

Ongoing Colonial Violence: Canada's Failure to Protect Indigenous Women in the Post-Reconciliation Era

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Abstract

This paper examines Canada's ongoing inadequacy in addressing colonial-era injustices which continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous women across the nation. Using the recent case of Rebecca Contois and the Brady Road landfill as a starting point, the manuscript observes the ways in which the country's refusal to act underlies deeper systemic neglect. A qualitative analytical methodology was utilized, with reference to peer-reviewed literature, research conducted by the Canadian government, indigenous literature, and publicly accessible statistical information, in order to explore the relationships between colonialism, gender, and systemic inequality using an Indigenous feminist critique. The analysis finds that there still exists an imbalance in terms of socio-economic standing, lack of representation in terms of leadership in politics and business, over-representation in terms of criminal and children's services, as well as excessive violence related to the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). These results illustrate the fact that, although significant policy decisions have been made as a result of the efforts toward reconciliation, the colonial framework, which leads to the production of systemic discrimination against Indigenous women, has not been dismantled by these policies. Ultimately, the manuscript demonstrates the importance of Indigenous-led structural reforms which target the deep-rooted legacies of colonialism, rather than superficial or symbolic awareness initiatives.

Keywords: MMIWG, Indigenous, Canadian Government, Reconciliation

1. Introduction

On May 16, 2022, a man looking for scrap metal in a residential garbage bin found the partial remains of Rebecca Contois, a 24-year old O-Chi-Chak-Ko-Sipi woman. As part of neighbourhood pickup, a portion of Contois' remains had already been dumped at the Brady Road landfill. Previously, two other Indigenous women had also been declared missing and so the discovery of Contois' remains suggested that these two women had also been killed and disposed of in a similar way. However, the Manitoba government refused to search the landfill at the time, citing health and safety concerns (Canadian Press, 2025). This sparked outrage, with some saying they would search the landfill independently. In response, the dominant party at the time—the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba—launched a campaign during the 2023 provincial election refusing to search the landfills, erecting billboards explicitly opposing the search. Conversely, the New Democratic Party promised a search after winning the election, which it did. A whole two years later, serial killer and self-proclaimed white supremacist Jeremy Anthony Micheal Skibicki was finally found guilty of sexually assaulting, defiling, and then disposing of four different women whom he had preyed on outside homeless shelters (Matza, 2025). The Canadian government's initial refusal to search the landfills underscores the systemic neglect of Indigenous women's well-being. The recency and pervasiveness of cases such as this demonstrate that colonial attitudes remain embedded within Canadian institutions, contributing to the continued marginalization and endangerment of Indigenous women. Canada's efforts at resolving these issues have been largely

insufficient in confronting ongoing injustices upon Indigenous women, whose lives continue to be marginalized and endangered today.

Though Canada markets itself as a progressive, peacemaking country, in all aspects of their lives, Indigenous women face systemic injustices ranging from lessened opportunities in education and work to the current Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis (hereafter referred to as MMIWG), emphasizing the deep-rooted colonial legacies which remain embedded in urban Canadian society (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2021). At the center is the Indian Act of 1876 whose sole aim was to erase individual and collective Indigenous identity and is recognized today as cultural genocide by the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (Young, 2018). Instead of disappearing over time, these racist policies are now present in modern institutions and continue to govern Indigenous women's day-to-day lives behind closed doors. The discrimination that Indigenous women face is intersectional; it is the composite result of being both Indigenous and female, living in a country that marginalizes both. Taken together, these harmful impacts of colonialism which still remain suggest that Canada has not effectively addressed the present-day injustices.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative analytical approach using peer-reviewed academic literature, Canadian government reports (primarily Statistics Canada and Indigenous Services Canada), and Indigenous scholarship published between 2013 and 2025. Sources were selected based on credibility, relevance to Indigenous women's experiences, and their discussion of colonial policy, socioeconomic outcomes, violence, or reconciliation initiatives. Preference was given to Indigenous authors and organizations where possible to ensure Indigenous perspectives informed the analysis.

