# The Gendered Impacts of Boomtowns: How Financial Dependence, Family, and Victimization Intersect with Hegemonic Masculinity

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## Abstract

Past research on the extraction industry has examined boomtown impacts or challenges primarily related to community cohesion, infrastructure issues and crime. However, few researchers have examined the gendered impacts of boomtowns, particularly as they relate to women. Through in-depth interviews with social service professionals working with women in boomtown settings, this article examines the gendered impacts associated with resource boomtowns. More specifically, this article explores the challenges women face in these hegemonically masculine environments. The research findings show how financial dependence, family impacts and victimization come to shape women's lives in these settings and intersect with hegemonic masculinity. The article also discusses the implications of having the impacts of boomtowns be gendered.

**Keywords:** boomtowns; extraction communities; gender; intersectionality; family

## Introduction

In the 2000s, Canada and the United States (US) experienced an oil and natural gas boom that drastically began to change the social and economic makeup of several oil and natural gas, mostly rural, communities. This modern-day gold rush can be attributed to technological advances in hydraulic fracturing, or 'fracking', which allows drilling deeper into the earth to extract natural gas in places that were previously labelled as exhausted or dry. The precarious nature of the industry – coupled with the dramatic micro and macro social and economic impacts – led researchers to label the oil boom as a "massive socioeconomic phenomenon" (Fernando & Colley, 2016, p. 410).

At the epicentre of this change are boomtowns. Loosely defined as once rural "out-of-the-way settings", these communities become home to the transient workforce attracted to the area by extraction industry work. Boomtowns can be seen throughout the US and Canada, with the best-known examples being Williston, North Dakota, US, and Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, which have experienced several cycles of boom and bust over the previous decades. When booming, these communities experience rapid population and economic growth. However, owing to the unstable nature of the industry, these communities can experience busts, or micro recessions, just as quickly. While there may be economic benefits and high-paying jobs that come with this industry, the social impacts that this type of work may have on a community include increased crime and disorder, housing shortages, and infrastructure and service delivery challenges (Flanagan et al., 2014; Ruddell, 2017; Ruddell & Britto, 2020).

When social impacts are examined in boomtowns, researchers have tended to focus mainly on increased crime rates, specifically male-on-male violence, theft and drug use experienced in these communities (Carrington, McIntosh & Scott, 2010; O'Connor, 2015; Ruddell et al., 2014). That is, research has focused on the experience of social isolation and how this impacts individuals' behaviours and actions (e.g. pushing people towards substances and/or criminality). Often, this means examining increases in violence using official crime statistics (e.g. uniform crime reports) (Jayasundara et al., 2016; Ruddell, 2011). However, this is problematic as many of the gendered issues raised in qualitative studies, such as increases in interpersonal violence, are not accurately reflected in quantitative data, nor do they accurately reflect impacts on women. Overall, there is a lack of research on women's experiences in boomtown settings. Also, while some research has been completed on violence against women in resource extraction communities, theorizing on this topic is lacking (DeKeseredy & Donnermeyer, 2022).

In this article, we add to the sparse literature on women's experiences in boomtowns. First, we provide our theoretical framework for the article which focuses on hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality. Next, we explore the literature on the gendered impacts associated with boomtowns before discussing the methods used to collect data for our study. The findings then demonstrate the challenges women face navigating boomtown culture and the proclivities of such an environment. More specifically, we show how the nature of

resource-based work, culture and lifestyle negatively impacts family relationships. The discussion examines the gendered implications of our findings in relation to hypermasculine culture, work structure and lifestyle, as well as hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality theorizing.

## Theorizing Hegemonic Masculinity, Intersectionality and Boomtowns

Connell's (1995) theorizing on hegemonic masculinity is used in this article to help illuminate how women experience boomtowns as gendered environments. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as "the pattern or practice" of actions that normalize men's (patriarchal) dominance over, and subordination of, women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). It is not about a specific type of man, but rather about the "way that men position themselves through discursive practices" in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). These discursive practices – which can include racist and sexist language and humour as well as excluding subordinated others from certain spaces such as workplaces (O'Shaugnessy, 2011) – help to construct hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, in practice, subordinates others that are perceived as lesser, weaker and not meeting the hegemonic masculine ideal (e.g. ruggedly male, powerful, economic breadwinner). Practicing gender is done in relation to this hegemonic masculine ideal (Connell, 1995). While no person can meet this ideal, women are often considered subordinate others. Women are argued to practice emphasized femininity relative to hegemonic masculinity. Emphasized femininity is "focused on compliance to patriarchy" as it is the idea that women must conform to men's desires through sexual validation, childbearing and keeping the household (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848; Currier, 2013; Schippers, 2007). Nagy (2018) also notes that subordinated others could include "Indigenous people, people with disabilities, immigrants, blacks, non-English speakers" (p. 22) and the LGBTQ2S+ community. Therefore, a person's position in society is tied to the division of labour which reinforces masculinity being tied to money and the economy, while domesticity is tied to femininity (Connell, 2005).

