

# Alberta tar sand and the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in canad...

[Countries](#), [Canada](#)



## Introduction

Alberta Tar Sands (Athabasca Oil Sands) is a large deposits of bitumen crude oil which located in Northeastern Alberta. It is the largest oil sand deposit in Canada consisting of water, clay, sand and crude oil. Alberta tar sand development is highly valued and of great assets to the Canadian government because of the economical, cultural and political benefits it creates. However, this resource extraction has greatly caused damages to Indigenous people residing in surrounding First Nation communities.

Although the history of the Alberta Tar Sands goes back as far as 1715, the issue now is the vast portion of lands that are being destroyed and the unwillingness of the government to show any concern. Thus, violating the Aboriginal treaty, human rights, culture and their lands. The production of tar sand is a human right issue regarding the Aboriginals because it has affected the water they drink, their environment, wildlife and their communities (Ufuoma, 2018).

Colonialism has been the main cause of trauma and intergenerational trauma of Aboriginal women who have lost their sense of health and wellness, leading to countless disappearance and murders. The arrival of the European people introduced the ' Residential School System' which affected the civilization of the Aboriginal people. With their arrival, colonialization came into place. This resulted in the ill treatment done to Aboriginal women and girls as they are being abducted, murdered and were even looked down as squaws. During the European reign, students who attended the Indian Residential School were sexually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually

abused for over a hundred years. Many Aboriginal women and girls felt disconnected from their culture and identity when they left these schools. The residential school system is one of the many reasons why the Aboriginal women and girls are victims of violence which has led them to being missing and murdered. Throughout history, these women have been the victims of oppression in the society. They have suffered through racism, sexism and domestic violence (Martin, 2018).

Personally, I think both Alberta Tar Sands and the missing and murdered Indigenous women are similar in many ways and can be linked to the residing issue of colonialism. Colonialism has played its role in both cases with the Europeans and government using and take control of what belongs to the Aboriginal people. The problems that the Aboriginal people are facing today started with the arrival of the European. Over recent years, the Aboriginal people have been oppressed by the Canadian society itself and they have continued to live under oppression. In both cases, the injustices, struggle and discrimination that have plagued the Aboriginal people for over several centuries are still unattractive and degrading in today's reality. The Alberta Tar Sands and the missing Aboriginal women share the same faith as either of them are being tossed aside with no care.

My argument is that colonialism has never ended in Canada; the continuous legacy of colonization has resulted in the terrible inequality placed on Aboriginals particularly the women. Canada has an ongoing practice of internal colonialism on First Nation Women, and a broader colonial relationship with all Indigenous people. Nevertheless, I think it is apparent

that Indigenous women are the ones who typically face economical, cultural, racial and political factors leading to them being missing and murdered. The case of the Alberta tar sand discloses and links the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls to the stated factors.

Historical and Racial Relation Between Alberta Tar Sand (ATS) and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada.

Comparing the case of the Alberta tar sand and, the missing and murdered Indigenous women, it might be right to state that Aboriginal women in Canada have historically been devalued not only as Aboriginal people but simply because they are women (racism). These cases have displayed similar insight regarding the ill treatment shown to Aboriginal women in the past. They also acknowledge the impact of colonization and went further to identify that they currently exist and affect Aboriginal women and girls. ATS and the MMIWG in Canada is probably as old as the development of Canada itself and can only be understood within the historical context of settler colonialism which has led to the ongoing racialization and sexualization of Indigenous women.

Colonialism can be described as the occurrence of an imbalanced power relation where people are taken over (or ‘colonized’) and exploited.

Typically, colonization is orchestrated through acts of violence and physical dominance creating an uneven power structure reaching into different aspects of society such as social, political, and physical power (Bychutsky, 2017). The problem of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada

started with colonization. Aboriginal women are seen as objects often sexualized, dehumanized and treated as prey. They are taken advantage of desperation to escape abuse at home or are poor and are looking for anyone care to for them. Since colonization, Indigenous women and girls have been stereotyped as sexually accessible and disposable women (Martin, 2018). Which has led to the brutal and terrorizing sexual violence that has been neglected and condoned by higher authorities including the police and courts in Canada. Even the federal government were perceived to be indifferent to those women suffering from sexual, physical and emotional abuse (Burnett & Read, p. 220). This dehumanization of Indigenous women and assumptions about their sexual availability is what basically resulted in the Aboriginal women missing and murder cases.

