

# The Racialization of Gender in the Social A Case Study of

BY PATIENCE ELABOR-IDEMUDIA

*Après avoir emménagé à Saskatoon en 1995, l'auteure s'est attaquée à l'élaboration d'une étude des défis qui confrontent les Africaines/Noires qui arrivent au Canada, au chapitre de leur intégration sur le marché du travail dans les sphères pour lesquelles elles sont qualifiées.*

Up until the recent past, Blacks were most often considered unsuitable immigrants<sup>1</sup> to Canada for a variety of reasons including their ethnicity, the economy, and the climate. As late as 1952, "climate" was raised as an issue by the then Minister of Citizenship and Culture as one of the conditions for admission to Canada as,

it is a matter of record that natives of ... (tropical and semi-tropical countries) ... are more apt to break down in health than immigrants from countries where the climate is more akin to that of Canada. (Lampkin 652)

Today, more Blacks<sup>2</sup> from Africa and the Caribbean, with women constituting a large part of the numbers, are coming into Canada as family members under the family reunification program, as refugees fleeing regional ethnic conflicts and, to some extent, as independent immigrants with education and skills. The fact remains that while immigrants from non-traditional source countries are encouraged through a non-discriminatory admission policy to come to Canada, Blacks and other immigrants of

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colour, once in Canada, face systemic and institutional discrimination and barriers (through non-recognition of their foreign qualification and experience) and racial and ethnic prejudice (through stereotypic portrayal and representation). As an example, a detailed analysis of the economic experience of Black Caribbean men and women in Canada (based on 1981 census) revealed a pattern of absolute and relative deprivation, compared with other immigrants and the Canadian-born (Richmond). When standardized for age and education, well-educated Black Caribbean immigrants had

greater difficulties achieving an occupational status and income comparable with their qualifications than those with less education. Those with university degrees had greater difficulties finding suitable employment than similarly qualified immigrants from European countries (Richmond).

The objective of this paper is to show how through the process of racializing society, social groups are distinguished and subjected to differential and unequal treatment on the basis of supposedly biological, phenotypical, cultural, and gender characteristics (Dei). Specifically, I will highlight (1) how the concept of race is used as a basis for differentiation and social marginalization of groups in Canadian immigration practice; (2) how racialization<sup>3</sup> has been used to construct meanings that maintain the social and economic dominance of particular groups within society; and (3) how gender is racialized in the social construction of immigrant women. Racialization as used here refers to a practice in which certain groups are "raced" and awarded power, status, and prestige on the basis of that race, while others are denied these things on the basis of how they have been "raced" (Dei).

## Racialization and Canadian immigration policy

The meanings ascribed to race and identity have increasingly become linked through a racialization process where collective identities are constructed in fragmented and complex ways. Satzewich claims that the crucial element of the racialization process is the delineation of group boundaries and identities by reference to physical and/or generic criteria or by reference to race. The following analysis of the Canadian context explains this process.

Prior to 1952, Canadian immigration policy engaged in racialization of potential immigrants by adopting a nationality preference system which favored European immigrants over non-Europeans. Emphasis was placed on white immigrants because they were considered to be of "superior stock," more desirable, and more assimilable than immigrants of colour (Elliot and Fleras 290). Non-Europeans were deemed undesirable and policies were put in place to prevent their immigration to Canada (Shepard 1997). For example, Section 38(c) of the *Immigration Act* of 1910 was amended in 1919 to create a class of immigrants considered to be "undesirable" for admission to Canada. Included in this category were,

# Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada

## *African Women in a Prairie Province*

those belonging to nationalities unlikely to assimilate because of their peculiar customs, habits, mode of life, methods of holding property and because of their probable inability to become readily assimilated or assume the duties and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship within reasonable time after their entry. This was seen as something that would consequently prevent the building of a united nation of people of similar customs and ideals. (Manpower and Immigration 9-10).

