Immigrant Women Workers In the Immigrant Settlement Sector

BY JO-ANNE LEE

Cet article examine les expériences des employées immigrantes qui travaillent dans le secteur des services d,intégration et de placement des immigrants, dans un contexte de restructuration néo-libérale et de citoyenneté.

In the 1990s, governments at all levels reduced their involvement in the provision of basic welfare services. Strategies such as restructuring, privatization, downsizing, and deregulation have been initiated by the neo-liberal state to enhance global economic competitiveness by reducing the debt load on the state and the tax burden on corporations and capitalists (Bakker). In this essay, I examine one aspect of neo-liberal state restructuring in Canada that has received relatively little attention to date: the selective incorporation of immigrant women workers into the immigrant settlement and integration services sector.

Over the last 30 years, since the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants from the developing third world, the state has organized and funded "immigrant integration and settlement services" as a sub-sector of the public social welfare system (Creese). As the name suggests, this sub-sector is directed at immigrants, refugees, and new Canadians not yet able to access the "Canadian" social services system because they do not fit the normatively constructed model of the typical "Canadian" social services client. The state supported and funded immigrant settlement service sector involves a number of not-for-profit, community-based, multi-ethnic, and ethno-specific organizations and groups, as well as branches and divisions of mainstream institutions such as schools and hospitals (Owen; Creese). In larger urban immigrant receiving centers like Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, there are several hundred organizations and groups involved in the delivery of a variety of human welfare services including housing, English language training, individual counseling, parenting and youth services, employment training and social welfare assistance—core citizenship welfare benefits that most Canadians assume as their right. There is a tremendous range and variety of organizational providers of services in this sector. Groups and organizations offering immigrant and refugee related services range from agencies with large multi-million dollar budgets to very small volunteer-based groups. Some are multi-service agencies serving all immigrants and refugees while others offer more specialized services to one or two minority ethnic communities.

The state has used gender and race assumptions to structurally organize the immigrant integration/multi-culturalism sector as a separate, parallel, and marginalized sector of publicly-funded social services.

Although there has been some recent research on the effects of neo-liberal state practices on women (Bakker), there has been little research directed at the immigrant integration sector, and even less research that has examined the effects on racialized minority women as workers and providers of welfare services, and not merely as needy consumers. Recently, however, some attention is being paid to the effects of political and economic restructuring on the immigrant settlement services sub-sector (Creese; Mwarigha; Owen; Richmond). This body of research has examined the effects of devolution and privatization on the organization of the immigrant settlement and integration sector. Agencies view the federal government's Settlement Renewal Plan as a major element in restructuring. Under the Settlement Renewal Program, federal responsibility has been devolved to provincial governments bringing with it major losses in funding and contraction in services (Mwarigha; Richmond; Creese). However, this emerging body of research has not yet examined the specific effects of restructuring on working conditions for female immigrant settlement workers who constitute the majority of workers in this field.

Through the testimony of immigrant women workers it becomes possible to shed light on how the state has used gender and race assumptions to structurally organize the immigrant integration/multi-culturalism sector as a separate, parallel, and marginalized sector of publicly-funded social services. Client advocates and researchers have observed the effects of streaming and separation of immigrant and refugee

clients from "mainstream" clients and have highlighted the failure of mainstream social services organizations to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee clients (Tator). However, devolution and cutbacks are only part of the story of restructuring.

This essay draws on a study conducted on behalf of the British Columbia Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism and Immigration (BCMRMI) during the winter of 1998 -99 that examined the impact of funding programs on projects for immigrant women (Lee). Ten sponsoring organizations and their projects for immigrant women were selected on the basis of a number of criteria, and approximately 50 individuals were interviewed. It was not the purpose of the government-sponsored study to examine working conditions for immigrant women workers in the multicultural and immigrant serving sector. Nevertheless, in the process of conducting semi-structured interviews, immigrant women respondents talked openly about their experiences of working in the sector.

