Newcomer Women’s Experience of Immigration and Precarious Work in Toronto

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Canada’s immigration policy targets immigrants with education and job skills. They are awarded points for specific skills and admitted in the “economic class.” This system is held up as a model of a modern immigration policy, but embedded in this policy are misogynistic norms that give male applicants a strong economic advantage over women. The policy divides applicants into “primary applicants” and “dependents.” Only the skills of the primary applicant—usually the husband in a family unit—are assessed. Thus women’s potential economic contribution is not considered. This study of 30 newcomer women in Toronto found that they remained in low-paid precarious work, and were vulnerable to workplace exploitation. They sacrificed their careers to support their husbands, and suffered economic and health repercussions. They also experienced difficulty getting better work due to unpaid household labour and lack of social supports. This paper shows the connection between the marginalization of these women and Canadian immigration policy.

In 2016 more than 20% of the population of Canada was born outside the country (Statistics Canada, 2017c). Between 2011 and 2016, Canada took in 1.2 million immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2017c), including 46,700 refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria during 2016 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017). Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen announced that the government will seek to admit 310,000 immigrants in 2018 (Government of Canada, 2017c).

Canada’s immigration policy is motivated by both humanitarian and economic concerns: the country is experiencing a shortage of skilled workers, such as medical professionals and engineers. In addition, Canada has an aging workforce and declining birthrate. Immigrants are crucial to avoid a future labour shortage (Shields & Bauder, 2015). Immigrants help stimulate the economy by filling jobs, creating new households, investing billions of dollars in new businesses, buying material items, and providing tax revenue (Gignac, 2013). To meet economic needs, Canada encourages potential immigrants who have existing education and job skills. Their economic potential is assessed through a point-based system. Applicants who earn sufficient points are admitted to a designated “economic class.”

This paper explores how this system unintentionally treats men and women differently, with long-lasting consequences for women. In 2017, I interviewed 30 Toronto women who were

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newcomers to Canada to learn about their lived experience with the immigration process and work, and how their precarious work conditions impacted their well-being. The study used the list of social determinants of health proposed by Raphael (2016) as a framework for investigating components of well-being such as income, employment and working conditions, food insecurity, housing, and health services.

The interviews were analyzed using a feminist political economy approach and thematic coding. Feminist Marxist theory (Nelson 2010), like Marxist theory, argues that the capitalist structure of society needs to be modified and that this will lead to gender equality. It considers patriarchy as a parallel social structure rather than solely focusing on capitalism as Marxism does. This approach criticises the relationship between the family and capitalism, how women’s unpaid work is not considered real work, and how women are assigned unfulfilling low-wage work (Tong, 1989) as they are viewed as a reserve pool of labour to be exploited (McMullin, 2004).

The study revealed that Canada’s immigration system sets up a sharp dichotomy between male applicants, whose job skills are officially recognized in the application process, and their wives, who are admitted without assessing their human capital and potential economic contribution. This classification of women as appendages to their husbands may account for a lack of supports such as job training. This, combined with gender-based social norms, consigns these women to poorly paid, precarious survival jobs (Nichols & Tyyskä, 2015), making them vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of understanding of Canadian labour laws. Thus immigration policies may be inadvertently increasing the population of marginalized immigrant women who are dependent on government services. These observations highlight a need for immigration and settlement policies and services that ensure equality for male and female applicants. This includes abandoning the “primary” and “dependent” applicant terminology, assessing the skills of both men and women, formulating a plan to improve immigrants’ job skills regardless of their gender, and devoting more attention to newcomer women’s unique post-immigration needs.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigration Policies

Canadian immigration policies have evolved significantly since the mid-20th century. Early immigration policies designated groups of desirable and undesirable immigrants based on their country of origin, religion, political beliefs, and other characteristics, favouring people of British ancestry. This practice ended in the 1960s. In 1967 a new policy shifted the priority to human capital and immigrants’ potential to benefit the economy (Siemiatycki, 2015).

A significant portion of immigrants are refugees. Canada has been a world leader in welcoming refugees since the 1970s following the displacement of massive numbers of people from Southeast Asia during and after the Vietnam War. This policy has continued with the reception of more than 40,000 refugees from the civil war in Syria since November 2015 (Government of Canada, 2017). In 2016, 296,346 permanent residents were admitted to Canada, including more than 58,000 refugees and protected persons (Government of Canada, 2017a).

Immigrants apply for admission to Canada in one of four classes: economic (skilled workers and business people and their families); family (sponsored by family members already established in Canada); refugees; and other (humanitarian and compassionate cases). Between 2011 and 2016 about 60% of immigrants were admitted in the economic class using a merit-based system for assessing potential economic contribution through attributes like education and
training, work skills and experience, age, knowledge of English or French, and having an offer of employment (Statistics Canada, 2017c). As a result, Canada has one of the most highly educated immigrant populations in the world (Siemiatycki, 2015).

In the economic class, one family member is designated as the “primary applicant.” The primary applicant’s spouse and children under age 22 are admitted as dependent family members on the same application. The primary applicant must score 67 out of 100 points on the assessment (Government of Canada, 2017d). The choice of primary applicant is based on which spouse is perceived as likely to be more successful under the point system (Banerjee & Phan, 2015). In most cases the husband is the primary applicant and wives are admitted as dependents. In 2013, women made up 54.1% of immigrants in the economic class, but only 19.7% were primary applicants. When women who were admitted in the family class are added to the total, 68.7% of women arrived in Canada as dependents of their husbands or other family members (Hudon, 2015).

