Poverty and Visible Minority Women in Canada

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Cet article met en lumière les trois facteurs importants qui sont la cause de la pauvreté des femmes du monde entier et examine la façon spécifique dont chacun affecte les femmes des minorités visibles au Canada.

This article will consider three main factors that cause poverty among women worldwide, and the particular manner in which each affects visible minority women in Canada. It will examine why the earnings and employment rates of immigrant and visible minority women are considerably less than those of other Canadians. It will consider the particular effect of public spending cuts on immigrant and visible minority women. And it will look at some general social and cultural factors that are important to visible minority women, and how these factors have interacted with changes in the social structure.

Employment

The forces of economic change have created a labour market characterized by ongoing downsizing, technological change, and constantly migrating labour. This new labour market has proved to be especially disastrous for immigrant and visible minority women; for them, it has only made a bad situation worse.

Immigrant and visible minority women have always faced barriers to finding gainful employment in Canada. Unfortunately, there are, as yet, no definitive studies on the subject of employment and earnings of immigrant and/or visible minority communities, or for that matter, immigrant and/or visible minority women. But by examining the findings of three studies which focused on immigrant and/or visible minority women and employment, it is possible to draw some broad consclusions—all three studies were controlled for different variables, and looked at different issues, but present complementary conclusions. Each report found that immigrant and visible minority populations tend to be more educated than other communities, but tend to be less employed and when employed, earn less.

In her 1995 article, "Visible Minorities—A Diverse Group," Karen Kelly considered variances in employment rates, types of employment, education rates, and ages amongst visible minority populations in Canada. She found that visible minority adults are less likely than other adults to hold professional or managerial positions and more likely to be in lower-paying, service or manual labour positions.

In the 1994 paper, "A Look at Employment Equity groups Among Recent Postsecondary Graduates: Visible Minorities, Aboriginal Peoples and the Activity Limited," Ted Wannell and Natalie Caron studied 1990 university and college graduates from Canadian institutions. They found employment rates for visible minorities to be lower than those of other graduates. And, in a relative comparison, visible minority women's employment rates tended to be slightly better than those of visible minority men's.

Krishna and Ravi Pendakur's extensive study, "The Colour of Money. Earning Differentials Among Ethnic groups in Canada" used data from the 1991 Census Public Use Sample to look at ten groups: non-visible minority men and women (Canadian-born), visible minority men and women (Canadian-born), visible minority men and women (immigrant), non-visible minority men and women (immigrant) and Aboriginal men and women. They found that in every category but one, visible minorities' mean earnings were significantly less than those of non-visible minorities. The one exception was visible minority women (Canadian-born). They were found to have earned slightly more than non-visible minority women (Canadian-born), and all immigrant women. Visible minority (immigrant) women earned less than everyone except Aboriginal women.

Each study presents a different piece, and when considered together, a rough shape emerges. First, visible minorities tend to better educated than other adults. In 1991, 18 per cent of the visible minority population had at least one university degree, as compared to eleven per cent of other adults. Also 33 per cent of visible minorities had less than a high school level of education, as opposed to 39 per cent of other adults (Kelly). However, both Kelly, and Wannell and Caron, find that visible minorities' university and college graduates' employment rates were substantially lower than those of their classmates. These rates were attributed to both lower participation rates and higher unemployment

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rates. Wannell and Caron noted that unemployment was particularly high for those whose first language was not English or French, who were married or divorced, or who had graduated from a science-based field of study. Kelly's study found that 13 per cent of visible minorities were unemployed, as opposed to ten per cent of others. She also found that despite education, visible minority adults were less likely to hold professional or managerial positions, and more likely to hold service or manual labour jobs.

It would seem that unemployment rates do not reflect educational background, either when comparing between visible and non-visible minority communities, or when comparing amongst immigrant and visible minority communities. Male and female Koreans, Filipinos, Japanese, and West Asians and Arabs were the most likely to have university educations.[1] Male and female Pacific Islanders, Blacks, Latin Americans and South East Asians were the least likely to have university educations.[2] There also appears to be a discrepancy within visible minority communities with regard to education and employment. Latin Americans and South East Asians had the highest rates of unemployment (19 per cent and 17 per cent respectively), which might appear to be consistent with education rates. But, their unemployment rates are closely followed by the West Asian and Arab group at 16 per cent. The latter group is among the most educated of immigrant and visible minority groups, and when occupational breakdown is considered, they are among the most likely to hold professional or managerial positions[3] (Kelly). These patterns are similar for both men and women. It appears that there is a variance within immigrant and visible minority communities with regard to the relationship between education and employment. This indicates that immigrant and visible minority communities are not homogenous. Experiences differ, according to dynamics of racism and sexism.