Accordingly, potential migrants were racialized and ranked into categories, with "preferred" immigrants being drawn from Great Britain, United States, France and, to a lesser extent, northern and western Europe. The federal government subsequently extended its preferential policies to include other "white" immigrants including Ukrainians, Italians, Poles, and Hutterites who were previously classified as "non-preferred." This was due to the failure of its efforts to produce the large numbers of "preferred immigrants" required to settle Canada's western prairie land (Henry *et al.*).

Post World War II economics in Canada was characterized by industrialization and rapid technological expansion which created a need for new labour sources. Canada responded by dropping its restrictive and overtly discriminatory immigration policies in order to create an immigrant labour force to fulfill its need. This move occurred under the 1967 *Immigration Regulations* which introduced the "points system," whereby immigrants (regardless of origin or color of skin) were awarded points based on job training, experience, skills, education, and knowledge of English or French. In addition, immigrants were selected on the basis of whether there was demand in the Canadian market for the occupations they held.

In 1971, the Canadian government adopted a multiculturalism policy; its ultimate purpose was to integrate Canada's many cultural groups and to achieve "unity in diversity." The policy was intended to support and promote cultural differences which would supposedly strengthen Canadian identity. In 1988, Parliament created the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* which further advocated the eradication of racial discrimination as was outlined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1985.

Despite existing multicultural ideology, emphasizing equal opportunity and tolerance, Canada's immigration

policy is still rooted in racial and class biases. A new immigration proposal and citizenship act was set forth by the Canadian government in the fall of 1994 and adopted in 1997. Changes suggested by the new proposal include: a reduction in overall immigration level from 230,000 to 190,000; attracting "economic" immigrants through the business class category; adopting a moratorium on immigrants' investment funds and the possible need for bonds or financial guarantees for sponsoring families; shifting of costs of settlement from the taxpayer to the immigrants; a crackdown on abusers of health and social welfare systems (that is, the immigrants who "abuse" the system); the separation of parents and grandparents into a category different from the family class category; knowledge of English or French as critical; and a separate refugee program (CEIAC).

This new immigration proposal has special implications with respect to race, class, and gender of those seeking entry into Canada. In essence, the new strategy is more concerned with economic/material gains rather than humanitarian concerns. Its emphasis on admitting those immigrants who possess adequate skills and wealth desired by Canada at this period in time and its goal of maintaining a certain type of "social fabric" is not only discriminatory but exclusionary. Many people who face persecution in other countries and who might seek asylum in Canada are poor and may not meet the language requirement. By adding a language requirement and proposing a guaranteed financial bond, Canada is able to limit the entry of immigrants from non-white countries and increase immigration from white European countries. By stressing a "preferred" type of immigrant, Canada is able to reduce the overall number of immigrants admitted under the family class category and as refugees.

### **Racialization and social construction of immigrant women in Canada**

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forms of violence, there have been differences in their nature and severity. For Black women, their experiences have been socially and institutionally structured in ways that are different from those who are not Black and female (Carty).<sup>5</sup> As a group, African/Black women tend to experience their social world differently than do men and other, non-black women. For example, in their relations with men, in the roles that are available to them in the family, in the labour market, in the paid and unpaid work that they perform, in their interactions with other women and in their knowledge of themselves, they experience oppression, subordination, exploitation, and discrimination mainly because of their race and gender. Racially-constructed gender ideologies and images often portray Black women as “naturally” suited for jobs in the lowest stratum of a labour market segmented along gender lines. As such, most Black immigrant women are employed in labour intensive, low-wage sectors, utilized as a reserve labour force, subject to intense exploitation, and often denied the most basic labour rights (Calliste).

