

Resisting Colonial Limitations, Building Community and Sharing Knowledge: Urban Indigenous Women Determine their Reproductive and Sexual Futures

by Holly McKenzie, Dory Nason, Colleen Varcoe, Elder Betty McKenna, Paulete Poitras, Jenelle McArthur, and Cassandra J. Opikokew Wajuntah

Abstract: Colonial forces in North America have long targeted the reproductive practices of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people as part of the project to assert sovereignty over Indigenous lands and these oppressive forces continue to shape struggles for reproductive rights. While the reproductive choice movement remains predominantly focused on rights and access to abortion and contraceptives, Black women, women of colour, Indigenous women and Indigenous youth activists have taken up reproductive justice as a framework to analyze reproductive violence and advocate for reproductive freedom. Yet, missing from the extant literature are ways that Indigenous women activate reproductive justice in everyday contexts. Grounded in a collaborative, action-oriented study that amplified an Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework that is relational and centers self-determination, this paper examines how urban Indigenous women in Canada build reproductive and sexual self-determination through resisting colonial influences, drawing on government and community-based services, and contributing to the resurgence of Indigenous teachings and practices. Through foregrounding these material-discursive practices, our analysis highlights resistance work taking place outside of what is usually considered both reproduction and politics. In doing so, we aim to foster a broader view of ongoing resistance work, as well as illuminate future potential sites for movement-building.

Keywords: Indigenous; First Nations; Métis; women; reproductive justice; self-determination; Canada

Résumé : Les forces coloniales en Amérique du Nord ont longtemps pris pour cible les pratiques reproductives des femmes autochtones et des personnes de genres divers dans le cadre de leur projet visant à affirmer leur souveraineté sur les terres autochtones, et ces forces oppressives continuent d'influencer les luttes pour les droits reproductifs. Alors que le mouvement pour le libre choix reproductif reste principalement axé sur les droits et l'accès à l'avortement et à la contraception, les femmes noires, les femmes de couleur, les femmes autochtones et les jeunes militantes autochtones ont adopté la justice reproductive comme cadre pour analyser la violence reproductive et défendre la liberté reproductive. Pourtant, la littérature existante ne rend pas compte de la manière dont les femmes autochtones mettent en œuvre la justice reproductive dans leur quotidien. S'appuyant sur une étude collaborative et orientée vers l'action qui a mis en avant un cadre autochtone de justice reproductive et sexuelle fondé sur les relations et centré sur l'autodétermination, cet article examine comment les femmes autochtones vivant en milieu urbain au Canada construisent leur autodétermination reproductive et sexuelle en résistant aux influences coloniales, en s'appuyant sur les services publics et communautaires, et en contribuant à la renaissance des enseignements et des pratiques autochtones. En mettant en avant ces pratiques matérielles et discursives, notre analyse met en lumière les actions de résistance qui se déroulent en dehors de ce qui est habituellement considéré comme relevant à la fois de la reproduction et de la politique. Ce faisant, nous visons à favoriser une vision plus large des actions de résistance en cours, ainsi qu'à mettre en lumière de futurs terrains potentiels pour la construction de mouvements.

Mots clés : peuples autochtones; Premières Nations; Métis; femmes; justice reproductive; autodétermination; Canada

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Elder Betty McKenna is Anishinaabe and speaks Anishinaabemowin. Her family reserve is Sapotaweyak Cree Nation. She follows the traditions of her people, speaks her traditional language, conducts numerous ceremonies, and gathers medicines. Elder Betty is an author of several peer reviewed publications and editor of the book "Listening to The Beat of Our Drum". Elder Betty is very passionate about Indigenous health, education and returning people to their traditional practices and languages. Elder Betty is currently involved with many research projects and is a lecturer at the First Nations University of Canada and Luther College in Regina. Elder Betty is also an Elder in Virtual Residence to the Canadian Virtual Hospice. She is also currently the first Resident Elder for the Mackenzie Art Gallery and recently became a Resident Elder for CAAN. Elder Betty currently also is currently the Guiding Elder to RESOLVE Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse, Institute of Indigenous People's Health-Canadian Institutes of Health Research (IIPH), Guiding Elder to IGNITE Adult Learning Corporation and she is an Elder in Regina Public Schools. Previously, she was a member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Saskatchewan Council and the Saskatchewan Police Commission Board, and she also was a member of the Elders National Advisory of Corrections Canada. She is widely recognized for her work and has received numerous awards over the years, these include: the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal, the Queen's Gold Jubilee Medal, the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal, and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. She has also been recognized with the Excellence in Health Award, the Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse (RESOLVE) Saskatchewan Community Award, the Regina Board of Trustees Shared Values Recognition Program Award, the Wakamow Valley Award of Distinction for Conservation of Prairie Plants, as well as the Sovereigns Award for Volunteers. She is also a member of the Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan's Prayer Breakfast committee.