Immigrant women participants in the study generally expressed widespread dissatisfaction with their working experiences in the immigrant settlement sector, a finding that merits special discussion. The study found that racialized immigrant women workers almost unanimously expressed feelings of anger, bitterness, and frustration with the working conditions in immigrant settlement agencies. They felt exploited and ghettoized in part because working conditions for immigrant and visible minority women in this sector is characterized by part-time, low waged, term-limited, and unstable employment.

Occupational segregation

Respondents perceive that agencies ignore and even promote occupational segregation by failing to challenge government funding policies for providing the framework that confines immigrant women to ethno-specific, front-line settlement, and counselling jobs. Although respectful of the dedication and commitment of their white Caucasian colleagues and superiors, respondents still felt that they worked within the same general "racial" hierarchy that exists in the wider society. In the largest of these agencies, known as the "big five" agencies, because of their large numbers of employees, the variety of services offered and their multi-million dollar budgets, with the exception of SUCCESS, a community-based agency primarily serving the Chinese-speaking community, senior management is almost entirely white and female.

"If you look at job training programs, most of these jobs are taken up by white women, there are some minorities, but most of them are white women. That sector gets paid a lot better."

A study conducted in the early 1990s for the British Columbia Settlement and Integration Workers Association (BCSIWA) found that in the settlement sector, women constitute an estimated 80 per cent of the labour force, 75 per cent are first generation immigrants, and approximately 70 per cent are visible minority men and women. The majority of immigrant women are concentrated in front line counseling and community outreach jobs (BCSIWA). In contrast, English-as-second-language (ESL) instruction and employment training jobs, which are more stable and better paid, and funded by Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC) tend to be held by white and/or Canadian-born women.

Some individuals commented on the "institutional oppression" formed by different funding programs that establish a hierarchy and segregation of jobs in the agencies. This funding structure affects the total experience of work: from wages and benefits, to self-esteem, to the way work is organized and managed. Management has responded in different ways to the funding context. One agency has placed all workers including senior management on one or two year contracts while two agencies have unionized. But neither strategy has successfully addressed occupational segregation and inequality in wages and benefits. One respondent suggested that unionization may make it even more difficult to address wage and benefit inequality by locking workers into fixed labor contracts. Many respondents expressed a high level of critical self-awareness of their working conditions:

> *If you look at job training programs, most of these [teaching] jobs are taken up by white women, there are some minorities, but most of them are white women. That sector gets paid a lot better than the settlement services sector. So even though workers might have equivalent education and training, the people who work in the training sector at____ and____ are a lot better paid and unfortunately most of those jobs are taken up by white women. The ones who work in the settlement sector, the ones who work for ten or fifteen years are getting low pay. Those inequities are there. They are very apparent and at one point it created some conflict. I think _____ has taken some steps to address this. She has tried to level it out a little bit.*
>
> *The funding from employment will allow you to pay a decent wage, while funding from the settlement sector is always more restricted. The pay is very low. If you try to pay more money, the*

project officer will question you. So it is institutional oppression. It is created by government in the way that they give out funding. The immigrant settlement funding doesn't give out very much. (Source Card No. 6920)

The following excerpts illustrate how the context of settlement work, shaped by different funders who provide different levels of funding for similar jobs, affect immigrant women's experiences and perceptions of their work:

[Staff are] isolated. And because we're being funded in a disconnected way, that's how we operate together. You are funded by HRDC, oh, that doesn't affect me, I'm funded by these settlement grants. You're funded by whatever, RAP [Refugee Assistance Program], that doesn't affect me because I'm funded by HRDC. So we just all stay in our own programs. This is my funder category, I don't need to actually know what you do. All we need to know is whether people can come in and out of the program. So for me it is an open program, anyone can come, so I get to know everybody, but for some employment programs I don't get to know them because you can only go in if you have EI [Employment Insurance], or you can only go in if you're on welfare, or, what is it three years and under at settlement services? So there's all these, it's the only way that we get to know each other. There's no conscious getting to know each other here at the agency. (Source Card No. 15855)