Family members are not evaluated through the merit-based point system. Thus in the majority of cases the husband’s potential economic contribution is assessed but the wife’s is not, regardless of her education and work experience. Men’s economic contributions are favoured over women’s, as Abu-Laban (1998) writes:

> The point system’s emphasis on certain types of skilled work favours work typically performed by men. Women who enter Canada, therefore, usually come as the dependent spouse of male independent immigrants. Indeed single women, and women in non-marital relationships, are particularly disadvantaged by the point system. (p. 77)

Creese & Wiebe (2012) agree:

> The points system of immigrant selection favours men and relegates most women to ‘dependent’ status through the family class. Entering as family dependents in turn affects women’s access to settlement services and employment, reinforces primary responsibility for parenting and family support, and in turn shapes family strategies that privilege men’s economic contributions. (p. 59)

In fact the government is unaware of immigrant women’s human capital and economic potential, grouping them with their children. This would seem to be contrary to the government’s intention of identifying skilled workers.

This view of women as “secondary” or “tied movers” upon entry to Canada has long-term implications in the labour market. Banerjee and Phan (2015) found that dependent applicants experience a reduction in their occupational status that they are unable to remedy over the years. They attribute this reduction to long-term dependence on the primary applicant, traditional gender roles that dictate that husbands work outside the home and women are homemakers, and difficulty finding employment. They are hampered by language barriers, difficulty with obtaining Canadian credentials, and discriminatory labour practices. Banerjee and Phan argue that the primary applicants in newcomer families are in a better position to re-establish their previous careers in Canada, while their dependents, regardless of their human capital, face greater hardships in the labour market.

Banerjee and Phan (2015) suggest two explanations for this difference in employment success. First, a couple may decide together that the wife will take on low-wage survival work to
support the family while the husband searches for better-paid work or pursues additional training. Once her husband is well established in his work, the wife may reduce her work hours or leave the labour market altogether. Second, a couple may decide to migrate for the overall benefit of the family rather than for the mutual career benefit of husband and wife. In the process, one spouse may benefit significantly more than the other in terms of income and career advancement. In both cases an enduring pattern of favouring male earnings is established early on. Thus the problem of underemployment of immigrant women is multifaceted, originating in cultural norms, family structure, government policies, and employment discrimination. This study seeks to better understand all of these factors and how changes in immigration and settlement policies could mitigate them.

**Settlement Programs**

Settlement programs are designed to support the adaptation of newcomers to Canada with services such as counselling, language training, information and referrals, education, social integration, and labour market integration (Government of Canada, 2017a). The federal and provincial governments share responsibility for settlement funding and services jointly, in partnership with private agencies. Information and referrals are provided by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). In 2016/2017 the government allocated $1.2 billion to settlement services, particularly language instruction (Griffith, 2017). In Toronto services such as language classes, health, and retraining are provided at settlement organizations, schools, libraries, and City Hall. There are 129 settlement service agencies in Ontario, some of which have multiple locations.

In recent years the federal government has rescinded some funding of settlement services as a result of neoliberal policies that cut back state responsibility for citizens’ welfare (Zhu, 2016). The challenges of the recent massive influx of immigrants to Canada are now becoming evident as settlement services are stretched to the limit trying to find language programs, schooling, housing, and jobs for the immigrants (McMurdo, 2016). Newcomer women have been impacted by both the limited number of programs that target their needs and funding cuts to other programs (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2006; Tastsoglou, Abidi, Brigham, & Lange, 2014). They may also face difficulties accessing services due to the demands on them of raising children, household work, and jobs outside the home (Newbold, 2010).

Creese and Wiebe (2012) argue that settlement programs are too short in duration to meet newcomers’ needs. Zhu (2016) notes that immigrant mothers are disadvantaged in Canada because the resettlement system has “been constructed within an androcentric, capitalist, and imperialist discourse” (p. 144), rather than being based on immigrant women’s lived experiences. In addition, she finds that immigrant women “face tremendous barriers in settlement including the gendered wage gap, unpaid care work, lack of support for childcare, and the racialization and marginalization of their everyday experience.”

Women’s need for settlement services may be different from men’s. Women require childcare in order to be able to attend schooling, job training, and language training. Women’s skill in English and French tends to be less well developed than men’s, pointing to a greater need for language training (Murphy, 2010; Meraj, 2015). To date scholars and policy makers have focused mainly on immigration policies. There is a lack of analysis of settlement programs and their impact on women (Newbold, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Meraj, 2015; Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Women’s Economic Council, 2011).
Canadian Employment Laws

A large majority of workers in Canada are protected by employment standards establishing minimum requirements to ensure fair and equitable workplace conditions. They pertain to matters such as hours of work, meal and break times, payment of wages, overtime pay, minimum wage, pregnancy and parental leave, medical leave, vacations, termination, and equal pay for equal work (Government of Ontario, 2018).

Despite these employment standards, exploitation of women, racialized individuals, and immigrants remains problematic. In 2014/2015, Ontario workers filed 614 complaints for violations of employment standards (Vosko, Noack, & Tucker, 2016). The majority of employment standards violations may go unreported to the employer and provincial authorities. Dlamini, Anucha, and Wolfe (2012) documented unfair labour practices against a cohort of 37 newcomer women in Windsor, Ontario. They found that 35 did not inform their employer of unfair practices related to their immigrant status and cultural background for fear of losing their employment.

