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PAUKTUUTIT
INUIT WOMEN OF CANADA

Midwifery is Essential Healthcare

KEY MESSAGES:

- **Expanding Inuit midwifery is a critical priority.** [Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada](#) identifies expanding Inuit midwifery services as a major priority for Inuit women and gender-diverse Inuit. Access to culturally grounded birthing care is not a luxury; it is a right.
- **The absence of Inuit midwives causes real and lasting harm.** When Inuit midwifery services are unavailable, Inuit women and gender-diverse Inuit face significant cultural, social, and economic risks - including family separation, anti-Indigenous racism, and inadequate support in southern hospitals. These harms remain critically under-researched and must be urgently addressed.
- **Midwifery must be funded and recognized as essential healthcare.** Midwifery must be formally recognized as an essential healthcare service, with dedicated and sustained funding allocated to Inuit midwifery programs and services across Inuit Nunangat.
- **Communities must have the right to choose.** Community-led midwifery must be sustained, and all Inuit communities and expectant mothers must have the right to determine where and how they give birth.
- **Midwifery education must be restored and accessible.** Midwifery must be reinstated as a recognized degree in post-secondary institutions in Inuit Nunangat and selected provincial learning institutes, ensuring the next generation of Inuit midwives can be trained on their own lands and terms.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- During the 20th century, Canada’s segregated Indian hospital system removed many Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse Inuit from their communities in the name of public health. Witness testimony within the [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls \(MMIWG\) Report](#) spoke to the trauma of medical relocation and the unanswered questions when mothers, aunties, sisters, or children were removed and never returned.¹
- Beginning in the 1950s, the federal government pressured Inuit to relocate to permanent communities by making family benefits and health services conditional on doing so. During this time, government regulations simultaneously dismantled Inuit midwifery practices. Home births were actively discouraged, and women were forced to give birth at nursing stations instead.²
- The legacy of colonialism remains deeply embedded in Canada’s health care system. Currently, health system policies and practices in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, and Nunatsiavut continue to require expectant Inuit to temporarily relocate to regional hubs or southern urban centres. This is for at least the final month of their pregnancy – a practice known as maternal evacuation (see Figure 1). Depending on individual circumstances, this relocation can last considerably longer.³



Figure 1. Inuit medical travel map.⁴

- While promising strides are being made — including Inuit-led midwifery programs that are beginning to return birth to communities in some regions — these remain the exception rather than the rule. For most expectant Inuit, maternal evacuation remains the standard of care, a practice rooted in systemic inequity that continues to separate Inuit women and birthing people from their families, communities, and lands during one of the most significant moments of their lives.
- For Inuit living in regions without Inuit midwives, evacuation for birthing usually requires living in a congregate living facility with other Inuit traveling for medical reasons or in a hotel room without kitchen or laundry facilities for three to six weeks, and sometimes longer.

1 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Retrieved from https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1b.pdf

2 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Access to midwifery services is a reproductive health right. Retrieved from <https://pauktuutit.ca/health/maternal-health/midwifery/>

3 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

4 Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, In Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

Midwifery is Essential Healthcare

- Neither arrangement meets the needs of expectant Inuit or their families. The length of time away from home can make it impractical (and prohibitively expensive) for partners and small or school-aged children to come along. Family separations create substantial stresses and risks during a time when the focus should be on preparing to welcome a new family member.⁵
- The mandatory requirement to travel to southern health centres places a significant financial burden on the health care system – one that is compounded by high birth rates in Inuit communities.⁶ The birth evacuation policy is not only financially unsustainable, but diverts substantial funding away from building the reproductive health, neonatal care, and health human resources infrastructure that Inuit communities need. That funding could instead be invested in expanding Inuit midwifery services and better supporting Inuit through pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period.⁷
- Currently, Inuit women's sexual and reproductive health is compromised by regulatory limitations that are neither trauma-informed nor culturally appropriate to Inuit.
- The Canadian healthcare system does not recognize Inuit knowledge, language, and birthing traditions, and Inuit are exposed to anti-Indigenous racism. The healthcare system denies Inuit sovereignty over their birth and birthing experiences.⁸
- Pauktuutit recognizes efforts and investments that enhance access to Inuit midwifery practices and improve cultural safety for Inuit for whom maternal evacuation to southern health centres remains necessary.

5 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

6 CBC News. (2021). 'It's 2021': Nunavut mothers say it's high time the territory gets more birthing services. CBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/nunavut-birthing-services-mothers-midwives-rankin-inlet-1.6188351>

7 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

8 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

All levels of government should build upon the existing strengths and prospects of Inuit midwives within Inuit Nunangat by:

- Recognizing midwifery as an essential healthcare service and allocating dedicated funding to Inuit midwifery programs and services to meet the needs of Inuit women and their families.
- Sustaining community-led midwifery and upholding the right of all Inuit communities and expectant mothers to choose where they give birth.
- Reinstating midwifery as a recognized degree and establishing Inuit midwifery education programs in post-secondary schools in Inuit Nunangat.⁹
- Support the development of Pauktuutit's National Inuit Midwifery Framework. It aims to:
 - Create a roadmap for integrating traditional midwifery services into healthcare delivery through community clinics and hospitals.
 - Address Inuit midwifery education and training needs to increase the availability of Inuit midwives and ensure access to safe and compassionate pre-conception, pregnancy, birth, postpartum, and newborn care.
 - Eliminate anti-Indigenous racism experienced by Inuit forced to travel to southern hospitals to give birth.
 - Close the gap in sexual and reproductive health outcomes between Inuit women in Inuit Nunangat and other women in Canada.
 - Reduce the strain on maternity departments in southern regional hospitals.
 - Reduce the exorbitant costs of medical evacuation and extended stays in southern regional hospitals due to childbirth.
 - Create meaningful employment for Inuit choosing midwifery as a career and contribute to economic prosperity in remote Northern communities.
 - Contribute to the path towards reconciliation with Inuit.¹⁰

9 Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2021). Addressing Racism in the Health Care System. Retrieved from <https://www.pauktuutit.ca/wp-content/uploads/Pauktuutit-Addressing-Racism-in-the-Health-Care-System-Apr2021.pdf>

10 Closing Remarks, Shylah Elliott, Manager of Health Policy and Research, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. Retrieved from Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2023). Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service across Inuit Nunangat. National Inuit Midwifery Forum Report. Draft.

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