The manuscript employs a critical Indigenous feminist lens, which examines how the intersectionality of various facets of one's identity affects the experiences of Indigenous women and girls. Namely, how the synthesis of colonialism, gender, race, and Indigenous identity produce unique forms of systemic oppression experienced by Indigenous women. This framework guided the interpretation of historical policies, contemporary institutions, and socioeconomic inequalities throughout the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Alternative Perspectives

Yet even with the statistics that prove socioeconomic inequality targeted at Indigenous women in Canada still exists, recent government efforts have prompted individuals to argue that progress is being made to resolve this disparity. Specifically, this manuscript will look at the significance of the 231 Calls for Justice and the 94 Calls to Action. The 231 Calls for Justice were recommendations released by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in 2019 to address the systemic causes of violence against Indigenous women. The 94 Calls to Action were issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 to advance reconciliation following the residential school system (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

While these initiatives represent important acknowledgements of historical and ongoing injustices, evidence suggests that they have produced only limited structural change. For example, the 231 Calls for Justice "aimed at ending genocide, tackling root causes of violence, and improving the quality of life of Indigenous women" and its predecessor, the 94 Calls to Action have yielded minimal results as García-Del Moral (2024) of the University of Guelph found Indigenous women are still 12 times as likely to be murdered or go missing compared to any other race, suggesting the work done to combat violence against Indigenous women has been ineffective (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). Furthermore, 3-year Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy, centralized around education and raising awareness, did not address the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in Canadian federal prisons. McGuire and Murdoch (2021) of Simon Fraser University, Indigenous women make up 42% of total federally incarcerated women, despite only being 4% of Canada's population. This over-criminalization reflects Canada's failed attempt at addressing the root cause of systemic inequality. Thus, although the Canadian government has implemented initiatives including the 231 Calls for Justice, the 94 Calls to Action, Canada's Anti-

Racism Strategy, and the National Action Plan on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ People to address historical injustices, the Native Women's Association of Canada, composed of Indigenous scholars and activists, still argues that "a measurable, costed plan" is needed to break the systemic barriers (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2023). These persisting disparities accentuate the still present structural barriers tracing back to colonial times, reinforcing the need for further action.

3.2 Socioeconomic Disparities and Structural Exclusion

Indigenous women in Canada remain subject to socioeconomic discrimination evident in three main ways: access to education, income inequality, and underrepresentation in positions of power. For most Indigenous women, colonial legacies have made it especially difficult for them to attain the same level of education. Statistics Canada (2023) reported only 14% of Indigenous women between the ages 25 and 64 had at least a bachelor's degree in 2016. Though this number is up from 9% in 2006, the disparity in education is still very much present. Even those who have the necessary education are still limited by employment inequality. The Government of Canada (2023) reported that in accessible areas, there was a 14.8% unemployment rate amongst First Nations women which contrasts with the 5.9% unemployment rate amongst non-Indigenous women. This discrepancy alludes to not only the surface-level issue of disproportionate employment but also underlies the larger issue of systemic discrimination. Still, even in the workplace, Indigenous women are subject to income discrimination and earn significantly less than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Labour Market Information Council of Canada (2024) used Statistics Canada data to calculate the "Average hourly wage of Indigenous women as a percentage of the average hourly wage of" non-Indigenous women and reported that in 2023, Indigenous women earned 90.3% of what their non-Indigenous counterparts earned. This number is slightly lower than in 2013 (90.4%), and demonstrates that Canada made virtually no progress in terms of correcting this wage disparity. When observing the average weekly earnings, it is found that Indigenous women earn 90.0% of what non-Indigenous women earn in a week. This number is 0.7% lower than in 2013 (90.7%) and demonstrates the steps backward that Canada has taken in terms of income inequality. However, this is where it is important to consider the intersectionality of income inequality which Indigenous women face as it is a known fact that women across Canada earn less than men. The Canadian Women's Foundation (2018) found that Indigenous women earn 65 cents for every dollar earned by non-Indigenous men. Statistics Canada (2023) found in a similar study that Indigenous women earned on average 20.1% less than Canadian-born men and 8.9% less than Indigenous men. Taken together, these statistics point to the widespreadness of income and employment inequality that Indigenous women are disproportionately affected by. This issue can be further perpetuated by comparing Indigenous women in positions of power in the workplace versus non-Indigenous men and women. This issue is prevalent not only in corporate businesses but also in government positions as well. For example, MacDougall et al. (2025), a group of lawyers at Osler, Hoskin, and Harcourt LLP found that Indigenous peoples held just over 0.7% of board seats under the Canadian Business Corporations Act. Further building on this, a report in 2024 by the Prosperity Project (2024) found Indigenous women accounted for less than 0.4% of all corporate director positions. Just as how Western settlers once denied Indigenous women their legal status, corporate leaders are now denying Indigenous women access in decision-making spaces, not because of their individual shortcomings, but because the structural systems in place were not designed to include them. These disparities which remain entrenched in modern-day Canada reflect the structural barriers Indigenous women are forced to endure as a result of the government's failure at taking meaningful action.

