Decolonizing Indigenous birth work and reproductive health

CGSHE Spotlight Series
Miranda Kelly (she/her)
June 1, 2021
Settler Colonialism in Canada


References: 1, 2, 3
Birth as a Site of Ongoing Colonization

- **1867**: British North America Act: federal jurisdiction over First Nations health services
- **1876**: British North America Act: federal jurisdiction over health services on-reserve
- **Early 1900s**: Nursing stations on-reserve employ nurses, nurse-midwives, NPs to enable birth in communities
- **1926-1943+**: First Nations experience disproportionately high rates of maternal and infant mortality
- **1928, 1933**: Sexual Sterilization Act: Alberta (1928) and British Columbia (1933)
- **1935**: Indian Affairs proposal to increase home births denied due to poor hygiene on-reserve
- **1942**: Federal government cites maternal and child health as top priority; implements evacuation policy

**References**: 4, 5
Birth as a Site of Ongoing Colonization

**Sexual Sterilization Act**: repealed in Alberta (1972) and British Columbia (1973)

1972, 1973

**Health Professions Act**: Midwifery became a designated (regulated) health care profession in BC

1998

Closure of many rural maternity care services across BC.

2000+

**Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 94 Calls to Action (Health 18 – 24)**

2015

First Nations continue to experience disproportionately high rates of infant mortality (FNHA & PHO)

2018

MMIWG2S Final Report; BC bans the practice of ‘birth alerts’; BC passed Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act

2019

COVID-19 public health restrictions; exacerbates inequities in health care services

2020+

In Plain Sight report

Nov 2020

References: 6, 2, 7, 3, 8
Birth as a Site of Ongoing Colonization

Witness Shares Account of Racism in the Delivery Room
An obstetrician told this Review about the terrible treatment received by an Indigenous woman who has a history of trauma and sexual assault. The woman attended a B.C. hospital to have a child by C-section.

Prior to the procedure, the obstetrician witnessed an anesthesiologist manhandling and yelling at the patient. The same anesthesiologist later made the statement that “People like her should be sterilized.”

In Plain Sight Full Report, page 73
LOCAL

Claims B.C. Indigenous girls forcibly given IUD birth control shock youth advocate

BY MARTIN MACMAHON AND LISA STEACY
MAY 21, 2021 AT 7:31 PM · 3 MIN READ

VANCOUVER (NEWS 1130) — An allegation that Indigenous girls in B.C. — some younger than 10 years old — have been forced to have IUDs inserted by social workers in child protection investigations.
Approaches to decolonizing birth and reproductive health


References: 1, 2, 3, 8
Position Statement on Evacuation for Birth

NACM strongly condemns the routine and blanket evacuation of pregnant people for birth and demands the return of birthing services to all Indigenous communities.

Position Statement on Indigenous Child Apprehensions

NACM strongly condemns the over-representation of Indigenous infants and children in child protection services across the country and within our Nations.

Position Statement on Forced and Coerced Sterilization of Indigenous Peoples

NACM strongly condemns the forced, coerced, and involuntary sterilization of Indigenous Peoples.
Holding Space for Indigenous Birth workers

- Centering and amplifying the voices of Indigenous families and birth workers
- Structural supports
  - Policy
  - Funding
  - Training

“...it is important to understand that in the process of decolonizing birth, one is not dealing with a homogenous subject ("The Indigenous Mother") but incredibly diverse Indigenous women from various sociocultural and geopolitical backgrounds. As such, Indigenous women may choose to forego customary practices even if they do have access to them for any number of reasons, and they should not be shamed for that decision. It is the ability to decide how they will give birth, where they will give birth, and who will be present during the birthing process that is crucial. Overall, Indigenous women must be free to choose. The act of Indigenous birth is, at its core, an act of radical love—an affirmation of Indigenous family resilience, of Indigenous peoples’ continued presence on these lands, and of Indigenous peoples’ strength and futurity.”

Erika Finestone & Cynthia Stirbys
Indigenous Birth in Canada: Reconciliation and Reproductive Justice in the Settler State, p. 192
References & Resources