Likewise, the development of tar sands in Alberta also show same form of colonization, with intersecting impacts of racism and hetero-sexism, particularly for the surrounding First Nations communities who are bearing the body burden of the resource extraction and environmental destruction. With the introduction of tar sand industries, more workers were always needed at extraction sites to monitor and process the natural resources (tar sand) being mined, drilled, manufactured, or transported (Preston, 2013). These workers, many of who are men from all over the country were housed in temporary accommodations. Consequently, with such influx and dominance of men, an imbalanced power structure (colonization) led to a patriarchal culture. Thus, increasing the rate of sexual violence against Aboriginal women in many of the impacted First Nation communities, where

the male dominated industry has the strongest foothold. Record shows that Alberta has some of the highest numbers of both sexual violence and rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women (Arriagada, 2016). This is challenging for First Nation communities as they continue to experience growing problems of violence and death (Kulchyski, 2007).

Martin stated in his research paper that 1, 017 Indigenous women and girls were murdered between 1980-2012 in Canada. Whereas within those same years, there were 206 Indigenous women and girls murdered in Alberta alone (Arriagada, 2016). The case of Alberta tar sands treats women in the same way as the case of MMIWG: with violence and disregard. With the introduction of colonization, the impact that dehumanization, sexism and stereotypes have made on Aboriginal women is a direct correlation to the missing and murdered Aboriginal women, and the Alberta tar sand violence on women. Whether it being the Europeans, government or people, both cases, oppresses the human right of Indigenous women and treat them as nothing.

#### Economical, Cultural and Political Connection to ATS and MMIWG

Economical, cultural and political concerns are undeniably connected to the ATS case and the MMIWG. For Indigenous people, their lands and territories are their life. They are valued not only for the life upon them and the subsistence they provide, but also for the spiritual, cultural, economical and environmental values which shows the existence of Aboriginal livelihood. Unfortunately, in both cases, the European and the government had power

and forced the migration of Indigenous people from their traditional lands because of direct removal caused by colonization or from loss of livelihood caused by resource extraction project. This obviously negatively impacted on Indigenous cultures and socio-economic structures.

Economically, the loss of livelihoods in hunting, agriculture, fisheries, and other traditional and alternative modern livelihoods by far exceeds the benefit of paid jobs generated from tar sand or mining industries (Ufuoma, 2018). While the mining industries report billions of taxes paid to the government, the state has seemingly failed in redistributing the benefits, especially to those directly impacted by the mining and oil industries. As a result, poverty and poor social services remain rampant, particularly in First nation communities hosting these industries (Anongos, 2012). The result was indeed a widespread decline in traditional skills that served the indigenous economy, accompanied by the fracturing of the cultures (forms of governance, spirituality, ceremony) intrinsic to that way of life.

The destruction of Indigenous livelihood and their partial replacement by paid employment in mining (mostly for men) resulted in a double reduction in the position and status of women. In both ATS and MMIWG case, the escalating problems of food security, conflict and lack of opportunities predispose Indigenous women to lowered self-esteem. Out-migration, in search for employment and/or an increase in sex work, have become economic options for Indigenous women, exposing themselves to more vulnerable situations. Studies reveals that the increase incidences of gender violence, including rape and trafficking, domestic violence are related to

both Alberta tar sand and, the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The influx of transient male workers in Alberta tar sand communities, and the lack of economic options for women has led the increased incidences of sex work leading to their disappearance and/or murder (Anongos, 2012). Residential schools were patriarchal (male-dominated) institutions where spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical violence and sexual abuse was widespread. Many Aboriginals, particularly men, treat women in the only way they learned how, and in the only manner that gives their own spirits a sense of control and self-worth. These abusive behaviours displayed by Aboriginal men today are widely seen to have been adopted from the behaviour and institutions of the colonizers. As a result of the numerous restraints systematically placed upon Aboriginal women in both cases, restraints such as inadequate housing, low income, low levels of employment and education, Indigenous women face socio-economic challenges unlike those faced by any other women in Canada.

Aboriginal women failed to resist the European's colonialization and even when they voiced their opinion against tar sand extraction, ecosystem destruction and health problems. Government and industry propagandas and actions of those in power always seem to forge a constant attack of rebuttal and dismissal, discrediting against their voices. For women, there is no separation between production and reproduction, land and life, resistance and survival. In the case of ATS and the MMIWG, patriarchal systems and colonialism do not recognize or value inherent worth in women's bodies and the work women do, and instead commodify them. The fact that once



women's bodies are objectified in this way, it positions violence against women as justified, embedding it into the fabric of society. Violence against women is and remains the bedrock for all other kinds of violence in both cases (Jiwani, 2006).

The impacts of Alberta tar sand development and the MMIWG cannot be seen as gender neutral. Women experience the direct and indirect consequences of colonization and oil extraction in different, and often more pronounced, ways than men. Many Aboriginal women and girls are faced with racism and sexism when it came to job hunting because society had already deemed them as "immoral" and "promiscuous" which made it difficult to find jobs (Burnett & Read, 2016). With few jobs available to them, Aboriginal women are left to fend for themselves, often falling into poverty and finding desperate means for work and food; promoting the negative stereotypes associated with them. The benefit (from signed treaties) of jobs positions offered within the Alberta resource extraction sites are disproportionately held by men. Even though women were hired by these oil companies, a gender division of labour often occurred where women are downgraded to traditional female occupations, such as kitchen work, housekeeping, cleaning or laundry and are paid much less, comparatively (Jiwani, 2006).

