

Contents

Socio-Economic Characteristics of Immigrants in Western Greece Region: Urban – Rural Continuum or Divide?	
THEODOROS IOSIFIDES, THANASIS KIZOS, ELEKTRA PETRACOU, EKATERINI MALLIOTAKI, KONSTANTINA KATSIMANTOU AND ELENA SARRI	91
Wrestling with 9/11: Immigrant Perceptions and Perceptions of Immigrants	107
CAROLINE B. BRETTELL	
Women's Cityward Migration, Domestic Service and Schooling in Southern Mexico	125
JAYNE HOWELL	
Refugee Policy is a Realist's Nightmare: The Case of Southeast Asia	137
CHEN CHEN LEE	
New figures for old stories: Migration and remittances in Nepal	151
MICHAEL KOLLMAIR, SIDDHI MANANDHAR, BHIM SUBEDI AND SUSAN THIEME	
Why Not Me? Women Immigrants and Unemployment in New Brunswick	161
JUDITH DOYLE, NICOLA MOONEY AND JANE KU	
Book review: <i>The Uprooted</i> by <i>Martin et al.</i>	171
Book review: <i>Human Cargo</i> by <i>Moorhead</i>	175

Why Not Me? Women Immigrants and Unemployment in New Brunswick

Judith DOYLE, Nicola MOONEY and Jane KU¹

Abstract

This article examines the experience of women immigrants and refugees in New Brunswick, Canada. In focus groups, employment, or rather the lack of employment, was a central concern for the women. Many were skilled immigrants who urgently wished to be working in their field of expertise and felt disappointed with Canadian immigration processes and settlement in New Brunswick. Their emphasis on employment contrasted with their classification as dependent spouses by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and as refugees.

Keywords: immigration; gender; employment; skilled workers; Canada.

Introduction

Canada and its provinces, including New Brunswick, have turned to immigration and immigrants as solutions to an aging population, low rates of fertility and for needed skills in the knowledge economy. In this way, immigrants are seen in a utilitarian fashion – as convenient solutions to demographic problems. This paradigm is particularly problematic for women who are constructed by immigration provisions as non-productive members of society.

Immigration research in Canada focuses mainly on Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal as these are the destinations of choice for many migrants. To counter this emphasis we explored the experience of women immigrants to New

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WHY NOT ME?

Brunswick. This article discusses the results of that study in order to better understand the gendered nature of migration and the experience of migrants to New Brunswick and Canada.

This article explores the results of focus groups with 23 immigrant and refugee women in New Brunswick. We conducted focus groups in the three metropolitan centres of New Brunswick: Fredericton, Saint John and Moncton. The focus groups in Fredericton and Saint John were conducted in English while the Moncton group was conducted in French. This matches the linguistic patterns of the officially bilingual province. Our participants varied in the length of time they had been in New Brunswick, from one month to thirteen years, although the majority had lived there for two to three years. A majority had migrated as dependents, accompanying their husbands and families for work or study. Several had brought their children on their own as refugees or widows. All of the women had children. Our participants also varied in their geographical origin; we had participants from Afghanistan, Algeria, Canary Islands, China, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, and Tunisia. Most of the women had been well-educated and professionally employed in their nations of origin, and the groups included a bank teller, an accountant, an elementary school teacher, a college teacher, a policewoman, a lawyer, and an engineer among other careers.

Research on migration has tended to focus on males. Kofman (2000) observed that in Europe, skilled immigrants are still conceptualized as male. In Canada, one reason may be partly because while the majority of immigrants belong to the economic category, women make up the majority of family class migrants. There has been a tendency therefore to see immigrant women's issues as 'family' based rather than connected to work and to the labour market (McLaren and Black 2005). This perception of women immigrants as not destined for the labour market meant until recently that they did not have access to settlement services such as language training (Lior 1994; Arat-Koc 1999).

For those immigrant women who do work, many find their employment choices limited to domestic service, janitorial services, garment work, plastic factory work, food processing, or work in 'family' businesses (often restaurants and small retail stores), and more recently, to nursing (Ng and Estable 1987:30; Pedraza 1991:314). Indeed, immigrant women are most often perceived as being working class, and this is particularly true for visible minority women.

Linked to occupational choices is occupational hierarchy and here again immigrant women are disadvantaged. There is evidence that suggests that immigrant women's labour force participation is bimodal: divided between the higher and lower levels with little representation in the middle levels of the occupational hierarchy (Arnopoulos 1979; Elabor-Idemudia 2000). The progress Canadian born women have made in the higher status jobs is not true for immigrant women, especially immigrant women from visible minorities (Pendakur and Pendakur 2000:178; Reitz 2003:484). A lack of occupational choice, a disregard for foreign qualifications and limited access to the higher levels of the occupational hierarchy affect immigrant women's salaries. Simply, immigrant women make less than Canadian born women and visible minority immigrant women make even less than white immigrant women (Pendakur and Pendakur 2000:165).

There is consensus that the following are limitations to immigrants women's participation in the labour force: credential recognition; skill and expertise recognition; limits to opportunities and institutions for educational upgrading; child care access; quantity and quality of English as a Second Language classes; limited knowledge of English or speaking accented English; employer emphasis on Canadian work experience; lack of, lack of support from and lack of knowledge about employment support agencies; domestic responsibilities and the role of women in the home; and finally, gendered beliefs about women, specifically visible minority women (Paredes 1987; National Association of Women and the Law 1999; Elabor-Idemudia 2000).

WHY NOT ME?

Adding to this national picture of immigration is the specificities of immigration to New Brunswick. Over a ten-year period from 1996-2005, New Brunswick had on average 758 permanent residents per year. New Brunswick's permanent residents² accounted for 0.4 percent of Canada's total permanent resident population in 2005 (CIC 2005). Over a ten year period from 1995-2004, New Brunswick received on average 26 refugees each year (CIC 2004).

