The Hidden Impact of Climate Change on Women’s Health: A literature review linking violence against women and climate change

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Background

A literature review was conducted to identify the impact of changes to the social, economic and traditional life styles of populations living in the circumpolar region. Specifically, the literature review investigated the connection between changes to the landscape as a result of climate change and violence experienced by women.

Violence against women is endemic to our society. Recent studies suggest that up to forty percent of Indigenous women will experience violence at some point in their life (Puchala, Paul, Kennedy, & Mehl-Madrona, 2010). In a northern context, this violence becomes entangled in the numerous issues that circumpolar regions and populations are experiencing as a result of changes to culture as well as the social and economic fabric of communities:

• The factors linking climate change to violence against women are not simple or linear. A complex web of social, economic, culture, traditional lifestyles are impacted by climate change. The result requires adaptation by Indigenous populations in an environment in which the traditional protective factor of the land is changing putting populations, particularly women at risk.

Objectives

To look at the complex social changes in northern populations in the context of climate change as well as illuminate the lack of academic research looking at the impacts of climate change on women’s health and wellness.

Key objectives of the literature review:

• Explore the impact of climate change on the health of women living in the circumpolar region.
• Reveal a complex web of association between climate change and violence against women.
• Situate climate change into a public health context to identify alternative avenues to address violence against women.
• Highlight an issue that little is written about:

Methods

This literature review examined research on climate change and violence against women in circumpolar regions using published documents from 2002 to the present:

• English language articles and government documents were selected through PubMed.
• Key words used were violence, women, climate change and mental health.
• Articles were primarily published in Canada, United States and Australia.

Articles were reviewed for an understanding of the interplay between climate change and the socioeconomic, health and cultural disruptions experienced by northern Indigenous populations.

Findings

The literature review concurred that stress resulting from erosion of land and sea ice, changes to wildlife and permafrost and irregular weather patterns as a result of climate change are impacting the culture and traditions of northern populations. Access to employment, traditional hunting grounds and way of life along with challenges to traditional knowledge and ceremony contribute to stress experienced by Indigenous populations. The erosion of social support networks, loss of traditional values contributes to undermining the social capital of a population (Berry, 2009).

Culture is a protective factor for northern cultures. Changes to the landscape weaken the ability of an individual and/or community to deal with other changes and stress. Unhealthy coping behaviors including substance abuse and violence aimed at women are a result of these stresses (Eaton needed).

Conclusion

The order of events that link climate change and violence is not linear. It requires an understanding of the complex changes that Indigenous populations in the circumpolar regions are experiencing. It also requires an understanding of the role that culture plays in the wellbeing of Indigenous populations. As a result, the relationship between violence and climate change requires attention and involvement of many different players.

Abuse often goes unreported and if reported it is not documented the same way in each jurisdiction. This contributes to the difficulty of understanding the relationship between changes in a community, changes in the environment and the violence experienced by women. The field of public health can access new and innovative methods of supporting northern communities in addressing issue of violence against women by recognizing the role of land and climate change.

Recommendations

• Develop common surveillance methods measuring violence against women.
• Establish gender-based analysis of impacts of climate change on health or northern populations.
• Support the development of resource centres for culturally specific responses to violence against women.
• Foster political support to recognize the impact of climate change on the health and wellness of women.

REFERENCES


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