African women who migrate to Canada as wives and dependents under the family class status are assumed to have financial guarantee and therefore are not expected to work outside their homes (Estable and Meyer). Their primary responsibility is seen to be with child care and housework. This, in effect, reproduces traditional gender ideology with regards to the sexual division of labour. The sponsorship agreement of up to ten years puts these women into a dependency relationship with their male principal applicants. Their dependent status is maintained and perpetuated by various institutional processes which have negative implications. For example, the inability of these African immigrant women to (1) access certain federal social services; (2) voice their experiences in family abuse situations; (3) access services and programs—which depend on provincial and municipal regulations and are interpreted in relation to the sponsorship agreement (Lee)—has a tremendous impact on their quality of

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life. Moreover, government-subsidized programs such as English/French as a Second Language (ESL/FSL) offered by Employment and Immigration Centre (EIC) are not made readily accessible to the women since they are seen as “not destined for the labour force.”

The salient use of these ideological constructs as parameters for determining their suitability for life in Canada is particularly challenging for African immigrant women. Racism traverses public and private spaces and is used in the articulation of gender discrimination that depicts Black women in derogatory ways.

The sexual division of labour within the market economy exists within a racist division of labour which disproportionately locates Black women within racial ghettos. Women’s work in the market economy, be it secretarial or service work is hierarchically ordered by race. Gender places most women within the sexual ghetto of the labour force, and race further orders the ghetto.

### **The case study of African immigrant women in Saskatoon**

This study was conducted in Saskatoon in 1996. The subjects consisted of 50 Black women of African decent who have lived in Canada for at least three years. They included women who came to Canada as students, housewives, economic and political refugees, and migrant workers. They represented at least ten countries in Africa and the diaspora identified as: Uganda, Kenya, Jamaica, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Trinidad and Tobago. Their ages ranged from 27 to 65, and 38 of them identified their marital status as married. They all spoke some English and 28 of them could read and write English. They all had primary and some secondary level of education while 22 had some post-secondary education. Twenty of the 50 women had lived in another European country before proceeding to Canada.

The objectives of the study were: to document the current employment patterns of African women and to compare their patterns with Canadian-born women; to analyse African women’s educational and socio-economic background in relation to their employment patterns; to identify and describe the employment needs and concerns of African immigrant women in Saskatoon; to analyse current resource allocation models used for allocating employment program resources and to evaluate agencies’ cost-effectiveness in meeting African women’s employment needs.

In accordance with the study’s theoretical objectives, both quantitative and qualitative research methods of data collection were used. The research necessitated cooperation with individuals at three different social constituencies—immigrant women, immigration personnel and their agents, post-secondary education personnel, and employers. The duration of the field research was four months. The project followed three stages: information gathering involving a review of current literature and organizations working with African immigrant women; four focus group meetings of African women which served for information gathering and personal in-depth interviews with ten women. These were followed by the collation and analysis of the data.

Contacts were made with personnel of the Immigration and Employment office in Saskatoon in order to collect information and learn more about the process of immigration. Documents produced by the office on the process of

emigrating to Canada were collected and examined in order to obtain information on the services available to immigrants. Contacts were also made with non-governmental agencies that provide services to immigrants in Saskatoon. Participant observation method was used to gather information on how government and non-government agency personnel adapt factors in the wider environment which are largely beyond their control, such as policy guidelines and funding constraints in their efforts to deliver effective client services.

### Research findings and analysis

The reported work status of the 50 respondents in the study consisted of 27 women who were gainfully employed; 16 women who were actively seeking jobs and seven who were not working or seeking employment. Twenty-one of the 27 working women said that they put in 20 hours or more of work per week. Nineteen of the 27 working women reported their hourly pay to be \$5.50 per hour as opposed to the \$6.00 per hour minimum wage. Nine women reported hourly wages equal to the minimum wage while five reported incomes higher than the minimum wage. The reported wages may give the impression that the immigrant women are relatively well-paid. However, when annual income levels are examined, the data suggest the opposite. The nature of their jobs included cleaning, child care, housework, caring for the elderly, dish-washing, restaurant work, making beds in hotels, hair-dressing, and sewing in garment industries. These are traditional female jobs in the service sector which are generally poorly paid.

Twenty of the 27 working women reported that their working conditions to be either adequate or very adequate. Adequate conditions were said to include a good working relationship with the supervisor, a good workplace atmosphere, and access to the allotted time for breaks. Fifteen women said that their working conditions were inadequate. Inadequate working conditions were described as including long hours, job insecurity, under-staffing, and overwork. On the whole, there appeared to be more dissatisfaction with working conditions than the quantitative data would suggest.

