# Transcript – [Indigenous land defenders](https://theconversation.com/indigenous-land-defenders-dont-call-me-resilient-ep-6-156632) (2.25 – 9.32mins)

## VS:

Ellen, during the 1990 Kanehsatake resistance the Canadian government sent 2,000 police and over 4,000 soldiers, along with armoured vehicles and helicopters, to subdue your communities. So, I know it’s complicated, but for those that are unfamiliar with the issues, what were you fighting for? What are you still fighting for?

## EG:

It’s always been about land since Europeans have come here. It’s about land. It’s dispossession and Indigenous people being criminalized for standing up for what is their right, which is to protect the people and the land. So being at the front line, as you call it, it’s not an easy thing. You have to have a will of steel. You know, you have to teach yourself to remain calm and not go for the provocation of whoever is up against you, which is really difficult because, as you know, I’ve been doing this for what’s going on 31 years now. And you get tired, you get frustrated. And the fact that the government who created the problem is just sitting back and not doing anything and just waiting for a violent confrontation to justify the use of force and to devalue and discredit and silence our voices is extremely maddening. You know, where we don’t own the land, the land owns us. We are her people. And I think that’s why we do this, is that people understand their ancestral teachings, is that we need to protect the land for this generation and for future generations.

## VS:

I watched the Obomsawin documentary again the other day, and I heard you say that, you know, as the trucks rolled in and the SWAT team came out, that you were with three women and you just sort of looked at each other and your instincts kicked in and you said something about being a woman and your role.

## EG:

The women are title holders to the land and the protectors of the land. And the men’s obligation is to protect the women who are protecting the land. Title to the land goes through us and we have not been respected as we see in the Indian Act, attacked the authority in the roles of women. So it’s a huge obligation because we need to fight a government that has infinite amount of resources, both financial and human. And so you need to be strong. And what you know is your obligation and why there is such an importance to it, which is without the land we’re nothing. Without the land we don’t have a language. We don’t have a culture. We cease to be ronkwe people. Ronkwe people is all Indigenous people. That’s our word — Kanien’kéha word - we are People of the Flint — Kanien’kéha:ka, so there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about that and how it’s a very scary thing to be in the front. You get attacked from within and you get attacked on the outside. So you really have to be strong in your beliefs. And if you falter just a little bit, it can be detrimental to your mental health because it is a very stressful thing to carry this this burden. I say it’s a burden because we should have been able to resolve this in 1990. But the government never negotiated in good faith. They had no intention of resolving this peacefully as they do now. It’s a new government. They seem to be really friendly, but they’re actually not. They’re just repackaging colonization to justify land dispossession, saying that we are willingly giving up our land and we never have willingly given up our land. You have to be really stubborn, which I think is in our DNA. So I’m proud to be a stubborn Kanien’kéha:ka woman in all this.

## VS:

And you’ve been stubborn for, as you say, 31 years. I’m wondering, has anything improved?

## EG:

Not for Kanehsata:ke. I think Kanehsata:ke has been punished over the last three decades. We have more land that has been taken from us by settlers and we are being silenced once again as we were in 1990 as traditional people. People who are following the original constitution and teachings of our ancestors that predate European arrival. When I look outside, yeah, I see a lot of improvements and a lot of changes. But even there, there’s still so much work to do on so many levels. And if we look at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action, there’s solutions in there which have to do with education because it’s a mindset, right? When you talk about peace for us, you have to have a good mind and that takes teachings. It takes education, which I think is absent from the educational system within Canada. And so it’s an uphill battle still for us.

## VS:

Anne you’re also a lead defender, and also in your work you document land defenders. And I’m just going to take a moment to just to pause for a minute to ask what may be a basic question. But what is a land defender? Who are the land defenders?

## AS:

For me, I think the land defender is not a title that you claim for yourself. It’s an action. And it’s about the practice of actually being on the land and reclaiming ancestral territories and territories that are under attack and insisting on a narrative that recognizes that these territories do not legitimately belong to the state, they don’t belong to Canada. When we talk about defence, it can seem like we’re just creating barriers from outside invasions. And some of the work is doing that because there are these really clear forms of invasion that are attempting to steal the land or steal the land again or repurpose it in ways that will damage it and damage our relations. It’s about protecting our relationships with the land and the water and the animals and upholding our responsibilities, which is part of what it means to be Indigenous Peoples. And it’s part of our teachings as Indigenous Peoples is to be holding those responsibilities and acting on them. And we’re consistently kept from being able to exercise those responsibilities by the state and by industry. And so our relatives are under attack in these spaces. And so part of our work is to protect them. And part of our work is to be able to deepen those responsibilities and those relationships in the face of this really violent industrial push onto Indigenous lands.