... you'll see a division of labour that is done in a particular way. And so, the people who are providing English, which is huge. And the people who are providing pre-employment programs, are white. The majority. Like if you leave here right now and go to the other office and just walk through all the ESL classes and then go to the sixth floor and walk through all the employment training programs, you will notice that it doesn't look like this. So the settlement services component is community-based. This is more the community part. This is why the agency started in the first place— to help settle and support and integrate immigrants and refugees. But now its become Human Resources Development Canada. It [this government department] [is] commodifying labour, processing, making sure everyone has the same English level. So it is very different. The look, the feel of it is very different. So that's the other thing is that it's going to be.... I don't know if it's that way in other places, but I've seen that it's similar in terms of English teachers and the ESL teachers community and if you look at employment counsellors, that community, they're not necessarily diverse. (Source Card No. 81666)

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... we have had discussions that every time a managerial role comes up, it is always someone who is imported from outside. They never give an opportunity to those who have been working there for a very long time because multicultural means that there must be whites there as well. That makes sense. But you start comparing what chances do we have of reaching out and getting someone to get onto the board (or senior position). (Source Card No. 37307)

I am actually the only full-time staff person, but there are seven of us in the office and several of those people work close to full-time, like 30 hours, 28 hours a week. Our program staff work very part-time: they might do five to nine hours a week. Some of them up to 15, if they're working in two programs. So it's very part-time for them, not only in terms of hours per week, but also weeks per year because we don't run programs in the summer. And our programs are very much based on not providing employment to people, although we do, but on the needs of the client group that we're serving. (Source Card No. 2493)

Although the prevailing conditions of work for immigrant women are largely externally determined, one smaller, women-centered agency, while still offering only part-time, seasonal jobs, has refused to permit funders to dictate wages and benefits. This board has taken the position that all staff doing the same job will receive the same wage. Although even here, the question of wage inequality and how to address this problem has been an issue of ongoing debate at the board level.

Volunteerism

The line between paid and unpaid work is tenuous for immigrant women working in the settlement sector. Some respondents reported that they are often expected to volunteer without pay so that programs continue during times of transitional funding, or to volunteer to do community fundraising or community development and outreach work to

their community on behalf of the agency:

> *. . . I am surprised that _____ does the amount of work it does. The people here do the amount of work that they do and I'm amazed at how those who run the program, the managers here, can make it work at all because clearly the funding is minimal. The amount of work done that's volunteer work, you wouldn't believe the amount of volunteer work. Just about everything. As I say, coming from a different place, it is really shocking.* (Source Card No. 65120)

In some ESL, life skills, and leadership training programs, immigrant and refugee women are often used as "assistants" to white Canadian facilitators. As one interviewee stated, the use of immigrant women as volunteers or "assistants" is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they gain experience and confidence but on the other hand, they are not able to earn a living wage. In addition, the present system screens out working-class women who cannot afford to work part-time. Women who need a full time wage cannot avail themselves of these "opportunities."

> *Some people are looking for part-time work, and it suits them well. Many women who maybe are lucky enough to be in the position where they can afford to work part-time. So for those people, we're really offering them something that fits with their life, but of course many of the staff who work for us start with us and get experience and training and, eventually, they move on to full-time work because that's what they want and we're not able to provide it for them. They may work for us as well as another organization. And that can be difficult because you're pretty scattered, even if those jobs are similar in the kind of work you do, you spend more time getting to work. If you're going to work for eight hours, your travel time is less significant than if you're going to work for three or four. So there certainly are issues like that for our staff and we've lost some good people because they've needed to find full-time work. Somehow I feel not bad about that, because they're working for ____ for a year or two years, and that part-time position has helped them to get that full-time job, so I feel that, while we weren't able to offer a full-time job, we were able to offer an "in" to the labour market for those women.* (Source Card No. 2493)

Immigrant women volunteerism is one of the key mechanisms for racializing and feminizing settlement work as low-paid and undervalued.