Most of these African immigrant women could only find jobs in the marginal labour market (service sector) where they are subject to exploitation in view of their non-unionized position. They are concentrated in low-paying, low-status, labour-intensive jobs in the manufacturing and service industries. They often find it difficult to get out of these job ghettos because of their "lack" of Canadian experience and limited proficiency in English. Added to this is the non-recognition by employers of their previous education, training and experiences acquired before coming to Canada.

For the 16 unemployed, the barriers to gainful employment and the challenges which they confronted in their

efforts to assimilate into the Canadian society are summarized as follows:

- difficulty in gaining recognition for education already obtained in country of origin;
- difficulty in gaining access to institutions of higher learning to upgrade their education;
- lack of access to daycare facilities for their children so as to enable them to engage in gainful employment;
- accent and language seen by potential employers as problems;
- lack of "Canadian experience" which is seen as a major setback to gainful employment;
- seen as being overqualified for English as a Second Language classes;
- personal circumstances, social pressure to stay at home, cultural barriers, and limited access to child care;
- lack of support from employment agencies;
- not knowing where to go, that is, lack of knowledge of existing resources, and inadequate knowledge of interview procedures;
- ideological and stereotypical beliefs of potential employers were evident in interviews and resulted in the poor performance of the woman being interviewed.

The focus group discussions also showed that no mainstream agency was currently delivering effective employment services that met the employment needs of the women. The agencies that serviced this client group were found to be limited in number and working under tremendous internal and external pressures which affected their ability to deliver services.

Many of the women were accustomed to participating in the paid labour force in their country of origin, and to the income, companionship, and independence such participation represented. For these women who find themselves unemployed in Canada, except as domestic labour, the emotional effects of immigration are staggering. The situation is worsened by watching their children and husbands being integrated into the Canadian society because of their proficiency in English. This is a further source of isolation.

The work life of the African immigrant women in the sample was found to have changed after their arrival in Canada. Some women who reported housework as their sole occupation in their country of origin, became employed in the paid labour force in Canada in such occupations as janitors, nurse's aids, and home-makers (cleaning the homes of middle-class white Canadian families or the elderly). Sixty per cent of women who had worked in the paid labour force in both their country of origin and in Canada,

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experienced a downward mobility trend in their occupational status when they entered the Canadian work force. Twenty per cent of the women continued working in similar occupations. Only five per cent of the respondents reported upward mobility in their change of work in the Canadian labour force. This included two women who worked as hair stylists in their country of origin and currently own their own beauty salons. Two other women reported owning their own restaurants after working as waitresses in their countries of origin. A former dress-maker in her country of origin now works as a social worker. Fifteen per cent of the women reported they could not find jobs despite their average education and work experiences from their home countries.

### **In-depth interviews**

In order to confirm some of the findings of the survey, in-depth interviews were held with ten professional immigrant women, including three medical doctors, a veterinary doctor, two pharmacists, three teachers, and an administrative secretary. These women talked about the frustration they confronted in being told to write exam after exam which did not result in successful placement in the labour force. The women with medical degrees were told after passing their exams to look for sponsors who would be willing to take them on and provide sponsorship for their "residency." After two years of trying to find sponsors without success, they looked for research positions and could not find any. Neither could they find any opportunity to volunteer as technicians in research so as to acquire some Canadian experience. They were forced to live on social assistance for over two years and began exploring opportunities in the United States after passing American Qualifying Exams.

