

The Ripple Effect

REFLECTING THE EXPERIENCES
OF FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND
INUIT WOMEN

How water insecurity impacts Indigenous women, in all their diversity

Factsheet Purpose: Show the lived, gendered, and intersectional realities of water insecurity: how it affects health, safety, cultural practices, mental wellbeing, and caregiving burdens for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.

INTRO

Water insecurity isn't just about what comes from the tap, it seeps into every corner of daily life.

For Indigenous women, in all their diversity, it shapes the rhythm of home, health, ceremony, and care.

Water is life itself, the bloodline of Mother Earth, present in our tears, our menstrual cycles, and the waters that protect new life in our wombs. When this relative becomes unsafe, the impacts ripple outward through our Nations. These ripples may be invisible at first glance, but they are deeply felt, every single day.



Quick Stats

According to NWAC's Water Carriers Facing Water Insecurity National Survey (March 2025):



43%

of Indigenous women reported that their households remain under **boil-water advisories**



Boil water advisory

A public health notice advising people to boil tap water for at least one minute before drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth, due to possible contamination.

28%

under a **do-not-consume advisories**



Do-not-consume advisory

A warning that tap water should not be consumed at all—even if boiled—because it may contain harmful substances not removed by boiling.

15%

under a **do-not-use advisories**, many lasting months or years.



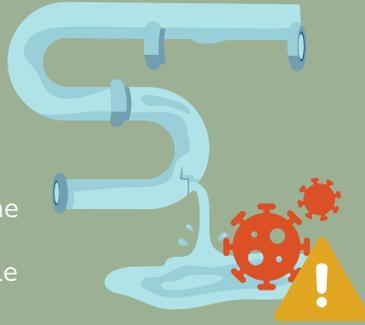
Do-not-use advisory

The most serious advisory, indicating that tap water should not be used for any purpose—including drinking, cooking, bathing, or cleaning—because it poses serious health risks.

Quick Stats (cont'd)

51%

of respondents **do not have reliable access** to clean water throughout the week, meaning there are ongoing and unpredictable interruptions.



Only half (49%)

of respondents have **reliable access seven days a week**, while 27% receive clean water between one to **three days per week**.



28%

households spends **approximately \$1000 per year** buying bottled water to stay safe, contributing to plastic pollution that threatens the waters and fish many communities rely on.

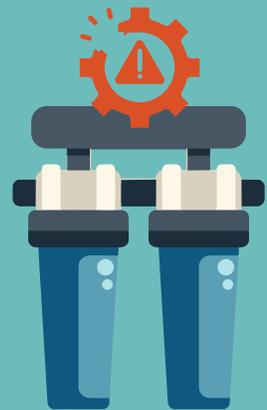
43%

of homes are classified by Environmental public health officers and other technical experts as **medium-to-high risk** household water.



Water disruptions are most often linked to failing infrastructure –

including water line breaks, poor filtration systems, and outdated equipment – along with the impacts of **nearby development projects** (*mining, hydro dams, agriculture, and other resource extraction*), often leading to **long-term advisories and unsafe source water**.



86%

of Indigenous women were unsatisfied with current **water governance**, many citing unsustainable systems and an exclusion of Indigenous women, in all their diversity, from decisions that affect them and their families the most.



The Ripple Effect

When water becomes unsafe, the damage begins at the source and spreads outward.

Water that once gave life now carries what makes people sick: bacteria, metals, chemicals, and more. This contamination affects not only drinking water, but food sources, ceremonial water, fish populations, harvesting areas, and recreation spaces that many communities rely on.

Fish disappear. Skin rashes spread. Children wake with stomach pain. Mothers spend hours boiling water. Grandmothers carry heavy containers up icy steps.

From there, the ripple expands.

Parents miss work. School days are lost. Household budgets collapse under the cost of bottled water and fuel to reach safe water sources. What begins as a local contamination quickly becomes a cycle of financial strain, exhaustion, and worry.

Then the next ripples forms.