These gender roles are strongly perpetuated in boomtown contexts which are much like the 'Frontier' and 'Wild West' environments of the past. The normalization and admiration of 'male culture' in resource industries is the main example. Filteau (2014) explains that men in frontier or 'manly' occupations legitimize the exclusion and subordination of women in resource extraction industries. As Nagy (2018, p. 22) argues, "hegemonic masculine culture has become an intrinsic part of the oil sands' culture, delineating resource extraction work as being primarily, or even exclusively, for men, and thus privileging traits that are stereotypically associated with masculinity".

These stereotypically masculine traits, for example "self-sufficiency, daring, ruggedness and strength" (O'Shaughnessy, 2011, p. 119), help construct boomtowns as dangerous places where only the toughest of men will survive and be financially rewarded (Miller, 2004). Therefore, the idea that only the 'manliest of men' would survive in extraction

environments facilitates a hyper-masculine environment in which men compete and strive for this hegemonic masculine ideal, while women are viewed as being unable to endure the environment's long hours and physical labour (Filteau, 2014). However, as DeKeseredy et al. (2007) note, social and economic changes that have occurred in rural areas in recent decades have challenged some of these stereotypical notions of masculinity which has led to a "rural masculinity crisis".

The impacts of hegemonic masculinity on women living in boomtowns ought to also be viewed through an intersectional framework. Intersectionality refers to multiple layers of someone's identity, and how these different layers create a unique, individual experience of discrimination. The term was introduced by bell hooks (1981) and popularized by Crenshaw's (1989) discussion of violence against women of colour and their unique experience of violence. Intersectionality examines the intersections of a person's different identities based on factors such as age, race, gender and class to explain the experiences of victimization (Crenshaw, 1989; Potter, 2013).

When including an intersectional framework to understanding women's experiences in relation to hegemonic masculinity, women of colour experience more subordination than white women due to the intersection of gender and race. This can also be seen institutionally in the resource extraction industry, as Indigenous women find themselves further disadvantaged in the workforce as they have fewer employment opportunities and receive lower compensation (Nightingale et al., 2017). Moreover, intersectionality theorizing helps illuminate the violence women experience in boomtown communities. This is especially important when looking at violence against Indigenous women and the colonial legacy in Canada and the US that has dehumanized Indigenous women (Monchalin, 2016), putting them more at risk of gender-based violence. Similarly, Nonomura and Baker (2021, p. 7) note that Indigenous women are at an "elevated risk of violence" in transient work-based resource communities due to the "prevalence of misogynistic and racist attitudes towards Indigenous women". Combined, hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality theorizing help to illuminate the gendered impacts experienced by women in boomtowns but also how these might intersect with people's other identities in boomtown environments.

### The Gendered Impacts of Boomtown Living

Since the extraction industry is mainly male-dominated, men are often the breadwinners of the family while their partners become dependent on their income and industry perks, most notably housing. If these partners are unable to find employment themselves or are in a position where they do not need to work, they often become homemakers. In this section, we examine these topics further by focusing on the sparse literature available specifically related to women's experiences in boomtowns. Existing literature has tended to focus on three broad areas impacting women: (i) economic hardships; (ii) violence; and (iii) mental health. Each of these topics overlap and have specific impacts on women's well-being and safety. These effects are also intersectional as women who are of

different socioeconomic status, racialized women and women of non-heteronormative sexual orientation may feel these challenges differently.

Women face specific economic challenges as workers in the oil/extraction industry. Although a small percentage, women working in extraction tend to be paid less and their jobs often conform to stereotypical gender roles, such as housekeeping and kitchen staff (Baker & Fortin, 2001; Measham, Fleming & Schandl, 2016; Nightingale et al., 2017; The Firelight Group et al., 2017). Some women have left their jobs because of discriminatory employment practices (e.g. wage discrimination) and experiences (e.g. sexual harassment) (Nightingale et al., 2017; The Firelight Group et al., 2017). For example, Nightingale et al. (2017), examining Inuit women's experiences working in mines in northern Canada, noted that the main reasons they left their positions were due to racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and constant sexual harassment and assault in the workplace. Also, women's lack of employment opportunities in lucrative extractive industry jobs makes it difficult to find affordable housing. For example, in addition to the inflated housing and rent prices that put many housing accommodations in boomtowns out of economic reach, there are long wait periods for subsidized housing in boomtowns, which puts single mothers and women working to escape intimate partner violence at a particular disadvantage (Jayasundara et al., 2018). Affordable childcare is also hard to find in boomtown areas which limits women's employment options and furthers women's economic dependence on their partners (Fernando & Cooley, 2016; Ruddell, 2017). There is also evidence that some women in boomtowns turn to sex work owing to poverty and homelessness (The Firelight Group et al., 2017).