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Introduction

Colonialism and other intersecting oppressive forces shape people's reproductive experiences in North America and their struggles for reproductive rights. In Canada, colonial forces have targeted the reproductive practices of Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) women and gender-diverse people as part of the project to assert sovereignty over Indigenous lands (Stote 2015; Lawford and Giles 2013; Tait 2009). These colonial forces have employed various strategies to disrupt traditional modes of gender, reproduction, family, and community, including demonizing gender-diverse people (Hunt 2015; Jacobs et al. 1997; Wilson 2009), imposing EuroWestern biomedical reproductive healthcare (Kelm 1998; Lawford and Giles 2013), enacting reproductive coercion (Stote 2015; Stote 2025), and instituting patriarchal structures of governance and family through federal legislation (Emberley 2001; Green 2001). In the face of colonial interventions, Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people have protected, sustained, and revitalized Indigenous teachings and practices, contested colonial heteropatriarchal violence, and developed community programming to meet local reproductive healthcare needs. Crucial to this work have been Indigenous feminist, Two-Spirit and queer scholars (Anderson 2011; Risling Baldy 2018; Simpson 2017; Starblanket 2024), and Indigenous midwives (Couchie 2007; Silliman et al. 2004).

While the struggle for decriminalizing abortion brought together feminists with various reproductive concerns, the reproductive choice discourse and material politics crystallized to focus primarily on legal and accessible abortion services and contraceptives (Silliman et al. 2004). This focus on technologies and procedures necessary to prevent and end pregnancies reflects the dominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual women within the reproductive choice

movement, women who are often compelled within North American society to become mothers. This is not to deny that these concerns remain pressing, as underscored by the 2022 United States Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* and related state-level legislation that criminalized abortion in various contexts (Guttmacher Institute 2025), and by Trump's defunding of health organizations that provide abortion care within and beyond the United States (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025). Nor is this to overlook the intersecting structural inequities that shape abortion and contraceptive access. Rather, it is to highlight that the reproductive choice movement's focus on abortion and contraceptives has marginalized other reproductive concerns pertinent to Indigenous people, Black people, people of colour, and people living in conditions of economic precarity (Silliman et al. 2004).

Black women from the United States working in reproductive rights and health in the 1990s first articulated reproductive justice as a framework to address various forms of reproductive violence and build liberatory futures (Ross 2017). Reproductive justice is grounded in a human rights framework, centres marginalized communities, and renders visible the interconnections among individual reproductive decisions and the sociopolitical contexts in which they are made. Alongside Black women, women of colour, and other communities, Indigenous women and youth have taken up reproductive justice as a relevant framework to analyze their experiences, engage in community work, and mobilize politically (Wiebe and Konsmo 2014; Women's Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2016). Vital to the development of Indigenous reproductive justice theory and practice has been the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), a grassroots organization led by, and for, Indigenous youth, whose spectrum of work includes land back advocacy (a movement to reclaim sovereign Indigenous lands), intervening in the child welfare and criminal system, culturally safe sexual health education, 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy, and environmental justice.

As state forces and service providers continue to subject Indigenous people to reproductive injustices including the forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system and reproductive coercion (Ma et al. 2019; Senate of Canada 2022; Stote 2015; Stote 2025), recently, various levels of government in the United States and Canada have targeted multiple communities' rights and access to health information and care. Right-wing populist governments have criminalized and limited people's abortion rights and 2SLGBTQ+ rights, as well as undermined access to sexual health education and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people's healthcare (CBC News 2023; DeMillo 2023; Guttmacher Institute 2026). Our collective struggles against these forms of violence must foreground Indigenous peoples' resistance, as Indigenous peoples have developed creative strategies to resist various forms of reproductive, sexual and gendered violence and sustain themselves and their communities in the face of it.

Grounded in our collaborative research exploring urban Indigenous women's conceptualizations of reproductive justice and reproductive experiences, in this article we share our analysis of everyday material-discursive practices urban Indigenous women in the Prairies engage to build reproductive and sexual self-determination. Through these practices, collaborators resist colonial regulation of reproductive decision-making and motherhood, draw on services and resources to meet their own and their family's needs, and build community, all of which strengthens their capacities for resistance. Collaborators also spoke about engaging and sharing cultural practices and teachings in dynamic, complex, and relational ways.