The veterinary doctor described her experience in Canada since her arrival five years ago as a "run-around." She had three years working experience before emigrating to Canada for safety reasons. She knew about the veterinary professional qualifying process which includes writing an exam. She tried gaining admission into a university in Ontario in order to upgrade her skills, was invited for an interview, but was unsuccessful in gaining admission. She was told that the competition was stiff and that there were a limited number of spaces. She was advised to take three courses by correspondence in order to be better qualified for admission the following year. She endeavoured to do as advised and tried again to gain admission the following year, but to no avail. This time she was

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not invited for an interview and was told, upon enquiring, that she did not need the courses that she had been advised to take by correspondence for admission to the program. "They only served as a way of assessing your capacity to function at a certain educational level," she was told. Her admission was turned down a second and even a third time. She is still trying to gain admission but is currently working with the Ontario Humane Society as a secretary. This way she is in an environment she loves but not in the capacity for which she is fully qualified to work.

The three women with degrees in Education accompanied their husbands who were graduate students. They are legally qualified to work in Canada but all efforts to secure jobs in their field of qualification were unsuccessful. They had sought accreditation for their degrees from Africa but were told that their foreign degrees were not recognized in Canada without make-up courses. The women were willing to take make-up courses but could not gain admission to any university because of their dependent status as the wives of foreign students. In the past three years, they have worked as a home-care givers and, at times, as baby sitters and domestics. While their husbands were completing their various studies, the women were not even given the opportunity to upgrade their skills and academic qualifications. They felt very frustrated and suffered from depression because of the loss of their privileged middle-class position in their homeland and the lack of extended family support, especially in view of the fact that they were mothers of young children.

The woman with an administrative background said that her efforts to find employment did not yield anything for three years and she finally gave up trying, resigning herself to becoming a full-time housewife. She hoped that the situation would improve for immigrant women to attain jobs for which they are qualified.

A number of issues arise from these interviews. The cost to the Canadian society in terms of lost skill and contribution to society, the money spent on social assistance, and the loss of human capital to Canada are immeasurable. The devaluation of the knowledge of these women because of the foreign nature of their qualifications is racist and problematic. Added to the barriers confronting the women were the interaction of cultural norms; the experience of being transplanted into a new community; pressures of raising young families; limited resources; lack of family connections; and lack of familiarity with support networks all have undoubtedly made their assimilation into the Canadian society difficult while placing limitations on their own personal growth and development.

Most of these new African women immigrants are educated (with at least a high school diploma) and have number of skills in addition to a wealth of work experience. When they arrive Canada, their foreign degrees, knowledge, skills, and experiences are devalued (Elabor-Idemudia). As economic survival through labour is a predominant reason for immigrant families' migration to

Canada, these women, in spite of their high educational background, are forced to engage in low-paying jobs under poor and difficult working conditions. Others engage in non-formal work in cottage industries where they are subjected to exploitation with incomes barely enough to subsist on.

### **Role of change agencies/social networks**

In order to deal with the discrimination, several agencies have been put in place to help alleviate the women's suffering. The women themselves have resorted to using social networks to get information on employment and basic survival. In an assessment of the effectiveness of the social networks African women activate to get employment, it was found that such networks were very effective. Some of the women who were able to secure jobs as homemakers and child care givers did so through information provided by their friends and network members. They were also introduced and recommended by other members of their social networks who themselves were doing similar work. The social characteristics of individuals the women identified as gate-keepers were identified in terms of race/ethnicity, class, language, gender, age, and length of stay in Canada. They were found to be mostly young, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon males who were either born in Canada or migrated with their parents to Canada at a very tender age. They were university educated and exercised a lot of control over the process of applying for employment. Some of the women found the gate-keepers to be unfriendly and very patronizing. On the other hand, most of the social workers working with these gate-keepers were women with limited clout in the agencies.

