



Racialized and Immigrant Women in Cities

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Introduction

Racialized and immigrant women in Canadian cities bring a wealth of diversity, knowledge, and experiences to local communities. Today, urban centres in the country are at a crossroads for radical change. This change should be informed by, and engage, racialized and immigrant women. This paper will outline who racialized and immigrant women are, some challenges racialized and immigrant women experience in cities, and government responsibilities. This paper does not describe the lives and experiences of Aboriginal women. As colonized women, they have a different history in Canada and this requires a different analytical lens.

Who are Racialized and Immigrant Women?

In 2001, the census figures illustrated that “18.4 percent of the total population were born outside the country. Ninety-four percent of all immigrants who arrived during the 1990s lived in Canada’s 25 Census Metropolitan areas (CMAs). . .Of these immigrants, almost 3 out of 4 were visible minorities” (FCM, 2005). These figures represent men and women; women are unequivocally represented as 50 percent of the above figures. Thus, racialized and immigrant women are prominently represented in urban centres across Canada.

The term racialized as described by CRIAW (2005) can be used to describe racialized women who “...experience racism because of their race, skin colour, ethnic background, accent, culture or religion...[and includes women] of colour...from different ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural minorities, [and women with different birth countries including Canada] who are targets of racism...Racialized women have different cultures, histories, religions, family norms, life experiences, and are subject to different stereotypes. What they have in common is they are racialized – they are subjected to racism and made to feel different because of their racial/ethnic background”.

An immigrant woman is a woman “...who moves to Canada with the intention of staying permanently. Immigrant [women] comes from all over the world: Asia, Africa, Europe, North or South America, or Oceania. Immigrants can be white or people of colour, speak English, French or another language as a mother tongue” (CRIAW, 2005). Recent immigrants are individuals who have arrived in Canada during the past three years but the societal perception and the socio-economic reality of the settlement or integration process extends beyond three years.

The distinctions between racialized and





immigrant women are unclear. Figures and statistics are collected for visible minorities and immigrants but not specifically for racialized women. As a result, some groups are missed, such as, Caucasian women with an accent, or Jewish women. Furthermore, there is no consistent framework or definition of racialized and immigrant women.

For example “foreign-born,” “visible minority,” and “recent immigrant” have become synonymous with “immigrant.” This is a false notion. It is important to keep in mind that not all racialized women are or were immigrants. In addition to the range of racialized and immigrant women, as described above, there are also women with visible and non-visible disabilities and different sexual orientations. Thus, a comprehensive picture or analysis of racialized and immigrant women is lacking. In drafting policies in urban centres, it is critical to be cognizant of the complexities of diversity, the misconceptions, stereotypes, and labelling of racialized and immigrant women.

Racialized and Immigrant Women in Urban Centres

The reality of racialized and immigrant women’s life outcomes in urban centres are complex and the challenges these women face are numerous. The following section provides an overview of a few challenges racialized and immigrant women face.

Employment is a core issue for racialized and immigrant women (Friskin and Wallace, 2000). Whether they are trying to

enter the labour force or are dependent on another person for income, the circumstances of many racialized and immigrant women are tied to employment. Their entry into the labour force is complex and is mediated by a host of factors, including education, economic resources, language barriers, professional credentials, Canadian work experience, age of entry to Canada (foreign-born women), the economy of the city, and labour market trends. One prominent feature of women’s experience is racial discrimination: “The existence of racial barriers to employment has been well-documented in hundreds if not thousands of complaints to employment equity and human rights tribunals” (Jackson, 2002). The supply and demand factor of the labour market channels racialized and immigrant women into unemployment, under-employment, survival or contingency work, or underground economies. Maximizing the skills of racialized and immigrant women in urban centres benefits the local economy and adds to the vitality of urban centres. The absence of employment equity policies and access to the hidden labour market creates barriers of systemic racism for racialized and immigrant women, as illustrated in the following statement:

I had applied for a promotion. I didn’t get the job. A guy that I had trained (he’s white) got the promotion. I don’t think he knows anything more than I do about the job. My manager calls me in and tells me “we didn’t give you the job.” She tells me I’m a mother and that



I've got other responsibilities. She never said anything about it being race, but prior to that, there was another promotion and a white girl got it. (Kunz, Milan, and Schetagne, 2000)

A female civil engineer from Columbia with an intermediate level of English expressed similar frustration in regards to her inability to find employment commensurate with her skills and experiences:

I applied for a job as a sale person at the Gap. I was, how do you say, on call. It was during the Christmas season so I worked quite a bit. It was not related to my profession, um...but at least I could take care of things. (Ngo, 2001)

Language can act as a barrier to employment and be a contributor to social isolation. To work and study in some urban centres it is essential to speak English or French. The lack of these language skills automatically narrows employment opportunities for racialized and immigrant women, regardless of their professional qualifications or educational credentials. In addition to limiting employment opportunities, the lack of language skills contributes to social isolation by making it difficult for individuals to interact in their local community unless there are people who speak the same language. As the following statement reveals, this isolation is very painful:

I have a friend who was pregnant [when she came] and now she has been here three years. She can apply for citizenship but there is no chance for her to learn English. She has spent all the time at home. She can't talk to you [in English] or make a relationship with the community around her. She is very isolated. She was a teacher [in her home country] but now she has this sad feeling about her future and concern about what she is going to do. (Friskin and Wallace, 2001)

The isolation resulting from lack of language skills, reinforced by lack of financial means, is described by a community organization participant at a Toronto focus group:

Many of our new immigrants [women] are highly educated people. They have to improve their language skills in order to get a job to support their family. But they can't find anywhere that will take care of their children. They have a little bit of money with them so they don't qualify for subsidies. But that is their only money and they're afraid



to use it up. (Frisken and Wallace, 2001)

These excerpts illustrate some of the variables that compound future outcomes for women. In many recent immigrant families, women tend to stay at home to care for children or elders and to maintain the family. The longer a woman remains in unrecognized and unpaid work, the more her chance of obtaining a job in her profession - or any job, other than low-end employment - diminishes. Even when women's domestic responsibilities lighten (e.g. the children have grown up), and they want to enter the labour force, they may be challenged by their lack of language skills, their age, and their lack of participation in the labour market.

Accessing services and supports upon arrival in Canada is critical for immigrant women and can make a difference to their future life cycles and long-term outcomes, as well as those of the next generations. Women's experiences with violence and poverty are linked to the lack of affordable childcare, housing, social supports and networks, education, and employment opportunities. These factors are also social determinants of health. Racialized and immigrant women face a number of stressors that may lead to stress-related health problems and ailments. It is important for racialized and immigrant women to learn how to use the health care system and to keep up-to-date on the transformations in health care. In order to facilitate communication with racialized and immigrant women, health care service providers need to become more culturally aware.

Focusing on settlement policy at an urban level will enable a provision of services that can assist immigrant women. The inclusion of racialized and immigrant women can assist city planners in applying an ethno-racial lens at the level of city planning, an element that is currently missing (Moore Milroy & Wallace, 2004). Furthermore, barriers preventing racialized and immigrant women from participating must be recognized by policy planners so they can become integrated into the political process (FCM, 2004).

Government Responsibility

Today Canadian cities struggle with finding new funding to maintain physical infrastructure and to provide services and programmes to meet the needs for racialized and immigrant women. Cities are challenged with meeting the needs of affordable housing, employment, poverty, sewage and water, public transit, and for immigrants settlement and integration services, to name a few. However, the city governments are not involved in decisions on allocation of resources or funding to address these challenges since the power and authority rests with the federal and provincial/territorial governments to make these decisions. Cities are creatures of the provinces and therefore have little fiscal and decision-making authority. While the federal and provincial/territorial governments have a relationship, cities are excluded. Given that the population is concentrated in urban centers it is important that cities are involved in discussions of allocating resources, funding, programmes, and services for the people living in cities, alongside the federal and respective



provincial/territorial government.

Recently, the federal government developed a policy initiative the *New Deal for Cities* (Federal Government of Canada, 2005). The New Deal for Cities provides a framework for coordinating all levels of government, the not-for-profit-sector, the private sector, and individuals in local communities, to develop a coordinated strategy, to generate funding, and to examine policies and programmes that cater to the unique needs of each city. This approach applies a “no one-size-fits-all” solution where each city will individually work in a collaborative process with the federal and respective provincial/territorial governments to design their own strategy that will enable each city to meet its unique challenges. The New Deal for Cities is an example of how to bring all levels of government together and work in a coordinated manner.

It is important to consider the challenges of racialized and immigrant women at a policy level and at the initial decision-making processes because it will have an impact on programmes, services, and infrastructure. The complexities of racialized and immigrant women span a range of areas and can no longer be ignored if cities want to progress and prosper.

Conclusion

Racialized and immigrant women are key actors in Canadian urban centres. The challenges racialized and immigrant women encounter in cities, however, are numerous. It is not possible in this brief paper to present a comprehensive overview of the

barriers faced by racialized and immigrant women who are living in urban centres.

The New Deal for Cities has been cited as an example of how all three levels of government can meet in a coordinated fashion. As Canada’s federal, provincial/territorial, municipal governments come together to recognize the importance of cities, they must also recognize racialized and immigrant women as key actors in urban centers. Action must be taken now, as each city drafts policies and programmes to meet its own challenges, for the inclusion of racialized and immigrant women. Applying a gender lens and including racialized and immigrant women will ensure their needs are met and their capabilities are engaged. While the New Deal is not the end solution, it can make a difference in addressing the systemic barriers racialized and immigrant women face today and can also have an impact on future generations.



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