Many studies have confirmed inequities in access to Employment Insurance (EI) for marginalized Canadian workers, including women, racialized individuals, and immigrants (Nichols, 2016; Pupo & Duffy, 2003; Porter, 2003; Porter 2015; Koning & Banting, 2013). The current framing of the Employment Insurance program is based on a male-breadwinner model that assumes long-term, full-time employment that is more typical of men, failing to acknowledge the impact of motherhood on employment and unemployment (Nichols, 2016). Women with child care responsibilities are more susceptible to precarious employment. Work interruptions, such as leaving work to give birth and care for a newborn, cause women to lose previously accumulated work hours for EI. They are subsequently ineligible for EI benefits (Nichols, 2016).

Immigrant mothers face more hardships in accessing EI benefits due to the combined impacts of lack of Canadian work experience, rejection of their foreign credentials, language barriers, and discrimination. All of these factors push them into precarious employment in which they work insufficient hours to be eligible for EI benefits or are paid under the table (Nichols, 2016).

Immigrant Women in the Labour Market

Toronto is a major settlement destination for immigrants. With a population of 2.8 million, it is the largest city in Canada and has a robust labour market. The unemployment rate in Toronto was 5.4% in January 2018 (very close to the national rate), compared to 10.1% in 2009/2010 at the height of the global recession, indicating a strengthening economy (City of Toronto, 2017a). Between 2011 and 2016 Toronto received 187,950 immigrants, with the largest numbers coming from the Philippines, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan (Statistics Canada, 2017b). In 2016, there are actually more immigrants (50.6%) than nonimmigrants (49.4%) living in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2017b), and immigrants make up half of the working population (Campion-Smith & Cole, 2017).

Across Canada, newcomers had an employment rate of 61.3% and an unemployment rate of 10.2% in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2017e), compared to an overall employment rate of 62% and an unemployment rate of 5.7% for workers over age 15 (Statistics Canada, 2018). Newcomer women had an employment rate of 52.6% in December 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2017f). Approximately 60% of recent female immigrants in Toronto are in the core working age group of 25 to 54 years old (Hudon, 2015). Thus they play a significant role in the Toronto labour market.
Newcomer women who come to Canada as dependents of primary applicants often accept survival jobs to support the family, while their husbands are seeking accreditation of their foreign training and looking for career employment. These jobs are characterized by low wages, low status, and lack of benefits and future security (Nichols & Tyyssä, 2015). Premji and Shakya (2017) and Premji, Shakya, Spasevski, Merolli, and Athar (2014) explored racialized immigrant women workers’ experience with underemployment and unemployment in Toronto and found impacts to their physical and mental health (such as social isolation), along with difficulty finding employment due to rejection of their foreign credentials, discrimination by employers, language and communication barriers, citizenship or immigration status, lack of knowledge of or access to professional networks, and limited access to services. While immigrant women in general have been studied to some extent, there is a lack of specific data on newcomer women and their experiences in the Toronto labour market.

**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this 2016/2017 study was to explore the employment experiences of 30 newcomer women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The inclusion criteria for the study were to be a newcomer woman (settled in Canada for less than five years—the federal benchmark for distinguishing newcomers from immigrants), in the core working age group of 25 to 54 years, residing in Toronto, and caring for dependents (including children, parents, in-laws, or dependent adult siblings), and the ability to understand and speak English. No refugees were included in the study. I particularly focused on newcomer women caring for dependents because (1) the majority of women in this age group are in fact caregivers to children or elderly relatives; (2) the 2017 target for newcomers to Canada included 84,000 applicants in the family class (Government of Canada, 2016); and (3) newcomers frequently point to their need for childcare services (Nichols & Tyyssä, 2015).

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants through online immigration support forums, social services, bulletin boards at social services or community organizations, and laundromats. Snowballing was used to increase the sample size. The participants included 8 newcomer women from Pakistan, 6 from India, 4 from Columbia, 7 from China, and 5 from Iran. Five were officially unemployed but working for undeclared cash wages (“under the table”) and 25 were precariously employed at the time of their interview. All of the participants entered Canada through their male partner—23 as dependents of a male primary applicant and 7 through the family class. The participants were settled in Canada for varying lengths of time: 2 between one and two years, 6 between two and three years, 7 between three and four years, and 15 between four and five years.

The women participated in a semi-structured interview with me, either in person at a location of their choosing, or by telephone or Skype. The interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the length of the answers that the participants gave. They answered questions about their immigration classification, their experience searching for work, current work status, desire for retraining, awareness of Canadian employment regulations, experience with employment insurance, social conditions such as income, and mental and physical health. All of the interviews were conducted in English.

The data was analysed using thematic coding, whereby themes are developed by recording the frequency of specific themes, words, and phrases (Bryman, Bell, & Teevan, 2012, p. 279).
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Eight common themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts: employment conditions, housing and transportation, caregiving and housekeeping responsibilities, financial insecurity, dependency, foreign credential issues, physical and mental health, and employment standards. These themes will be discussed in the next section.

Employment Conditions

All of the participants were employed in unstable or precarious work. Five women did not realize that they were officially employed by virtue of being paid cash to care for friends’ and family members’ children on a regular basis. They had no formal contract or agreement about their working conditions and were unaware that they had any employment rights. The other 25 participants were engaged in temporary, on-call, part-time, and contract work or employed on a day-to-day basis. They worked in jobs such as professional cleaning, manufacturing or other factory work, call centres, providing IT support in clients’ homes, retail work, and fast-food restaurants. Twenty-six participants worked part-time, ranging from 20 to 30 hours per week, including those who worked as babysitters for their friends and family members. Two participants worked less than five hours a week. Another two worked full time (40 hours a week) in a temporary contract.

