 31% of children cared for by “Social Services”.^{16,23} Since the 1970s, a mounting burden has been building on the mothers of Grassy Narrows, with little help from the Government of Ontario concerning distributive fairness.^{16,23}

2.2 Procedural Fairness

Procedural fairness refers to inclusion in the processes of environmental decision making.²² The major role women play in care work and their responsibility to protect water leads to a greater vulnerability to mercury exposure.^{7,16,23} Therefore, women’s voices need to be included throughout decision-making processes.^{7,16,23} The women of Grassy Narrows have pushed their way to the forefront of advocacy, while the Government of Ontario continues to ignore their voices.^{4,7,16,23,25} In the 1970s, the Anishinabek peoples were not consulted on the harms of the Reed Paper Mill.⁴ Despite the high levels of mercury, Health Canada reported that they were unable to diagnose mercury poisoning due to the lack of symptoms.^{4,21,26} Concurrently, a mercury expert, Dr. Masazumi Harada, investigated the residents and found symptoms of mercury poisoning including the loss of senses and motor functioning.^{4,21,26} Furthermore, hair samples taken from residents confirmed the presence of mercury poisoning in 87 individuals.^{4,21,26} Unsurprisingly, the Government of Ontario predicted that mercury remediation would take 30 years; however, increased logging in the area resulted in the increased movement of sediment, exposing mercury back into the water column.^{27,28} As a result, it is predicted that restoration to safe levels will take more than a century.²⁶ In 2002, the women of Grassy Narrows initiated a youth and women led blockade to protect the water system from the impacts of logging.⁷ After a year of blockade expansion, the logging company retreated.²⁷ The elders announced a prohibition on all industrial activities within their traditional land without community consent.²⁹ A decade later, the Government of Ontario promised no clear-cutting for at least five years.²⁹ However, the community’s rights to consent were ignored by the current Premier Doug Ford.²⁹ Nine mining permits were issued for the traditional land, and the Grassy Narrows community were not informed of these permits.²⁹ Like logging, mining increases the remediation period for mercury due to disturbed sediment. As is evident, the Ontario Government refuses to practice procedural fairness and continues to reinforce injustice towards women who lead advocacy.

2.3 Corrective Action

Corrective action refers to the acknowledgment and reconciliation of past wrongs pertaining to distributive and procedural fairness.³⁰ Proper reconciliation requires a focus on social context; therefore, solely covering material costs is not enough.¹⁰ From 1970 to 1984, the Reed Paper Mill operations received a net profit of \$235 million.⁴¹³¹ This dwarfs the \$17 million compensated to the Grassy Narrows community.⁴¹³¹ With this reparation, Grassy Narrows elders announced the purchase of a fishing lodge to help create opportunities for economic growth.⁴¹³¹ Fishing is predominantly completed by men, resulting in a gap for women.⁷ Care-work and health care could not be targeted by corrective action, as money alone can not solve this issue. As a result, the Anishinabek community has continued to suffer, as seen by early deaths (less than 60 years of age) and high youth suicide rates.^{716,23} In 2021, a \$90 million agreement was signed between the community and the Federal government with the promise of an operating long-term care home for residents with mercury poisoning.³² However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Grassy Narrows community anticipates it is unlikely to be developed.³² Hopefully, the government will honour the rights of the Grassy Narrows community by providing the promised health care.³²

CONCLUSION

The disproportional gender impacts of mercury pollution on Anishinabek women of Grassy Narrows provides strong evidence that the Government of Ontario failed and continues to fail in addressing environmental justice for the community. A review of distributive fairness showed the impact of mercury exposure on the health and economic resources of women due to their responsibility of care work. These added stressors can lead to more mental health issues and higher rates of children raised by “Family and Social Services”. Similarly, a review of procedural fairness provided evidence that the Government of Ontario has had a history of neglecting the rights of the Grassy Narrows women. Despite women’s higher vulnerability to mercury exposure, their voices continue to be disregarded by the government as seen in new mining permits. Surprisingly, the Ontario government has contributed to some corrective action through monetary compensation. However, developments to address the increased burdens of mercury sickness has yet to be seen, and women continue to be left out of corrective action, as material value alone assist in implementing a health care facility. The Government of Ontario must respect and incorporate the perspectives of women and the community. Grassy Narrows has

been suffering from the violence of environmental racism on their watershed for decades. This is an infringement of the Canadian Charter on the basis of rights to life, liberty, and security of the person (Section 7), as well as their rights to equality (Section 15).¹² It is time the Government of Ontario recognizes and acts towards environmental justice for Grassy Narrows through the incorporation of the foundations of environmental justice.

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Keywords: Mercury Poisoning, Generational Impacts, Environmental Justice, Environmental Racism, Gendered Perspective, Grassy Narrows First Nations

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