Women are at a high risk of violence in boomtowns. For example, increases in stalking of and physical and sexual violence toward women have been reported across a range of boomtowns (Jayasyndara et al., 2016; Nightingale et al., 2017; Shandro et al., 2014). DeKeseredy and Donnermeyer (2022) and DeKeseredy et al. (2007) attribute this to already existing patriarchal structures in boomtowns. In particular, many scholars highlight the severe sexual assault risk Indigenous women face being located near extraction environments and/or man camps (Amnesty International, 2016; Anaya, 2014; the Firelight Group et al., 2017; Nightingale et al., 2017; Sweet, 2014). In terms of intimate partner violence, while industry workers often receive housing accommodation as part of their employment, this privilege does not extend to separated spouses. Thus, women are often dependent on their partner's housing accommodations and income, which makes it difficult for them to flee situations of abuse (Amnesty International, 2016; Jayasyndara et al., 2016). Further, resources are scarce in these rural settings, and obtaining assistance (e.g. medical assistance, rape kits, access to properly trained medical professionals) once violence has occurred becomes extremely difficult (Maier, 2008; Parnis and Du Month, 1999; The Firelight Group et al., 2017).

Gender ratios in boomtowns tend to be disrupted as large numbers of (young) men flock to boomtowns for work, which heightens women's risk of victimization (Fernando & Cooley, 2016; Ruddell, 2017; Taylor & Carson, 2014). These men are often away from their families and are experiencing socially isolating conditions while immersing themselves in alcohol and drug industry cultures. Women experience much more unwanted male attention,

and often do not feel safe doing common daily tasks such as shopping for groceries (Ruddell, 2017). Thus, it is not simply the growth of the population, but the substance abuse and hypermasculinity involved in frontier or rigger culture that endangers women's well-being (Carrington et al., 2016; Ennis et al., 2017; Nightingale et al., 2017; The Firelight Group, 2017). The overall lack of female representation within extractive industry jobs and the power dynamic between those who are included in the workforce helps portray women as the 'weaker sex' and reinforces the subordination and marginalization of women in the industry (Sharma, 2012).

Many partners of extraction workers also face mental health challenges, mostly owing to the social isolation they experience. For example, often extraction workers and their families are forced to leave their hometown life behind to relocate to isolated boomtown areas. This relocation separates women from their traditional support systems and social circles, leading to loneliness and a lack of support. In cases of intimate partner violence, women often do not have alternative living arrangements and enough means to support themselves and their children (Ruddell, 2017; Jayasundara et al., 2016). This worsens for women who experience language barriers (Ruddell, 2017; Nightingale et al., 2017; Sharma, 2010). For example, in Australia, it has been found that immigrant Asian women who locate to remote settings with working partners have increased feelings of loneliness because of their separation from familiar culture and language rituals (Sharma, 2010). Overall, women, as well as men, in boomtown settings lack access to mental health resources.

Given the sparse literature on this topic, it is clear that much more research and theorizing are needed on how women experience boomtown settings (DeKeseredy & Donnermeyer, 2022). Our research sought to enhance our understanding of women's lives in boomtown settings and is guided by the following two research questions:

> (i) How are women impacted (e.g. financially, physically, mentally) by boomtown settings?; and
> (ii) Are all women impacted similarly or are there differences across racial and socioeconomic lines?

Previous research suggests that boomtowns carry with them gendered impacts, which researchers have not yet fully explored. For example, many researchers discuss the infrastructure challenges in boomtowns, such as the housing crisis, but fail to mention that this places women in particular at extreme risk. Historically, women have been denied much of the lucrative economic benefits associated with boomtowns, which has led to several consequences for women (e.g. dependence on male partners, inability to leave abusive relationships). In this article, we further explore these consequences in more depth across a range of boomtown settings.

## Methodology

To answer our research questions, we undertook qualitative in-depth interviews with social service providers working in boomtown settings. We chose this approach because it is well known that issues impacting women are not always accurately reflected in quantitative methods, and that qualitative methods can provide richer and more complex descriptions of the impacts of boomtown environments on women (Jayasundara et al., 2016; Maier, 2008).

Given that we know little about women's experiences in boomtowns and that recruiting research participants is notoriously difficult in these settings, our research was exploratory (O'Connor 2010; Stebbins 2001). Examining social service provider perspectives allowed us to garner an in-depth understanding of the breadth of challenges impacting women in boomtowns.

### Sampling, Recruitment and Participants

We utilized purposive sampling in order to carefully select participants because they are information-rich (Patton, 1990). Targeting information-rich participants allowed us to gain a large amount of knowledge from a select, yet imperative, group of individuals. More specifically, we used expert and critical case sampling techniques to recruit participants. Expert sampling is useful when there is a lack of empirical evidence on a topic: in this case, women's experiences in boomtowns, and when experts with knowledge on the topic (i.e. social service providers) are likely to provide insight into an underexplored area (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Critical case sampling is useful when conducting exploratory research, and particularly when looking at boomtown communities as it asks: "if it happens there, it will happen anywhere", or vice versa "if it doesn't happen there, it won't happen anywhere" (Patton, 1990, p. 174). Thus, experts were recruited to participate from select boomtowns in Canada and the US. Ideally, the richness of these few critical cases articulates the kind of environment women experience in boomtown areas. The goal of critical case sampling is logical generalizations rather than traditional statistical or broad generalizations (Patton, 1990).