Study Context

This study was a collaboration of urban Indigenous women and accomplices living on the homeland of the Métis and Treaty One (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada), Treaty Four (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada) and Treaty Six (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada) territories who brought experience in service provision, community leadership and advocacy, research, and navigating challenges in reproductive and sexual healthcare and in child welfare. Manitoba and Saskatchewan were constructed by colonial governments that divided and named territories on which First Nations (including the Cree, Dene, Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda), Inuit, and Métis lived, and still live. There is a long history of colonial displacement from, and migration within, these lands (Daschuk 2013; Hogue 2015), including among Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. As of 2021, Indigenous people comprised 12.4% of Winnipeg's population, 11.5% of Saskatoon's population, and 10.4% of Regina's population. More broadly, Indigenous people consti-

tute 5.0% of the Canadian population with 44.3% of Indigenous people living in large urban centres (Government of Canada 2022).

Colonial and class segregation dominate these cities. Various policies and practices, including the ongoing legacy of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the continued forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system, and sexist, classist, and racist provisions in the *Indian Act* have pushed, and continue to push, many Indigenous people into under-resourced areas such as Saskatoon's West Side, Regina's North Central, and Winnipeg's North End, areas known as inner-city (sometimes "core") neighbourhoods.

These cities are also spaces of community-building. Indigenous women living in these urban centres engage in diverse forms of activism and community work. Grassroots and community-based organizations mobilize to hold police accountable for their problematic responses to violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people, to resist the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families by the child welfare system, and to hold the state and corporations accountable for environmental violence. A few specific examples include the grassroots, Indigenous-led blockades in 2023 to pressure the Manitoba government to search the Prairie Green Landfill near Winnipeg for the bodies of First Nations women who were suspected to have been murdered by a serial killer now convicted of the crime; Ikwe Safe Rides, a volunteer-based safe ride group in Winnipeg created by Indigenous women in 2016 in response to taxi-cab drivers' harassment and violence; and the Idle No More movement, which emerged in late 2012 from teach-ins led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Saskatchewan to protest threats to First Nations rights that were introduced by the federal Bill C-45 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). These three cities are also sites where Elders and cultural leaders are recovering, practicing and sharing First Nations cultural practices, including reproductive health practices, such as Indigenous doula care and birthwork, moon lodge teachings and full moon ceremonies. As such, these three cities were, and are, ideal sites in which to amplify Indigenous women's everyday work building reproductive and sexual justice.

Study Process, Methodology, and Methods

Study Development

This project was instigated by the first author (McKenzie) through a collaborative, community-engaged approach. McKenzie is a white-settler, queer, cis-gender feminist woman who works as an accomplice with Indigenous peoples in the fight against the colonial heteropatriarchal order (Arvin et al. 2013; Fornssler et al. 2018). The catalyst for this study was not one moment or conversation. Rather, it was informed by the first author's experiences while living in Saskatchewan, working at a reproductive choice organization in which colonial narratives continued to shape reproductive healthcare funding and programming. At this time, and since, McKenzie also engaged in activism alongside Indigenous community leaders to fight reproductive injustices (e.g., the colonial child welfare system and violence against Indigenous women and girls). Informed by these experiences, NYSHN's work, and other Indigenous reproductive justice literature, the first author instigated conversations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, friends, and mentors about this potential work. These conversations explored whether it would be useful to community for the first author to facilitate a study about Indigenous women's conceptualizations of reproductive justice and reproductive experiences. Buttressed by these generative discussions and support for this project's concept, the first author initiated this three-phase collaborative, action-oriented study, guided by an Ojibway Elder (co-author Elder Betty McKenna), and informed by Indigenous Storytelling and post-critical ethnography (Kovach 2009; Lather 2007). This project's data gathering methods in Phase One and Two included a series of study conversations (research circles, individual interviews, and research meetings) between Elder Betty McKenna, McKenzie, local *kokums* (a Cree word that translates to the English word "grandmother"), and collaborators. McKenzie led the analysis drawing on thematic and Indigenous Storytelling approaches, with collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna contributing throughout. We also collaboratively determined how to share knowledge through academic and community outputs to prompt change.

Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Ethics

In Phase One, the first author drew on existing relationships to engage with others with professional and community experience related to reproductive (in)justice(s), sharing study information and inviting potential collaborators to participate via email. We use the term collaborators rather than study participants to make clear how collaborators' roles differ from those of participants in much research. Twelve collaborators were involved in Phase One of the project and participated in open-ended one-to-one interviews. In Phase Two, McKenzie and Phase One collaborators focused on involving Indigenous women with personal experience related to reproductive and sexual (in)justice(s) through our relational networks as well as organizations who provide services related to reproductive (in)justice(s), particularly to women whose reproductive experiences are stigmatized or silenced (e.g., women with HIV/AIDS and Two-Spirit, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and trans women). In particular, we shared information about the study through community events, as well as email and poster communications. Potential collaborators contacted McKenzie to learn more about the study so they could determine whether they wanted to be involved. Twenty additional collaborators joined the study, with five participating in research circles led by *kokums*, and all twenty participated in open-ended one-to-one interviews (Kovach 2009). Collaborators from Phase One and Phase Two also participated in individual and group meetings focused on the analysis of study conversations and knowledge-mobilization activities. Twenty-nine of these thirty-two women identified as Indigenous, many identified as First Nations (predominantly Cree), and some identified as Métis. Rather than relying on the colonial heteropatriarchal system of gender/sex, we involved a diverse group of collaborators, including Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people who also identified with the category "women." Collaborators brought diverse educational, advocacy, professional and lived experiences related to sexual health, sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking, doula and midwifery, HIV, harm-reduction and substance use, family support and outreach, the child welfare system, the justice system, and Two-Spirit people's rights and services.

