

Social Justice for Indigenous people - who leads the journey?

There has been a lot of conversation about what social justice *should* look like for Indigenous people, some of which has been posed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, but aside from this important and significant commission, there are also ideas of what social justice should look like from a colonizing mentality. A colonizing mentality is defined as the view of ethnic and cultural inferiority, and is a type of internalized racial oppression (Decana, 2014). Social justice for Indigenous people is the only way forward to ensure that the steps toward truth and reconciliation take place in meaningful ways that can truly lead to positive outcomes. Social justice is targeted at fostering a society that is equitable and which values diversity, and provides equal rights for every individual regardless of disability, sexuality, race or religion. Social justice also works towards establishing a fair distribution of resources and support for human rights (Bhugra, 2016). Along the journey of achieving social justice, colonial ways and stereotypes can be struck down, leading to a powerful shift where Indigenous communities can be more self-determining through the reclaiming of Indigenous values, wisdom, and ways of knowing. This literature review considers the important questions of what social justice may look like for Indigenous people by reviewing the work of the report, “Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side,” by Carol Muree Martin and Harsha Walia. It is a powerful and emotionally-provoking report that tells the stories of Indigenous women who have lived in the Downtown East Side (DTES), but also provides hope for the future. The DTES is an **impoverished** location in Vancouver, BC, and this tiny area of approximately 18,000 people has become a home base for some of the most marginalized and

transient populations in the country since the 1900's (Linden et al, 2013). The stories told by Indigenous women living in poverty often centre around the theme of violence, both from inside the family and at residential schools. These impactful stories also include narrative of how when they lived on the streets, they were similarly abused by men and other people who saw them as "less worthy" (Martin et Walia, 2019). Taking a deeper dive into these stories, they also show how those who are trying to find work to help them get out of poverty are often rejected because employers are reluctant to hire someone who has the DTES as their address, or someone who might have no address at all (Martin et Walia, 2019).

One of the ways that Indigenous social justice could look and be exercised, is by establishing a human rights, Indigenous rights and gender-based analysis in the integration and implementation of all poverty reduction strategy policies, legislation, and decision making (Martin et Walia, 2019). The authors state that an example of a human right is having access to protection by police, and also that Indigenous rights means recognizing their culture and traditions. The authors also mention that implementing gender-based policies involves acknowledging that the violence that they face is one of the reasons that Indigenous women work in the DTES, even though it might be unsafe or dangerous (Martin et Walia, 2019). This is an act of social justice because through the stories that have been shared, it is evident that Indigenous people do not have a voice or self determination and agency, and are therefore at risk of having their children removed from their care by a government authority such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development, because they are deemed to be in an unsafe environment or are unfit parents. This viewpoint serves to perpetuate the socially constructed stereotype that Indigenous people are inferior or "less than". Therefore, it is essential that Indigenous people have a seat at the table where they can participate and contribute to legislation and other public

practices that will be helpful and meaningful for them, rather than just having them implemented and imposed. By re-establishing Indigenous rights, it reaffirms the message that Indigenous people are equal citizens and have unique or autonomous needs.

Using gender-based analysis policies reflects the idea that the violence faced by Indigenous women is associated with poverty and economic marginalization (Martin et Walia, 2019). Gender-based analysis policies from an Indigenous perspective reflects the idea that patriarchal “histories structures and social norms that have been established by white settlers... since early contact” have had disastrous consequences on their sovereignty, communities and families, and has been associated with impacts on health and wellness (Sanchez-Pimienta et al 3, 2021). Gender-based analysis policies also reflect the particular cultural, geographical, historical, spiritual factors, and solidarity of diversified Indigenous communities that have held out and withstood the “imposition of patriarchal views” (Sanchez-Pimienta et al 3, 2021).

Something very powerful in the report “Red Women Rising: Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side” was the fact that poverty results in a higher probability of Indigenous women being exposed to abusive relationships and sexual harassment, unsafe working conditions, and much more (Martin et Walia, 2019). By implementing a gender-based lens or analysis, it allows for society to see that there is not only ongoing discrimination by race and ethnicity, but also by additional sustained discrimination as a result of gender and gender identity. For example, it is only by implementing this new poverty framework acknowledging that Indigenous women’s experience of poverty is connected to the violence that they experience that we can truly solve poverty in ways that are relevant for Indigenous people (Martin et Walia, 2019). Another way that the authors suggest as a way to tackle poverty is to design solutions that recognize what Indigenous people have been through and take into

consideration that poverty reduction isn't a "once size fits all" approach. The Red Women Rising report connects to the work done at a national level as follows.

In the report, "Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," by the National Inquiry, it breaks down what the National Inquiry is and its work done to date in Canada to help and benefit Indigenous people. The National Inquiry was undertaken to investigate the systematic forms of violence faced by Indigenous women and girls, including sexual violence (National Inquiry, 2019). The report highlights many important issues that still urgently need to be addressed such as the lack of safety for Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBQQIA people in Canada. As well as highlighting these important issues and suggesting solutions on how to improve them and move towards a process of truth and reconciliation, the report also provides powerful stories from Survivors and their families. The report mentions the startling fact that Indigenous women and girls have a higher probability of being victims of family violence and spousal homicide, and face a higher level of violence when compared to other groups of women in Canada (National Inquiry, 2019). Research shows that the reason most people living in Canada don't know this is because it is not given the attention or focus it deserves in society. Violence against Indigenous women does not get the same amount of public attention or media coverage that violence against non-Indigenous women does when someone goes missing or is murdered. The report also adds that the long string of disappearances and murders of Indigenous women and girls is a component of the structural, institutional, and intimate violence that Indigenous women have experienced over their lifetimes (National Inquiry, 2019). One of the suggestions from the Coutu Report that is still very much relevant today, states, "...those who will be responsible for the implementation of the aforementioned recommendations should take into consideration the