Table 1 shows the incomes of the participants in the year prior to the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $19,000</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$19–$35,000</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>$35–$45,000</td>
<td>10</td>
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The participants’ income correlates with general trends in Toronto. Toronto has a high rate of low-income residents (20.2%) compared to Canada (14.2%). The Canadian low-income measure after tax (LIM-AT) defines low income as $44,266 for a household of four and $49,491 for a household of five (City of Toronto, 2017b; Statistics Canada 2017d). The majority of the participants (64%) had three or more children, meaning that they would need more than $49,491 to be above the LIM-AT. In fact none of the women’s incomes was above the LIM-AT. The husbands of 22 participants (73%) were working—18 in full-time positions and 4 in precarious part-time or contract positions. Eight husbands were in school full-time to upgrade their qualifications. Thus the women remained dependent on their husbands and government services for survival with few possibilities for rising above that level. This is in contrast to the expectation that their husbands would at some point find professional work with a living wage, with support from the government and their wives to achieve that goal. Considering that the participants had more university education than the average Canadian woman, they expressed that they found their underemployment and dependence distressing.

Low-income, precariously employed workers often have few or no other financial resources to fall back on when their unstable employment ends. Participants in this study frequently reported financial instability whether their spouse was working or not—being the
primary applicant does not mean that the men find well-paid employment quickly. No participant was receiving support from extended family or friends. On the contrary, 10 of the women were sending money to their families abroad. Five participants relied on the child benefit, a tax-free monthly payment to families with children under age 8 (Government of Canada, 2017b).

Childcare work for these women was characterized by an unpredictable schedule. Five participants who babysat for their friends and family members reported that their schedules were not fixed and changed from day to day or moment to moment. Two participants were often called to provide childcare without much warning. About one-quarter of the participants did not know their work schedule at least one week in advance, making it difficult to schedule childcare, medical appointments, and social service appointments. Inadequate notice of the work schedule may cause women to resort to substandard childcare, miss a work shift, or be unable to take training courses. One participant observed:

*In the morning I may get a call . . . or I may not. . . . I don’t know when I work or when they need me. Sometimes [the employer] has too much cleaning jobs. So, sometimes I stay longer. . . . But this does not allow me to attend retraining programs.*

Twenty-three participants (76%) said they were dissatisfied with their current job. All participants reported difficulty finding better employment, citing their lack of Canadian experience and family care responsibilities as obstacles. They reported being “stuck” in low-wage jobs that they had taken on to meet their family’s immediate survival needs, rather than pursuing retraining or going to interviews in their career field. One participant reported that as part of her information technology job she was expected to do other tasks like administrative work for which she was unprepared.

Another participant, who earned a postsecondary degree and had work experience in Colombia but none in Canada, was unable to find work due to different requirements in Canada. She ended up taking a precarious job as a cleaner. This participant explained how newcomer women end up in survival jobs to support the family while their husbands search for career positions:

*We came here because of my husband’s application. He is looking for a medical job. . . . But no one will hire him. It is expected [because of his status as primary immigration applicant] that he get the job. So, I have to work cleaning to pay the bills. . . . I have kids and an in-law I have to take care of as well. So . . . I just don’t have much time [to look for a job].”*

Her situation demonstrates the challenges faced by women who must juggle a low-wage survival job with their culturally expected labour as the primary family caregiver. These challenges make it difficult for them to find time to search for a better job.

Thus newcomer women’s official immigration status as dependents has a deep impact on their employment trajectory. Men’s designation as primary applicants expected to make a significant contribution to the Canadian economy through their professional work relegates women to a supporting role, with little attention to women’s own training, experience, and career aspirations. The unspoken message of Canadian immigration policy—expressed in the term “primary applicant”—is that women’s abilities, life course, and value are secondary to men’s. This framing of women as having lesser value repeats long-standing norms in Canada and around the
world that assign to women the task of supporting their husband’s career while performing unpaid work bearing and caring for children (Banerjee & Phan, 2015).

While numerous Canadian laws establish legal gender equality, feminist scholarship (Evans, 2009; Hankivsky, 2007) confirms the longevity of entrenched misogynistic attitudes. These attitudes still make their way into public policy if hidden assumptions about the unequal value of men and women and their labour contribution are not continually examined. Feminist scholars also reject the idea that women freely decide to live by misogynistic cultural norms when they are constantly pressured to conform to them (Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Participants in this study indicated that they did not willingly accept their precarious underemployment and exploitation on the job.

**Housing and Transportation**

In this study, participants’ residence in Toronto, one of the most expensive cities in Canada, had an impact on their settlement and integration into the labour market. Twenty-seven participants lived in rental apartments and three owned a condo in low-income areas of Toronto. In 2017/2018 a three-bedroom apartment in Toronto cost from $2,500 to $4,500 (Ryerson University Off-Campus Housing Office, 2017). A household required an annual income of $200,633 to buy a detached house in Toronto or $92,925 for a condo (The Red Pin, 2017). Home ownership was beyond the means of 90% of participants and their spouses in this study, and 25% needed government assistance to pay their rent.

Location of residence played a significant role in participants’ precarious employment because low-income Toronto neighborhoods have less access to public transportation to get to work and to social services like career counselling and job training. The desire to live in more established, higher-income neighborhoods was high among the participants, but as one participant noted,

> I want to live in a better neighborhood, but I can barely afford my rent of $1,250. I am living in a two-bedroom apartment with my three children and husband. . . . How is someone supposed to move when the jobs don’t pay enough? Yet I do not have good access to public transit to get to employment support services or interviews. What can I do?