At the beginning of research circles and individual interviews, the first author shared commonly accepted principles of reproductive justice from Ross (2006), that is, a person's ability to determine: 1) whether or not to have children, 2) whether or not to continue or end pregnancies, 3) how and where they give birth, and 4) their ability to raise the children they do have in safe and healthy ways, free from violence. These research circles and interviews focused on the relevance of reproductive justice to Indigenous women's lives, the meaning of reproductive justice, the forces that constrain or foster reproductive justice, and how Indigenous women assert their rights to reproductive justice within these constraining contexts.

In order to make meaning from study conversations (research circles, interviews, and meetings), we used an adapted thematic approach that was inductive and deductive (Braun and Clarke 2006) and grounded in postcritical ethnography (Lather 2007). We also condensed women's stories through an Indigenous Storytelling lens (Kovach 2009). McKenzie led the analysis, of which she presented an early iteration to collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna, who then shared their insights and input, which McKenzie incorporated into the analysis. Elder Betty McKenna, collaborators, and McKenzie's supervisory committee also determined whether they wanted to be co-authors/co-presenters of study products, and if so, contributed to the thoughtwork of these products, to writing and revision. For instance, co-authors of this article include Elder Betty McKenna, collaborators (Poitras, McArthur, and Opikokew Wajuntah) and graduate co-supervisors (Nason and Varcoe) who contributed to the writing of this article. The bios of all co-authors are included here.

Our study was guided by Indigenous ethical principles (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; Walters et al. 2009) as defined and activated within this study. Our project followed both Indigenous and university cultural protocols for informed consent and sharing knowledge. In particular, after potential collaborators reviewed study consent forms, they gave oral or written consent to participating in the study. Then, in alignment with Kovach's (2009) research, McKenzie presented potential collaborators with tobacco and asked them to become involved with the study and share their experiences and knowledge. In recognition of some Métis people's preference for the gift of tea when asked to share stories, knowledge, or teachings (Campbell 2012 as cited by LaVallee et al. 2016, 171), tea was also offered. Our study was reviewed and approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Informed, ongoing consent was practiced throughout our analysis and knowledge-sharing processes. As McKenzie and co-authors prepared study products, we shared any quotes and condensed stories with collaborators for their review and consent prior to publication. Collaborators chose whether they wanted to be identified by their pseudonym or name with these quotations and in the study more broadly. In addition, we circulated drafts of study products to all collaborators and Elder Betty McKenna for their review prior to publication/presentation. See McKenzie et al. (2022) for an in-depth description of study approach, methods, including policy analysis and environmental scan methods not drawn on in this article's analysis, and ethics.

Findings

The study conversations amplified and further developed a distinct Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework, which emphasizes the interconnections among the rights to determine gender and sexual identities, reproductive experiences, birthing and living conditions, and relationships with community, culture, and land. Self-determination was identified as the central tenet of Indigenous women's reproductive and sexual justice. This framework resonates with Indigenous reproductive justice writing and community work (see for instance, Wiebe and Konsmo 2014; Women's Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2016), and thus, we are not claiming it is new. Rather, we recognize this framework amplifies and builds upon community conversations and work, as well as Indigenous scholarship in this area. In McKenzie et. al. (forthcoming), we further articulate this framework.

Grounded in this framework, our analysis below illustrates the material-discursive practices Indigenous women have engaged to build self-determining pathways; through these practices, collaborators resist colonial heteropatriarchal influences on reproductive decisions and the regulation of Indigenous motherhood, as well as draw on available services to sustain them and their families and build community—strategies that strengthen their capacities for resistance. Collaborators' engagement with Indigenous teachings and cultural practices emphasized the dynamic nature of cultural knowledge as they discussed the influence of colonial processes on Indigenous teachings and practices and re-envisioned teachings to be inclusive of women, girls, and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people.

