

Flipping the Script for Skilled Immigrant Women: What Suggestions Might Critical Social Work Offer?

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ABSTRACT: Research on skilled immigrant women revealed that they are losing their professional skills and career identity due to lack of employment and underemployment, postmigration. These negative outcomes in employment are reported as key factors in the economic instability they face in host countries. On the other hand, reports indicate that economic growth for host countries have increased through skilled immigration. In fact, countries such as Canada, United States, Australia and others, continue to revise their immigration policies to attract more highly skilled immigrants, due to reported benefits. So how are skilled immigrant women in particular, coping with the negative impact of skilled migration that is more favourable for host countries? More importantly, what suggestions for changes and action might critical social work offer to transform current disproportionate outcomes?

This paper provides a brief discussion on the reported labour market outcomes for skilled immigrant women in Canada. It includes a critical assessment of the challenges they face to re-enter the labour market in Canada and argue that the current outcomes are direct manifestations of discriminatory practices, beyond the scope of the labour market alone. The paper highlights reported economic benefits of skilled migration for host countries such as Canada, and raise questions about possible systemic actors in the substandard results for skilled immigrant women. The paper draws on a critical social work perspective to discuss alternatives to improving outcomes for skilled immigrant women and concludes with suggestions for changes in the current social and employment prospects for skilled immigrant women.

KEYWORDS: skilled immigrant women, critical social work, economic migration

1. Introduction

This paper provides a brief discussion on the reported labour market outcomes for skilled immigrant women in Canada. It includes a critical assessment of the challenges they face to re-enter the labour market in Canada and argue that the current outcomes are direct manifestations of discriminatory practices, beyond the scope of the labour market alone. The paper highlights reported economic benefits of skilled migration for host countries such as Canada, and raise questions about possible systemic actors in the substandard results for skilled immigrant women. The paper draws on a critical social work perspective to discuss alternatives to improving outcomes for skilled immigrant women and concludes with suggestions for changes in the current social and employment prospects for skilled immigrant women.

Individuals who gain entry to Canada as skilled workers secure permanent residence under the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) administered through the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA). Successful applicants require a minimum score of sixty-seven out of a total of one hundred allocated points to be eligible for the program. The assessment of skills for allocation of the accumulated points, is based on education at the college or university level or the completion of a skilled trade, ability to speak French or English, work experience, age, ability to adapt to Canada and pre-arranged employment in Canada. Immigrants who enter Canada as skilled workers are expected to settle faster and make greater contributions to the Canadian economy (Phythian, Walters and Anisef 2009, 365).

The increasing demands on immigration to supplement population and economic growth for developed countries such as Canada, placed skilled migration squarely at the forefront of public policy and socioeconomic discussions (Adsera and Chiswick 2007, 496). The issue gathered further traction in the literature, as a result of the reported struggles that skilled immigrants in particular, continue to face to re-enter labour markets. The ambiguous nature of their skills, make them ideal immigrants for admission to Canada on one hand but not enough to re-enter their professions once they arrive in Canada. The barriers that skilled immigrant women face are reported to be high on this list of ambiguity. Considering that in 2013 alone, women make up approximately 40.9% of the applicants admitted to Canada as economic class migrants, the number of women impacted is significant (Hudon 2015, 5). A critical discussion of some of these issues will add to the demand for change.

Hick and Pozzuto believe that there is no single understanding of critical social work, however, the general consensus is that a better social world is achievable through changes to the current relations in society (2005, ix). Woodward pointed to the theoretical basis of critical social work that aligns with confronting social injustice in areas of race, gender and ethnicity as examples of sites to contest (Woodward 2013, 137). Despite the numerous and different perspectives of critical social work, the quest to achieve social justice for individuals and collectives, remain at the core of these approaches (Campbell and Baikie 2012, 67). The concern with issues such as oppression, domination, discrimination, power structures, social injustice, inclusion and exclusion and other forms of social inequities, also remain at the core of understanding of critical social work. The key outcome is to create effective responses from a critical lens, to tackle issues that negatively impact groups and individuals in society.