In 2017 the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area had a vacancy rate of 1% (City of Toronto, 2018). This makes it very hard to find housing, especially if people have any marginalizing factor working against them.

Five participants reported that their limited English made it difficult for them to find housing in better neighborhoods. One stated, “Nobody will understand if you speak that way. They [won’t] rent you the house.” Due to her limited English and accent she felt that she wasn’t taken seriously in her search for housing and she ended up in a low-income area, an immigrant enclave. Another participant said, “I did not hear back from some calls when searching for a place . . . maybe due to my accent.” Thus cultural differences such as language impact where immigrants live, and by extension where they work and how much they earn.

All participants in this study expressed a need for social services, especially English language training, employment support services, and childcare. Two-thirds of the women reported a lack of access to services in their neighborhoods. One interviewee said that even if she were able to obtain a better job with full-time hours, there was no affordable licensed daycare near her.
In order for settlement services to be effective, immigrants need to be aware of their existence and must be able to get to them via public transportation. Participants in this study appeared confused about the existence and location of immigrant services, pointing to a need for greater visibility of services in local neighborhoods and increased effort to inform newcomers about them. Ten participants were aware of settlement services but had difficulty travelling to them.

Public transportation to jobs and services was a common theme among the participants. North American cities are experiencing a reversal of settlement patterns as more affluent white residents move back to the city centre from the suburbs—in part to escape long commutes to work—and low-income people and immigrants are pushed to the edge of the city, compounding their transportation problems. Hulchanski (2007) documented an increase in both poverty and the ethnic population in what he calls “City #3” on the outskirts of the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) from 1970 to 2005. Several participants in this study lived in City #3. The number of immigrants in these neighborhoods increased from 31% to 61% from 1971 to 2006 and the number of low- and very low-income residents increased from 19% to 53%. Meanwhile affordable housing decreased: the number of renters in City #3 who spent more than 30% of their income on housing increased from 27% to 81% between 1981 and 2006.

Toronto’s subway system serves higher-income areas in and around the city centre and bus connections to the subway from the outer neighborhoods—so called transit deserts—is limited. Pointing to the impact of transportation disparity on employment, Hulchanski writes, “Residents of City #3, the neighbourhoods with the lowest average income, have to travel farther to find employment, yet they have the poorest access to the Toronto Transit Commission’s subway stations. Only 19 of the system’s 68 subway stations are within or near City #3 neighbourhoods” (p. 12). Meanwhile, the cost of public transportation in Toronto is among the highest in the world, with a monthly pass costing $146. Kaur and Teelucksingh (2015) also found a lack of affordable public transit and poor servicing of low-income Toronto neighborhoods.

People who need public transit the most are the worst served by the existing system: in City #3 there are only 52 jobs per 100 residents of working age and therefore 63% of residents of City #3 work in the city centre (Hulchanski, 2007, p. 23). Due to inadequate public transport immigrant women often work closer to home and take on precarious jobs (Kaur & Teelucksingh, 2015). Thus there is a direct link between housing, transportation, income, and immigrant status.

**Caregiving and Housekeeping Responsibilities**

The majority of participants in this study (83%) reported conflict between their desire to work and traditional cultural norms that assign them responsibility of caring for their home and family, including children and in-laws. Caregiving took precedence over work, interfering with their ability to work and to look for a better job, as indicated in these interview excerpts:

“I took maternity leave and went back to work, but the demands of my baby and in-laws made it difficult. I had to quit.”

“I have to take care of the kids, I have to cook, I have to take care of the parents as well. I don’t have time [to look for a better job].”
“I am the one who is to care for my children, ages 6, 8, and 12. I can’t attend retraining or work. I try but cannot find something flexible enough. If I work, I work for cash, like babysitting or cleaning. I feel like I am stuck.”

The last quotation above conveys the frustration and loss of hope felt by many of the participants. Like their husbands, they had to confront the challenges of all new migrants to a new country, but they were burdened by the additional demands of caring for as many as eight people in the household, leaving them little time to devote to their own careers. One woman was expected to maintain the home, care for children and in-laws, and work as a cleaner despite the fact that her husband was not working.

Financial Insecurity

All of the participants in this study experienced financial insecurity since migrating to Canada. A full 80% had difficulty paying for housing and 75% struggled to pay other bills. One participant noted that the family was surviving on savings that she and her husband had accumulated in India. She had tried to get a credit card but was refused due to her lack of income. The participants’ financial insecurity was related in part to their husbands’ low income. Twelve of the women said that their husbands did not earn enough to cover all expenses and that their own precarious employment was necessary for the family to survive.

Most of the participants (28 out of 30) said that if they increased their work hours they would still not be able to afford daycare for their children. In 2017 the median daycare fee per month in Toronto was $1,758 for infants and $1,354 for toddlers (Monsebraaten, 2017), clearly beyond what participants in this study could afford since they already struggled to pay for housing. In 2016, 31% of children age 0 to 4 were in licensed childcare centers in Toronto, but only 8% of these children received a childcare subsidy (City of Toronto, 2017c).

Five participants reported using a food bank within the last month. A mother from India explained, “I spend my money on the fresh produce or meat that I can’t get from the food bank. I then get the can goods from them. I just can’t buy everything with my current situation.” Ten of the women used thrift stores for clothing and household items.