The influx of men and loss of Indigenous livelihood in ATS has left a significant impact on important aspects of Indigenous culture, such as a loss of Indigenous language and moral values. Also, tar sand development has led to the destruction of places of cultural and spiritual significance for

Indigenous people, including sacred sites and archaeological ruins. This has been an issue for Aboriginal people, where a lack of understanding of their Indigenous spirituality, including a culture of secrecy, has resulted in the destruction and damage to important sacred sites (Anongos, 2012). While for the MMIWG case, Aboriginal forms of spirituality were deemed as heathen and therefore evil. Their form of spirituality was banned, and their languages were characterized as devil-speak. In many schools, students were severely punished if they spoke their mother tongues. Over generations, many children indeed became disconnected from their traditions and their languages, and thereby from their Elders who lived with those ways. After a few years away, many of the first generations of residential school students could no longer speak with their parents or grandparents. Lost with the words is the rich and complex body of knowledge inherent in the words and concepts that form languages as transmitters of cultural and historical knowledge. The deliberate destruction of language is generally agreed to be a manifestation of cultural genocide.

From another perception, traditional roles and responsibilities of women have become more marginalized as First Nation communities became more dependent on the cash-based economy created by the tar sand development and residential school system. This economic shift resulted in outside culture and influences that erode traditional culture and cultivate antisocial activities like sex work (prostitution). The intrusion of outside culture has led to the disintegration of Indigenous society and culture, manifested in the weakening of traditional values that are important in maintaining and

sustaining peace and order in the communities, clans and families (Anongos, 2012).

Politically, women were honoured and respected members of the community. However, with European colonialism came a male-dominated system wherein the idea of female political participation, much less leadership, was not accepted. In Canada, Indigenous women are on the frontline of exploitation because the exploitation and rape of land (Tar sand development) is profoundly and deeply connected with the exploitation and rape of Indigenous girls and women. More than 80 per cent of all lands utilized or occupied by Indigenous peoples lack legal protection and are highly vulnerable to being seized by private companies, individuals, and governments themselves (Dorow, 2013). In Canada, resource extraction projects are ethical economic opportunities for all Canadians ambiguous and normalise processes of environmental racism, Indigenous oppression and violence. Alberta's tar sand provides a particularly demonstrative site where this political control plays out with every barrel of bitumen extracted from Indigenous territories (Ufuoma, 2018). While the effects of colonization are felt by Indigenous people, it should be noted that Aboriginal women are mostly affected by its negative impact. They are ignored and neglected by political powers when facing problems with the tar sand development in their community, and even when they are found missing or murdered. Many women have come to see these patriarchal political systems as normal as the impose on bands, continues to diminish female political agency. This

limitations on female political agency are seen as attacks on traditional governance systems.

It is important that non-Aboriginal Canadians should recognize colonialism as a framework for understanding Canada's history, economy and tensions between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. The history of Canada is known to be multi-cultural and have individuals of multiple ethnicities, races and cultures. Canada was not formed many years ago by the Indigenous inhabitants; it was established by the European settlers who came from various part of Europe (Uribe, 2010). Without the immigration of the first Europeans in this land, Canada would not have been made. Canada's colonial foundations have resulted in many challenges and tensions in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the non-Aboriginal 'settlers' in Canada today especially the governments and corporations exploiting the land. Demographically Aboriginal peoples are under-represented in government and this clearly illustrates the extent to which European cultural systems of language, law, and property have been imposed on the original inhabitants of these lands.

Many of non-Aboriginal people think they are entitled to the benefits Canada has to offer and think otherwise for the Aboriginals. Whereas, Aboriginals are the original owners of the land. Nevertheless, the only way for non-Aboriginals to understand the history and economy of Canada is to recognise the issue of colonialism. Understanding colonialism in relation to Canada's history will help non-Aboriginals to realize what Aboriginals went through during the European's reign and what it meant for their land and culture to

be taken away from them. With this understanding, non-Aboriginals would be able to know the reason for Aboriginal's cry for help. They will be able to respect those who had made an impact in Canada's history. Hopefully, ensuring that Canada will be a good co-habiting place for the next generation of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals without negative stigma. We're all Canadians. We are all responsible. We all need to heal. Some call this process decolonization, others reconciliation. Education and dialogue bring hope to this honest engagement. Understanding Canada's colonial history and discrediting the racist myths that run through Canadian society is an important part of the truth and reconciliation process.