concerns expressed by Aboriginal Women Associations” (National Inquiry, 2019). While this is an important step toward ensuring Indigenous women have a voice, it came too late. It was only after there were many deaths and macabre curiosity from the media that this recommendation was finally implemented. The report discusses that in 2017, the Quebec Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat proposed the action plan *Do More, Do Better: Government Action Plan for the Social and Cultural Development of the First Nations and Inuit*, which was used as a template by the Quebec Government to begin the process of reconciliation by acknowledging the impacts of colonization on Indigenous people (National Inquiry, 2019). Something significant about this report was that it focused on issues faced by Indigenous women such as violence and poor living conditions, and makes two recommendations for establishing the ability to act as individuals and communities (Gouvernement du Quebec, 2017). Even though this action plan has been a step forward, some of the actions are not directly aimed at the needs of Indigenous women, and are vague and open to interpretation. The National Inquiry was an important statement for the country, and many scholars, such as Sheila Cote-Meek, have been developing strategies for how to address these kinds of systematic violence in educational systems.

The book, “Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education,” by Sheila Cote-Meek, provides an in-depth account of Indigenous students’ experiences in post secondary education, and also spends time discussing what healing means from an Indigenous point of view. What was really compelling within the book was learning how Indigenous people refer to healing as “walking on the red road”, “participating in healing circles”, and “grief work” (Cote-Meek, 35, 2014). These can all be understood as part of the process of healing. One of the most interesting definitions of healing was “resistance”, which in white settler and colonizing culture means fighting back against something, but within

Indigenous culture, it refers instead to the process of healing from trauma. Similarly eye-opening about this book, was how the term “medicalization” or “medicine” is used a lot in society but has negative impacts for Indigenous people. The book explains that by frequently using the word medicalization or “problem”, an individual loses their identity and becomes the perceived problem, which results in different forms of violence being used against them by those who are in positions of power (Cote-Meek, 2014). One of the solutions that was suggested to remove this “othering”, is to use a trauma-informed approach to recognize the harm caused by the violence, without blaming the victims (Cote-Meek, 2014). This example shows just how powerful language is, which is often taken for granted, and how it can harm groups of people without us being aware of it.

The same book highlights that in the early 1960’s when residential schools had begun to close, there was a significant change starting in the education sector where Indigenous control over Indigenous education was starting to take over. This was as a response to the “White Paper” by the federal government (Cote-Meek 2014). This represents a step in self-determination and reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty, as Indigenous people were able to again teach Aboriginal understandings of the environment and the world as well as spiritual and cultural beliefs (Cote-Meek, 2014). This was a substantial shift because the cultural teachings and beliefs about the environment and the world had been seen as “inferior” or “insignificant” in the white colonial school system. The book suggests that one of the ways to strengthen or reconnect with Indigenous identity, is to include more learnings and teachings about Indigenous culture and identity into the curriculum, and to implement student services that are culturally relevant (Cote-Meek, 2014). While this is beneficial moving forwards, it is not always done with a critical analysis about what is being taught. Without this critical analysis being present in the curriculum,

the learning only serves to further stereotype Indigenous people and students. Beyond teaching for better outcomes for Indigenous students, the question of how non-Indigenous people should relate to topics of colonial violence is also important to explore.

In the thought-provoking book, “Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada,” by Emma Battel Lowman and Adam J. Barker, they investigate what it means to be a settler and that accepting this title is part of the process of changing our relationships with Indigenous people. Something very striking is the idea that the process of decolonization will not be fully understood until it is practiced, and even at this point it will still be necessary for a transforming set of goals, always responding to the needs of Indigenous communities (Lowman et Barker, 2015). It demonstrates that the process of decolonization is a continuous and evolving process and there is no start and end point. The process of decolonization also involves stepping out of our comfort zone and actively collaborating with Indigenous communities to learn about and embrace their perspectives and ways of living. The book makes a powerful point about it being our duty as settlers to educate ourselves about what settler colonialism is instead of making it the responsibility of Indigenous people to teach us, which can take up their time and energy to constantly explain the same thing (Lowman et Barker, 2015). The main takeaway message is that it cannot all be left to Indigenous people to teach us about this important and dark history, but it is our duty as settlers to broaden our awareness about what has occurred in the past and what the implications are for the present and future. The book makes note of the point that the process of reclaiming Indigenous identity has, for the most part, been received well by settler Canadians with most of them agreeing that Indigenous people should have the same rights as other minority groups (Lowman et Barker, 2015). While a step forward that most settlers have this mindset, it is not enough to be considered a step towards truth and reconciliation. This can be considered a

passive mindset because there is not any action taking place that sets the path towards accomplishing truth and reconciliation.

Something discussed in the book that was interesting is the fact that the fear, discomfort, and uncertainty that settlers encounter while thinking about or discussing Indigenous culture or land, is the result of society being unable to discuss why the relationship with land is significant (Lowman et Barker, 2015). This highlights the reality that we may not be ignorant and might not feel comfortable talking about the land relationship because it is something not well understood. This also demonstrates the need for society to take more time understanding Indigenous culture so that these important conversations can be understood by non-Indigenous people so they can continue to improve their knowledge and growth.

These literature examples highlight the need for society to move away from the white settler idea of what social justice should look like or should be, and instead begin a process of active listening and collaboration with Indigenous communities that is grounded in cultural humility, to discuss and learn more about what their idea of social justice looks like. It is only by respectful collaboration that social justice will be established in a way that is beneficial and meaningful. As a white settler myself, I found that these pieces of literature were really intriguing and moving, and have increased my curiosity about how to be an ally and how I can work towards building what social justice looks like for Indigenous communities.

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