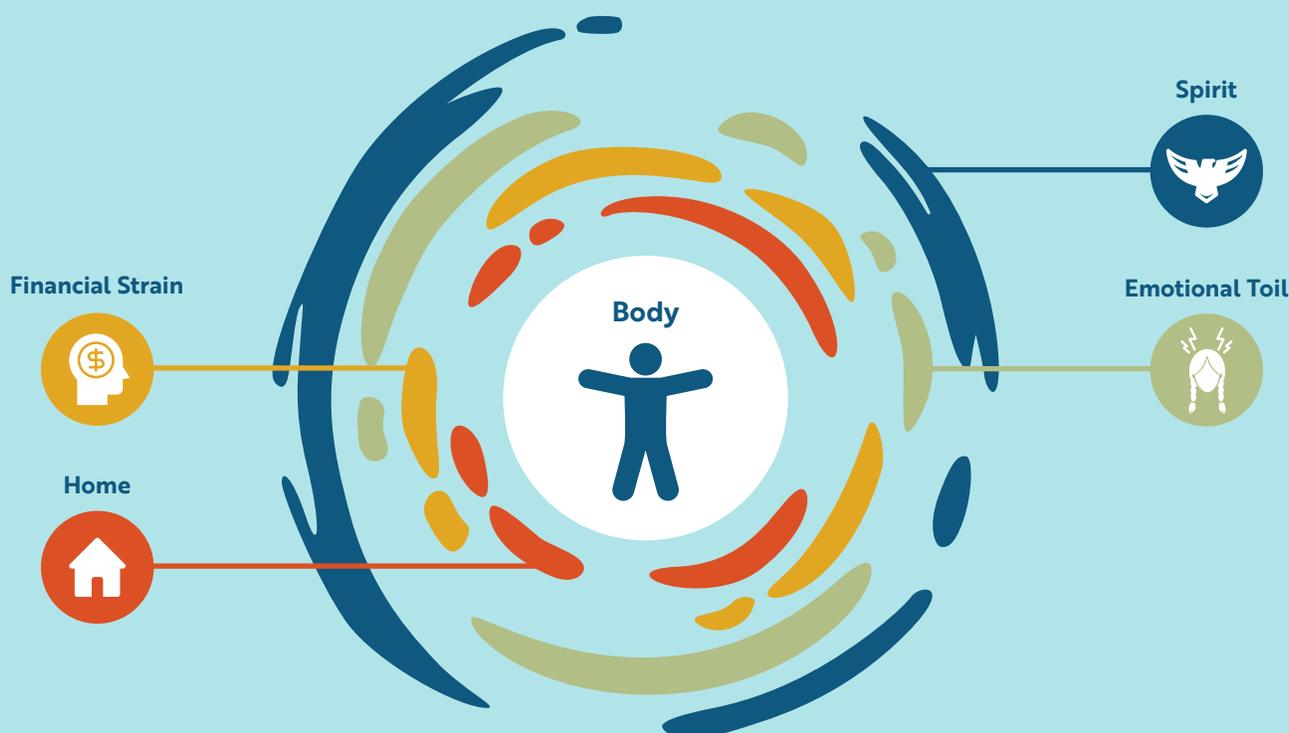
Chronic stress builds. Anxiety turns to exhaustion. Family tensions rise. Ceremonies are postponed because sacred water can't be used. The songs that once honored the rivers grow quieter each season.

Teachings tied to rivers and lakes become harder to pass on.

This is how water insecurity spreads - from the body to the household, from the household to the spirit.

It doesn't just contaminate water; it contaminates one's trust, stability, and trickled through generations.

Each ripple erodes balance, forcing Indigenous women, in all their diversity, to carry the weight of a crisis they did not create, while still protecting the kin, culture, and community that depend on them.



“WE CANNOT DRINK FROM THE TAPS. WE CANNOT TRUST WHAT WE WERE ONCE TAUGHT TO LIVE BY.”

*Water Carriers Phase 3 Roundtable participant,
Stories from the Headwaters, 2025*

The Gendered Weight of Water

Across many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, women are honoured for having a sacred relationship to water, because within their wombs, they may encase new life, and each of us enters this world through the waters of our mothers. For generations, this has shaped the understanding that water is not merely a resource, but a living relative.

“Women are connected to water. We carry our children in the sacred waters. We embody this inherent relationship that exists with water. It’s a spiritual relationship. It is where we lived before we joined the blue planet.”

Water Carriers Roundtable participant, 2025

Women carry that teaching forward. Through ceremony, prayer, and daily practice, they uphold their responsibility to protect and care for water, ensuring that the relationship between people and Mother Earth remains in balance. Many women describe this connection as a bond that is felt long before they become mothers, and long after their children have grown – a connection that ties them to their ancestors and to the waters that have sustained their Nations since time immemorial.

In the face of water insecurity, that sacred role has become heavier.

When systems fail, it is Indigenous women, community caretakers, who must fill the gaps: collecting, boiling, budgeting, and protecting.

They rise before dawn to boil water for their families. They ration bottles so Elders stay hydrated. They soothe children’s skin irritated from poor-quality water. They carry jugs up icy steps, wait for water deliveries, and fill bathtubs so there is enough for washing. These tasks, once occasional, become daily (sometimes hourly) rhythms of survival.

Women are the first to feel the strain when water runs scarce, and the last to rest when care is needed.

“It’s not just the physical risk; it’s the emotional toll of watching our people lose trust in something that used to sustain us.”

Water Carriers Roundtable participant, 2025

This work is a continuation of their traditional duty, now carried under the weight of colonial disruption.

And it is not only physical labour, but also emotional labour.

Women carry the worry, the guilt, the uncertainty.

They feel the ache of being unable to fulfill cultural responsibilities in the way their grandmothers once did. Ceremonies are altered. Teachings are delayed. The water that once sustained the spirit now brings fear.

Restoring balance means recognizing that Indigenous women are not only caregivers but governors of the water itself, and that water security will only exist when their leadership is restored.



The Cost of Inaction

Every year that advisories continue, the ripples deepen.

Communities increasingly spend on bottled water while infrastructure crumbles.

Children grow up thinking contamination is normal.

Women lose time, income, and health to a crisis they did not create.

Water insecurity is not a technical glitch – it is a reflection of **whose voices are missing** when decisions are made. Ignoring it means accepting that some people can live without clean water.

And that is a cost none of us can afford.



CALL TO ACTION



WATER JUSTICE IS GENDER JUSTICE.

Recognize the lived realities of Indigenous women, in all their diversity.

Go beyond statistics and technical measures of water.

Listen to the stories behind each advisory and act of care.

Support Indigenous-led, community-driven efforts to restore long-term, sustainable balance, so that the next ripple we feel is one of **healing**.