The target group of participants was individuals in the social service field that work with women in boomtowns/extraction areas. To recruit participants, boomtowns in Canada and the US were first identified through previous academic research, news articles, blogs and Reddit threads that discussed oil and natural gas hotspots. The terms used to search for these boomtowns included the word boomtown and various combinations of oil, natural gas, Canada and the United States. Next, Google Search and Google Maps were used to identify social service organizations (using the search terms women and various combinations of social services, housing, and counseling) in these areas servicing women. Personnel in these organizations were then contacted and asked to participate in our study, or a general request was made via the social service's online inquiry form on their website. In total, 44 individuals/organizations were contacted to participate, and we received 11 responses with 10 people completing an interview. Table 1 presents the general location and occupation of each

participant in this study. Given the lack of social services available in certain locales, only the general area where the participant was located is reported in order to protect their identity. The final sample of participants included front-line workers, project coordinators and managers working in outreach, housing, employment services and education. Others worked as nurses in drug response roles and with survivors of sexual assault and interpersonal and domestic violence.

**Table 1**

*Participant Locations and General Occupations*

| Reference | General Location | General Occupation |
|---|---|---|
| Participant #1 | Northern North Dakota | Crisis Prevention |
| Participant #2 | Northern British Columbia | Women Services Outreach |
| Participant #3 | Central West Alberta | Drug Response Nurse |
| Participant #4 | Northern British Columbia | Employment Relations Professional |
| Participant #5 | Central West Alberta | Drug Response Coordinator |
| Participant #6 | Northern Alberta | Outreach and Support Worker |
| Participant #7 | Northern Alberta | Director |
| Participant #8 | Northern Alberta | Community Educator |
| Participant #9 | Central-North British Columbia | Manager, Women's Services |
| Participant #10 | Central-North British Columbia | Manager, Community Services |

**In-depth Interviewing and Analysis**

Data collection for this study took place between March and July 2019. In-depth interviews were conducted over the phone, were semi-structured, and lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were guided by Holstein and Gubrium's (1989) active interviewing technique that allows interviewees to construct meaning from their environment. In-depth interviews are a powerful tool as they aim to understand how a participant makes sense of their lived experience (Charmaz, 2006; Dworkin, 2012). Our semi-structured interview design allowed the conversation to be guided by the participant, as the few open-ended questions that were formulated beforehand allowed participants to introduce topics and raise concerns they saw in their communities. This format also allowed for probing and follow-up questions to be asked on topics and concerns raised by participants. Overall, the questions were designed to illuminate the gendered and intersectional impacts of boomtowns on women. Thus, the interviews were focused on generating rich understandings and a well-rounded picture of the challenges women face in boomtowns (Berry, 1999; Dworkin, 2012).

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and anonymized. The transcripts were then analyzed by the first author with the assistance of the qualitative software program NVivo. The analytical approach followed Deterding and Waters' (2021) flexible coding method. This method requires researchers to first analyze transcripts "with broad codes that reflect the questions they ask in their interviews and the concepts they sought to examine" (Deterding and Waters, 2021, p. 715). Therefore, the first round of coding focused on broad codes and 'big picture' ideas. The next reading of the transcripts involved developing more "fine-grained codes" in order to develop conceptual themes within the data and to check the initial codes for accuracy. This reading of the transcripts added more specificity to the broad codes elicited from the first round of coding. The final reading of the transcript was used to refine the coding scheme and solidify the specific themes found in the data (Deterding and Waters, 2021). At this stage, quotes from participants were also selected to illustrate these themes.

## Findings

This section focuses on the specific challenges faced by women in boomtowns as identified by social service workers. The four themes that emerged from our interviews were: (i) *financial and employment challenges*, such as women's experience in the industry and financial dependency; (ii) *violence and safety concerns* including increases in domestic violence, sexual violence, and trafficking; (iii) *lifestyle challenges*, such as drug and alcohol dependency, impacts to the family unit, isolation, and the 'oil housewife' identity; and (iv) *intersectional impacts*, including discussions of race, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. We discuss each in turn but there are clear overlaps between the themes.

### Financial and Employment Challenges

Participants discussed the financial challenges women face within boomtowns where male-dominated industries prevail and men make up the majority of the workforce. First, women are often overlooked for lucrative boomtown jobs. For example, Participant #4 stated:

> I'm actually… fully certified… in oil and gas field operations. I'm a field operator so I work on leases and stuff like that, and I've been trained too. But when I finished that course, actually nobody would hire me because I was a very green woman… lots of people don't think that a woman can hack it.

Furthermore, Participant #8 who had worked in management in the oil fields noted "a lot of the times qualified females… wouldn't get hired" by their male colleagues. Even if a woman gets hired "they would often get overlooked for the better positions that came up, like the higher-paying positions or the better jobs".

Second, women hired into the more lucrative oil and natural gas jobs face ongoing challenges at work. One of the most talked about challenges by participants was "the stigma that women are very girly and that they can't do the same things that men can do"

(Participant #4). This stigmatization often manifested itself through bullying and harassment. For example, Participant #4 noted that "most of the time the guys will make fun of you" for being feminine at work, such as wearing makeup, and that in order to fit in women need to "hide the fact that they are feminine when they are at work". Participant #8 added:

> [W]omen in the oil sands – and a lot of them did run into, at some point, if not all of them, some sexual harassment, or misogynistic comments, or [were] made fun of, or bullied for being female.