Despite the participants’ financial insecurity, they expressed a willingness to pay for things that would enhance their husbands’ employability, including retraining, transportation, and clothing for job interviews, even if it meant making sacrifices in other areas. One woman explained,

*We pay for my husband’s accounting school. I think we spend between $10,000 to $15,000 so far. It’s for him to find a job here in Canada. We pay that even if we don’t have enough for food or rent. We have to spend that money.*

Such sacrifices to enhance the husbands’ careers again exemplify the prioritization of men’s economic progress over women’s.

Dependency on Male Partners and Immigration Classification
The majority (73%) of the participants relied on their husband’s income to survive and maintain their households. One participant reflected on her loss of independence, “I feel dependent and because of that many emotional changes are also there. I can’t decide anything on my own.”

The interviewees were aware that their dependency was related to their immigration classification. They understood the implications of their classification, even though the implications are not acknowledged by the government. A woman from Colombia with three children, who worked as an administrative assistant, explained:

*My husband applied to come to Canada. He added me to the application. I am now helping him . . . find a job. He has more time [to look for a job]. . . . For me it’s harder because I have all of this responsibility [of caring for the family].*

This couple was prioritizing her husband’s job search “because he’s the main income in the family.” Her husband “has more time” only because his wife is performing time-consuming household labour. A participant from India with two children who worked as a nurse stated:

*I came as family class with my children after my husband migrated to Canada. He is working and going to school to become an engineer. My focus is on him. . . . So I complete the cleaning and care for my children. . . . I work when I can.*

Immigrant women know that their secondary status and dependency enabled them to migrate to Canada. We can therefore hypothesize that they are unlikely to break away from paternalistic norms that create in them an even stronger feeling of obligation to perform traditional household duties, and support their husband’s career aspirations rather than their own. Participants in this study expressed an awareness of their secondary status in their home country, during the immigration process, and in Canada. There was little support for their employment goals, even though they had worked in their home country. As they fulfill their socially assigned duties to their husband and children, immigrant women deepen their own marginalization.

**Foreign Credentials and Deskilling**

All of the participants in this study expressed frustrations with deskilling of their foreign credentials as well as a lack of validation of their work experience outside Canada. “Deskilling” refers to both the failure of Canadian employers to recognize credentials and skills acquired in another country and the subsequent placement of immigrants in work that is below their level of education and training (International Organization for Migration, 2015). The deskilling of immigrants is often marked by underemployment, lack of occupational mobility, and erosion of skills that are not actively maintained and developed (International Organization for Migration, 2015).

The majority of the participants in this study (83%) had an undergraduate degree, in fields such as accounting, information technology, education, nursing, and medical fields. In 2016 only 67% of females in Canada had postsecondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017a). The remaining five participants had a high school education and worked in offices or call centres. All had worked
in their native countries—85% worked full-time and 15% worked part-time prior to migrating to Canada. In spite of being more educated than the average Canadian woman, newcomer women have a higher level of unemployment and lower incomes than nonimmigrant Canadians holding the same qualifications (Melchers and Schwartz, 2011). Only 17% of the women who had professional training were professionally employed at the time of this study.

One participant who had a degree in information technology from Colombia and work experience in the United States described her deskilling in Canada:

*Initially when I came here . . . I heard that [there aren’t many IT jobs here]. . . . I had worked for an IT company . . . but my experience was not valued here. . . . Everywhere you go they ask you for Canadian experience. As a newcomer, how are you going to get the experience before having a job?*

A participant from India who also had an IT degree applied for more than 50 jobs over a period of 6 months but was continually turned down due to her lack of Canadian experience. She became discouraged, remained in her under-the-table cash cleaning job, and stopped searching for better work. A woman with a degree in human resources and ample administrative experience had difficulty finding a job in administration and went back to school to take courses in customer care. Although they sought help with their job search, participants reported that the assistance they received could not overcome the discrimination they faced when trying to find work.

When the interviews turned to retraining in Canada, again the prioritization of husbands’ education and careers arose as obstacles to women’s needs for training. A woman from China with a degree in accounting clarified, “Maybe eventually I will [seek retraining]. That’s what the counsellor told me: ‘You have to upgrade yourself.’ But my husband is retraining right now. . . . I can’t pay for both.” Given their limited resources, newcomer women feel forced to do what is best for their family, and support their husband who is predetermined to become the primary supporter of the family.

Thus Canada’s immigration policy creates a “brain drain” in other countries of qualified workers who leave their homeland, but then these workers experience “brain waste” when their education, skills, and experience are not utilized in Canada. In Europe, immigrant women are at a greater risk of being deskilled than immigrant men or the native-born population (International Organization for Migration, 2015). The present study confirms this phenomenon in Canada and links it to immigration policy. Deskilling crushes immigrant women’s hopes of improving their personal socioeconomic status by migrating to a prosperous country and reinforces their inferior economic status globally. If they benefit from Canada’s prosperity, it is likely to be secondarily through their husbands’ success.

**Impacts to Physical and Mental Health**

Ample research has established a correlation between low socioeconomic status and poor working conditions, and lower physical and mental health (Chandola & Zhang, 2018; Labonté et al., 2015). In this study 86% of participants mentioned adverse impacts of migration on their
physical or mental health, including insomnia, backaches, headaches, dental problems, high blood pressure, stress, and loss of motivation.

For 76% of the women in this study, emotional issues were related to their current employment situation. One participant said that when she was unable to find a job she became depressed and “lazy” and then suffered from insomnia. She identified isolation as one cause of her deteriorating mental health:

*When my husband goes back to work, it was like I was in some jail. . . . I could hardly do anything, I was . . . stressed out because nobody to talk here, nobody. We did not have internet. Initially, it was like I was locked up somewhere.*

Another participant confirmed this sensation of imprisonment:

“Instead [of working], you stay home. . . . It’s like you’re tied up, because you don’t know what to do [to find a good job], and your emotional state changes completely.”