Regardless of the approach however, critical social work is synonymous with critical reflective thinking as a way to critiquing unjust social, economic, ideological and structural systems in society. As Hick and Pozzuto pointed out, “critical social work does offer an analysis of the social context that includes an identification of oppressive elements and potential paths for their elimination” (Hick and Pozzuto 2005, x). The intent is to create change that will foster social justice. By shedding light on the current circumstances that impact skilled immigrant women in Canada, systemic change can become a closer a reality (Pozzuto 2000, 32). The issues of oppression need to be at the centre of the critique so that efforts for fundamental and systemic change can be initiated.

2. Skilled immigrant women and Canadian labor market

Schellenberg and Feng reported that despite the increase in the number of immigrants in Canada with university degrees, their transition to the Canadian labour market has been quite difficult (Schellenberg and Feng 2005, 49). The lack of recognition of their credentials and lack of “Canadian experience” impedes their access to comparable employment after they migrate. Similarly, Ikura attributed the under-utilization of the labour market potential of skilled immigrants to the lack of recognition of their credentials despite their higher levels of education (Ikura 2007, 17). Khan pointed out the lack of access to social and economic capital as one of the many challenges that skilled immigrants face to enter Canadian labour market (Khan 2007, 64). These noted struggles are prevalent for many skilled immigrants and Canada is lagging behind with comprehensive measures to address these known issues.

Reports on labour market re-entry for skilled immigrant women in Canada showed similar challenges faced by skilled immigrant groups. In addition, the loss of acknowledgement of their skills in the labour markets, force many to accept care work and domestic work. This is despite them having the training, work experience and skills to qualify for higher skilled employment (Man 2004, 135 and Raghuram and Kofman 2004, 95). This erosion of the strides that some women have made in securing qualifications and skills beyond the gendered categories of the domestic realm, raises many questions about the gendered setbacks of migration for skilled immigrant women. Iredale pointed out that for women to be able to participate in the skilled migration category in the first place, gendered considerations must be present within education systems of migrating countries (Iredale 2005, 157). In which case, the current struggles that skilled immigrant women face to enter the Canadian labour market, is unravelling the gains that were made towards gender parity in previous countries. For a developed country such as Canada, these erosions should be condemned and every effort should be made to increase measures for gender parity rather than eroding them.

Re-entry to regulated fields such as dentistry, law, medicine and engineering for skilled immigrants in general proved to be especially challenging and expensive, with limited opportunities for re-entry. Many skilled immigrants do not realize that the assessment of skills for the Canadian immigration points-based process prior to migration, is independent of the occupational licensing process of assessment that is required to re-enter regulated professions postmigration. For many, the realization that they cannot re-enter their (regulated) professions in Canada, happens only after they have migrated. Zietsma found that in 2006, it was less likely for immigrants who belonged to regulated professions prior to migration to be working in a regulated profession after migration to Canada (Zietsma 2010, 19). The study found that immigrants who managed to re-enter regulated professions, lagged well behind their Canadian counterparts in these professions. This is the case for up to as long as 10 years after they have been living in Canada. In addition, skilled immigrant women who are in traditionally male dominated occupations that are regulated face even greater challenges. Iredale pointed to overt forms of discrimination and gender bias in skilled employment fields such as engineering, that deliberately screens out female jobseekers even after they manage to get an interview for vacant positions (Iredale 2005, 164). She further noted that even when women secured employment positions in certain fields, they are overlooked for promotions and other forms of recognition of their skills and contributions. Since hiring decisions are made by employers, biases

towards women and skilled immigrant women in particular, in certain professions can certainly go undetected.

The focus on the re-entry of skilled immigrant women into professions considered male dominated, takes away from the broader conversation of the priority given to male dominated professions in skilled migration. Mollard and Umar called attention to the ideological construction of competencies in current migration conceptualizations considered as skilled, that focus on stereotypically male dominated occupations. They pointed out that many feminist scholars take exception to these stereotypical definitions that exclude occupations in the social production sector, which are usually linked to 'women's work' (Mollard and Umar 2012,13-14). This exclusion further renders immigrant women as casual labourers who can only compete in informal sectors of employment. The authors call for the definition of skills beyond the current gendered constructs, to allow for deeper understanding of the issues related to non-recognition and loss of skills.

