

RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY: PROF. KAREN SOLDATIC'S MISSION TO ADVANCE HEALTH EQUITY

By Yasmeen Aslam



Long before she became a leading researcher in health equity, Prof. Karen Soldatic was learning about inequality simply by growing up in Western Sydney, Australia.

The daughter of migrants, Prof. Soldatic grew up in a region defined by contrasts. Western Sydney generated enormous economic wealth, yet many

PROF. SOLDATIC'S AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Disability and Inequality

- How disability intersects with poverty, gender, race, and other forms of inequality.
- Understanding why some disabled people face greater barriers than others.

Health Equity and Healthcare

- Creating more accessible and equitable healthcare systems.
- Improving health outcomes for disabled people.

Violence Against Women and Girls with Disabilities

- Preventing gender-based and technology-facilitated violence.
- Improving access to justice and support services.

Disability, Technology, and Digital Futures

- Designing accessible technologies with disabled people.
- Exploring technology's impact on inclusion and wellbeing.

Disability Rights, Policy, and Social Change

- Advancing inclusive policies and disability rights.
- Working with communities to create more equitable systems.

communities faced persistent gaps in housing, employment, infrastructure, and access to services. The area was also home to Australia's largest urban Indigenous population and welcomed large numbers of refugees from around the world. Growing up in this environment exposed her to the realities of social inequity. It laid the foundation for a career dedicated to understanding and addressing the factors that shape health and quality of life.

Today, Prof. Soldatic serves as the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Health Equity and Community Wellbeing (CERC HECW) at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU). She leads research focused on tackling some of society's most complex challenges. The path that brought her to Canada spans continents, cultures, and decades of work.

Early in her career, Prof. Soldatic worked in Cambodia and Sri Lanka on international development and education projects. These experiences deepened her understanding of how inequality intersects with conflict, displacement, and social change.



Working alongside communities facing significant challenges reinforced her belief that meaningful and lasting change must come from people that are most affected by those issues. One experience in particular left a lasting impression on Prof. Soldatic. In post-war Sri Lanka, she worked with disabled women from Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim

communities. Decades of war left deep divisions between these groups, with some communities having little interaction, despite living only kilometres apart.

What emerged from the project was unexpected. Through conversations about disability rights and the challenges they faced as disabled women, participants discovered similarities and a common ground despite their cultural, religious, and political differences.

Conversations about disability opened the door to broader discussions about rebuilding lives, supporting families, and creating more inclusive communities. Prof. Soldatic's project with colleagues revealed to her that bringing people together around shared experiences can create opportunities not only for problem-solving, but also for healing, reconciliation, and justice.

The lessons Prof. Soldatic learned through this work continue to shape her research today. She focuses on what policymakers often describe as “wicked policy problems,” which are complex social challenges that resist simple solutions.

Rather than approaching issues through traditional research methods, she focuses on creating spaces for communities to share their stories and solutions. This philosophy now sits at the heart of the CERC HECW.



Since arriving at TMU, she has worked tirelessly to build a research program grounded in collaboration and community engagement. The CERC HECW brings together researchers, community organizations, policymakers, and people with lived experience to address critical issues, ranging from disability justice to gender-based violence.

Now in its third year of an eight-year initiative, the CERC HECW continues to expand its reach across Canada and around the world. The most rewarding part of this work for Prof. Soldatic has been witnessing the enthusiasm and commitment of those involved. There is a shared belief at the CERC HECW that research can initiate lasting change and justice. This collective energy establishes a broader vision for the future, where research creates opportunities for communities to shape policies and build more equitable futures for everyone.

For Prof. Soldatic, this vision has been decades in the making. Across every stage of her journey, one thing remains constant: the people affected by a problem are the ones best equipped to help solve it.