Agencies' effectiveness in meeting African women clients' employment needs when measured in terms of former clients' rate of participation in the labour force after various periods of time (up until ten years), was found to be inadequate. Of the 50 women surveyed, only seven found the agencies to be useful in meeting their employment needs. With regards to the resource allocation models used to meet the employment needs of African women, they were found not to be structured but developed on an ad hoc basis. They tended to focus on training in English as a second language although most of the African women already spoke and understood English. The "Canadian experience" which the women lacked was not provided by the agencies and their allocation models.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this research show that African immigrant women face many of the same problems that most women face in Canadian society. Discrimination, ghettoization in the paid labour force (that is, the restrictions that limit women to low-paying and low-status

jobs), and the "double-day" duty of both paid labour force activities and the domestic labour of caring for home and family, are common experiences for women in Canada. In addition to these problems, immigrant women are required to adapt to the new society, to learn a new language, and to overcome the isolation and discrimination imposed by their new society. The dependence of immigrant women is dramatically perpetuated by their isolation especially when they are in abusive relationships. Although this was not an object of the case study, it was revealed that immigrant women face a "choice" of breaking sponsorship and risk deportation or staying silently within the abusive marriage.

The implications of these findings for African immigrant women is a perpetuation through systemic practices of dependency on their male family members and on an inadequate welfare system. This is alien to the women who have been raised and taught to be self-dependent in their countries of origin and regard themselves as subjects in their own right. It takes a lot of adjustment and re-adjustment to suddenly find themselves in a marginalized position. It not only destroys their self-image but creates in them a sense of worthlessness. This has negative implications for gender relations both within and outside Black family households in the diaspora.

The alleviation of some of the challenges confronted by African immigrant women will rely on the acknowledgement of the unequal power which women of colour, particularly Blacks, hold within the Canadian diaspora. This is in view of the fact that "groups unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their access to the resources necessary to implement their perspectives outside their particular group" (Henry 94). The hope for meeting this gap in power lies in the fact that ethno-cultural and racially specific community-based agencies are growing to fill the gap in service delivery created by failure of mainstream institutions to serve the needs of a multi-racial, multicultural, immigrant population. The agencies spend their time identifying the challenges and barriers to women's quality of life and demanding amelioration of the situation through advocacy and lobbying. Although, these agencies are themselves isolated from the mainstream delivery system through lack of institutional support but they have undertaken responsibility for providing effective, responsive, and equitable services to immigrant communities. It is through these organizations that Black immigrant women must fight for their rights and their children's rights to food, shelter, clothing, and health care, all of which are dependent on training, upgrading

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of skills, and opportunities for gainful employment. Using racist and sexist stereotypes as justification for denying them access to their basic needs is an abuse of their human rights in a country that they have come to know as home.

*Patience Elabor-Idemudia is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Saskatchewan. She is an immigrant from Nigeria and an anti-racism activist. She has researched and published articles on immigrant women; women, gender and development; diasporan-African women; and feminist pedagogy.*

<sup>1</sup>The term immigrant here refers to any person born outside Canada (foreign-born), but who is seeking or has received permanent status. Immigrants include those who are seeking family reunification or improvement of economic status. About 16 per cent of Canada's population is foreign-born (that is, immigrant)—a figure that has remained relatively constant since the early 1950s.

<sup>2</sup>The terms "African" and "Black" are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to immigrants of the same race with origins in Africa.

<sup>3</sup>Racialization as a process, be it the issue of segregated schooling, restricted immigration strategies or enlistment practices during the 1914-1918 war, has been critiqued by some Whites.

<sup>4</sup>The concept of minority group does not refer to numbers or statistical proportions. The concept of minority (sociologically) refers to any group (whether based on race, ethnicity, or gender) that is disadvantaged, underprivileged, excluded, discriminated against, or exploited. Such socially defined category of individuals are perceived as different and treated accordingly by the majority. The one thing that all minorities have in common is their lack of access to wealth, power and privilege.

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## Call for Papers on Child Care Advocacy

Seeking submissions for an edited text on the history of childcare advocacy in Canada from 1945-1995. The project, "Childcare Advocacy and Canadian Policy Processes: History and Practice from World War Two to the Present," is funded by Child Care Visions Canada.

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(but flexible)

*For more information, please contact:*

Dr. Susan Prentice, Sociology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2  
Tel: (204) 474-6726 (call collect)  
Fax: (204) 261-1216  
Email: [sprenti@cc.umanitoba.ca](mailto:sprenti@cc.umanitoba.ca)