Mollard and Umar pointed to findings from Creese and Wiebe's 2009 study, that revealed a lack of acknowledgement of educational credentials attained in Africa, among Canadian employers and professional regulatory bodies (Mollard and Umar 2012, 24). Creese and Weibe further put forth that the lack of recognition of credentials should be considered as part of the process of gendered deskilling, that associates unskilled labour as synonymous with Black or African immigrants (Creese and Weibe 2009, 69). Similarly, Mollard and Umar found that the deskilling of skilled immigrant women in Canada, is not as a result of labour market requirements alone; instead, issues of gender, nationality and systemic racism are key factors in the deskilling process (Mollard and Umar 2012, 24). Bernhardt called attention to racial discrimination as a perpetual feature within the Canadian workforce that creates economic consequences of poverty for racialized individuals (Bernhardt 2015, 3-4).

Furthermore, Canada's history of ethnic and racial bias is part of a legacy that is evident in Canada's preference for European immigrants over immigrants from non-white source countries. In fact, Elabor-Idemudia highlighted recent practice in Canadian immigration system, where Blacks from Africa and the Caribbean were not considered suitable immigrants to enter Canada (Elabor-Idemudia 1999, 38). She pointed out that immigrants were excluded based on their ethnicity, for economic reasons and the belief that they could not withstand the Canadian weather (38). Despite changes to immigration policies to allow lessen restrictions on entry for immigrants from these regions, the foundation of racialized power structures in Canada remains unchanged. As a result, issues of race and racism still plague the settlement, integration and access to employment for racialized immigrants in Canada. The struggles that skilled

immigrant women from non-white source countries encounter are reported to be plagued by these encounters as well. The issues of discrimination extend well beyond the Canadian labour market and into the wider Canadian society.

3. Economic benefits of skilled migration for Canada

Bannerjee reported on the dramatic increase in the demand for highly skilled workers in Canada as a response to the growth of the “knowledge economy” (Bannerjee 2009, 482). Canada is also considered to attract higher skilled immigrants than the U.S., primarily because of its FSWP points-based system selection program (Aydemir 2011, 454- 461 and Clarke and Skuterud 2014, 1). The anticipated benefits of attracting highly skilled immigrants include the replenishing of an aging Canadian population and the filling of highly skilled positions (Bannerjee 2009, 482). Immigrants with higher levels of skills are also considered to adjust more quickly to the labour market, thus meeting skill demands and contributing to the Canadian economy faster (Aydemir 2011,452). Overall, a key feature of skilled immigration for host countries including Canada, is the enhanced economic potential and integration of skilled immigrants, for faster economic contributions over longer periods.

Clarke and Skuterud stated that research in both the U.S. and Europe points to higher levels of innovation and productivity among immigrants than natives, especially in areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Clarke and Skuterud 2014, 1). Despite the customary male dominated professions highlighted above, the exceptional skills and talent that immigrants provide is beneficial in any sector. The higher levels of education that skilled immigrants possess, provides an advantage to not only local economy but even if by perception alone, on the global platform as well. In addition, despite the economic challenges that skilled immigrants encounter in the Canadian labour market, they are less likely to seek certain government (financial) benefits, due to conditions and terms of their migration. The reported benefits for host countries are not on par with reported outcomes for skilled immigrants. However, Canada continues to capitalize on the available and steady source of immigrant and skilled immigrant labour.