Resisting Colonial Heteropatriarchal Influences on Reproductive Decision-Making

Collaborators described the pervasiveness of colonial heteropatriarchal structures and narratives within health and social services, and wider society in these three Prairie cities, and their impact on their families' and communities' norms and values. These structures and narratives operate through various mechanisms, including the imposition of heteropatriarchal norms, the perpetuation of stereotypes about Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people, the erasure of gender- and sexually-diverse people's histories, and the disruption of reproductive health and midwifery knowledge. Alongside discussions about these harms, collaborators shared how they resisted colonial influences on their reproductive decision-making.

During this study's fieldwork there were burgeoning conversations across Saskatchewan and Canada about forced and coerced sterilization after Indigenous women shared stories with journalists about healthcare and social service providers who had pressured them, or even forced them, to have a tubal ligation after giving birth at the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon (Boyer and Bartlett 2017; Adam 2015). In study conversations, collaborators shared stories about service providers subjecting them, and other Indigenous women, to reproductive coercion in relation to various technologies and procedures, and ways they resisted and navigated these coercive contexts. For instance, Jasmond spoke about how she navigated pressure from multiple healthcare providers to agree to end or prevent future pregnancies (i.e. abortion, tubal ligation procedures, and long-term contraceptives). Jasmond explained how she accessed support from an Aboriginal Liaison Worker and her sister, both of whom spoke to these doctors and helped Jasmond advocate for her rights. She also rejected care informed by colonial narratives. In particular, after an encounter with her gynecologist during which he evoked colonial and racist stereotypes to justify prescribing Jasmond an intrauterine device (IUD), she did not fill the prescription for the IUD, and avoided further dialogue with the doctor about it.

Indigenous women did not equate their resistance to colonial influences on their reproductive decision-making with deciding to become pregnant or to continue a pregnancy despite pressure to end it; indeed, this was only one expression. Collaborators also highlighted access to abortion services and various challenges that constrain this access, such as stigma from EuroWestern society at large and from individual practitioners, as well as limited abortion services. Indeed, Saskatoon is considered one of the most difficult urban locations in Canada to access an abortion, as surgical terminations are only provided in hospital and up until thirteen weeks and six days gestation (Saskatchewan Health Authority 2019). Further, these decisions may contradict, or align with, individual women's traditional teachings, as Melissa explained:

There's stigma in general in society, but there is also, as far as traditional teachings go, I've had women say, "Oh, I'm not a murderer," or "Creator gave me this gift and I can't give that gift back" and so depending on which Elder that they talk to, and which ceremonial family that they have, those beliefs are different and lots of women feel very strongly. If their grandma tells them, "You can't do that, you can't have an abortion" or "You can't give your baby up for adoption," that woman will listen to their grandma even if that woman is really struggling. So, that's a really tough subject, some women won't even talk about it.

Collaborators from diverse Nations, with varied familial and geographical histories, and ceremonial teachings, expressed that colonial ideologies have influenced Indigenous teachings. For instance, Tanya shared that while at least some Indigenous communities have techniques to control pregnancy and reproduction, the imposition of colonial norms "definitely played a huge role in the loss of teachings around Indigenous women's moontime and medicines and things like that, as well as Indigenous midwives and the medicalization of childbirth." Colonial forces disrupted Indigenous reproductive health teachings in various ways including the criminalization of First Nations ceremonies through the *Indian Act* until 1951, the imposition of Christian anti-choice teachings through residential schools, and EuroWestern biomedical approaches to reproduction and childbirth (Kelm 1998; Lawford and Giles 2013). As such, Indigenous women who terminate pregnancies as part of building their reproductive futures may face stigma and pressure from various forces within their community and family, as well as from EuroWestern society. They also navigate limited and fragmented systems of care and support. Collaborators spoke about these complex conditions despite the pervasive stigma and silence about abortion.

Resisting Settler-Colonial Regulation of Indigenous Motherhood

Collaborators emphasized that service providers' pressure on Indigenous women to make specific reproductive decisions—whether to prevent, continue, or end pregnancies—is intertwined with settler-colonial regulation of Indigenous motherhood, imposed through colonial institutions and policy, which continues to shape community narratives and relations. Collaborator Autumn openly resisted such regulation in her statement, "For me to have a safe home [for me and my children], I am going to do what I feel is right whether the public or the community says, 'This is how it should be.'" This resonated with other discussions about the pressure collaborators have faced to comply with colonial ideals of motherhood and womanhood, and how they have navigated these pressures.

