Work and Health of Foreign-Born Racialized Women in Toronto: A Community-Based Study

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There are about 3.2 million immigrant women in Canada. A little over half (55%) are from racialized backgrounds.

Compared to any other group, immigrant women continue to experience the worst labour market conditions and outcomes.

Yet, immigrant women are more likely to be university-educated than their Canadian-born counterparts.

While the reasons for these gaps are relatively well-documented, the impacts of deskilling and precarity are not well understood.
To examine the work and health experiences of largely university-educated, precariously employed racialized immigrant women in Toronto, Ontario.
Methods

- Community-based study led by Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, and involving an interdisciplinary team.

- We recruited for interviews 30 racialized immigrant women.

- We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Most (21) were in a language other than English.

- Interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using NVIVO.
Results – Demographic characteristics

- 80% of participants were between 30-50 years.
- 71% had a university degree.
- Evenly distributed in terms of length of stay in Canada.
- 30% came through refugee stream.
Results – Working conditions

1) Participants were in gendered low paid precarious employment that did not reflect their education and experience.

2) Participants’ employment pathways were marked by multiple short periods of employment and lengthy periods of unemployment between jobs.

3) Many had or were engaged in informal income generating activities.
Results – Labour market strategies

1) Participants used a wide range of job search strategies.

2) Participants sought to upgrade their education.

3) Participants sought to gain experience through volunteer work.
1) Participants were responsible for most of the household responsibilities.

I was doing everything. I was cleaning, I was cooking everything. Because as I said my husband he went to work at 5:00 in the morning until 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening. And as soon as I got home I starting to do the things for cooking, cleaning doing everything. [Interviewer asks: 'And you were working 12 hours too?' And participant replies:] “Yes, from 8:00 a.m. until sometimes 7:00 or 8:00 in the evening. As soon as I got home, thank God my apartment was close to work, I didn’t lose time to come and go, but I did until 1:00 a.m. I was taking care of the other things. Like a robot (“Arlinda”).
1) Deskilling and precarity had a damaging impact on the mental and physical health of women.

So I went back home and I stayed for a year because I was too frustrated. I was trying all means, it was not working. My self-esteem kept going down, that I was from a place where people used to highly esteem me and now I’m in a place where nobody cares about me, I don’t even make a difference anywhere (“Zaria”).
2) Deskilling and precarity had a damaging impact on the mental and physical health of women’s families.

No he’s [son] better now but my only problem with him is, especially when I went back to school is he’s constantly asking for attention... one time I was yelling at him last weekend and I asked him, I’m so tired and I’m also sick and I told him 'what do you want from me? Tell me, I know you can speak now, tell me what do you want to say to mommy?' And he was saying that 'I just want you to hug me.' Because he was saying that it seems that, since I was always busy I don’t really look as often as we did before, I don’t play with him anymore, and he said; 'you don’t hug me as much as you did before.' So at 3 years old 'oh my goodness', it’s like 'wow'... I feel so guilty (“Gemma”).
3) Participants took on a health promoting role within their families.
Conclusions

- Irrespective of education and length in Canada, racialized immigrant women are getting pushed into gendered occupations marked by low wages and precarity.

- Deskilling and precarity leads to damaging mental and physical health impacts for racialized immigrant women and their families, and this further constrains women to precarious employment trajectories.
Recommendations

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