Women who live in work camps, or man camps, constantly experience the large men-to-women ratio disparity. For example, Participant #3 noted that in a "420 [person] man camp, I would say there was probably maybe 40 to 50 women" and that these women often work in hospitality services on the site itself rather than industry work. This gender disparity mixed with men abusing substances can have serious consequences for women. For example:

> [T]here is security on site but there is no guarantee that somebody is watching you walk down the hallway to your room. I know of women who have had to make calls because there have been men knocking on their door trying to get in. (Participant #2)

Therefore, women are vastly outnumbered at these sites. Similarly, past research has found that hospitality workers at camps are also at risk of harassment and assault, making this situation even more problematic (Nightingale et al., 2017).

Third, the nature of boomtowns encourages women's financial dependence. Because of the lack of well-paying employment prospects for women, they are often left unable to afford the cost of living in a boomtown on their own. For example:

> A lot of times the jobs in town, say serving or working at a grocery store, that's minimum wage, and you will never be able to live on your own here working those jobs for that money. (Participant 7)

Women often travel to boomtowns with their partners and then are unable to obtain gainful employment. For example, without the ability to obtain their own income, some women become dependent on the housing perks and large industry salary of their partners. Without traditional support systems in place, women are put at risk:

> Women cannot be single and live here. They rely, pretty much, on having a partner and if a breakup or separation happens, they're at risk. They are at high risk of being taken advantage of because they have no choice, or of becoming street-involved… [or they] have to save up money secretly and leave overnight type of thing. (Participant 7)

> Or they stay in bad relationships because they can't afford it. (Participant 8)

Financial dependency coupled with a lack of affordable housing puts women in a very vulnerable position. As participant #2 states:

> There is a lack of affordable housing in terms of if a woman… wants to leave her partner... usually the partner is… male, who is making the money. And if she leaves, she will not or generally won't have any money, so women will stay in relationships in order to survive financially. Especially if they have children. (Participant #2)

Therefore, financial dependency can leave women in extremely vulnerable positions. Owing to their inability to become independent, they often feel stuck in the position and are deterred from leaving situations of violence. Therefore, financial dependency in boomtowns can often lead to further victimization of women.

## Violence and Safety Concerns

Violence against women and increased concerns for their safety was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. Participants reported increases in risk for victimization of women (e.g. domestic violence) and noted that this is often tied to financial dependency and a lack of affordable housing. Participants also noted increases in sexual assault and sex trafficking. As Participant #10 explained:

> Some of the behaviours that arise from the influx of money and not being able to manage it, it then leads to those criminal pieces which then impact women. Because statistically… women are the most impacted by crimes that are committed during the influx [of people to]… resource extraction industries.

Some noted that violence against women increased during 'down times' in the industry. As Participant #2 stated in regards to the impacts of employment instability in boomtowns:

> It will impact women first because these are the women who are home with their kids and their husband comes home and he can't work. And he gets angry and he takes it out on her – I've seen that happen lots.

Others attributed violence against women to the isolating environment of boomtowns (e.g. being away from traditional support systems).

Participants also discussed the increasing demand in the sex trade and how that has led to an increase in sex work and sex trafficking in their communities. The recent shutdown of advertising spaces (e.g. online marketplace Craigslist) for sex work had "forced [it] into darker places [where women] aren't able to ensure their safety" (Participant #5). Moreover, owing to financial disparity, many women are pushed into sex work as a way of "making ends meet" (Participant #9):

A great deal of the people experiencing homelessness is women who engage in survival sex because of not having places to go… sex trafficking or human trafficking definitely takes place in this area (Participant #5).

I know women who have gone and had camp jobs and end up going into sex work because those camp jobs are gone [due to a substance use disorder]. (Participant #2)

As a result, sex workers were often scapegoated for issues in the community and women more generally were "seen as expendable" (Participant #2). As Participant #5 stated:

[T]here is a very strong male-dominant attitude that [is] take, take, take to make a living… they think *'I don't have to go to school, I don't have to get an education to create and establish a career because there is oil in the ground. There is gas in the ground, I can take it'*. So, it's that same kind of mentality that's like, *'oh well look at this woman, she wants me, I can take her and I can use her and dispose of her'.*

Overall, much of the violence and safety issues experienced by women were linked to hegemonic masculinity as it plays out in a boomtown context.

**Lifestyle Challenges**

Boomtown environments challenge women's previous ways of living. In particular, participants noted the impact that the boomtown lifestyle has on families and relationships. For example, partners of industry workers are often under extreme stress. The distance and increased money can lead to breakdowns in relationships and severely impact the family unit.

