

First Nations Women: Unequal Citizens

What you need to know

First Nations women regularly experience discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization in daily life, and thus may be prevented from fully participating as citizens. These factors may limit their access to safe accommodation, social services, and life opportunities.



What is this research about?

The ‘NIMBY’ (or ‘not in my backyard’) phenomenon refers to a response by community members that serves to prevent supposedly ‘undesirable’ facilities (such as public housing, shelters, or service facilities) from being located within the community. NIMBY stems from residents fearing that residential properties will decrease in value, and that community harmony and safety will be jeopardized by disorderly persons drawn to the area. This research is a case study of

NIMBYism directed at First Nations women who wished to locate a transition home that offers temporary housing and a variety of services to vulnerable First Nations women in a lower-income neighborhood in a small Canadian prairie city. Residents of this neighborhood had become increasingly active in their efforts to reclaim public space that they felt had been overrun with ‘street people,’ and opposed the relocation of this facility to their community. The proposed

facility offering shelter, childcare, job training, and educational upgrading to vulnerable First Nations women initiated a public debate that centered around ideas about who qualifies as a legitimate citizen. Within these debates, researchers discovered that First Nations women were subject to stigmatization based on their socioeconomic status, gender, and membership within an ethnic group that has historically been perceived as ‘less worthy’ of citizenship.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal, First Nations, women, NIMBY, citizenship, stigma, poverty

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ARTICLE SOURCE

The article *Outsiders in Their Homeland: Discursive Construction of Aboriginal Women and Citizenship* by Jo-Anne Fiske, Yale D. Belanger, and David Gregory was published in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 34(3): 71-92, in 2010.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers collected qualitative data on NIMBY encounters that were related to the proposal of a transition house, and then conducted an analysis of how the issue was being discussed in the public. They observed public meetings, conversations between city administrators and members of the public, and letters submitted

to the city and local newspapers. The researchers also examined what was being published in city websites, the local museum, and city-run cultural interpretive centers. These researchers sought to understand this public debate by using critical discourse theory, a method of analysis that explores how power operates through language.

What did the researchers find?

- **The dominant concept of citizenship in Canada emphasizes property rights, individualism, personal independence, and limited government.** These ideas can work to limit some groups from fully participating as citizens.
- **First Nations people within Canada may be unable to fully participate as citizens for several reasons.** The lands reserved for them are held by Canada and therefore cannot be privately owned. Forced assimilation, residential schools, and the reserve system have led to social and economic disadvantage for First Nations groups. Thus, First Nations groups in the present are more susceptible to poverty, isolation, and underemployment. Therefore, they may be perceived as less worthy of citizenship rights if they utilize social services.
- **Aboriginal people may be perceived as a threat to community stability and citizen's economic wellbeing.** Stigma against Aboriginal people that label them as addicts and alcoholics, or as violent and sexually amoral, reinforced such ideas.
- **The women and their supporters drew on ideas of human rights and collective responsibility for all members of society to respond to their opponents.** However, the structural causes of poverty, such as racism, sexism, and political-economic marginalization, were rarely addressed.



HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used by policy makers, academics, and city council members to understand how Aboriginal people may be prevented from realizing full citizenship rights. This research is helpful in understanding the connection between social exclusion and poverty. These findings can also be used to educate the general public in order to prevent NIMBYism in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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