3.3 Ongoing Violence and the MMIWG Crisis

The modern legacies of colonialism extend beyond mere socioeconomic inequality and are even more evident in the ongoing MMIWG crisis, highlighting systemic violence against Indigenous women in Canada. According to a study by The Lancet journal, 1200 Indigenous women went missing between the years 1980 and 2012 (The Lancet, 2016). However, there is some disagreement over this number; a study by professor Jerry Flores et al. of the University of Toronto into the government's inaction instead documented the number to be over 4000 (Flores and Román Alfaro,

2023). This discrepancy highlights yet another issue: much data available regarding Indigenous women is either incomplete, incorrect, or tainted by institutional biases. This systemic neglect of Indigenous women is tied to a more deliberate attempt at severing matrilineal bonds and dismantling cultural foundations. New Zealand historian Judith Binney (2004) writes in her exploration of Māori communities under colonization that “women...are the first conveyors of history” because they are the composers of the Oriori, the “lullabies written for children by which they are taught the history about their [family] and [clan]” (p. 211). Thus, the notion behind the targeted violence against Indigenous women went beyond stopping reproduction, but was meant to shatter the very roots of Indigenous culture and community by disrupting the source of knowledge, traditions, and language. This persistent legacy of Indigenous women not being given the same respect and rights has made it so that today, the police do not regard MMIWG cases with the same urgency as they would any other homicide case. At the time, European settlers justified their racist behaviour using pseudoscientific beliefs, like that Indigenous peoples’ ill health and poverty were signs of slower racial evolution when in truth, disease was brought by European settlers and poverty was a result of racist government legislation. Though the majority of these acts have been abolished, their legacies persist, with The 2019 Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls deeming present-day violence against Indigenous women and girls a genocide (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

3.4 Colonial-Era Policies and Their Enduring Impacts

Despite colonialism no longer being a direct source of inequality and marginalization, many policies and systems put in place during the era of colonization continue to covertly affect Indigenous women today. A notable example of a colonial-era act with modern-day implications is the Indian Act. Under section 12(1)(b), Indigenous women would lose their Indian status if they married non-Indigenous men, meaning that Indigenous women were being trapped in cycles of poverty which rendered them unable to pass down land nor status. The 1985 Amendment, or, Bill C-31 sought to address some of these issues, those with reinstated statuses had limited abilities to pass down status (Assembly of First Nations, 2020). Further amendments like Bill C-38 resulted in the complete removal of all sexist provisions, however, still did not address the covert racism present in society as a result of colonial policies, with professor Regine Halseth (2013) of the University of Northern British Columbia finding rates of poverty amongst Indigenous women to be double that of other Canadian women. Another colonial policy which has left lasting impacts is the child welfare system. Sociology professors Julie Kaye and Alana Glecia (2025) at the University of Saskatchewan report that despite making up only 7.7% of all children under 15, Indigenous children represent 52.2% of children in foster care. This overrepresentation of Indigenous children without homes perpetuates the legacy of colonial practices which forcibly removed Indigenous children from their ancestral homes. Especially when considering the history of colonial narratives which cast Indigenous mothers as unfit—believing that “their cultures and ways of life were detrimental to their children’s social and moral development”—it becomes apparent that this overrepresentation underscored the larger goal of undermining the role of Indigenous women as teachers, nurturers, and passers of culture and knowledge (Caldwell and Sinha, 2020). Manuscriptist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah (2012) captures the emotional impact of these losses on the children of the victims, using an anecdote and saying “neither [she] nor anybody in [her] family would be able to place flowers where they rest and say, ‘Yes, see this here: this is my family here. These are my people. This is where we came from’” (p.5). Though Ghansah’s reflection was regarding her experience as an African American, it has the ability to resonate with the reality of Indigenous families in Canada where residential school policies resulted in a stark disconnect between Indigenous individuals, their land, and their community. These practices not only disrupted families then but also left intergenerational scars on families, trapping individuals in cycles of trauma. Until action is made, these policies and their respective legacies will continue to disproportionately harm Indigenous women and girls.