Clearly, many respondents see volunteering as a positive program outcome for individual immigrant and refugee women. But as stated earlier, volunteerism in the settlement sector has mixed effects. The negative outcomes are clearer when the immigrant settlement and orientation departments are compared to the ESL and employment training departments even in the same agency. Workers in training departments tend to receive higher compensation for their work, and in general, jobs are more permanent and full-time. There is little reliance on volunteer labour to keep employment training programs in operation in contrast to the settlement service sector.

BCMRMI funding for immigrant women support groups helps to institutionalize volunteerism in the sector. For example, the dominant program model of support groups for immigrant women is designed to recruit, train, and place immigrant women in volunteer positions within the sponsoring agency or in other community-based social service agencies. While these strategies offer opportunities to immigrant and refugee women to use their skills in the community, they also limit and channel these skills. Notwithstanding the benefits that individual women gain by volunteering, many skills gained through volunteering at agencies prepare immigrant women to work as front-line staff regardless of their qualifications and previous work experience. As one agency reported, immigrant women stuff envelopes, send faxes, type letters, and act as volunteer receptionists in order to have one line on their resume stating they have "Canadian" work experience.

While some do move on to take full-time work in the wider community, many respondents reported that immigrant and refugee women move out of volunteer positions into part-time paid positions either at the sponsoring agency or at other community-based agencies. The present model, at best, provides opportunities for lateral movement, but very little formal support for upward or orthogonal movement out of the sector. The present volunteer training model offers the means for reproducing the volunteer base of settlement work in the sector. Immigrant women volunteerism is one of the key mechanisms for racializing and feminizing settlement work as low-paid and undervalued. It provides the structural underpinning to support the sector.

Marginalization, lack of voice and representation

Interviewees expressed dismay that

within their own worker association, BCSIWA, the executive is dominated by white Canadian men and women, even though it was started by racialized workers. Racialized women settlement workers lack a voice and an organization to voice their concerns. Since immigrant women constitute the front line staff, they do not have the time or the funding to allow them to participate in BCSIWA meetings. The meetings are attended by management staff who are mainly mainstream, white Canadian-born men and women. The exclusion of front-line female staff from BCSIWA deliberations is not a consequence of any deliberate actions, rather, like other mechanisms of marginalization, it reflects the taken-for-granted practices and dominant assumptions prevailing in society.

Boards of agencies have contributed to the exploitation of the immigrant women staff by agreeing to provide services and by managing the agencies in a segmented way so that these discrepancies in wages and benefits are accepted as "normal" and unavoidable. The lack of representation of racialized women in decision-making positions in this sector contributes to feelings of low self-esteem and self doubt. As one person put it, it leads to "internalized oppression":

I've actually attended forums where people openly said, you look at the immigrant agencies, the five big agencies, including Victoria, all the Executive Directors are white people except for SUCCESS. [an agency serving primarily Chinese-speaking immigrants] Again it is a matter of leadership—of how much energy and effort are being put into leadership by minorities.

When I became the first coordinator, I was the only coordinator of an immigrant background within a system that funded three people of Asian background. They were all Canadian born. So you always hear that you got the job because you can speak Chinese. I don't know whether it is internalized oppression or not, people are talking about it and see that you got the job because of your language, not because of your ability. So you need to get out of that situation. I don't know whether that is part of the self-fulfilling prophecy that maybe minority people who are very good may want to prove themselves elsewhere rather than inside the immigrant communities. But then on the other hand, they won't hire you because they don't think you are good enough to do the job. (Source Card No. 6920)

The lack of representation of racialized women in decision-making positions in this sector contributes to feelings of low self-esteem and self doubt.