What these numbers indicate is that education rates for immigrant and visible minorities do not necessarily ensure or even increase employment. Rather, there seems to be a preponderance of educated poor. For most adults, increased education is linked to increased employment. These studies suggest that for visible minority adults in Canada, this is not the case.

Visible minorities, regardless of whether born, schooled and/or socialized in Canada, face significant earning gaps in comparison to other Canadians.

Earnings

The fact that visible minorities in Canada are having difficulty finding employment despite their educational qualifications is unacceptable. What is even more difficult to accept is that it seems that should they find employment, their average earnings are less than those of other Canadians. Pendakur and Pendakur's study on earnings in visible minority communities attempted to determine the "degree to which ethnically-based earning gaps exist in Canada's wage labour market, the degree to which these gaps are confined to visible minority groups and the degree to which these gaps extend through to Canadian-born generations" (2).

Pendakur and Pendakur found that large earning disparities did exist between whites and visible minorities. Some differentials diminished when they controlled for different characteristics (gender, occupation, official language, household type, place of education, etc). However, the differentials did not disappear. Pendakur and Pendakur concluded that visible minorities earn significantly less than their white counterparts, although it differs depending on gender, and whether or not they are Canadian-born. Like Kelly, Pendakur and Pendakur found a great deal of heterogeneity amongst groups. Interestingly, they found that two white ethnic groups – Greek and Balkan origin men, and Greek origin women – faced wage disparities as well. They also found that Chinese immigrant women do not face significant earning gaps. In general, they found that visible minorities, regardless of whether born, schooled and/or socialized in Canada, face significant earning gaps in comparison to other Canadians.

It is important to note that Kelly's study may hold some explanatory power for Pendakur and Pendakur's study. The latter study was based on mean earnings. The Kelly study found that visible minorities, despite education, were less likely to hold managerial or professional positions, and were more likely to hold service or manual labour jobs. Perhaps this is part of the reason that the average earnings of visible minorities are less than those of other groups.

Geographic location was also considered. The statistical data compiled for this paper noted significant variances between provinces with regard to poverty rates. Pendakur and Pendakur also considered geographic location, running regressions that substituted ethnic composition between Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. The data found that poverty rates did not change significantly if, for example, they substituted Toronto's ethnic make up for Vancouver's. They concluded that the city's attributes did not have a significant effect on poverty rate. That is, if visible minorities face an earning gap of 15 per cent in Vancouver, changing the ethnic composition to that of Toronto did not change the gap. As such, it appears that the differences between visible minority women's poverty rates in different provinces have more to do with the economic situations in the provinces themselves; however, further research and analysis would be required to reach any definitive conclusions.

A hopeful note is that Pendakur and Pendakur found that Canadian-born visible minority women are earning

the same as their non-visible minority counterparts. Wannell and Caron found that visible minority women graduates have a slightly lower unemployment rate than visible minority men. This suggests that women born and educated in Canada are more likely to be treated equally in the Canadian labour market, and that inequities faced by immigrant women are minimized for their Canadian-born daughters. However, we can not generalize from this example, because this pattern is not repeated for Canadian-born visible minority men, who still face significant earning gaps and unemployment rates.

However, it remains that the statistical data compiled for this paper found that poverty rates for visible minority women are much higher than those of other women. The contradiction between the poverty rates and the suggestion of earning and employment parity for Canadian-born visible minority women can be reconciled by factoring in, first, that Canadian-born visible minority women comprise only a small part of the visible minority population. Second, the Pendakur and Pendakur earnings study applies only to those that are employed, and the Wannell and Caron employment study looked only at those women with post secondary education from Canadian institutions. Finally, in most professions, women still face a significant wage gap. This is an issue that will require further data and analysis, especially as more second-generation visible minorities enter the workforce. Still, however small a victory, the statistics for Canadian-born visible minority women are heartening.

So, from this selection of studies, an overall trend is evident; visible minorities are less likely to earn less, regardless of educational qualifications. Kelly, Wannell and Caron, and Pendakur and Pendakur's work clearly demonstrate that immigrant and visible minority women face tremendous difficulties in the Canadian labour market. Their conclusions support the statistical data, as immigrant and visible minority women's earnings and employment rates can be considered a partial explanation for their high poverty rates.