We're finding women who now have access to so much money and their husband is away at work so they are partying up a storm, and they're picking up whatever it is… they need in terms of substances or extramarital affairs. (Participant #2)

I'd say it affects the work-life balance… husbands work 2-weeks in 2 weeks out, or 3 weeks in 1 week out, they come home and their husbands just want to rest and do their own thing because they've worked for 2 weeks or 3 weeks and the wife has been home dealing with the kids the whole time, and working, and this all by herself. And it's the stress and we see alcohol intake increase in women because of the stress factor, but… it's a huge stressor of families and on life in general. (Participant #3)

As illustrated by the above quotes, often women end up taking on all of the household and childcare responsibilities while men are away working which can have a significant impact on the family unit. There are also strains on relationships when men return home from work and have to adjust to more structured family life. When both parents are working, they "try to fill the gap with giving their kids things instead of time" (Participant #7).

In addition to increased stress that can drive women toward substance abuse or affairs, participants raised concerns about the loneliness felt within this population. For example:

> I think about… this group… what that is like, oilfield wives… how lonely they are and the challenges of having their man gone for however long and this deep sense of loyalty… So therefore, it's like, you know, how much of their identity as a woman, a mother, or a partner, how much of that gets lost or never developed? (Participant #5)

> I would never ever, ever, ever go to a pub or a bar or even a late-night restaurant by myself because a lot of the younger men who are that population, um, they hang out in big groups, because on their shift work and stuff they are out together. It's not a very friendly space for women to do things independently. (Participant #7)

Boomtowns are inherently masculine places that promote a hegemonic masculine lifestyle. The lack of female-friendly places and activities in these environments contributes to the loneliness felt by women.

There are also expectations placed on women to project/perform a certain lifestyle in boomtowns. Participants discussed the stereotypical identity of the 'oil housewife' or 'site wife'. For example:

> These women pulling up in their Hummer or Mercedes or whatever, in these really nice vehicles, right, and they'd jump out and they have big diamonds and their hair is all coiffed and they are faked and baked, tanned and aerobic-sized. (Participant #5)

> [The] site wife… wants a new diamond ring or the top of the line juicer. (Participant #7)

The emergence of the site wife female identity echoes that of emphasized femininity in response to the hegemonic masculine environment.

**Intersectional Impacts**

Participants were directly asked if specific groups of women were impacted more than others. Although a few intersectional impacts were mentioned, most participants maintained that boomtown impacts "cross… every demographic" (Participant #10). Some participants focused on women with low socioeconomic status, women in rural locations, impacts on the LGBTQ2S+ community, and in particular, Indigenous women. For example:

> If you're First Nations women here, you're even more likely to be victim to [boomtown effects because]… there's already so many socio-economic issues impacting First Nations women like intergenerational trauma and violence, and so those are carried forth. Stigma, racism, those are perpetuated in the community. Literally, [British Columbia Boomtown] is the wild west sometimes in terms of the

mentality of the community. The community that has been here for a long time - we're getting more and more new people in and that's changing, but… it's very redneck. And so that mentality really plays out and makes it very difficult on First Nations women in the community. (Participant #2)

Participant #10 explained that "working with a lot of First Nation families where there is that legacy of residential school and trauma" is a large part of what she sees in her work. Moreover, Participant #5 explains how racism can play a large part in Indigenous women even finding housing:

We live in a community where everybody is in it to make money so [in terms of] housing… people are capitalizing on it and it no longer becomes about providing shelter for people… and people are going to pick and choose who they want to let live in their suites… I can guarantee you the majority of people experiencing homelessness in this community are Indigenous.

As Participant #4 further explains: "A lot of people don't like the Aboriginal people up here".

In terms of socioeconomic status, multiple participants noted that being financially vulnerable is a huge "factor that will trigger further victimization" (Participant #10). Similarly, "women on the verge of homelessness or low income [are] more at risk because they are taken advantage of" (Participant #6). Women struggling with addiction are also extremely disenfranchised when attempting to find housing. Further, the LGBTQ2S+ community in boomtowns described facing "additional barriers of being able to speak about what's going on for them" (Participant #10), especially in a community that is largely influenced by hegemonic masculine culture. Similarly, Participant #6 noted that "if [women] are from the LGBTQ population or if they are from a different race, they are more at risk" while Participant #8 noted there were extremely limited services for LGBTQ2S+ women in the community, especially for trans women.

## Discussion

As our findings illustrate, the social environment for women in boomtown communities is precarious. Boomtowns create serious challenges in women's lives. Specifically, women face challenges to their financial independence, employment, safety and well-being, and family life and relationships. Past boomtown literature (Amnesty International, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016; Ennis et al., 2017; Jayasundara et al., 2019; Nightingale et al., 2017; The Firelight Group, 2017) has noted similar findings regarding financial and safety concerns, although the discussion of family impacts is mostly absent from previous boomtown literature. In what follows, we examine women's challenges in boomtowns in more depth applying a gendered lens to our analyses.

According to participants in this study, financial dependence can be one of the most consequential challenges for women in boomtown communities. Women are often shut out, or not valued, in the 'male-dominated' oil and natural gas industry. Ennis et al. (2017) similarly found that men dominated extraction work and that there is an ingrained idea of masculinity embedded in the work. Although female presence in the industry has slowly become more normal, people in management positions or individuals that have been part of the industry for many years still view it as a place for the manliest of men. Due to this belief, women have been overlooked for positions in the industry, meaning they lose out on the lucrative benefits of industry work, such as high salaries and housing. At work, women experience a hegemonic masculine workplace through bullying and verbal and sexual abuse, which works to drive women out of the industry. Similarly, Nightingale et al. (2017) found that harassment and discrimination were the main factors for women leaving their positions in the industry. When examining this through a hegemonic masculinity lens, this would make women the 'subordinated other' in the workplace which is used to justify exclusionary practices against them (Connell, 1995).