We began our focus groups with general questions asking the participants what brought them to Canada and to New Brunswick. Issues of employment, unemployment, access to work, wanting to work, and work and self-identity were returned to throughout their answers. In their answers the women sought to make sense of their employment status in Canada and to try to answer the question, "why not me?" They want to know why they are not getting interviews or jobs.

In Fredericton and Saint John, some participants offered the explanation that New Brunswick and its cities are small for why they were unable to find employment. For those with academic and industrial research experience there was awareness that the universities are primarily teaching based and that there is little funding for extra research in which they had previously been employed. Conversely, in Moncton it was noted that without the Université de Moncton, it would be likely that they or their husbands would be unemployed as it was perceived that there were few jobs for French speaking researchers.

Maria³, a Columbian, observed that she has been unemployed for four years in Fredericton despite qualifications and Canadian experience (in another province). She suggests that

although it might be because [Fredericton] is a small town, it is more likely that New Brunswickers and Canadians don't think much

² Permanent residents have been granted official leave to remain in Canada indefinitely, but not full citizenship.

³ all participant names are pseudonyms

wickers and Canadians don't think much of immigrants. They think immigrants are less capable, less intelligent.

That is, as much as size offers an explanation, a more plausible explanation suggests systemic discrimination. Indeed Lily, with her engineering PhD and 18 years experience in China and Japan, agreed with Maria's observation and added that

there is discrimination here and in the big city.
Born Canadians are thought to be more capable.
It is very hard to compete.

For some of our participants, this discrimination was understood as language based. In all focus groups, it was commented that many employers in New Brunswick would not hire someone with an accent. Several women commented on the difficulties in having Canadians understand their accents, and on having been told that their accented English meant that they could not speak English. In Moncton, discrimination by accent was compounded: employers seeking French speakers would not hire them because of their African accented French while employers seeking English speakers would not hire them because of their French accented English. It was further felt in Moncton that

even if they don't hear the accent, they can tell
by your name or CV that you are primarily
French and so you are not given consideration.

This negative stereotype of immigrants as less intelligent, less competent, and less capable was felt by our participants to extend to both the unwillingness to treat foreign qualifications as equivalent but also in the difficult processes of certification. There was a general consensus that there needs to be a change in how foreign credentials are recognized. There was disappointment that education counts in the point based system of immigration but seems to count little amongst Canadian employers. This is best said by Vêra from Kosovo who argued that

WHY NOT ME?

immigrants are highly educated, let them use their expertise. People feel disappointed because education counts towards the point system but then when you get here you find that your education doesn't count. We just want to work in what we enjoy. It is a waste of knowledge and education.

This assertion that work is important was agreed to by Ming, from China, who explained

most of us don't care too much about big salary. We want to work in what we like, in what we do. I want life to be similar to what I had before. I liked to work, feel appreciated, want to work.

For some of our participants, the feeling of being frozen out the job market, unappreciated for their education and skills, meant that they planned to return to their country of origin, in some cases once the kids were old enough and in others after a set time of trying to make it in Canada. Maria, close to tears because of this frustration simply said, "it is tough because I'm not able to work."

Part of our participants' sophisticated analysis of their position in the labour force was the knowledge that they lack the social networks necessary to get employment. However, our participants also felt that the homogenous nature of New Brunswick meant that many social networks were closed to newcomers. As Vêra observed, they are working against established networks based on family and long-term school friends with little room for newcomers. One participant in the Fredericton focus group quietly stated, "If they want immigrants, then they should act that way." This captured the feeling of many of our participants that New Brunswickers are not used to newcomers and outsiders, not empathetic to or accepting of newcomers, not aware of the slow and painful processes of immigrant adjustment, and need education in these regards. Interestingly, none of our participants blamed their inability to find work on their race or ethnicity. They preferred to articulate more pragmatic factors such as

language, lack of Canadian experience and access to social networks as explanations for their exclusion. Nonetheless, their experiences might be understood as ethnic or racial discrimination.

Our participants were also critical of the official immigration information they had received before coming to New Brunswick. When Annie suggested that immigrants “need to have accurate information before we come over, especially about employment opportunities” there was much agreement and recall of the overstatement in some of the official material.

While all our participants liked New Brunswick, particularly finding it safe for raising children, they all understand that mobility for work is necessary in Canada. As one said, “you go where the employment is.” Our participants in Fredericton and Moncton indicated that they were willing to move elsewhere in Canada for a position. In Saint John, they felt that the cost of living, the quality of the schools, the safety of Saint John for children would mean that a position elsewhere would have to be considered carefully. But, as Nada from Iran pointed out, she “can’t find a job and a job is essential. Saint John is good for the children but it depends on whether you have a job or not.”

Conclusion

Our participants are frustrated at not being able to find work and linked this unemployment to their identity. This was especially, although not exclusively, true for women with post-secondary degrees and professional careers. They wanted to be able to work and to do work that was useful. For many they wanted to work because it was what they had trained to do, what they had invested in, both financially and emotionally. In Fredericton and Moncton, the issue of work, or more precisely, the lack of work was returned to frequently throughout the focus groups. In Saint John, the link between employment and quality of life was made explicit and understood as essential to survival in Canada. Employment would mean being able to afford better quality

WHY NOT ME?

housing, being able to afford more food, being able to give their children a better life.

Migrant women are often thought of as dependent housewives, not destined for employment. And when they are employed, they are often only considered for manual or low status jobs. The results of our study show that this category of immigrant demonstrates a diversity of education, skills and work experiences and that it includes professional and skilled women who will move for work if necessary.

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