The lack of professional development and cross-skill training opportunities for front-line workers means that when the need for front-line counselling and settlement services declines for a particular ethno-linguistic group, workers who only are seen to have only language and cultural skills are easily dismissed and replaced by new workers who have the language and cultural skills needed to work with newer immigrant groups. When immigration slows and their language skills are no longer in demand, such as the situation with Portuguese and Italian groups in Vancouver, these older workers find themselves without employment and without possibilities for equivalent employment elsewhere.

A high turnover rate in staff was reported in some projects funded by BCMRMI. In one program offering family support, there were seven different staff over a period of three years. Such a high rate of turnover obviously affects the quality of service provided. Different reasons were suggested for high job turnover in the immigrant settlement services sector. In addition to the conditions discussed above, some mentioned the isolation and marginalization that outreach workers experience in doing outreach work in community settings without the support of colleagues who are working on similar issues and with similar clients. Burnout and isolation were frequently mentioned causes:

Some get better job opportunities, but I think it's burnout as well. It's about saying we don't want to work in this way and doing this kind of work because you really are struggling to stay above water because people don't know what you do and they don't know the level of intensity. When I worked at a rape crisis centre, you had everyone working on one issue, although there's other issues, child sexual abuse or battering or other issues that women would bring in, but you had everyone working on the same issues and you'd get support and you were working in a kind of team on some level, or even in transition house, when I worked in transition houses there'd be still everyone working together. It's very specific and everyone's working on it. Whereas here you have people who are doing basic settlement, food, shelter, clothing, you have people doing ESL, LINC, pre-employment training, and then you have the family support program kind of out there. (Source Card No. 79171)

Feelings of isolation can also be felt by staff who may be working in an area not directly linked to settlement, or whose political stance on immigration and multiculturalism differs from the majority. If they speak up, they fear that they will not be rehired when their contract or project funding runs out. Yet there is also a sense of not being able to make any significant changes, consequently they express intense feelings of powerlessness.

Immigrant women respondents also feel caught in contradictory tensions. On the one hand, they feel loyalty to the agency, a commitment to the work and to helping their ethnic community, yet on the other hand, they feel unhappy that the core work of settlement services is being supported only by their willingness to work for low wages and unstable employment. Many immigrant women workers expressed profound ambivalence about their work. They are extremely dedicated, committed, and passionate, yet they also feel very isolated, exploited, and devalued.

> *It is frustrating and yet it's privileged because I feel that because of my analysis and because I'm kind of defiant and ultimately I'm not scared of being fired and I don't have kids to support or a mortgage to pay, I'm not.... .like I have a lot of privileges and when I speak about these issues and identify them—and a lot of times I end up being the person that other people who are scared to speak about the issues come to because they're really worried that they're never going to work somewhere else and I understand that and I don't have the same level of fear and I have a lot of reasons not to. I don't have those obligations, so a lot of times I'm in a place of speaking up but it is very tiring. [I feel] ... incredibly isolated, under supported, targeted in terms of other people. I know now we are doing this focus on anti-racism and this is a new thing for this agency. This agency has been around for 25 years an this is a new thing to talk about anti-racism.* (Source Card No. 81576)

As the above interview suggests, it is still difficult to address racism within an immigrant settlement agency. In part, this difficulty is due to the general impression, sometimes fostered by the agency's internal culture, that racism is something that occurs "out there" in the wider society and not "in here." A lack of space to talk about racism as a systemic issue that positions minority women and men in subordinate positions, that affects social relations between people, and that results in pain and hurt helps to keep many minority women silent and isolated in immigrant settlement agencies.