Dependency and economic abuse are dangerous for women as they create vulnerability (Haifley, 2021; Jayasundara et al., 2019; Stylianou, 2018). Participants raised concerns regarding increases in interpersonal disputes and how dependence, paired with the lack of affordable housing, made it difficult for women to leave situations of violence. They noted that women often follow their partners to boomtowns and owing to the lack of gainful employment opportunities, they become dependent on their partners. Similarly, Jayasundara et al. (2018) found that in the Bakken region of North Dakota and Montana in the US, the oil and natural gas boom increased women's vulnerability owing to a lack of available and affordable housing from which to escape violent situations. Participants in our study also explained the increase in domestic violence as being closely related to the instability of the industry as it puts stress on workers. This aligns with past research (Carrington & Scott, 2008; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2017; Jayasundara et al., 2016; Jayasundara et al., 2019; Ruddell & Britto, 2020) that raised concerns about increases in domestic violence in similar contexts. Carrington and Scott (2008) tie this increase to the hegemonic masculine culture in boomtown settings which normalizes gendered violence. The increase in domestic violence is a way that men can exercise power over women through the ingrained hegemonic masculinity of the resource industry (Messerschmidt, 1993).

When examining hegemonic masculine culture, violence against women is part of the 'masculine' identity. Men can use violence, such as sexual assault and harassment, as a tool to assert dominance over women and reinforce the patriarchal status quo (DeKeseredy et al., 2007; Messerschmidt, 1993). Participants in our study raised concerns about women's high risk of victimization and their objectification in the masculine work culture in boomtowns. As Messerschmidt (1993) explains, part of the hyper-masculine identity is the belief that a man's sexual appetite is natural and therefore uncontrollable. Thus, the increase in violence can be understood as a method of performing a culturally accepted masculine identity within this boomtown work culture and as a reaction to internal struggles of loneliness, isolation and substance use. Findings from similar boomtown studies support this notion (e.g. Carrington et

al., 2016; Ennis et al., 2017; Fernando & Cooley, 2016; Nightingale et al., 2017; Ruddell, 2017; Taylor & Carson, 2014; The Firelight Group, 2017).

One of the least examined issues in the literature is the impact boomtowns have on families. Our participants discussed the breakdown of relationships and families due to the work lifestyle and general dynamics of the work. The industry's fly-in-fly-out structure (such as where workers fly in for three weeks of work and back home for one week with their families) often means men are away from their families for weeks at a time, if not longer (Carrington et al., 2010; Ennis et al., 2017; Ruddell, 2011). Although, it should be noted that different stages of development bring with them more transient workers (e.g. early construction phases) than others (e.g. ongoing maintenance of a mine). That is, as communities stabilize over time, workers become less transient and the number of families in the community is likely to increase. Thus, different locales and stages of development bring different impacts on women (DeKeseredy et al., 2007; Jayasundara et al., 2019; Jones & Mayzer, 2021; O'Connor, 2017; Ruddell, 2017).

While some researchers have discussed how family separation strains workers' relationships and how this impacts workers themselves (e.g. Ennis et al., 2017; Angell & Parkins, 2011; Sharma, 2010), few studies have examined how this impacts women on the other side of the relationship. Our participants highlighted that the responsibility for home life falls on the women who remain at home. This puts a large amount of stress on women as they are forced to be solely responsible for the house and children, while also sometimes working full-time themselves. Participants noted that this increased stress has consequences for the stability of the family unit. For example, some women attempt to manage increased responsibility through substance use. Also, participants noted that emotional connections between family members become strained. For example, participants explained that there is often tension when men return home because they can have a hard time readjusting to home life due to the lifestyle they became accustomed to when on jobs. Specifically, the unstructured 'blowing off steam' and 'play hard' aspect of industry work is suddenly replaced with structured household chores and childcare (Amnesty International, 2016; Carrington et al., 2010).

These concerns are compounded when we consider the intersectional impacts on women in boomtown environments. Women experiencing poverty were said to be at a high risk of victimization due to their financial dependence and lack of work experience and educational qualifications. As noted by participants and Jayasundara et al. (2018), women experiencing poverty lacked options to extricate themselves from violent relationships. Some women are pushed into survival sex to afford the high cost of living and due to a lack of affordable housing. Other women are pushed into homelessness (Firelight Group et al., 2017). Indigenous women, in particular, have experienced boomtown impacts more severely than others, and many of the challenges they experience can be attributed to racism (Nonomura & Baker, 2021). For example, our participants noted that many Indigenous women are unable to obtain housing as landlords would opt out of having them as a tenant. Also noted was how employers would not consider Indigenous women as serious candidates

for lucrative oil and natural gas jobs. This helps push Indigenous women into financial dependence and increased victimization, which can be tied to the colonial legacy of North America (Amnesty International, 2016; The Firelight Group et al., 2017; Monchalin, 2016; Nightingale et al., 2017; Sweet, 2014).