Anxiety was reported by 56% of participants, and 66% of participants identified stress. A participant related her anxiety to her precarious work:

*It keeps me awake at night thinking about what’s going to happen in the future. If things get more complicated, what’s going to happen? It’s a lot of what if, what if? . . . . It’s something that I’m not really comfortable with. . . . My job is not guaranteed.*

Robert and Gilkinson (2012) identified several migration and post-migration stressors that impact newcomer women’s health, including discrimination, language barriers, lack of support, separation from family, and unemployment. One participant noted the added stressors of women immigrants:

*You have no support. . . . I just came here, it could be the time change, the transition. I have had to deal with the people . . . to learn myself all kinds of things I have to do. My husband does not have the same responsibilities. . . . I care for my children. . . . He doesn’t have to.*

Thus newcomer women are bearing a greater burden of settlement stresses that impact health and well-being.

*Employment Standards*

Employment standards cover workplace matters like pay, holidays, shift length, and termination of employment (Procyk, 2014). In order to benefit from the protections of employment standards, workers need first to be aware of them and then have the willingness and means to file a complaint when a standard is violated. Procyk (2014) found that many precarious workers are not aware of Ontario employment standards, making it impossible for them to know when their work conditions are unreasonable or illegal. Newcomers are particularly susceptible to exploitation
due to their lack of knowledge of Canadian labour laws. Employers may aggressively recruit immigrants and then fail to pay them.

In 2017, Toronto Star reporter Sara Mojtehedzah went undercover as a temporary worker in a food processing factory in Toronto to investigate the exploitation of workers by temporary agencies. She reported that she was paid in cash with no proof of deductions or pay stub, and that most of her co-workers were racialized women or newcomers (Mojtehedzadeh & Kennedy, 2017). The survival jobs in which participants in this study were employed were characterized by problematic working conditions related to their work hours, pay, and deductions. None of the women reported violations—67% did not know about the complaint procedure, and 33% feared they would lose their job if they complained.

Employment standards only cover workers who are legally employed and whose employers report their wages. Employers may resist recording wages if they are operating a business outside the law, to avoid paying their share of employment insurance and the Canada Pension Plan, to avoid the complexity and expense of accounting, or to pay less than minimum wage (Gellatly, 2016). If records are not kept, workers have difficulty recouping their wages if they are not paid and proving their work hours to qualify for Employment Insurance (Nichols, 2016).

Seven participants in this study who worked as cleaners were unaware of the problems of being paid under the table. Immigrants may be led to believe that unreported cash payment is better because they don’t have to pay taxes, as this participant who worked as a cleaner stated: “My employer told me that cash was better. I would not have to pay taxes on my pay. I also could be paid weekly. He told me it was a lot easier to be paid by cash.” This woman was vaguely aware of employment insurance policy and described how employers may bargain with employees to avoid recording their wages and pay them a lower wage:

*The [employment] counsellor told me . . . you had to work . . . six or nine months [to be eligible for employment insurance]. I didn’t pay much attention. . . . I do the cleaning job and the lady willing to pay cash. It’s better for me, right? I don’t have to pay the tax. . . . But even if I work for a year for her it looks like I have never worked in Canada. So it means I can’t apply for unemployment insurance. If I get a job in the warehouse, they tell me if I pay you $12 then you will go into the system, you have to pay tax. Eventually, after you work for six months or nine months you can apply for the employment [insurance] because go in the record. But if you want, . . . I can pay you cash; then I will pay you $10 an hour so you don’t have to pay much tax. When you try to apply for the UI, you can’t get it.*

Workers who accept under-the-table jobs expose themselves to four hazards: They (1) marginalize themselves from the workforce, (2) fail to build retirement savings, (3) lack the proof of past employment that is required to receive Employment Insurance and other government benefits in case of hardship, and (4) are not protected by employment laws. Unreported income facilitates exploitation of immigrant workers. One participant in this study was told by her employer that she would be taxed at 30% of her wage, which was incorrect given her low income.
Newcomer women may feel forced to accept unreported jobs with poor working conditions due to the socioeconomic conditions described above that stream them toward precarious employment.

Summary of Findings

This study found that newcomer women in Canada are often underemployed in precarious work. They tend to experience difficulties accessing settlement services needed to improve their work prospects and struggle to get employers to accept their foreign credentials. They are also vulnerable to exploitation on the job because they are unaware of Canadian employment laws. In addition, newcomer women have difficulty juggling the demands of caring for their families and searching for better work and they experience financial insecurity with basic necessities such as food and housing. As a result they remain economically dependent on their husbands and the government, and experience physical and mental health problems related to the combined impacts of those challenges. While there are multiple causes of these conditions that disadvantage newcomer women, Canada’s immigration policy and strained settlement services reinforce their marginalization. These findings pertain specifically to newcomer women, as previous literature has focused on immigrant women who have been in the country longer.

POLICY AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study illustrate the prioritization of immigrant men’s socio-economic status over that of immigrant women. The government’s practice of not evaluating the skills and economic potential of the so-called dependent spouse may appear liberal on the surface as it requires only one applicant to demonstrate economic potential. But this policy and the language in which it is couched—with the terms “primary” and “dependent” applicants that are all too easily interpreted to mean men and women—are consistent with paternalistic norms that view women as so unlikely to have skills that it is not even useful to inquire about them.