We will now turn to the other explanations, beginning with a consideration of why immigrant and visible minority women face such difficulties in the labour market. Part of the explanation for the employment and earnings rates of immigrant and visible minority women lies in the prevailing economic conditions. As discussed above, the combination of neo-liberal economic policies, new technologies and firm's attempts to take advantage of these conditions has resulted in thousands of jobs lost in Canada, either replaced by technology, or simply eliminated because of corporate downsizing. Remaining unskilled, labour-intensive jobs are regularly moved to countries where labour costs are cheaper. Consequently, there are far fewer jobs available, and the remaining "good" (secure, unionized, with benefits, well-paying) jobs require more skills and education than before. The other jobs, the ones taken mostly by women, tend to be low-paying, insecure (temporary, contract, part-time), without benefits, and without any room for advancement.

Immigrant and visible minority women have always occupied the lowest tier of the labour market. The loss of unskilled jobs to cheaper labour markets means fewer jobs for them. They have always taken the dregs of the markets, the jobs which other Canadians would not. Now, they find themselves with fewer options: cleaning, domestic help, manual labour such as fruit-picking, "home-work" (often garment work, where workers have to supply their own equipment and are paid as little as one dollar an hour) and so on.

There are several reasons why immigrant and visible minority women have historically taken these positions. First, there is the issue of foreign accreditation. Often, when immigrants come to Canada, their degrees and qualifications are not recognized because they were earned in other countries. As Pendakur and Pendakur note, this situation immediately results in a loss of human capital for the immigrant, and "it may also be that Canada is losing a portion of its workforce potential as skills go unrecognized" (17). This is more common for women than men because it is generally men who are the primary applicants for immigration, and, as such, it is their qualifications which are screened for entry into the country. Women are more often the secondary applicants or dependents. Their qualifications are not screened, and are more likely to go unrecognized (Pendakur and Pendakur).

Pendakur and Pendakur have noted that where credentials are acquired makes a difference. It appears that, unlike men, women educated in the United States or the United Kingdom do not see a significant payoff in terms of earnings. Furthermore, women who acquired their credentials in Africa or Asia face a 16 per cent earnings gap. Women from Central Europe face a 22 per cent earnings gap. Such women often have to take jobs for which they are far overqualified, "hiding" their foreign qualifications so they will get jobs. This situation is at the root of the umpteen stories about doctors certified in Latin America operating sewing machines in Canada.

Language ability can also pose an obstacle to employment for immigrant and visible minority women. Some 16 per cent of immigrants, particularly refugees, come to Canada without a knowledge of either official language. Many others come with a less-than-fluent grasp of wither language. Clearly, this hampers their ability to function in the country, especially with regard to gaining employment. The government does offer language

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training programs, but they are often used more by men than by women, especially if the women have small children at home. Funding for these programs has already been reduced, and will likely be cut further. Even when women are fluent in French or English, they may still have an accent which can keep them from being employed in more highly paid administrative positions. Unfamiliarity with the language is an enormous obstacle; not only does it restrict employability, it also makes matters such as applying for social assistance or training programs difficult. It also keeps women from getting help when they need it, for example when health information is only provided in French or English. Another example is women who are intimidated by the thought of pursuing a court case for child support from a delinquent husband because they are unable to understand the lawyers.

Of course, it is not only foreign accreditation issues and language barriers that bar immigrant and visible minority women from accessing job opportunities. Racism and sexism are also at work; immigrant and visible minority women are not hired because they "do not know how to act," or "are already draining the system," or "will get pregnant—they all do," or "are all thieves," or "smell funny" or "talk funny," or any other combination of stereotypes and assumptions. Sometimes, the racism and sexism is expressed as a backlash against immigrant and visible minority women, such as when people joke that young white men are currently the most marginalized group in North America. Often, the racism and sexism is subtle; i.e., a white man professing surprise and praise when an immigrant and visible minority woman is able to express herself clearly in a professional situation. Such attitudes imply that immigrant and visible minority women are expected to perform poorly, and, that out of kindness, other Canadians should make room for them in the workplace. What such attitudes do not account for are the facts that were reported in the Kelly, Wannell and Caron, and Pendakur and Pendakur studies, that immigrant and visible minority women are educated, qualified and capable.

Reductions to public spending

The cuts to public spending have had several negative effects on immigrant and visible minority women. In addition to the loss of jobs, and the reduction of access to daycare, there has been a loss of training programs. Previously, the government had offered language training programs and job training programs for those who were having trouble entering or re-entering the labour force. As it was, these programs were not meeting the needs of immigrant and visible minority women. More often than not it was their husbands who went to the classes, and they would stay home with their children because there was no daycare available. With further cuts to social spending, these programs, already inadequate to meet the needs of immigrant and visible minority women, will be further reduced.