Intersectional impacts in boomtowns can be examined by looking at hegemonic masculinity. Being 'different' often designates a person as the 'subordinate other' and 'inferior' in a community dominated by men who prescribe to a hegemonic masculine identity. The intersectional identities discussed by participants align with Nagy's (2018) understanding of the subordinated other, as it could include women, Indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ2S+ population. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the 'subordinate other' position is dangerous as this group becomes a target for men to assert their dominance over, especially through violence. Therefore, women are at risk in boomtowns, but women of colour and women in the LGBTQ2S+ population experience heightened risk due to their identity. As Monchalin (2016) notes regarding Indigenous women, violence is part of the colonial legacy which has aimed to dehumanize the Indigenous female identity, putting them at high risk for victimization. This colonial legacy combined with hegemonic masculinity and the subordinated other help explain the increased violence against Indigenous women in boomtown settings.

Our study, while revealing several interesting findings, also comes with limitations. First, given the exploratory nature of our research, we have only begun to examine the impacts boomtowns have on families and intersectional identities. Unfortunately, we were unable to fully examine intersectionality and the direct experiences of women impacted by boomtowns. More research directly accessing diverse populations and research looking at how family dynamics are impacted by boomtowns would help to illuminate the issues identified in this article in more detail.

Second, our sample was limited to a very specific group of professionals and was small. Although, as Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p. 182) note, "there are no universally accepted rules for sample size in qualitative research". While we may have limited the number of participants available to us by not taking an in-depth case-study approach focusing on one particular area, as much of the existing literature has done (Ennis et al.,2016; Jayasundara, Heitkamp & Ruddell, 2016; Shandro et al., 2010), we made up for this limitation by contributing breadth to the boomtown literature through examining commonalities found across a range of boomtowns. Further, boomtowns are notoriously difficult to recruit participants from given the transient nature of the environment and busy schedules of people working in these settings. Related, we had hoped to conduct a comparison between the US and Canada but unfortunately were only able to speak with one individual in the US. While this limited our ability to contrast our findings by location, future studies should compare differences and similarities between the countries as Canada has a more developed social safety net (e.g. universal health care) than the US which could explain differential impacts on women. For example, Jayasundara, Heitkamp & Ruddell (2016) found that in North Dakota, the boom substantially limited women's access to social services (e.g.

affordable housing, basic healthcare) as well as overwhelmed social service workers who now spent their time reacting rather than proactively intervening when issues arose for women. Unfortunately, our lack of US participants made it difficult to determine whether Canada's more developed social safety net would have done a better job.

However, given that our interviews hit a saturation point and findings aligned with existing research on this topic, this supports the validity of our results. Also, given that our goal was to illuminate the challenges women faced in boomtowns, and that these professionals drew on their experiences working directly with multitudes of women through their social service professions, this helped to broaden our understandings and add to the sparse literature examining women's experiences in boomtowns. Overall, we have added to what Jones and Mayzer (2021) have identified as the fifth wave of boomtown research and in part attempted to meet recent calls by DeKeseredy and Donnermeyer (2022) for the patriarchal nature of boomtowns to be more thoroughly investigated.

## Conclusion

Our findings add to the literature by providing additional support for women being directly, and oftentimes disproportionately, impacted by boomtown effects. Although, as DeKeseredy and Donnermeyer (2022) note, while boomtowns might heighten concerns for women, the hypermasculine nature of rural places generally has always made these places dangerous for women. In addition, the findings from our study expand the literature by noting that intersectional identities are important to consider in boomtown communities, as is examining boomtowns through a gendered lens. Future research should examine this issue more closely with a diverse group of people who have connections to boomtown contexts.

Communities experiencing booms should anticipate increases in the victimization of women and therefore should increase emergency services. For example, communities should consider mobile crisis services as many of these areas are rural and isolated and women may not always have the means to drive to a hospital. Moreover, it might be important to consider providing financial literacy programs to victims of economic abuse to lessen dependency on an abusive partner (Haifley, 2021; Stylianou, 2018). Future studies should also compare and contrast oil and natural gas boomtowns with other types of boomtowns (e.g. recreational/seasonal) and rural areas involved in resource extraction and energy development which could help to enhance our gendered understandings of these varied environments.

We should also attempt to move beyond responding to problems after they occur in boomtowns and instead attempt to change the source of many of the problems women face in boomtown environments, mainly the hegemonic masculine culture these boomtowns embody. This is in part a task for the human resources departments and leadership of extraction companies. It is also imperative that men work toward much-needed change. In addition, our research also suggests more attention needs to be paid to the impacts boomtowns have on families. The increased stress placed on families touches many of the issues previously identified by researchers (e.g. substance use, victimization, financial

dependence), but more research is needed on how the nature of boomtowns intersects with the stresses placed on familial relationships. Understanding this issue might go a long way to finding solutions to some of the issues that have consistently plagued boomtowns.

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