State and religious forces have imposed patriarchal ideals on First Nations communities through institutions such as residential schools as well as through legislation such as the *Indian Act*. The latter regulates First Nations people's identities as status Indians, which determines access to reserve lands, resources (such as hunting, fishing, and trapping rights), education, and funding. For over a hundred years, this legislation did so according to heteropatriarchal family formations. Between 1869 and 1985, the *Indian Act* stripped First Nations women of their status if they married non-status men. The children of these First Nations women were also denied status under the *Indian Act* and further, under the *Indian Act*, the status of all children was determined by their biological father (Lawrence 2003; Lawrence 2004; Cannon 1998). First Nations women have engaged various national and international bodies to challenge the heteropatriarchal provisions of the *Indian Act*, including Charter challenges, challenges to Canadian courts, to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, and to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Gabriel 2011; Lawrence 2004). While changes to the *Indian Act* in 1985 and in 2011 aimed to address sexism propagated by the *Indian Act*, the effects continue to be felt in families and communities. Collaborators spoke about this Act, its con-

tinuing effects, and how they and other First Nations women resist and navigate them. One collaborator, Laverne, said that by the time she had finished her master's thesis, which analyzed the impacts of this legislation, she concluded that "one of the most revolutionary acts as a woman is just to have a baby and to hell with laws, policies, and legal crap."

Various government systems intrude into Indigenous women's and families' lives and demand their engagement. A particularly germane example is the ongoing forced removal of Indigenous children by the child welfare system in these two provinces (McMillan 2020; Bennett 2009). Collaborators spoke about strategies they used to navigate the child welfare system's intrusion into their families, to maintain or regain custody of their children, and to support other families in these efforts; such strategies ranged from complying with demands from child welfare workers to advocating for themselves and others. For instance, Tatanka Ska Win spoke about herself and other Indigenous mothers becoming "super moms, super advocates" to protect themselves against the threat of child welfare and justice system involvement, which entailed learning laws and their rights within these systems to advocate for themselves and their family members. While the power of pushing back against these narratives and institutions was emphasized, collaborators also spoke about individuals fearing retaliation if and/or when they did. For instance, Laverne described how people working in government services often punish women who do not engage with systems and services the "right way," denying them access to other critical supports unless they fully comply with the system.

Drawing on Government and Community-Based Services and Building Community

Alongside discussions about resisting and navigating intrusion from government forces, collaborators also discussed utilizing government systems and community-based services to meet their families' needs. Drawing on these resources was a pathway for collaborators to build both their reproductive lives and their capacities for resistance to colonial domination. Jaqueline explained: "Community-based organizations and the grassroots have been really vital to providing these services that we need for access to culture, access to food, rides, and transportation, and Elders and family/children centres." Indeed, through drawing on existing government and community-based services, Indigenous women mitigate the harms of colonial erosion of knowledge- and resource-sharing practices, as well as the harms of inadequate government services (e.g., social assistance, child welfare services, education, and housing) and the high cost of living.

This resistance of colonial influences and navigation of systems imposes a heavy mental and emotional burden, one that may be mitigated by building community relations. Chris stated that while Indigenous women often experience a lot of isolation,

[Eventually many also access] the community as a sisterhood, the women, the aunties, you know and really reaching out and that is powerful and real and happening...and it is done outside of policy and government and funding. I have seen young women learn how to navigate health benefits through INAC [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada]...I have seen young women get pregnant so that they can start the life that they want and leave a way they were raised that isn't what they want and, because they have educated themselves, they have become empowered and they want to change a cycle that has been set on them. So, that is one avenue that they will access to become independent and start their own life. I have seen young women, and again back to the community—it is going back to the teachings that they know are inherent and they have been taught, but may not have had an opportunity to practice so they start accessing and asking for what they need.

Chris pushed back against the epidemiological discursive constructions of young pregnancy and parenting as inherently problematic, constructions that have been mobilized to justify harmful sexual and reproductive health interventions and programming. In this quote, she revealed colonial epidemiological narratives as a narrow representation of people's complex realities and related that Indigenous women's pregnancies can be pathways through which many build community relations and disrupt harmful intergenerational patterns. Chris and other collaborators spoke about the value of building community relations and knowledge-sharing, and how doing so fostered Indigenous women's resistance.

Engaging and Sharing Indigenous Practices and Teachings

Collaborators described engaging Indigenous knowledge and practices emanating from specific Nation-based traditions and shared understandings across Nations. Collaborators from various Nations discussed engaging with the same, and similar, culturally-grounded and culturally-safe programming, and organizing and attending ceremonies together. They identified as powerful the opportunities to spend time with Indigenous women from other Nations who had shared experiences navigating colonial systems and participating in cultural practices. Their framing of First Nations teachings suggests that most found more similarities across First Nations teachings than between First Nations and EuroWestern beliefs and values. In the context of insufficient resources for Indigenous-specific programming in the three cities, programming often needed to be designed to meet the needs of Indigenous women from diverse Nations. As Laverne explained, “We never get a chance to actually sit around and negotiate [our differences in values and beliefs] amongst ourselves, because we are so busy trying to just have a place so that there is assistance [for Indigenous women in Winnipeg].” Laverne’s quote gestures to how increasing resources for Indigenous-led organizations would likely foster these critical conversations and Nation-specific programming.

