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Oil worker confronts Trudeau on his 'gender impact' comment — but he dodges question



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WATCH ABOVE: Trudeau brushes off woman's question during town hall event in Regina.

During Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's town hall in Regina on Thursday, an oil worker stood up and asked him to clarify comments he made about the "gender impact" of construction workers in rural communities.

"During my time working in the oil field as a young female, I have come across some of the kindest and most respectful male coworkers ... in the rural towns I have temporarily relocated to," the woman said.

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"I feel like you have painted myself, my coworkers and friends in a negative light with your comment. What exactly did you mean by 'gender impacts' when you bring construction workers into a rural area?"

But Trudeau skirted the question and gave a somewhat unrelated response.

"Construction workers build this country every single day," Trudeau said, adding that his government was investing "historical amounts in infrastructure." He then thanks the woman for her question and was booed by some people in the crowd.

Trudeau's comments in question were made in December during a G20 meeting on gender equality in Argentina, in which the prime minister discussed the importance of looking through a gender lens when dealing with large construction projects.

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"You might not say, 'What does a gender lens have to do with building this new highway or pipeline?' Well, there are gender impacts when you bring construction workers into a rural area, there are social impacts because there are mostly male construction workers, how are you adjusting and adapting to those?" Trudeau said.

But the comment sparked backlash from Conservatives leaders, saying the prime minister cast male construction workers in a negative light.

Global News reached out the Prime Minister's Office on Friday to ask for further clarification on what Trudeau meant by gender impacts and construction workers.

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“Our government knows that the decisions we make impact different people of different genders in different ways,” a spokesperson from the Office of the Minister for Women and Gender Equality said in an email.

“Government policies affect Canadians differently depending on a variety of factors, including age, where they live, how they identify and/or their official language of choice. That’s why we apply a gender and diversity lens as we develop various policies across government.”

Link between large construction projects and sexual violence

Several studies show there is a link between large-scale infrastructure projects and violence against woman.

A government official told Global News that studies show a rise of sexual assault during large construction projects. That is one of the reasons why it puts on a gender lens on a variety of policies.

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Tracy Porteous of Ending Violence BC says evidence supports the link between an increase in violence and large construction projects in some areas.

“I think the prime minister is right; whenever there will be a resource industry project there should be a gender-based analysis ... as there will be more violence,” said Porteous.

But she stressed that a majority of men, in any context, are not violent and do not abuse women, “and that includes men in this industry.”

A 2017 report by the Firelight Group, a consulting group that works with Indigenous communities in Canada, said there are “gendered effects” of infrastructure projects, such as pipelines, on nearby Indigenous communities in northern B.C.

“There are linear relationships between the highly paid shadow populations at industrial camps, the hyper-masculine culture, and a rise in crime, sexual violence, and trafficking of Indigenous women,” the report stated.

WATCH: Indigenous women 12 times more likely to be murdered than other women

A 2014 study from the University of Victoria said data from RCMP detachments showed a 38 per cent increase in sexual assaults during the first year (2010) of a large construction phase of a mining project in Fort St. James, B.C.

A report by the Clean Environment Commission, released last year, detailed allegations of sexual abuse against Indigenous women in a remote area of Manitoba by hydro workers.

The 165-page report, which has testimony from community members, elders, and band councillors, detailed the impact Manitoba Hydro workers had when working in their community starting in the 1960s.

It said the arrival of a largely male workforce in the 1950s, '60s and '70s led to the sexual abuse of women from the Fox Lake Cree Nation.

Manitoba Sustainable Development Minister Rochelle Squires called the allegations of abuse disturbing and said the RCMP is investigating.