The division between men and women deflects attention away from how women could be helped to increase their employability through further education, training, and support with their job search. To end this unequal treatment of women, the immigration application should assess the education and skills of both spouses in the economic immigration class with the goal of building on existing skills and integrating both applicants into the workforce.

This study points to a need for policy and program changes such as the following in the areas of immigration, settlement and social services, and employment standards to increase equal employment opportunities for newcomer women.

(1) **Apply the immigration point system to both spouses and drop the designation of “primary applicant.”** Applying the point-based system only to the primary applicant sets up long-term inequality for immigrant women, undermining the stated goal of recruiting immigrants to strengthen the economy. While supporting economic independence for one class of people (male immigrants), the current system creates another class of dependent people (their wives). The terms “primary” and “secondary” are unnecessary. A possible approach to the point system would be to require a certain number of points for the combined skills of both spouses; there may be other solutions. Regardless of the comparative status of husbands and wives, both should receive support with job training, education, and job searches.
(2) Expand settlement services that support newcomer women’s economic independence and full labour market integration. The point-based assessment should form the basis of an individualized employment plan directing new immigrants to services that address the variety of skills that all workers need: language, cultural skills, education, job training, getting a driver’s license, and job hunting. The goals of services should include helping newcomer women find full-time employment that is consistent with other previous education and experience, thereby avoiding placement in dead-end precarious work that is below their abilities.

Making participation in job-oriented settlement services a requirement for newcomers would help women strengthen their employability while counteracting negative cultural messages about women’s place in the workforce. Settlement services should extend beyond initial survival needs to help women avoid long-term stagnation in economic dependence.

This study underscores the need to improve access to settlement programs, such as by providing van transportation directly to the programs and setting up satellite locations in local community centres, schools, and churches.

(3) Expand affordable childcare. Due to their low-paid precarious work involving unpredictable hours, immigrant women become trapped between the competing demands of work and childcare. They cannot increase their work hours unless they have affordable childcare. A subsidized universal childcare program that accommodates various cultural and religious groups would free immigrant women to increase their workforce engagement. Affordable non-profit childcare could be sited at settlement programs.

The Province of Quebec provides a model for a successful childcare program. In 1997, Quebec’s Educational Childcare Act instituted universal childcare which currently costs $7.30 a day per child for families with incomes below $50,000—a small fraction of the cost of childcare in Toronto. Over the last 20 years women’s employment rate has increased by 9% in Quebec, to 85%, compared to 2% in other provinces, to 80% (Fortin, 2018). This outcome demonstrates that the perceived high cost of childcare is offset by economic gains from women’s increased employment, their contribution to the economy, and their reduced reliance on welfare.

(4) Educate newcomer women about Canadian employment standards, increase workplace monitoring where immigrants are employed, and streamline the complaints process. As part of the immigration process all new immigrants should receive information about federal and provincial labour laws. Greater oversight of businesses that employ substantial numbers of immigrants is needed, along with higher fines for violations and simpler protocols for workers to submit complaints about their working conditions (Vosko et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study found a pattern of underemployment and financial dependence among newcomer women in the Toronto area. While the participants were better educated than the average Canadian woman, they struggled to break out of precarious low-wage work with poor working conditions. They live in low-income neighborhoods, have limited access to public transportation and services, and experience financial insecurity along with physical and mental health problems. Their desire to find better employment was hindered by rejection of their foreign education, lack of Canadian work experience, and homemaking responsibilities. Unaware of
Canadian labour standards, they tolerated negative working conditions. Ultimately they appeared to be heading toward long-term dependence on their husbands and the government.

The study linked that outcome to unexamined gender norms built into the Canadian immigration system, currently lauded in other countries as a model for attracting highly educated immigrants. The benefits of this system accrue mainly to males. The government’s policy of dividing immigrants into primary and secondary applicants and only evaluating the skills of primary applicants—usually men—leads women into a long-term pattern of precarious employment or unemployment. When the focus upon entry to Canada is on male primary applicants, the prioritization of male success is likely to continue after settlement.

Officially classifying women as dependents of men who play only a minor role in the economy is incompatible with Canada’s values of equality and its economic goals. The very word “dependent” has long been synonymous with “women and children,” a usage that automatically places males at the head of the family and females in a secondary supporting role with low expectations of their economic productivity. By not documenting their education and work skills, the government is missing the significant economic potential that immigrant women bring to Canada.

Immigrant women must not be relegated to unpaid household labor and low-wage survival jobs while their husbands continue their education and search for career work. We need instead to seek ways to offer immigrant women new possibilities in Canada that might not have been open to them previously, including revising immigration policy and expanding social services to support women’s full employment. Changing immigration policy to focus on the job skills of men and women equally would allow severely stressed settlement agencies to reorient services to integrate women into the job market at a level consistent with their skills as quickly as possible, lessening their dependency and their need for social welfare.

Two significant changes that would advance this agenda are universal childcare and increased enforcement of employment standards. These changes are consistent with Canada’s efforts to be at the forefront of social justice and equality for all citizens.

This study focused on newcomer women who entered Canada as dependents of a male primary applicant or through the family class. Future studies of women who come to Canada in other classes, including as refugees or as primary applicants, will allow a comparison of outcomes across various means of entry. Further studies on diverse groups of newcomer women and statistical analysis of their experience in the labour market in various Canadian cities, including a large-scale survey, would yield information to help planners design optimal labour market supports for this growing group of new Canadians.

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