Collaborators described engaging with Indigenous teachings and practices in diverse ways. For instance, Jennifer shared how they prepared for the arrival of their adoptive daughter prior to, and shortly after, their daughter was born:

I took a traditional parenting program and I remember asking the Elder, “What can I do to help with that bonding since I am not carrying?” and she told me about going as soon as I was able to after she was born to have a blanket and wrap that over us and sort of simulate being in the womb and hold her. Then, just send her as much love or talk with her about whatever I wanted to in order to make that connection and so I did that. I brought one of my ceremonial blankets and when we were in the hospital, I did that. I talked with her and told her about her birth mom and her birth dad and about all of this love that was waiting for her. It was beautiful because I felt really connected to her. I prayed lots before she was born and went to ceremony in sweat lodges and felt that was my way to connect with her as well.

Jennifer’s quote illustrates that cultural practices are activated in dynamic, relational, and complex ways. Similarly, Tanya reflected that engaging in cultural practices promotes further growth within and across communities: “I think that the more that there is space made for people to come together and talk about these things, it becomes less isolating and there are more opportunities to...share the knowledge or teach the knowledge.” Collaborators discussed various sites where this knowledge-sharing has taken place, including community-based organizations and community and family settings. Several collaborators specifically spoke about the importance of NYSHN, particularly their work on consent, violence on Indigenous lands, and violence on Indigenous bodies, and their collaboration with the National Council of Indigenous Midwives.

As alluded to above, collaborators discussed the diversity of teachings among families, ceremonial families, communities, and Nations about reproductive decision-making and how these teachings can shape what decisions are more (or less) possible. They also spoke about challenges to seeking teachings and finding the right teachers. In particular, Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse collaborators and collaborators who live at a distance from their Nation’s traditional territory and are seeking Nation-specific teachings spoke about challenges and difficulties in this regard. Melissa discussed this challenge and her work to recover knowledge about pregnancy, labour, and birth:

Yes, there are a lot of women’s ceremonies and family ceremonies and things like that, but when it comes to cultural knowledge around pregnancy, labour and birth and things like that, that is kind of lacking in general. I have a lot of people e-mailing me or messaging me and saying, “Who can I talk to about this?” and “Have you heard about this teaching and that?” I have a little bit of knowledge; it feels like a tiny bit compared to what an Elder would have...My dad’s side is from Arizona and I connected with a really good friend who is a midwife down there, so I have been learning a lot about that side of me.

She added that colonial forces have purposefully undermined the intergenerational transmission of this knowledge through violence at residential and boarding schools, forced removal of women from communities for childbirth as well as related patterns of colonial violence, all of which are part of the ongoing genocidal effort by the Canadian state to undermine Indigenous women's and communities' self-determination.

Re-Envisioning Indigenous Teachings and Interrogating Teachings for Colonial Influences

Indigenous women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people respond to these constraining conditions by seeking out affirming teachers, recovering and re-envisioning knowledge, and interrogating Indigenous teachings for the influence of colonial processes. For instance, Paulete described how she plans to share her Dakota teachings with her future children in ways that will support her children's gender and sexual identities:

I want my child to feel that they are in a safe space to grow the way that they are intended to be, because I grew up with someone telling me exactly how I was supposed to be and I ended up not being any of them, but very active and traditional in my role. I understood that these were done with good intentions but that is not something that I am going to enforce in my own family with my own children.

Our discussions about collaborators re-envisioning traditions to be more inclusive of girls, women and Two-spirit and trans and gender-diverse people aligns with writing by Indigenous feminist and Two-Spirit scholars, which explicitly and implicitly argue for, and demonstrate, such inclusivity (Wilson 2009; Simpson 2017; Starblanket 2024).

Collaborators also critiqued the influence of colonial values on what some people share as traditional teachings. Jennifer explained how they respond:

Often, I will question, when I am told, "This is a traditional teaching," I will ask, "Where did that come from? Is that really a traditional teaching or is that based on a Christian teaching that has been mixed into it? Is that a colonized teaching? So, are those cultural teachings actually there to help women? Or, sometimes those cultural teachings can actually be more harmful.