Cultural and social factors

In addition to the changing social structures discussed earlier, there are other cultural factors which must be considered: the role of women in immigrant and visible minority communities, the adjustments that come after immigration, and issues arising from living in dual-culture community. By far one of the most difficult issues is the question of women's status within a culture. Clearly, definitions of women's role and status varies from culture to culture, but it can be safely said that on average, women's status is still secondary. Some cultures do not believe in educating women, others do not believe in having them work after marriage. Most require women (and girls) to do all or the majority of the work at home. Many have very strict rules governing women's behaviour, whether those are explicit or implied. In contrast, men's roles are often much more loosely defined; a wider range of behaviour is considered acceptable, and transgressions are more apt to be overlooked than punished.

In addition to restrictions from within their community, immigrant and visible minority women are often stereotyped by the "mainstream" culture, for example, the submissive, exotic Asian woman, personified in many South and Southeast Asian airline advertisements. Restrictive roles for women, or stereotypes of certain cultures can restrict women from seeking or gaining decent employment, and can also keep them in situations where they are unhappy or abused.

A second issue is that of immigrant women adjusting to the expectations of employers. Some immigrant women do not want to wear Western-style clothing, while others choose not to leave their children in daycare. Everyday issues, seemingly "small" things can make it difficult for immigrant women to be hired.

In addition there are the issues faced by immigrant and visible minority women who exist in dual-cultures, the ubiquitous hyphenated Canadians. Many visible minority communities work very hard to maintain their traditions and beliefs distinct from "mainstream" Canada. Sometimes, women may find themselves in situations where the expectations of their community clash with the expectations of the "mainstream." Certain jobs or fields of study may be considered unacceptable for women. Choices such as moving away from the family home to pursue an education or a job opportunity may be seen as rejecting the family or community. Even without considerations of community and culture, choices concerning work, family and home are difficult for women. Adding these factors to the mix makes them all the more impossible, and adds another layer of restriction.

A final consideration is that visible minority

communities, like other communities, experience social change, such as an increase in divorces, single parent families, revelations of domestic abuse, and so on. Single parent families are becoming more prevalent, whether through divorce, death or war, as is the case for recent immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Burundi, and Rwanda. Painful in any community, the breakdown of the family structure is accentuated in visible minority communities because many believe that their communities are very traditional, and are immune to the changes that are happening in "Western" societies. Also, these changes and accompanying upheavals do occur in communities already struggling with racism, they may not want to admit that they have any problems for fear of further stigmatization.

The cultural and social factors described above can all be considered as contributing factors to immigrant and visible minority women's poverty rates. Cultural restrictions on women's behaviours can curtail their employment and earnings potential, as can difficulties in adjusting to Canadian life. Changing social structures impact immigrant and visible minority communities, and the rise of single parent families has been a major contributor to poverty rates.

This article was excerpted from "Immigrant and Visible Minority Women: Profile of Poverty," *written by Jeea Saraswati for The National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada (NOIVMWC) and published in 1996.*

[1]Among men, 36 per cent of Koreans, 28 per cent each of Japanese, West Asians, Arabs and 36 per cent of Filipinos were university educated. Among women, 25 per cent of Filipinos, 21 per cent of Koreans, 20 per cent of Japanese and 17 per cent of West Asians and Arabs were university educated (Kelly).

[2] Among males, nine per cent of Pacific Islanders, 13 per cent of Blacks, 13 per cent of Latin Americans and 16 per cent of South East Asian men were university educated. Among females, seven per cent of Blacks, eight per cent of South East Asians and nine per cent each of Latin Americans and Pacific Islanders were university educated (Kelly).

[3] Japanese are the most likely to hold professional positions (19 per cent), followed by Chinese and West Asians and Arabs at 15 per cent. Koreans are the most likely to hold managerial positions, followed by Japanese and 13 per cent and West Asians and Arabs at twelve per cent (Kelly).

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Black Beauty

for Sarah

black is—
their night sky cloak
against the shining spirits of our ancestors—
my love—
the cool shade of my mother's midday
shadow—
my father's back bronze-hardened by the
sun—
the twilight breeze in my lover's arms—
the coffee rose of my daughter's smile—
for these i pray each day under the blazing
sun—
a salaaming human flower unfolding—
in prayer my heart is baked black
to match my skin
so i may return
to the richness of the nubile earth
from which i came—
reflected in the night-black sky

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