Conclusion

Globalization is a process that supports flexible capital accumulation that, in turn, requires flexible citizenship. It is through flexible citizenship that the nation-state maintains its sovereignty and its legitimacy by maintaining, strengthening, and intensifying national boundaries and citizenship categories. Using a race and gender sensitive lens and attending to the voices of immigrant women workers, this essay demonstrates that state multiculturalism and immigrant integration policies have not yet resulted in the development of common institutions into which new Canadians and minorities integrate. Current practices and policies have created a separate racialized and feminized immigrant services sector wherein parallel proto-institutions deliver a limited set of welfare benefits of citizenship to immigrants and refugees. Under restructuring, the financial costs of providing even these narrow and truncated welfare rights of democratic citizenship to newly-arrived Canadians are transferred onto immigrant communities themselves, and within these communities, to women. Devolution, privatization, cutbacks, and other strategies of neo-liberal restructuring have profound gender and race effects that, in turn, profoundly affect the ways that new immigrants and refugees are being integrated into Canadian society and ultimately the nature of Canadian society.

Without much notice, the existing and normalized multi-tiered social welfare system is already differentially subjectifying and embodying new immigrants as second-class subject-citizens on the basis of numerous social signifiers. Socially constructed signifiers associated with categories of citizenship such as "immigrant" and "refugee" position individuals onto different tracks. Although not fully determining of life chances, differential access to the social safety net affects life experiences that help to construct and reproduce differentially-valued raced, classed, and gendered subject identities.

In the absence of public debate and recognition, globalization and its partner, neo-liberalism, has encroached into the life worlds of citizenship and democratic processes. Universal citizenship in Canada has been premised on equality of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all citizens to access common institutions of the nation. Whether the present phase represents a transition to more common institutions, as liberals such as Kymlicka hope, or, as I suspect, a reformulation and reorganization of institutional policies, procedures, and practices in ways that ultimately continue the institutionalized hegemony of the dominant cultural groups, is a question that remains to be determined.

What is clear, is that as front line settlement workers and volunteers, immigrant women provide the unpaid and low-paid labour that enables the state to resolve its need for legitimacy in several ways by:

- ensuring that immigrants do not threaten social cohesion by failing to integrate;

•enabling the dominant culture to continue to shape mainstream institutions with minimum disruption thereby reasserting the hegemony of the dominant groups; and

•allowing the state to provide the conditions necessary for global capital competitiveness through the availability of skilled low cost labor while simultaneously ensuring that immigrant integration is achieved in structural selective ways without overburdening the neo-liberal state.

The impact of transferring the financial costs of immigrant integration through the mutually reinforcing dynamics of voluntarism, downloading, and privatization on immigrant settlement workers has remained invisible and hidden, in part, because the state is able to draw upon already existing assumptions of women's traditional role in providing care and support, and on assumptions around cultural "differences" in racialized ethnic minority communities' responses to their members' social welfare needs.

Due to lack of space, I have not discussed strategies of resistance and advocacy in this essay, yet a number of strategies of resistance are being employed to resist the negative effects of restructuring (Creese, Owen). Increased cooperation, reorganization of work, coalition advocacy, more critical analyses and research, better communication strategies are all being undertaken. Yet these strategies also need to be subjected to critical gender and race sensitive analyses, since these strategies are also traversed by societal assumptions and hegemonic practices. Nevertheless, the opening of a sub-sector of human welfare services that is primarily based on the labour of immigrant women has allowed a space where immigrant women are able to assert themselves as active citizens in civil society. Excluded from other spheres of public life, the space provided by immigrant integration and multiculturalism policies is, and continues to be, a space of possibility for affirmation and for broadening immigrant and refugee women's inclusion into the public sphere.

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TANYA CLARK

Grasping those waspy wings of happiness.
So close I can almost feel the breeze upon my aching smile.
Ravenous circles of over indulgence,
burdens of overactive thoughts.
Oh! something I will never be dragging down all that I am.
Ripping my blinded eyes from thin distorted sockets.
Reflections untold, and unfamiliar belong in the coldness of my palm,
as I watch life revolve around my tired bones.
and listen for salvation in the silence of my despair,
that offers no hope.

Tanya Clark lives in Trenton, Ontario.