Despite its preference for European immigrants, Canada touts itself as one of the most culturally diverse countries that offers immigrants a smoother transition into culturally diverse communities (Reitz 2012, 521). Canada also boasts a multicultural policy that recognizes minority culture in Canada that many critics believe creates silos of difference to separate immigrants from Canadians. Both Australia and Europe

have drawn on Canada's example of multiculturalism and Canada continues to promote multiculturalism as a key component of its national identity. Reitz pointed out that the actual effect of Canada's multicultural policies on immigrants' integration is not clear, however there is minimal indication that it may be attributed to higher citizenship achievement rate (Reitz 2012, 530). The current issues of racism and sexism that skilled immigrant women and skilled immigrant groups face, are at odds with this image of Canada. Nevertheless, Canada considers a multicultural society as one of its key attributes that allows skilled immigrants to feel more like they are a part of Canadian society.

4. Critical perspective and possible alternatives

The inequitable, sexist and prejudicial relationship that Canada currently has with skilled immigrant women, is a social justice issue. Chatterjee noted Sakamoto's argument that the expectation that professional immigrants should possess "Canadian experience" is a human rights violation (Chatterjee 2015, 366). In addition, their ability to be competitive in the Canadian labour market is undermined by systemic barriers, many of which are based on their ethnicity and where they acquired their credentials. Danso pointed out that it is "...discriminatory, oppressive and unjust" to deny the access of an individual to employment opportunities on grounds that are not related to their abilities or sector in which they were trained (Danso 2009, 539). Inroads that skilled immigrant women have made are being eroded and their means to move beyond feminized roles are being compromised. Canada fervently recruits skilled immigrants to build its economic and social structures but is yet to address the discriminatory, racist and sexist barriers that they encounter. Instead, Canada is keen on refining immigration programs to attract even higher skilled immigrants, even though reports indicate that many who are already in Canada are not faring well. Chatterjee aptly pointed out that the traditional focus of social work on immigrants, looks at the challenges that individuals and families encounter in the settlement and migration process, their resilience and the navigation of systemic barriers in the labour market (Chatterjee 2015, 364). The focus on professional immigrants in the labour market for social work she pointed out, is fairly new (364). In addition, the new focus is similar to existing scholarly and policy attention that attends to professional immigrants as "... self-deficient subjects" who require policy and program interventions (Chatterjee 2015, 364). She further pointed out that the opportunity is ripe for critical engagement of these issues to move attention beyond structural interventions and deflections of exploitation, accumulation of capital and immigrants as deficient (364).

A critical social work perspective provides focus on changes to the current oppression and discrimination that skilled immigrant women face in the Canadian labour market. The concern is with addressing the social injustice that create the issue in the first place, rather than just the problems it created. As a discipline, social work can spearhead scholarship to call out the racist, sexist and ethnic forms of discrimination that skilled immigrants face that are at the root of these issues. By leading the charge to develop a deeper understanding of the injustices that skilled immigrant women face, it will move attention towards creating a society that is more equitable and just. The dynamics of power and the current social relationship are intertwined to produce the barriers that skilled immigrant women encounter. The social reality for racialized immigrants (and minority groups) that is constructed in a settler colony such as Canada, needs to be called out and addressed.

5. Conclusion

Discussions on the issues of oppression and discrimination that skilled immigrant women face focus on the challenges that they encounter within the Canadian labour market. The professional-paraprofessional focus distracts attention from the social rights that is being taken away from skilled immigrant women. Canada needs only to look to a similar points-based immigration program in Australia that is more transparent and include regulatory bodies in the pre-immigration assessment process, for more effective outcomes for skilled immigrants. If the issue is indeed about the recognition of skills and credentials, then the structural fix should be undertaken with the vigour that is afforded to the ongoing revisions of the Canadian points-based program to select suitable skilled immigrants.

This paper by no means provide a comprehensive assessment of the different aspects of the issues that impact the experiences of skilled immigrant women in Canada. However, it makes clear that Canada has taken great steps to attract highest caliber of skilled immigrants but has fallen short in doing the same to recognize their social rights. It makes it clear that it is crucial for social work to challenge the issues that skilled immigrant women currently face, without normalizing or individualizing their skills as the root cause of the issue. The systemic issues of race, racism, sexism and other discriminatory factors that shape their current experiences need to be the primary focus. Canada needs to be held accountable for its role to provide a socially just and equitable society for skilled immigrants and skilled immigrant women.

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