Jennifer's approach to these conversations resonates with Joyce Green's (2007) assertion that it is necessary to analyze how power, including colonial and patriarchal power, may flow through traditional practices, and how they impact Indigenous women, men, and children. There are varied ways that colonial influences manifest in how traditional teachings and practices are articulated and activated. For instance, Laverne critiqued the homogenization of Indigenous women's roles within many Indigenous communities: "There is way more around women's roles. Women are not just mothers; they are aunties, and those different roles we played in the community. They can accept us as mothers, but they can't accept the other roles we played." Collaborators discussed how limiting the value of women to their reproductive capacity and related qualities reflects colonial processes and has, in fact, been produced by them. This resonates with Anderson's (2010) critique of masculine-dominated Indigenous political organizations' conflation of Indigenous womanhood with motherhood as well as the way in which these organizations marginalize social issues (read: women's and children's issues) within politics.

Colonial government forces have long perpetuated static and essentialized notions of Indigenous cultures and gender, a pattern that reverberates through Laverne's discussion of funding organizations' recent expectations about culturally-relevant programming:

I've been worried a little about what is considered cultural, because our funders, they are all focused on culture ... so we're not doing the beading class ... but what we are focusing on is responding, so if our women become politically outspoken, that's who we are, that's our culture. We have always been historically political leaders and speakers, because we did care for our community. That is our culture. So, how am I going to frame that to the funder to understand that yes, we are responding and we are responding in a cultural way, because this is who we are.

Laverne's resistance of government funders' essentialized notions of culture is crucial work, as is the collaborators' questioning of how tradition is framed by Indigenous community members. This work is one of the ways Indigenous women are asserting their roles as political leaders.

Discussion

Our analysis of urban Indigenous women's material-discursive practices highlighted that through these practices, collaborators resist colonial influences on reproductive decision-making and motherhood, draw on government and community-based services, as well as build community, which assists women in meeting their needs and strengthens their capacities for resistance. This resonates with Indigenous feminist scholarship that highlights how Indigenous women in the Prairies have used government services and settler economies to meet their needs and advance their sociopolitical aims at different points in history (Anderson 2011; Nickel 2018). Informed by this analysis, our study's public-facing products both sought to intervene in colonial systems and processes (e.g., a policy brief addressing coercive sterilization) and provided information Indigenous women can draw upon to navigate health and social systems (e.g., fact sheets about abortion care, the child and welfare system, and patient's rights to informed consent).

While collaborators did not use the terms Indigenous refusal or resurgence, their stories, insights, and discursive shifts resonate with these terms as articulated by Indigenous feminist scholars such as Audra Simpson (2007) and Leanne Betasamoske Simpson (2017)—in particular, the latter's articulation of refusal as refusing colonial heteropatriarchy and generating alternative lifeways. Collaborators refused epidemiological deficit-based framings and constructions of culture as homogenous and static through discursive moves and collaborative processes. As we have demonstrated, collaborators' everyday work of building reproductive and sexual self-determination contributes to the resurgence of Indigenous teachings and practices, including re-envisioning teachings so they are inclusive of girls, women and Two-Spirit and trans and gender-diverse people, and interrogating teachings and practices for the influence of colonial processes.

In alignment with the distinct Indigenous reproductive and sexual justice framework developed through this study, collaborators' everyday practices of building reproductive and sexual self-determination cross various contexts and various aspects of their reproductive lives; these aspects include: resisting reproductive coercion and abortion stigma, advocating to regain custody of their children from the child welfare system, and re-envisioning cultural practices and teachings so they are inclusive of their (future) children. Collaborators' engagement with these various strategies and contexts was shaped by their cultural teachings, access to resources, experiential, professional, and educational knowledge, as well as local and sociopolitical contexts.

Both this framework and collaborators' everyday material-discursive practices emphasize the relational aspects of reproductive and sexual self-determination, which disrupts EuroWestern liberal narratives that isolate reproduction from other aspects of people's lives (Silliman et. al. 2004). Collaborators' insights resonate with work that foregrounds the relationship between individual and communities' self-determination (Simpson 2017; Kuokkanen 2019). Specific to Kuokkanen's work, our analysis highlights the non-legislative work Indigenous women engage to build self-determining pathways. We amplify this everyday work with the aim of fostering a broader view of ongoing resistance, as well as illuminating future potential sites for resistance and movement-building.

Conclusion

Grounded in this analysis, we call for others to recognize and foreground the leadership of Indigenous women in our collective struggle against right-wing populism (read: the most recent articulation of settler-colonialism). As we agitate for legislation and policies to protect and, in certain locations, re-establish people's right to safe, accessible abortion care, and as we struggle for other legislative and policy changes that will address ongoing reproductive violence (e.g. transforming child welfare and protecting 2SLGBTQ+ people's rights), we must also work to radically transform Canada's political and economic relations, including the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Stote 2017; Stote 2025). It is crucial that we engage in everyday practices that disrupt oppressive, hierarchical relations. As part of this movement, it is integral for settler organizations use creative techniques to redistribute resources to Indigenous-led organizations, networks and communities to foster Indigenous people's leadership in building just reproductive relations.

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