4. Call to Action

In order to fully confront and acknowledge the issues which are very much present in Canadian society today, the

Canadian government must work in conjunction with Indigenous women to create formal changes in Canadian legislation. “Canada’s systemic failure to adequately address and protect Indigenous women from violence is a product of the nation’s persistent refusal to remedy historical racist and sexist practices and policies” (Decoste). In addition, Canada would benefit from a fully costed national action plan that goes beyond outlining where Canada has failed, but also incorporates clear timelines and funding allocations which do not exclude Indigenous women and Elders from the conversation. Justice systems should also be reformed through mandatory police training, Indigenous-led oversight boards, and full transparency with complete data on missing persons cases, especially when it comes to Indigenous women. Finally, long-term socioeconomic inequality requires the implementation of mandatory hiring quotas for Indigenous men and women, ensuring equal opportunities for all. To cultivate equitable opportunities for Indigenous women, efforts should also be made to expand education opportunities for Indigenous women, which provide opportunities for learning without disregarding Indigenous culture and ways of learning as well. To truly combat the injustices which disproportionately affect Indigenous women in Canadian society today, the government must move beyond symbolic education and awareness efforts and towards Indigenous-led legislative change.

5. Conclusion

Hence, Canada has not done enough to correct the inequalities that are so pervasive in Canadian society today. Chickasaw author Elizabeth Rule (2018) says, “This context necessitates a rethinking of violence levelled against Indigenous women throughout Canada and demands a new conceptual framework in which such violence must be understood as both an immediate threat to Indigenous women’s lives and a systematic attack on Indigenous nations and cultures.” To truly rectify systemic racism and discrimination, change must be made on a structural level that goes beyond education and apologies. Historians Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah and Judith Binney showcase in their work that the deliberate destruction in lineage through the exclusion of women’s roles as transmitters of knowledge has made it so the very core of Indigenous worldview is disrupted. Effective transformative action would involve structural frameworks that protect the rights that settlers fought so hard to strip Indigenous women of and a formal abolishing of colonial-era policies designed to marginalize women of Indigenous descent. To be able to move forward, Canada must understand that systemic racism today is a continuation of settler colonialism then. What is needed now is a complete repudiation of colonial structures and a framework that addresses the intersectionality of discrimination against Indigenous women in Canada. Until Canada dismantles the colonial structures that continue to marginalize Indigenous women, reconciliation will remain a promise rather than a reality.

6. Limitations

While this paper is able to thoroughly investigate the ongoing colonial injustices impacting Indigenous women in Canada, it is not without limitations. The research referenced in this manuscript is primarily drawn from secondary sources, including government data, literary analyses, and journalistic accounts, without the inclusion of primary research. As a result, it may lack the nuance and depth that direct, anecdotal data would otherwise provide. Additionally, many of the statistics referenced (ie. Data regarding the MMIWG crisis) are either incomplete, contested, or tainted by institutional biases, which may affect the accuracy and generalizability of the findings. The paper also approaches Indigenous women as a collective, which, while analytically useful, may overlook important distinctions among First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and other communities across various regions of Canada. These limitations highlight the need for continued, community-led, and historically grounded research that centers Indigenous voices and epistemologies without the biases caused by the over-involvement of larger government institutions.

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