

CERC IN HEALTH EQUITY AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING *PERSPECTIVES:*

LOOKING BEYOND OUR BORDERS: A REFLECTION ON INDIGENOUS EQUITY

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Indigenous Peoples have shaped societies for thousands of years through their knowledge, responsible stewardship of the land, languages, cultures, and traditions. Their contributions continue to influence environmental conservation, community well-being, and sustainable ways of living. Yet, despite their vital role in our societies, Indigenous communities around the world continue to experience significant inequities rooted in colonialism, discrimination, and unequal access to resources (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023).

Although every country has its own history and context, one thing remains the same: Indigenous Peoples continue to face barriers that affect their health, well-being, and opportunities. This is not an issue unique to any one country; it is a global challenge that requires respect, recognition, and meaningful action.

Working at the CERC in Health Equity & Community Wellbeing (CERC HECW) has encouraged me to reflect on these issues from a broader perspective. Coming from Colombia and now living in Canada has allowed me to view Indigenous equity through two different lenses. While these countries have different histories and approaches, they have both shown me that achieving equity is an ongoing journey.

Growing up in Bogotá, Colombia, I lived in one of the most culturally diverse countries in Latin America. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Colombia is home to 115 Indigenous Peoples, representing nearly 2.5 million people, or approximately 4.7% of the country's population. These communities have protected ecosystems, preserved ancestral knowledge, and enriched Colombia's cultural identity for generations. However, despite the constitutional recognition of Indigenous rights, many communities continue to experience forced displacement, territorial conflicts, violence, poverty, and unequal access to healthcare and education (IWGIA, 2025).



Growing up, it was common to see Indigenous communities travel to Bogotá to advocate for their rights. They marched to demand better access to healthcare and education, the protection of their territories, and the fulfillment of commitments already made by the government. Unfortunately, what many people focused on was not the reason behind these demonstrations, but the traffic they caused.

At that moment, and looking back, I realize how easy it is for society to overlook the experiences of others when they do not directly affect us. Instead of asking why Indigenous communities had travelled hundreds of kilometres to make their voices heard, many people simply saw them as an inconvenience. I think that is one of the biggest challenges we face today: we often become so focused on our own lives that we forget to understand what others are going through.

Moving to Canada gave me a different perspective. Canada has made important commitments toward reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. Indigenous cultures are more visible in public life, land acknowledgements have become common, Indigenous-led organizations are helping shape policies, and governments have publicly recognized the need to address historical injustices (CTV Your Morning, 2025). These efforts represent meaningful progress and demonstrate a commitment to reconciliation.

Nevertheless, research continues to highlight the inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples within Canadian institutions, including healthcare. A study from the University of British Columbia found that Indigenous women continue to experience racism and discrimination during pregnancy and childbirth, affecting both their health outcomes and their trust in healthcare providers (CBC News, 2024). Reading stories like these reminded me that, although the realities of Colombia and Canada are different, Indigenous communities in both countries continue to fight for equitable treatment, respect, and the opportunity to have their voices heard.

To me, comparing Colombia and Canada is not about deciding which country is doing better. Instead, it is about recognizing that Indigenous inequities exist in many different forms, regardless of a country's level of development. Both countries demonstrate that meaningful progress requires much more than legal recognition, it requires sustained action, accountability, and a willingness to listen to Indigenous communities rather than speaking for them. Policies matter, but so do our attitudes, our education, and our ability to understand experiences that may be very different from our own.

Every year, on August 9, the United Nations observes the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, creating an opportunity to celebrate Indigenous cultures while also raising awareness of the challenges Indigenous communities continue to face around the world. More importantly, it serves as a reminder that advancing Indigenous rights requires more than a single day of recognition; it requires an ongoing commitment from governments, organizations, researchers, and society as a whole (United Nations, 2026).

That is one of the reasons I value the work being done at the CERC in Health Equity & Community Wellbeing. Through community-engaged research and partnerships with Indigenous communities, CERC HECW continues to promote health equity by ensuring that Indigenous voices and lived experiences remain at the centre of research. One example is the Walking My Path project, which explores the experiences of Indigenous gender- and sexuality-diverse Peoples in Australia.



Although the project takes place on the other side of the world, it reflects an important idea: meaningful research begins by listening to communities and recognizing that they are the experts in their own experiences. That same principle can guide conversations about Indigenous equity everywhere.

Living in both Colombia and Canada has reminded me that Indigenous inequities do not stop at national borders. They may look different from one country to another, but they are often rooted in similar histories of exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, these experiences remind us that meaningful change is possible when communities, researchers, governments, and individuals are willing to listen, learn, and work together.

As we recognize the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, I hope we move beyond celebration toward reflection. Indigenous Peoples are not only part of history; they continue to shape our present and our future. Their cultures, languages, traditions, and knowledge strengthen our societies every day. Building more equitable communities begins with understanding their realities, challenging discrimination when we encounter it, and recognizing that reconciliation is not a destination but an ongoing commitment that belongs to all of us.

