



THE WELLBEING EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN THE HAISLA NATION AND THE DISTRICT OF KITIMAT

May 2018

PREPARED BY THE COMMUNITY VITALITY ADVISORY GROUP AND RESEARCH TEAMⁱ

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from discussions with 130 women aged 14 and over, living in the Haisla Nation's Kitamaat Village and the nearby District of Kitimat (British Columbia). Through these discussions, we documented local women's definitions of wellbeing, as well as the factors that impact wellbeing in their personal lives and across their communities. These discussions occurred between June 2016 and May 2017.ⁱⁱ

The findings from the discussions are organized into 18 themes: the physical environment, recreation, mutual aid, social isolation, migration, technology, volunteerism, education, health services, transportation, appropriate housing, safety, childcare, employment, women's empowerment, Indigenous cultureⁱⁱⁱ, discrimination, and politics. Across these categories, we learned that connections to the land and social cohesion are critical for sustaining women in this region. Participants also offered many insights into how their communities might begin to address ongoing challenges of isolation (both social and geographic), inequality, environmental change, and economic "booms" and "busts" reflective of areas – like this one – that rely heavily on the natural resource economy.

Overall, the report shows that women in Kitimat and the Haisla Nation have both common and unique experiences. For example, some mothers in both communities discussed appreciating the safety and accessibility of their small communities. However, many other mothers, and women more generally, noted concerns about their personal safety, particularly in relation to large influxes of men in the town, which comes with temporary work camps. In other words, some women feel that the community feels less safe than it used to be.

The cost of living was a major dividing factor in women's experiences. The high cost of living in Kitimat means that lots of families go without access to sports teams and clubs in the community. Food access is also an issue. Many women in Kitimat described a strong network of social services that help to create minimal food security for people, but this should raise the question of why so many women struggle to have access to good food for themselves and their families. There is also a sense that some

women who do have access to sufficient economic resources may not understand the extent of the challenges faced by women who live without the comfort of being able to meet their daily needs. Food security and food sovereignty have both been affected negatively by disruptions to important cultural practices within the Haisla Nation. Haisla women explained several ways that their traditions and cultural practices have become more difficult to uphold, particularly in terms of ensuring everyone in the community has access to food.

Young women had a great deal to say about gaps in the educational system, and problems introduced by the prevalence of mobile technology. They can easily identify instances of sexism and racism, and many describe a lack of activities for youth to participate in, which contributes to drug and alcohol use amongst teens. Young women also told us that a lack of public transportation is a big problem – especially in Haisla Nation’s Kitamaat Village – where there is no way to leave the community on the weekend if you don’t have access to a car, or if you cannot afford an expensive taxi ride. Senior women expressed concern about the absence of supportive services for aging in place, mental health services, and limitations to their capacity to relocate. Relocation to another town would destabilize their personal support networks, is complicated by the precariousness of their children’s employment, may be out of reach financially, and may compound issues of isolation.

The full report will be disseminated to a range of public, community, and private sector audiences. Our findings have also informed the development of an action plan, which emphasizes the importance of finding ways to ensure that the experiences of Indigenous and settler women are included in local planning and decision-making. Ultimately, the capacity of women in Kitimat and the Haisla Nation is remarkable – from working year in and year out to provide safe shelter for women leaving violent situations, to advocating for more and better services for young people. The discussions that contributed to this report taught us a lot about the strength of diverse northern women and girls. The support networks that women have built to keep their communities running are strong, and the wisdom of older women and Haisla Elders is evident.

ⁱ The local advisory group includes: Ehryn Bolton, Haisla Youth Coach; Cassidi Bolton, Haisla Youth Coach; Rosanna Christiansen-Stewart, Haisla Health Centre; Dolores Pollard, Haisla Youth and Family Service Coordinator; Marilyn Furlan, Haisla Elders Centre; Marianne Hemmy, Kitimat Community Development Centre; Michelle Martins, Tamitik Status of Women; Laura Olsson, Haisla Health Centre; Mary Ellen Proctor, Community Volunteer; Cheryl Rumley, Tamitik Status of Women; Kristin Guite, Tamitik Status of Women; and Julie Wakita, Hospital Foundation. Tracy Porteous and Kate Rossiter of the Ending Violence Association of BC are also advisors on the project. Leah Levac and Lisa McMurtry help to facilitate the project from the University of Guelph in Ontario.

ⁱⁱ This project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

ⁱⁱⁱ We had a lot of discussion about whether we could include “Indigenous culture” as a theme, without being reductive. Eventually, through discussions with our Indigenous partners, we decided to use the thematic approach to highlight the relationship between (primarily) Haisla women’s wellbeing and the erosion of their culture, but also to recognize the intersections between Indigeneity and all other dimensions of Indigenous women’s experiences.



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